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Q5(d)

Descent Groups

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · Anthropology GS 1 · 10 marks · Kinship

2.5 Kinship: Consanguinity and Affinity; Principles and types of descent (Unilineal, Double, Bilateral, Ambilineal); Forms of descent groups (lineage, clan, phratry, moiety and kindred); Kinship terminology (descriptive and classificatory); Descent, Filiation and Complimentary Filiation; Descent and Alliance.

Core demand of the question

- Write a note on Descent Groups
- Keep the note to a 10-mark length of about 150 words

Revision summary

A descent group is recruited by a rule of ancestry.

Unilineal clans and lineages are corporate; kindreds are often not.

They organise exogamy, property, office, and feud.

Nuer lineages and Trobriand sub-clans are type cases.

Descent is not the same thing as the domestic family.

Introduction

A descent group is a body of kin recruited by a rule of ancestry. It owns names, rights, and often land. It is not the same as a household.

Body**Types**

- **Unilineal** groups are patrilineal or matrilineal. **Nuer** lineages and Trobriand dala are classic cases.
- **Cognatic** and bilateral kindreds, common in the West and among some hill peoples, recruit through both sides but often lack a single corporate estate.
- Clans, lineages, moieties, and phratries are scales of the same idea. A clan may be totemic and exogamous.

Functions

- They regulate marriage through exogamy, as **Lévi-Strauss** and **Dumont** read alliance between groups.
- They hold property, office, and feud. **Evans-Pritchard** made the lineage the political unit of the Nuer.
- Ancestors and ritual legitimate the group. **Morgan** earlier mistook clan for a stage of the family; the group is a jural corporation, not a household type.

Limit

- People also live in houses and networks. Descent is one idiom of belonging, not the whole of kinship.

Flow diagram

Descent group -> Unilineal
Descent group -> Cognatic
Unilineal -> Marriage property feud
Marriage property feud -> Nuer Trobriand

Conclusion

Descent groups recruit by ancestry, hold rights, and marry out. Nuer, Trobriand, and Indian gotra-clan talk remain the teaching set.

Facts & figures

Evans-Pritchard

Nuer lineages as segments that fuse and split in politics and feud.

Malinowski

Trobriand matrilineal dala holding garden land and names.

Fortes

Distinguished the domestic family from the lineage as a jural group among the Tallensi.

Morgan

Ancient Society treated gens as a stage; later kinship theory treated descent as structure, not a ladder.