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Q6(c)

Critically evaluate Lewis Morgan's classification of family

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Classical evolutionism (Tylor, Morgan and Frazer)

(a) Classical evolutionism (Tylor, Morgan and Frazer)

Core demand of the question

- Critically evaluate Lewis Morgan's classification of family
- Write about 200 words for 15 marks

Revision summary

Morgan ranked families from group marriage to Victorian monogamy.

He linked terms, property, and a three-age history of culture.

No ethnography confirms consanguine or punaluan stages.

Boas, Lévi-Strauss, and feminist work dismantled the ladder.

Keep his comparative kinship method, not his timetable.

Introduction

Lewis Henry Morgan ranked families from promiscuity to monogamy as stages of progress. The scheme organised a vast kinship vocabulary. As history and as ethnography it fails.

Body**What he classified**

- In **Ancient Society** and **Systems of Consanguinity**, Morgan moved from the consanguine family (sibling group marriage) through the punaluan (group of brothers marrying a group of sisters), syndyasmian pairing, patriarchal, and the monogamian family.
- He tied these to savagery, barbarism, and civilisation, and to Malayan, Turanian, and Aryan kinship terms.
- **Engels** took the scheme into a Marxist history of the family and private property.

Critical evaluation

- Fieldwork found no consanguine or punaluan stage as a real household. **Trobriand**, **Nuer**, and **Andaman** families are not rungs on that ladder.
- **Boas** and historical particularism rejected unilinear family history. Terms can be classificatory without proving group marriage.
- **Lévi-Strauss** shifted the problem to alliance and incest prohibition, not to Morgan's fossils of promiscuity.
- **Weiner** and feminist kinship showed that Morgan's endpoint-Victorian monogamy as the highest family-was ethnocentric.

- What survives is the method of comparing kinship terms, the **Iroquois** case, and the insight that family form is social, not a natural given.

Verdict

- Use Morgan as a founder of kinship study. Do not use his five families as a timetable of humankind.

Flow diagram

Morgan -> Consanguine to monogamian
Consanguine to monogamian -> No field stages
Morgan -> Kinship terms comparison
Kinship terms comparison -> Later alliance descent

Conclusion

Morgan classified family as evolutionary stages ending in monogamy. The typology is historically false. The comparative study of terms and of property in the family is his lasting gift.

Facts & figures

Ancient Society

1877 book that set savagery-barbarism-civilisation and family stages.

Iroquois

Morgan's own kinship fieldwork that launched classificatory terminology.

Engels

Origin of the Family used Morgan to historicise patriarchy and property.

Punaluan

Hawaiian-inspired group-marriage stage that later ethnography did not find as a historical household.