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Q6(c)

How does Lévi-Strauss look at the Tsimshian myth of Asdiwal? Critically discuss Lévi-Strauss' theory of structuralism in the light of his study of mythologies.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Structuralism (Lévi-Strauss and E. Leach)

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

Core demand of the question

- Explain Lévi-Strauss's reading of the Tsimshian myth of Asdiwal
- Use it to set out structuralist method and concepts
- Critically assess the method's achievements and limitations
- Distinguish structural relations from a historical retelling of the myth

Revision summary

Lévi-Strauss treats the Asdiwal myth as transformations among relations, not failed history.

Mountain/sea, hunting/fishing and residence rules form linked oppositions.

Mythemes gain meaning through position, following Saussurean linguistics.

Different versions transform one structural problem rather than copy one original.

The method reveals patterned classification and contradiction.

Critics argue that analyst-chosen binaries neglect performance, history, agency and power.

Introduction

For Claude Lévi-Strauss, myth is not an inferior historical chronicle but a machine for thinking contradictions. His analysis of the Tsimshian story of Asdiwal reads successive versions as transformations of relations-high/low, land/sea, nature/culture and matrilineal/patrilineal.

Body

Asdiwal as structural analysis

Asdiwal, born through the intervention of a supernatural helper, travels vertically and horizontally, hunts, marries women from different domains, and ultimately fails to reconcile the worlds he crosses. Lévi-Strauss maps geography, subsistence and marriage together. Mountain versus sea, hunting versus fishing, east versus west and matrilineal versus patrilineal residence form homologous oppositions. Mediating figures and journeys temporarily bridge them.

The myth does not simply mirror Tsimshian society. Its ending exposes contradictions between ideal and lived social arrangements that cannot be permanently solved. Different versions are therefore not corrupt copies; each transforms a common relational matrix.

Structuralist theory illustrated

Borrowing from **Saussurean linguistics**, Lévi-Strauss argues that meaning lies in relations, not isolated motifs. Minimal relational units or "mythemes" combine like language. Binary oppositions reflect unconscious classificatory structures; **transformation** explains variation across myths. In *The Structural Study of Myth and the Mythologies*, he sought a comparative science of thought.

Critical assessment

The method rescued myth from evolutionist fantasy and showed patterned variation across ecology, kinship and symbolism. It is replicable in asking what relations transform.

Yet **Edmund Leach** warned that neat binaries can be selected by the analyst. Historical colonial change, performance, emotion and the narrator's purpose recede. **Pierre Bourdieu** objected more generally to rule-like structures detached from practice, while post-structuralists question a universal stable code. Some critics also dispute whether Asdiwal's variants support all the geographic alignments assigned to them.

A stronger use joins structure to who tells a version, on what occasion, and under which historical conditions.

Flow diagram

Asdiwal variants -> Binary oppositions
Binary oppositions -> Mountain versus sea
Binary oppositions -> Hunting versus fishing
Binary oppositions -> Matrilocal versus patrilocal
Mountain versus sea -> Transformations and mediation
Hunting versus fishing -> Transformations and mediation
Matrilocal versus patrilocal -> Transformations and mediation
Transformations and mediation -> Contradiction expressed not finally solved

Conclusion

- **Asdiwal demonstrates structuralism at its best:** myth transforms stubborn social and ecological contradictions rather than reporting events. Its weakness is the same abstraction-relations become elegant while speakers, history and unequal power can disappear.

Facts & figures

Tsimshian

Indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast whose Asdiwal narratives Lévi-Strauss used for a focused structural analysis.

Transformation

A mythic version changes terms or relations while preserving an underlying problem; variation is evidence rather than noise.

Mytheme

A relational unit of myth whose meaning comes from combination and opposition, analogous to structural linguistics.

Edmund Leach

Applied and criticised structuralism, warning against making formal models more orderly than social life.

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