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Q4(b)

How do the concepts of binary opposites and exchange figure in Levi-Strauss' structural analysis of kinship?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Structuralism (Lévi-Strauss and E. Leach)

(d) Structuralism (Lévi-Strauss and E. Leach)

Core demand of the question

- How do the concepts of binary opposites and exchange figure in Levi-Strauss' structural analysis of kinship?
- Write about 200 words for 15 marks

Revision summary

Binary opposites are the mind's contrasts, as in own/affine.

The **incest taboo** is the nature/culture cut.

Exchange of spouses builds the social whole.

Restricted and generalised exchange are the two machines.

Cross-cousin terms turn the binary into a marriage rule.

Introduction

Lévi-Strauss read kinship as a language of contrasts and as a system of exchange. Binary opposites are how the mind cuts the world; exchange is how groups are tied.

Body

Binary opposites

- **Structuralism, from Saussure and Jakobson, treats meaning as difference:** raw/cooked, nature/culture, own/affine.
- The **incest taboo** is the cut that makes culture. Women of one's group become 'sisters'; women of the other become spouses.
- **Kin terms work as oppositions:** parallel versus **cross cousin** is a binary that organises marriage.

Exchange

- Society begins when groups **give spouses**. The gift of women is the elementary social contract in his formula.
- **Restricted exchange** is two-sided swapping. **Generalised exchange** is a delayed circle, often with status.
- Cross-cousin marriage is the operator that turns opposition into repeating alliance.

How they join

- **Binary:** sister versus wife. Exchange: my sister's marriage makes me affine to another line.
- **The Elementary Structures of Kinship** is this algebra. Later **Needham** said ethnography is messier than the grid.

Flow diagram

Levi-Strauss -> Binary nature culture own affine
Levi-Strauss -> Spouse exchange
Binary nature culture own affine -> Incest cut
Spouse exchange -> Cross cousin alliance

Conclusion

For Lévi-Strauss, kinship thinks in binaries and binds groups by exchanging spouses. The incest cut and cross-cousin rule are the hinge between opposition and alliance.

Facts & figures

Elementary Structures

1949 book that made alliance the structure of kinship.

Incest taboo

The rule that forces marriage outward and founds culture.

Cross cousin

Mother's brother's or father's sister's child; the preferred affine in many elementary systems.

Jakobson

Phonological binaries that Lévi-Strauss analogised to kin thought.