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Q8(c)

Critically discuss A.L. Kroeber's contribution to kinship studies.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 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

- Critically discuss A. L. Kroeber's contribution to kinship studies
- Write at 15-mark length

Revision summary

Kroeber's 1909 paper treated classificatory kinship as linguistic-cultural, not as a primitive stage.

Eight principles generate terminological pattern.

Kinship sits in the **superorganic**, not in raw biology or psychology.

California ethnography supplied cases inside Boasian culture history.

Lévi-Strauss wanted alliance, Schneider wanted to question the genealogical grid.

Kroeber remains the terms-as-culture charter, not the whole of kinship theory.

Introduction

A. L. Kroeber treated kinship as culture, especially as a language of terms, not as a biological tree that explains itself. His contribution is that shift, and the critique is what a terms-first method can miss.

Body**Kinship as culture**

- Against a simple **Lewis Henry Morgan** reading of classificatory systems as fossil stages, **A. L. Kroeber** in his 1909 paper on **classificatory systems of relationship** argued that kin terms are linguistic and cultural classifications.
- Eight principles, including generation, affinity, collaterality, sex of speaker, and relative age, could generate the pattern of a terminology without a unilinear social stage.
- Kinship therefore belongs with the **superorganic** of culture, the same move Kroeber made against reducing culture to individual psychology.

Ethnographic and comparative work

- California ethnography, including **Yurok** and other peoples with **R. H. Lowie** in the wider Boasian set, supplied term lists and marriage practice for a historical-particularist file rather than a world stage.

- Kroeber's wider Anthropology treated kinship beside art, dress, and language as items of culture history, including diffusion, which later alliance theory would find too shallow.
- He helped make the **kinship schedule** and the comparison of terminologies a professional tool of American anthropology, beside **W. H. R. Rivers's** genealogical method from the British side.

Critical limits

- **Claude Lévi-Strauss** and later alliance theory said that terms without marriage rules and exchange miss the social structure that the terms serve.
- **David Schneider** later said that the whole biological grid of kin types was an American folk model; Kroeber had culturalised terms but still used genealogical boxes.
- Descent-group politics, property, and gender are thinner in a principles-of-terminology paper than in **Meyer Fortes** or **Evans-Pritchard**.
- Indian joint-family and caste hypergamy need Dumont and Karve as well as Kroeber's eight principles.

What still stands

- The refusal to treat classificatory kinship as primitive error still stands.
- The idea that terminology is a cultural logic, not a poor biology, still organises the kinship chapter.
- A critical answer therefore keeps Kroeber as the Boasian who made terms cultural, then adds alliance, practice, and critique of the genealogical grid.

Flow diagram

Kroeber -> Kin terms as culture
 Kin terms as culture -> Eight principles
 Morgan stages -> Rejected
 Levi-Strauss Schneider -> Critique of terms-only

Conclusion

Kroeber's contribution is to treat kinship terminologies as cultural classifications generated by a few principles, not as Morganic fossils. The limit is a terms-first view that underplays alliance, property, and the folk biology still sitting inside the genealogical chart.

Facts & figures

Classificatory Systems of Relationship (1909)

Kroeber's paper arguing that kin terms are cultural classifications produced by a small set of principles.

Lewis Henry Morgan

Earlier evolutionary treatment of classificatory and descriptive systems as stages; Kroeber rejected that fossil reading.

Superorganic

Kroeber's claim that culture has a level of order not reduced to individual minds or to biology.

W. H. R. Rivers

Genealogical method from the British side; a complement to American term-list comparison.

David Schneider

Later critique that anthropological kinship imported a European biological folk model into the grid of types.

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