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Q6(c)

How do the rules of descent and alliance in kinship differ from each other? Illustrate.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · Sociology GS 1 · 15 marks · Systems of Kinship

Systems of Kinship: Family, household, marriage; Types and forms of family; Lineage and descent; Patriarchy and sexual division of labour; Contemporary trends.

Core demand of the question

- How do the rules of descent and alliance in kinship differ from each other? Illustrate
- Keep the answer within a 15-mark length

Revision summary

- **Descent:** who belongs across generations (**patriliney**, matriliney, bilateral).
- **Alliance:** who marries whom and how groups exchange spouses (**Levi-Strauss**, **Dumont**).

North Indian lineage-plus-exogamy versus South Indian cross-cousin prescription illustrate the cut.

Caste endogamy is alliance at jati level.

Household in the **Census** is not the descent group.

Introduction

Descent rules say who belongs to a kin group across generations. Alliance rules say who may or must marry whom, and how groups exchange spouses. They interlock, but they answer different questions.

Body

Descent

- Unilineal descent traces through father (**patriliney**) or mother (matriliney). Cognatic and bilateral systems count both.
- Descent allocates membership, often property, ancestor worship, and jural identity.
- **Illustration:** a North Indian patrilineage (gotra, kul) as a descent corporation; Khasi matriliney as descent through women.

Alliance

- Claude **Levi-Strauss** treated the incest taboo and the exchange of spouses as the elementary structure of kinship.
- Positive rules (prescriptive **cross-cousin marriage**) and negative rules (whom one must not marry) organise alliance.
- Louis **Dumont** read South Indian kinship as alliance between groups, not only as a tree of descent.

- **Illustration:** Dravidian **cross-cousin marriage** as repeating alliance; North Indian sapinda and village exogamy as negative alliance with strong patrilineal descent.

Difference

- Descent is filiation through time. Alliance is marriage between groups in a generation and the next.
- A society can have strong descent and weak prescription, or strong alliance with shallow descent names.
- **Caste endogamy is an alliance rule at a higher level:** marry inside the jati, outside the lineage.

Mead and the household

- George Herbert Mead's family as the first game of roles is socialisation, not a substitute for these jural rules.
- **Census** household is not the lineage. Household and kin group must not be collapsed.

Flow diagram

Descent membership -> Across generations
Alliance marriage -> Exchange of spouses
Descent membership -> Kinship system
Alliance marriage -> Kinship system

Conclusion

Descent assigns membership through parentage. Alliance assigns marriage relations among groups. **Levi-Strauss** and **Dumont** centre exchange; lineage theory centres the corporation. Indian North-South contrasts illustrate the difference without making either region a pure type.

Facts & figures

Levi-Strauss

Elementary structures: kinship as exchange under the incest taboo.

Dumont

Stressed alliance in South Indian kinship against a purely descent reading.

Patriliney

Membership through the male line; common in North Indian lineages.

Cross-cousin marriage

A classic positive alliance rule in many Dravidian systems.

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