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Q1(b)

Theoretical significance of Purum kinship-system.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · 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

- Locate the Purum kinship-system in the ethnographic record
- State what structural pattern Needham and others claimed to find
- Show its theoretical significance for alliance theory and the model-practice debate
- Note the main criticisms without dropping the value of the test case

Revision summary

The Purum are a Kuki-Chin group used by Needham as a test case for alliance theory.

The claim was prescriptive marriage to mother's brother's daughter, with wife-givers and wife-takers in a cycle.

- **Needham argued against Homans and Schneider:** the pattern is structure, not sentiment.

The case mattered because it took elementary structures beyond Australia and clarified prescription versus preference.

Ackerman and others showed that the tables did not seal the cycle as neatly as the model.

The lasting names are Lévi-Strauss, Needham and the model-practice gap.

Introduction

The Purum are a Kuki-Chin people of the Indo-Burman hills. They became famous in kinship theory because **Rodney Needham** used their marriage rules as a test of **Claude Lévi-Strauss's** alliance theory. The question asks for theoretical significance, not a full ethnography of one group.

Body**What Needham claimed**

Needham read Purum marriage as a **prescriptive matrilineal** system. A man is expected to marry his mother's brother's daughter, or a woman who stands in that structural place. Women move in one direction. Lineages become wife-givers and wife-takers, and the groups are ranked by that flow rather than by a simple "exchange of sisters".

- **Alliance, not descent:** Following Lévi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, the unit of study is the relation between groups, not only a lineage unfolding through time.
- **Form, not household feeling:** **George Homans** and **David Schneider** had said that men prefer mother's brother's daughter because they feel close to the mother's brother. Needham's *Structure and Sentiment* (1962) rejected that psychology. For him the pattern is a logical

structure, not a family mood.

A nearby ethnographic comparison is **Edmund Leach's** Kachin of highland Burma, where asymmetric alliance also produces ranked wife-givers and wife-takers.

Why it mattered theoretically

- **A test of elementary structures:** If a small highland society could run a circulating connubium, Lévi-Strauss's contrast between elementary (prescriptive) and complex (choice-based) marriage gained an Asian example, not only an Australian one.
- **Prescription versus preference:** Purum forced a clear vocabulary. Is mother's brother's daughter marriage a jural rule, or only a statistical leaning? That distinction still organises kinship analysis.
- **Model versus practice:** Later re-counts of Needham's tables, especially by **Charles Ackerman**, argued that actual marriages did not close the cycle as neatly as the model. Needham's replies, and his later caution about "the Purum case", turned the episode into a lesson on **formalism**. An elegant diagram can outrun the census of who actually married whom.

Theoretical yield

The significance is threefold. Alliance theory was made operational. Psychological reduction of cross-cousin marriage was challenged. Anthropology learned to separate the grammar of a kinship system from the mess of practice.

Flow diagram

Purum marriage -> MBD prescription
MBD prescription -> Alliance cycle
Alliance cycle -> Test of Lévi-Strauss
Alliance cycle -> Model versus practice
Purum marriage -> Compare Kachin / Leach

Conclusion

Purum kinship is theoretically famous because it was asked to carry alliance theory. It remains a clear exhibit of matrilineal prescription, and the case that taught students to check a beautiful structure against real marriage counts.

Facts & figures

Rodney Needham

Structure and Sentiment (1962) used Purum marriage to argue for structural alliance against psychological explanations of mother's brother's daughter marriage.

Claude Lévi-Strauss

Elementary Structures of Kinship contrasts elementary (prescriptive) and complex (preferential or choice) marriage systems. Purum was recruited as an elementary exhibit.

Matrilateral cross-cousin marriage

Marriage to mother's brother's daughter, generating asymmetric alliance and a cycle of wife-giving and wife-taking groups.

Homans and Schneider

They explained mother's brother's daughter marriage by affective closeness to the mother's brother. Needham treated this as reducing structure to sentiment.

Edmund Leach

Political Systems of Highland Burma used Kachin asymmetric alliance as another famous case of ranked wife-givers and wife-takers.

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