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Q8(c)

Explain the structural analysis of kinship as proposed by Levi-Strauss

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Structuralism (Lévi-Strauss and E. Leach)

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

Core demand of the question

- Discuss Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis of kinship
- Write about 200 words for 15 marks

Revision summary

Kinship is treated as a system of exchange, not a biological family stage.

The incest rule creates alliance between groups.

Restricted exchange is two-sided; generalised exchange is a circle.

Kachin and Dravidian systems are teaching models; Dumont extended the method.

Feminist critique, after **Weiner**, refuses women as mere signs.

Introduction

Claude Lévi-Strauss analysed kinship as a system of communication. The units are relations and exchanges, not biological households in Morgan's stages.

Body

The argument

- In **The Elementary Structures of Kinship** the incest prohibition forces men to give sisters and daughters. Society begins as alliance.
- **Restricted exchange** is two-group, often symmetric cross-cousin marriage. **Generalised exchange** is a circle of groups, as in Kachin-type systems that **Leach** also treated politically.
- Kinship terms are a language. Binary oppositions-inside/outside, own/affine-organise the field, as in his later myth work.

Method

- The anthropologist seeks the hidden grammar, not the native's first explanation alone. A Trobriand or Dravidian map is a transformation of one structure.
- **Alliance** is the positive rule of whom to marry. Descent theory, associated with **Fortes** and British Africanists, had stressed the lineage corporation instead.
- **Dumont** carried structural analysis into Indian hierarchy and Dravidian alliance, a productive heir, not a copy.

Critique

- **Weiner** and feminist readers rejected the woman-as-sign. Trobriand women give cloth and wealth; they are not only messages between men.
- History, inequality, and emotion drop out if structure is too clean. **Geertz** wanted thick local text, not only a combinatory grid.
- What remains is the shift from family stages to rules of exchange, still the cleanest attack on Morgan's ladder.

Flow diagram

Levi-Strauss -> Incest prohibition
Incest prohibition -> Alliance exchange
Alliance exchange -> Restricted two-group
Alliance exchange -> Generalised circle Kachin

Conclusion

Lévi-Strauss made kinship a grammar of alliance and incest. Restricted and generalised exchange, Kachin and Dravidian cases, are the core. The method lasts; the silent woman as gift does not.

Facts & figures

Elementary Structures

1949 book that founded alliance theory on the incest prohibition and the gift of women.

Restricted vs generalised

Two elementary regimes of marriage exchange.

Leach

Kachin ethnography that politicalised the marriage circle Lévi-Strauss formalised.

Weiner

Trobriand women's wealth as a critique of the brother-exchange model.