An introduction to theory in anthropology

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have been if colonialism had never taken place, and in doing so minimised not only the dynamics of indigenous African history, but the consequences of the slave trade, and the introduction of taxation, wage labour and freehold title to land by colonial governors. Asad argued that 'it is because the powerful who support research expect the kind of understanding which will ultimately confirm them in their world view that anthropology has not very easily turned to the production of radically subversive forms of understanding' (1973: 17). This explains why Safa relied on a Marxist analysis to explain the powerlessness of the shanty town's inhabitants. The response to this criticism by other anthropologists will be considered in chapters 5 and 7.

CHAPTER THREE

Structuralism

The Structuralism advocated by the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss during the 1950s and 1960s is closely related to the Structural Functionalism practised by Radcliffe-Brown and his students. Both were heavily influenced by the theories of Durkheim. The principal difference is that Radcliffe-Brown studied the regularities in social action, which he saw as an expression of social structures made up of networks and groups, whereas Lévi-Strauss located structures in human thought, and saw social interaction as the outward manifestation of such cognitive structures. Structuralism is opposed to the Marxist theory that people's beliefs and ideas are determined by the material conditions of their existence. In the United States, cognitive anthropology developed a parallel approach to the analysis of cultural structures during the 1960s and 1970s exploring, like Lévi-Strauss, kinship, symbolic communication and indigenous classifications of the natural world. D'Andrade suggests it was the development of artificial logic in computer languages during the 1950s which stimulated interest in discovering the natural logic of the human brain during the following decades (D'Andrade 1995: 10).

Durkheim and the origin of Structuralism

The earliest Structural analysis appeared in 1903, when Durkheim and his nephew Mauss published a study of *Primitive Classification* (Durkheim and Mauss 1963) in which they tried to reconstruct the origin of logical thought in the collective consciousness of the earliest

societies. Returning to the problem posed by Rousseau concerning the origin of language, Durkheim and Mauss took the opposite approach to that of later structuralists, arguing that taxonomies of the natural world are too complex for the individual human mind to construct, if it has only its innate capacities to rely upon. They therefore asserted that such classifications are collective in origin. Durkheim and Mauss further argued that the structure of natural taxonomies cannot be derived from simple observation of nature. The hierarchy of families and genera is not empirical. Therefore, they concluded, society also provides the structure upon which classifications of nature are built. After all, the term *genus* originally referred to a Roman kin group.

Taking the indigenous societies of Australia to be the simplest human societies to have survived, they reconstructed the development of clan totemism into the form recorded in central Australia by Strehlow, and Spencer and Gillen (Strehlow 1907–20; Spencer and Gillen 1899): the same authors who later influenced Radcliffe-Brown. Supposing that the simplest, and therefore earliest, form of a compound society would be one with two segments, they envisaged moieties as the earliest social divisions. Moieties often have totemic emblems which form opposed pairs, such as eaglehawk (a hunting bird) and crow (a scavenging bird). Subsequent development of a section system (known to Durkheim and Mauss as 'marriage classes') would impose a generational division on each moiety, creating a four-fold division of society as in Table 3.1. Since clans are more numerous than this, they imagined that the division of society into many clans would be a third stage of development. At both moiety and clan level, it was argued, the classification of nature derives from the classification of people in society.

Durkheim and Mauss contended that once a totemic system had been established it could 'react against its cause' and bring about increasing social differentiation. If Australian Aboriginal societies became increasingly divided into larger numbers of clans, this could be the consequence of philosophical reflection upon the form of society, which had been made possible by the development of the system of thought. They argued that the Aranda of central Australia had developed the more complex system of eight subsections, rather than the four-section system already recorded in eastern Australia, as a consequence of this supposed process. Here, too, can be seen the theoretical tradition on which Radcliffe-Brown was to draw in his argument that the Aranda kinship system had developed from an earlier system of the

Table 3.1 *Durkheim and Mauss' hypothetical reconstruction of the development of Australian Aboriginal social systems*

Moiety I (Eagle)	{ marriage class A	{ emu clan
		{ snake clan
	{ marriage class B	{ caterpillar clan . . .
Moiety II (Crow)	{ marriage class A′	{ kangaroo clan
		{ possum clan
	{ marriage class B′	{ lizard clan . . .

Kariera type. Outside Australia, the consequences of this developmental sequence could be found in the allegedly more complex systems of native North Americans such as the Zuñi. Chinese Taoist philosophy was claimed to carry the process forward towards the abstract and 'relatively rational' order seen in the earliest philosophies.

Durkheim and Mauss' extraordinarily speculative theory makes many unjustifiable assumptions. Social causality of cognition is never demonstrated. Unilinear evolution is assumed, and taken to justify ranking historically unrelated cultures on a single ladder of complexity. While it will never be possible to reconstruct the circumstances in which the first totemic classifications appeared, Needham (1963) has pointed out that a simple comparison of Australian societies with others of comparable complexity, such as the Basarwa or San of the Kalahari, would have shown that clans and totemism are not invariably associated with such hunter-gatherer cultures (Barnard 1989; but see Lee 1979: 340–1, where he suggests some form of totemism may have existed among the Ju/'hoansi (!Kung San) in the nineteenth century).

Durkheim took the analysis of totemism further in his subsequent book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915 [1912]). Here he argued that religion originated in the deification of the collective consciousness. To reconstruct the origin of religion it would therefore be necessary to discover the circumstances in which people had first become aware of the collective consciousness. Durkheim still supposed that indigenous Australian societies were the simplest known. The central Australian ethnography of Spencer and Gillen (1899) described how some central Australian rituals culminate in a moment when the participants rush together to the centre of the dance ground. Durkheim interpreted this episode as a re-enactment of the moment when the members of the clan first met each other. He seems to have

visualised a primal condition not unlike that imagined by Rousseau, in which people normally wandered as solitary individuals through the vast outback but, in Durkheim's image, periodically emerged from the bush to meet together. The meeting, like the start of a nuclear chain reaction, initiated a social current which swept through the minds of the participants and was perceived by them as a spiritual force acting upon each from the outside.

Durkheim argued that, although the Aborigines were aware of the social current generated when the clan assembled, they could only express their awareness through 'symbols'. These symbols were supplied by clan totems. Durkheim had learned from the central Australian ethnographies that people attached particular importance to the material objects used in ritual to represent clan totems. 'If left to themselves,' he concluded, 'individual consciences are closed to each other; they can communicate only by means of signs which express their internal states' (Durkheim 1915 [1912]: 230). Sacred objects were the concrete realisation of the sense of a collective force felt by members of a clan when they interacted. Celebration of the clan's totemic ancestor in ritual was a reaffirmation of the group's identity within the wider compound society. Indeed, he argued, the survival of the society as a system depended on such periodic reaffirmation of each segment's place in the whole. The association of each clan with a particular animal emblem was arbitrary. It did not matter whether a particular clan had snake, possum or kangaroo as its emblem. Once the association was established within the collective consciousness, however, it seemed natural and immutable.

It is extraordinary that such a speculative theory could have been so fruitful, but this is probably because Durkheim failed fully to appreciate that an explanation for the function of a custom in contemporary society does not need to be based on a speculative reconstruction of its origins. Durkheim's theory of the function of symbolic action stimulated three lines of development in the social sciences: structural linguistics, the structural theory of myth and ritual, and the Functionalist theory of religion.

Structural linguistics

The Swiss linguist Saussure was presenting his structural theory of linguistics through general lectures in Geneva at the time Durkheim was developing his theory of totemism (1906–11). Although Saussure died

Table 3.2 *Durkheim's model of clan totemism*

GROUP	clan A	clan B	clan C. . .etc.	(social group)
motif	Emu	Python	Kangaroo	(animal emblem)

Table 3.3 *Saussure's model of the linguistic sign*

IDEA	RIVER	STREAM	RIVULET. . .etc.	(SIGNIFIED)
sound	'river'	'stream'	'rivulet'	(signifier)

before he had committed his lectures to writing, several of his former students relied on their lecture notes to reconstruct his theory. Saussure had given his course three times, changing his ideas to some extent each year. Even those who had listened to the same lecture found their notes did not always agree. The published book expressed what they considered Saussure had intended (Saussure 1959: xiv–xv). Several writers have subsequently argued that Saussure interpreted Durkheim's model of clan totemism as a special case of a more general phenomenon, and developed it into a general theory of communication through signs (e.g. Barthes 1967: 23; Ardener 1971: xxxiv). Saussure took issue with the idea that language originated by imitating the sounds of things, so that the message DOG might be communicated by barking, or the message BEE by buzzing. Like Rousseau, he realised that in all extant languages, the vast majority of words derive their meaning from the arbitrary or conventional association of sound and meaning. Even if onomatopoeia could explain the way hypothetical, early languages conveyed meaning, it could not explain how language has functioned throughout history. Language has all the qualities Durkheim attributed to the collective consciousness; it exists prior to the birth of those who use it, and seems to impose itself upon people, as if they had no choice but to accept its conventions. Saussure concluded that, as in Durkheim's model of clan totemism (Table 3.2) each clan is arbitrarily associated with a particular totemic emblem carved on its sacred objects, so each idea in language is arbitrarily associated with a sound (Table 3.3). The sound is the *signifier*, and the idea the *signified*. Together, they constitute a linguistic sign. The significance of each clan's totemic emblem derives from its place in the structure of a segmentary society. The meaning of each linguistic sign is determined by its position in the total language. A 'stream' is smaller than a 'river', but larger than a 'rivulet'.

Saussure's theory was more complex than Durkheim's, and one of the crucial additions that he made was to introduce the distinction between *language* and *speech*. Speech draws upon the vocabulary and grammar of the language to construct a limitless series of statements. Saussure showed that signs can be related in two ways, firstly as a *syntagmatic* chain such as a subject and object linked by a verb ('the woman threw the ball') and secondly as a *paradigmatic* series, consisting of alternatives that could be substituted for any of the signs in a syntagmatic chain ('the *child* threw the ball'; 'the woman *found* the ball', and so forth). Saussure also pointed out that a language gradually changes. A sign can be studied *synchronically*, that is, in terms of its position in the structure of the language at any time, and *diachronically*, as its meaning is transformed by changes in the structure of the language.

The Structuralist theory of ritual

The British Functionalists such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown took from Durkheim's theory the inference that a people's religion will both 'reflect' the structure of their social system and function to maintain that system in its present state. Variations between myths told by neighbouring peoples would be expected to reflect differences between their social systems. Centralised political systems will be associated with beliefs in a high God, who has lesser beings to mediate between himself and ordinary people. Uncentralised political systems will be associated with religions in which there are a number of deities of equal status. In particular, lineage-based societies such as the Nuer and Tallensi will be associated with ancestor cults.

In continental Europe, anthropologists more closely linked with Durkheim took up the proposition that a culture's belief system had an internal logic which gave meaning to ritual actions. Like the British school, they were reacting against earlier writers who had interpreted customs as survivals from what were supposed to be earlier stages in human social evolution. The British argued that the presence of each custom should be explained in terms of its contemporary *effect* on the social system. Writers such as Hertz (1960 [1909]) and van Gennep (1960 [1905]) argued that the *meaning* of each custom had to be deduced from its place in a cognitive structure. In his essay 'The Preeminence of the Right Hand' (originally published in 1909, and reprinted in Hertz 1960) Hertz documented a general tendency among many cultures to associate the right hand with strength and order, the left with chaos and weakness. He concluded that the structural opposition between right and left stood for a more general opposition between right and wrong. He regarded this as one case of a general tendency for 'primitive man' to think in terms of dual oppositions. What is, in biological terms, a statistical tendency for more people to be right- rather than left-handed is transformed by culture into an absolute opposition filled with meaning. 'The vague disposition to right-handedness, which is spread throughout the human species,' he wrote, 'would not be enough to bring about the absolute preponderance of the right hand were this not reinforced and fixed by influences extraneous to the organism' (Hertz 1960: 91).

In *The Rites of Passage* (originally published in 1905), van Gennep argued for the widespread occurrence of three-part, rather than binary cultural structures. He contended that there is a general tendency among human societies to conceive of a change in status on the model of a journey from one town or country to another or, as he put it, a 'territorial passage' (van Gennep 1960: 18). Territorial passage had three aspects: separation from the place of origin, transition and incorporation into the destination. Just as the opposition between right and left hands could stand for more general, moral oppositions, so territorial passage could stand for any change of status in society. 'Marriage by capture', where the groom and his brothers ride to the bride's house, snatch her and carry her back to the wedding is not a survival from some fancied early epoch in human evolution when cave men clubbed women and dragged them home, but a symbolic enactment of the separation of the bride from her status as an unmarried girl in her parents' house, and her incorporation into the groom's household. Rituals of birth, entry into adulthood and death may all have the same structure. As van Gennep emphasised, 'The primary purpose of this book is precisely to react against the procedure which consists of extracting various rites from a set of ceremonies and considering them in isolation, thus removing them from a context which gives them meaning and reveals their position in a dynamic whole' (van Gennep 1960: 89). Although van Gennep's case of territorial passage is not the only image around which passage rites are constructed, many others have the same tripartite structure, as set out in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4 *Tripartite structures in the symbolism of rites of passage*

	Separation	Transition	Incorporation
(a)	leave home	travel through wasteland	arrive at destination
(b)	eaten by monster	lie in belly	reborn
(c)	immoral order	destroyed by flood	replaced by new order

Lévi-Strauss

Lévi-Strauss developed the theories of Structuralism in two directions, first in his analysis of the structure of kinship systems and later, in his study of the structure of myth. His study of kinship centred on the discovery that strikingly similar marriage rules existed among historically unrelated peoples in Australia, Asia and the Americas. All such societies were characterised by rules which specified that an individual should marry his or her *cross-cousin.* Cross-cousins are children of siblings of the opposite sex (i.e. children of a brother and a sister). Such kinship systems differ from those with which British anthropologists who had worked in Africa were familiar. In the so-called *descent* systems of Africa, corporate descent groups frequently consist of 200 or more people and are sometimes much larger. The descent group is internally divided into segments and marriage occurs more or less at random outside the lineage, giving each member a distinctive network of kin relations traced through the in-marrying parent. Children are generally forbidden from finding a spouse in the in-marrying parent's lineage, further diversifying the ramification of kin relationships between lineages. In the *alliance* systems studied by Lévi-Strauss lineages, while still exogamous, are smaller, having perhaps 50–100 members. Such lineages enter into regular alliances with other lineages by regularly exchanging marriage partners. Successive generations of one lineage are expected to marry into one other lineage. In consequence one's cross-cousins become preferred marriage partners.

What is cross-cousin marriage?

The character of such a social system can be illustrated with reference to the Yanomamö of southern Venezuela and adjacent parts of Brazil. Although now sadly disrupted by the logging and gold-mining perpetrated by colonial settlers, the Yanomamö may number around

10,000 people. Prior to colonisation, they lived in villages of between 40 and 250 inhabitants. The average village housed about 80 people. The Yanomamö environment was densely forested, but each village was surrounded by gardens in which plantains (a banana-like fruit) were cultivated. Politically uncentralised, the Yanomamö belonged to small, autonomous patrilineages, which depended upon the exchange of women in marriage to maintain alliances with other lineages, either resident in the same village or in neighbouring communities.

Yanomamö frequently move the location of their settlements. They do so partly because garden soil becomes exhausted and must be allowed to return to fallow but, more frequently, they move to escape the raids perpetrated by other Yanomamö. Chagnon, the anthropologist who described the Yanomamö marriage system, reports that ruthlessness in warfare was the foremost male virtue (Chagnon 1968). All men must constantly demonstrate their bravery and lack of mercy in daily behaviour. There is constant fighting between neighbouring villages. Sometimes whole villages move to escape from neighbours' raiding. On other occasions a village which has exceeded the critical size of around 150 members splits, because irreconcilable feuds have broken out within the community, and the members of one lineage move away.

It is hard work felling trees to open a new garden. Plantain seeds and cuttings must be carried to the new site, together with sufficient stored food to sustain people until the new gardens bear fruit. During the first year yields from new gardens are irregular. Successful marriage alliances are crucial, because they forestall the need to move by providing the lineage with allies. Chagnon estimates that a village must have around 50 inhabitants if it is to defend itself successfully, but only persistent enemy attacks will compel a village of above 150 to remain intact. He cites the case of a village known to him which contained 200 people, who split into three factions, each of which established a new village. After suffering persistent raids, the factions reunited and even then endured twenty-five raids in fifteen months. The smallest villages are most dependent on alliances with other villages; the largest are most dependent on alliances within the village.

The sequence by which a Yanomami alliance is established and maintained can be exemplified by taking two model lineages, each of which contain one man and one woman in each generation. In the first generation, the two unrelated men exchange their sisters in marriage

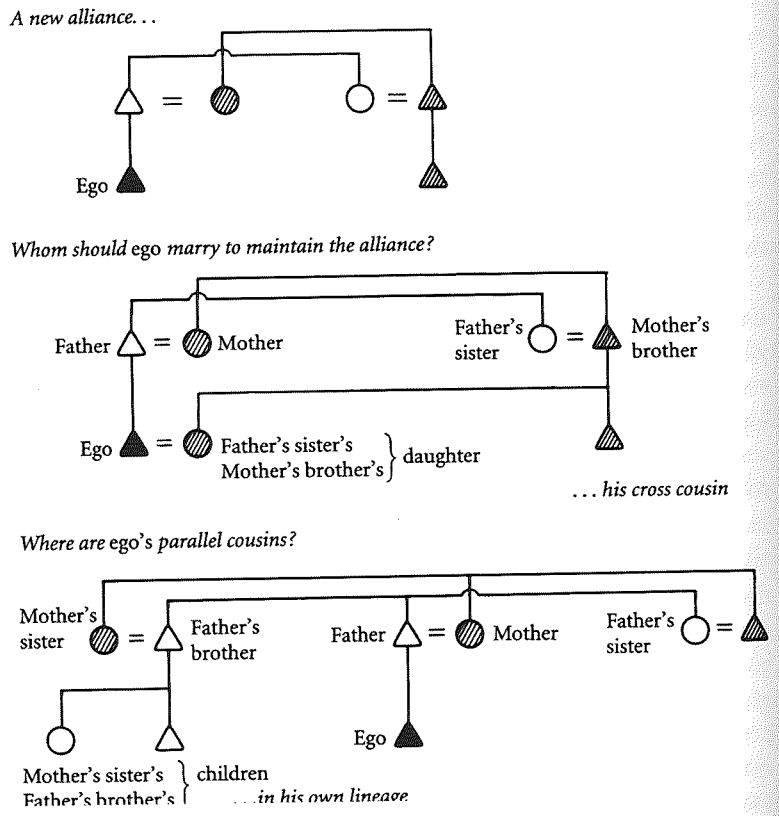


Figure 3.1 Development of a Yanomamö marriage alliance

(Figure 3.1). When their sons repeat the exchange, each is now marrying a woman to whom he is already related. The Yanomamö marriage rule requires marriage with a cross-cousin. The relationship can be traced both through the father and the mother. The woman whom the man marries is both his father's sister's daughter and his mother's brother's daughter. The woman is marrying a man who is both her mother's brother's son and her father's sister's son. Radcliffe-Brown, who studied such marriage rules in Australia, termed this *bilateral cross-cousin marriage.*

In practice there are, of course, several men and several women in each generation of the lineage. All the men, however, address each other as 'brother' (or 'fellow-male-member-of-my lineage'), and all the women address each other as 'sister'. Men address women of the

lineage to which they are allied as 'wife', or 'marriageable woman', while women address the men as 'husband' or 'marriageable man'. Members of the same sex in the other lineage will be addressed as 'brother-' or 'sister-in-law'. The marriage rule is, therefore, that a man must marry a woman he calls 'wife', and a woman a man she calls 'husband'. *Parallel cousins* (children of one's father's brothers and mother's sisters) are addressed as brother and sister, and cannot normally be married. They are, in fact, members of one's own lineage, because the father's brother has married the mother's sister (see Figure 3.1). The rule is only broken when senior men of an over-large lineage precipitate a split by starting to address women in distantly related segments as 'wife', not 'sister'.

The pattern of relationships created by the Yanomamö marriage rule is exactly the same, at least in the model, as that in the Kariera system of north-west Australia (see Figure 2.1 (a)). It was the remarkable convergence of such kinship systems on opposite sides of the world which prompted Lévi-Strauss to develop his theory of cross-cousin marriage.

Lévi-Strauss' theory of cross-cousin marriage

Lévi-Strauss' theory of kinship is built in some important respects upon Radcliffe-Brown's analysis of Australian kinship systems, although this is not as explicitly stated in Lévi-Strauss' writing as it might be. The British Structural Functionalist's influence is apparent from the fact that Lévi-Strauss adopts Radcliffe-Brown's three forms of cross-cousin marriage (bilateral, matrilateral and patrilateral) as his basic typology; he re-analyses Australian kinship systems in the first of the ethnographic sections of his book *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (first published in France in 1949, second edition 1967, English translation 1969), and his theoretical position is frequently framed by placing it in opposition to Radcliffe-Brown's. Like Radcliffe-Brown, Lévi-Strauss is interested in the life of social systems, not individuals, and the needs of the individual are subordinated to the alleged needs of the system. One of the shortcomings of Radcliffe-Brown's typological approach noted by Leach was that there is no apparent limit to the number of types and subtypes of society that can be devised (see chapter 2). Lévi-Strauss set out to demonstrate that there were logical limits to the number of types among what he termed 'elementary social systems'.

Mauss' theory that exchange perpetuates social relationships was equally influential upon Lévi-Strauss' work (see chapter 4), but Lévi-Strauss argued that the structure created by exchange was itself determined by the structure of human thought, developing the ideas of Hertz and van Gennep. Lévi-Strauss' work follows closely earlier Dutch studies of kinship in Southeast Asia, especially Van Wouden's analysis of the practical consequences of different types of cross-cousin marriage and their representation in myth (Van Wouden 1968 [1935]). Structuralist theory explains the structure of society as the product of ideas rather than the material conditions of existence.

Lévi-Strauss pointed out that cross-cousin marriage is a phenomenon which occurs in many parts of the world: not just Australia (as among the Aranda, 'Murngin' and Kariera), but lowland South America (the Yanomamö and others), Southeast Asia and India. Lévi-Strauss accepted that this could not have occurred through diffusion of the custom from a common point of origin, and saw it as an expression of universal patterns of human thought. Durkheim and Mauss had attributed the origin of logical thought to the experience of structure in the segments of a compound society. Lévi-Strauss reversed this hypothesis, and argued that it was the structure of human cognition which generated structure in social relationships. He argued that the exchange of gifts and marriage partners were forms of communication and should be treated like language, the best-studied medium of human communication. While regarding the most basic structures of cognition as universal, Lévi-Strauss accepted Durkheim's caution that supposedly universal psychological mechanisms could not explain human cultural diversity, and he interpreted the *content* of structural thought as the property of specific cultural traditions, paralleling the enormous diversity of languages.

Radcliffe-Brown's theory of kinship was that relationships were built outward from the nuclear family, increasing in scale as social systems achieved higher levels of complexity. Lévi-Strauss followed Saussure in arguing that kinship terms only gained meaning from their place in a structural system, that is, in opposition to other kinship terms, and not by extension from close relatives to more distant ones. One of the simplest might be the four-fold division created by the combination of patrilineal and generational moieties, and expressed through the Australian four-section system (see Table 3.5). In this structure, there are only four basic positions, since grandparents and

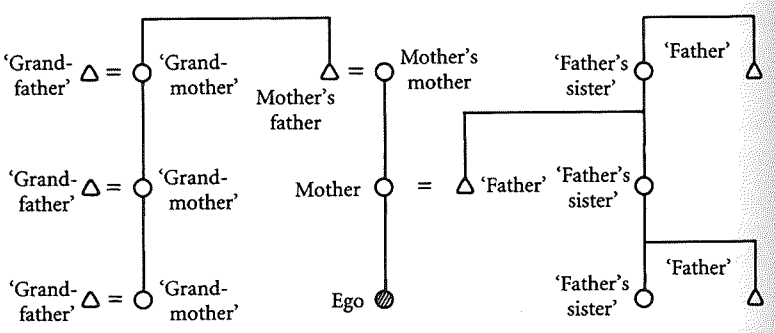
Table 3.5 *A four-section system created by combining generational and patrilineal moieties*

		Patrilineal moiety A	Patrilineal moiety B	
	Generation			
A1	Other }	Father and father's sister	Mother and mother's brother	B1
A2	Own }	Ego and siblings	Spouse and sibling-in-law	B2

Note: The table shows how ego's closest relatives are distributed between the four sections, A1, A2, B1 and B2.

grandchildren belong to ego's generation. In the Kariera kinship terminology, which is based on this four-fold division, the father's father and the mother's mother's brother are therefore called by the same term because they occupy the same position (see chapter 2, Figure 2.1 (a)). Parallel cousins occupy the same position as ego's siblings (his brothers and sisters), and are therefore also called 'brother' and 'sister'. Even the closest kinship relationships are thus determined by the structure of the system, and not extension (such as, from father's father to mother's mother's brother, or from sibling to parallel cousin). Just as people are unconscious of the structure of their language, so they are unconscious of the structure of their kinship system and accept it implicitly (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 177).

Lévi-Strauss classified the world's kinship systems into three types: elementary, intermediate and complex. In elementary systems, everyone known to a person stands in a definite kinship relationship to them, even if they have no known genealogical link. There are precise rules of marriage, which specify what type of relative a person must marry. This is the type of kinship system found in Aboriginal Australia. At the other extreme are the complex systems found in Europe. Here only a fraction of the people known to anyone are regarded as their kin. Marriage is regulated by a principle that close kin should *not* marry, and people normally marry non-kin (the Sarakatsani, outlined in chapter 2, exemplify this type of kinship system). Intermediate kinship systems are of the sort found among native North American and many African peoples. Crow-Omaha systems are of this type (Figure 3.2). Here, Lévi-Strauss argued, the social universe is divided into a determinate number of lineages but these are not linked by a regular pattern of marriage alliances. Ego can therefore only specify kinship relationships with members of other lineages into which (s)he or their close relatives happen to have married.



In this example, descent is traced through women. Men marry women of other lineages. The diagram shows the links which *Ego*, in the third generation, has with the lineages of their father and mother's father. In the father's lineage, all women regardless of generation are addressed by the same term as the father's sister and all men born into the group are addressed by the same term as the father. All women of the lineage into which the mother's father was born are addressed as 'grandmother' and their husbands as 'grandfather'.

Figure 3.2 Example of a Crow-Omaha type kinship terminology

Lévi-Strauss' study of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* is only concerned with kinship systems of the first type. He argued that all systems of this form can be classified according to three subtypes, depending on which rule of cross-cousin marriage they follow. Exchange, he argued, is the universal basis of kinship systems, and is made possible by three properties of the human mind: to accept that rules must be followed, to regard reciprocity as the simplest way of creating social relationships, and to consider that a gift, once given, binds giver and receiver in a continuing social relationship. The structures created by exchange depend on the type of marriage rule followed. In making these claims, Lévi-Strauss was clearly influenced by the work of Malinowski and Mauss (exchange theory will be discussed further in the following chapter). He follows Radcliffe-Brown, however, in arguing that the ultimate beneficiary of relationships created by exchange is the social system, not the individual participants in it.

The Yanomamö case study showed how, wherever a society contains exogamous, unilineal descent groups, cross-cousins will always belong to a different group to ego. Once such lineages are linked by regular marriage exchanges, parallel cousins will always belong to ego's group. Any social system which depends on such regular alliances can therefore specify cross-cousins as the ideal marriage partners and forbid marriage with parallel cousins. Cross-cousins function as 'markers'

who, even if they do not themselves become ego's marriage partners, signal the identity of the group into which he or she should marry. Logically, as Radcliffe-Brown had already appreciated, there are only three types of cross-cousin: patrilateral (the father's sister's child), matrilateral (the mother's brother's child) and bilateral (where the father's sister's child and mother's brother's child are one and the same or, at least, occupy the same position in the structure of the kinship system).

Lévi-Strauss' most fascinating discovery was to realise that each type of cross-cousin marriage produces its own structure of exchange. Van Wouden had earlier made the same discovery and it is hard to believe Lévi-Strauss was unaware of his work (see Van Wouden 1968: v, vii, xii). The insight can be illustrated with models which again assume each line of descent has only one man and one woman in each generation. If the men of the two lines of descent exchange their sisters, the mother's brother marries the father's sister. Ego's marriage partner will be at once his mother's brother's child and his father's sister's child. Repeated over several generations, a closed alliance develops between two lines of descent, of the type exemplified by the Yanomamö (Figure 3.3 (a)). One alternative is to open up the pattern of alliance by following a rule that, while the men of one group give their sisters to the men of a second one, they themselves receive their wives from a third. This is the pattern generated by following a rule that men must marry their mother's brother's daughters, but not their father's sister's daughters (Figure 3.3 (b)), which Van Wouden called *asymmetric connubium* (Van Wouden 1968: 86–7). This system can be extended indefinitely, creating a chain of allied groups which only terminates when the chain closes in upon itself to become a circle. For this reason, Lévi-Strauss referred to bilateral cross-cousin marriage as *restricted* exchange, and matrilateral exchange as *generalised*. Both the Kariera and the Aranda have restricted exchange but the so-called Murngin (Yolngu) of northern Australia, whom Radcliffe-Brown chose to exemplify another of his types of Aboriginal society, practise matrilateral cross-cousin marriage.

The third possibility is for a series of lineages each to transfer the members of one sex in marriage one way in one generation, as in matrilateral exchange, but to reverse the direction of exchange in the following generation, as if to repay the debts incurred by the receipt of marriage partners in the previous generation. This is what happens if a

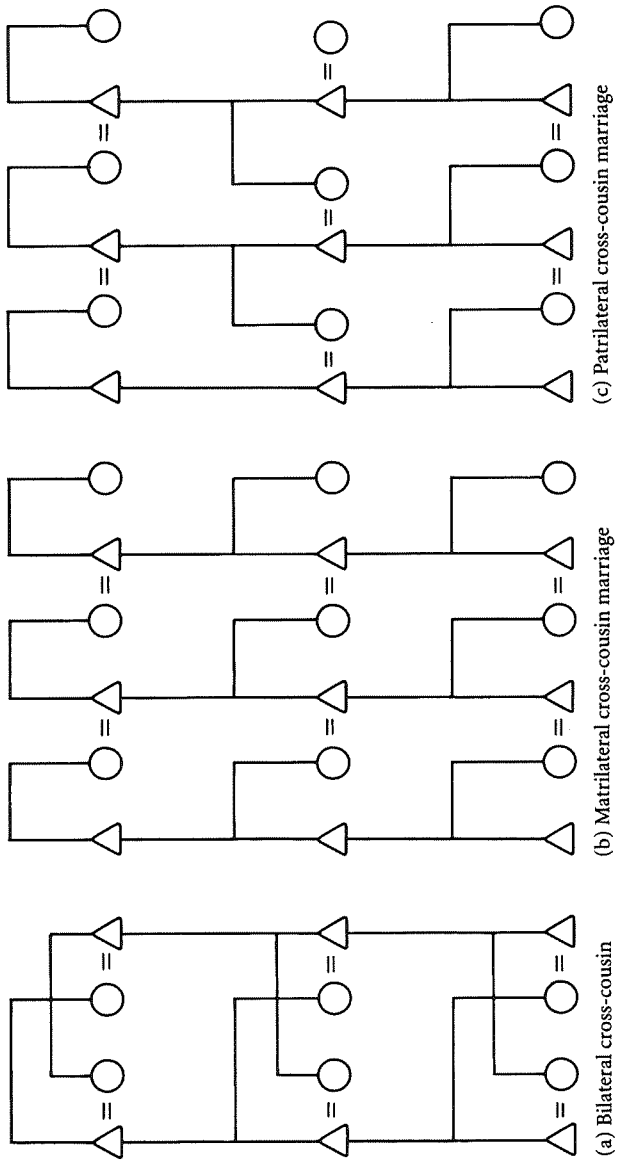


Figure 3.3 The structures created by the three types of cross-cousin marriage

rule of patrilateral cross-cousin marriage is followed (Figure 3.3 (c)). Van Wouden anticipated this would have a disruptive effect on social relations, while Lévi-Strauss regarded it as tantamount to a sudden loss of confidence in the stability of the system. Both matrilateral and patrilateral exchange create patterns of debt and credit linking a chain of lineages, but in the case of matrilateral exchange, each lineage has to accept the cost of being permanently indebted to the group who give them their wives, even though it remains permanently in credit with the group to whom it is giving its sisters. Even in bilateral exchange, the two lines remain in a balanced state of debt and credit over successive generations. In the case of patrilateral exchange, the system constantly 'returns to a point of inertia' (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 444) from which social relationships must once more be re-initiated. It is a system with inherent internal contradictions, which will either succumb to these contradictions and collapse, or transform itself into a more stable condition (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 311). Lévi-Strauss' theory appears to be supported by the fact that patrilateral cross-cousin marriage is in fact the rarest of the three types.

To what extent do the participants in such a system need to be aware of its structural consequences? Like Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss considered that there was no more need for them to be aware of the total structure than there was for native speakers of a language to be capable of consciously articulating its grammatical rules. They *do* need to recognise the obligations incumbent on them by virtue of their position in that system. Lévi-Strauss admits that matrilateral cross-cousin marriage seems a 'risky venture' from 'an individual and psychological viewpoint', because each man gives his sister to one group, but relies on the goodwill of another to receive a wife (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 451). He quotes two proverbs from a Sumatran people who practise matrilateral cross-cousin marriage. One, explaining the prohibition on marrying a patrilateral cross-cousin, asks 'how is it possible that water can flow up to its source?' The other, justifying confidence that anyone who has given away his sister in marriage will receive a wife, states 'the leach rolls toward the open wound' (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 449).

Criticisms of Lévi-Strauss' theory of cross-cousin marriage

Two principal lines of criticism have been directed by British and American anthropologists at Lévi-Strauss' theory. The first is generally known as the 'preference or prescription' debate. Critics ask what

proportion of marriages have to follow the rule of cross-cousin marriage for Lévi-Strauss' predictions about the structural consequences of cross-cousin marriage to be realised. The Asante told Fortes that they considered the ideal marriage to be with a bilateral cross-cousin, but Fortes found that only 8 per cent of marriages actually accorded with this ideal and alliances between different lineages were rarely perpetuated (Fortes 1950: 279). Chagnon, on the other hand, found that 70 per cent of Yanomamö marriages took place between members of already-allied lineages, and many of them were with first cousins (Chagnon 1968: 73). It is clear that, while the Yanomamö exemplify Lévi-Strauss' predictions concerning the type of structure generated by bilateral cross-cousin marriage, the Asante do not. Another version of the criticism asks how tightly the pool of marriageable women has to be defined to generate Lévi-Straussian structures. Even the Yanomamö allow marriage with second cousins, or more distant relatives, providing they are members of the same lineage as ego's cross-cousins. Suppose the whole of a small-scale society were simply divided into three categories, such that (from the individual's perspective) one-third were members of his own category, one-third were potential wife givers and one-third potential wife receivers? The Purum of Burma, a small community of four villages containing a total of ninety households, appear to have organised matrilateral cross-cousin marriage somewhat in this way (Wilder 1971). Unfortunately for the Purum, their villages came under attack by the Japanese during the Second World War and their marriage system was not available for reinvestigation at the time of the debate stimulated by Lévi-Strauss' theory.

The second critique concerns what Leach termed the 'structural consequences' of cross-cousin marriage. Will the structures generated by a particular marriage rule be the same, even where it is embedded in otherwise very different social systems (Leach 1961b)? Leach pointed out that the Katchin of Burma, whom he had studied, were hill-dwelling, dry-rice cultivators who used matrilateral cross-cousin marriage as a means of creating closed alliances between aristocrats and similar alliances among small groups of commoners. Each alliance might embrace no more than three lineages. Certain women were given in marriage between aristocrats and commoners to create links of dependence. Leach argued that the alliances were unstable. Commoners sought to maintain equality, while aristocrats attempted

to extract tribute, in the way that neighbouring princes did in the wet-rice cultivating valleys, but without their access to agricultural surpluses (Leach 1954). The 'Murngin' of Australia, on the other hand, were egalitarian hunter-gatherers, whose use of the same marriage rule created chains of relationships among numerous clans. Leach's study suggests the material conditions of existence may have a radical effect on the way that cognitive structures are expressed.

Just how the Murngin system really worked became the subject of intense debate. Lloyd Warner, an American student of Radcliffe-Brown, had carried out extensive fieldwork among the Murngin. In his book *A Black Civilisation* (Warner 1958 [1937]), Warner had published the Murngin kinship terminology (Figure 3.4) which clearly identified seven lines of descent. Many anthropologists assumed each line on Warner's chart corresponded to a distinct clan, or descent group, on the ground. Since Warner had also written that the Murngin had patrilineal moieties, some assumed that Warner must have missed an eighth line of descent, otherwise the two outer lines whom, it was inferred, closed the circle of the alliance, would be guilty of intra-moiety marriage. Lawrence and Murdock published an interpretation along these lines (1949) which was ridiculed by Radcliffe-Brown as demanding a greater complexity of kinship relationships than even native Australians, masters of kinship though they are, could handle (Radcliffe-Brown 1951)! It is clear from Warner's own work that the Murngin do not create such tidy marriage alliances (Figure 3.5). Yolngu marriages in fact create a network of alliances which sometimes turn back on themselves, so that two local groups appear to be engaging in bilateral exchange. Leach realised this was because some clans consisted of more than one exogamous lineage (Leach 1961b: 70; compare Warner 1958: 26 and Morphy 1978: 217).

When the second edition of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* was published in 1967, Lévi-Strauss responded to earlier criticisms by contending that, even though in practice matrilateral cross-cousin marriage might involve no more local groups than were needed in the Aranda system, the potential of the two types was always different: the Aranda system would always tend to close in upon itself, whereas the Murngin system would always tend to open out into longer chains of alliance. His argument has received support from Keen's comparison of marriage practices among the Yolngu (Murngin) and their neighbours the Gidjingali, who have an Aranda-type system (Keen 1982).

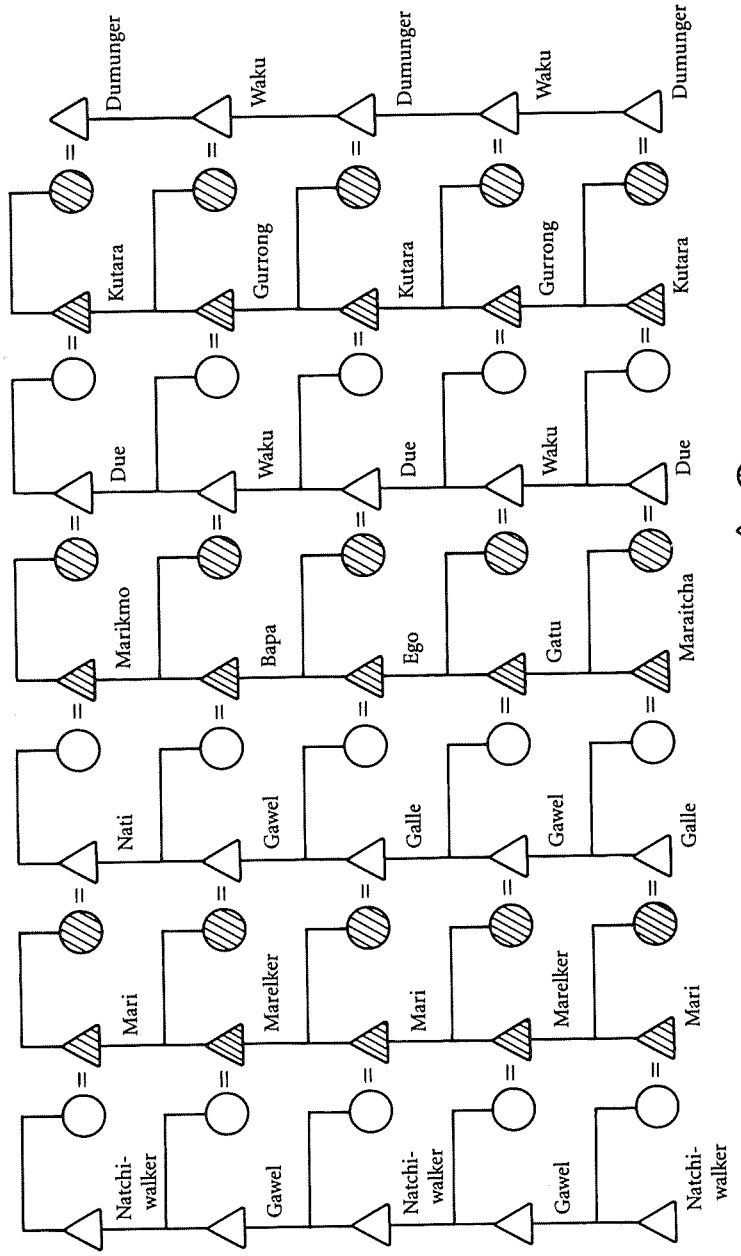


Figure 3.4 'Murngin' (Yolngu) kinship terminology

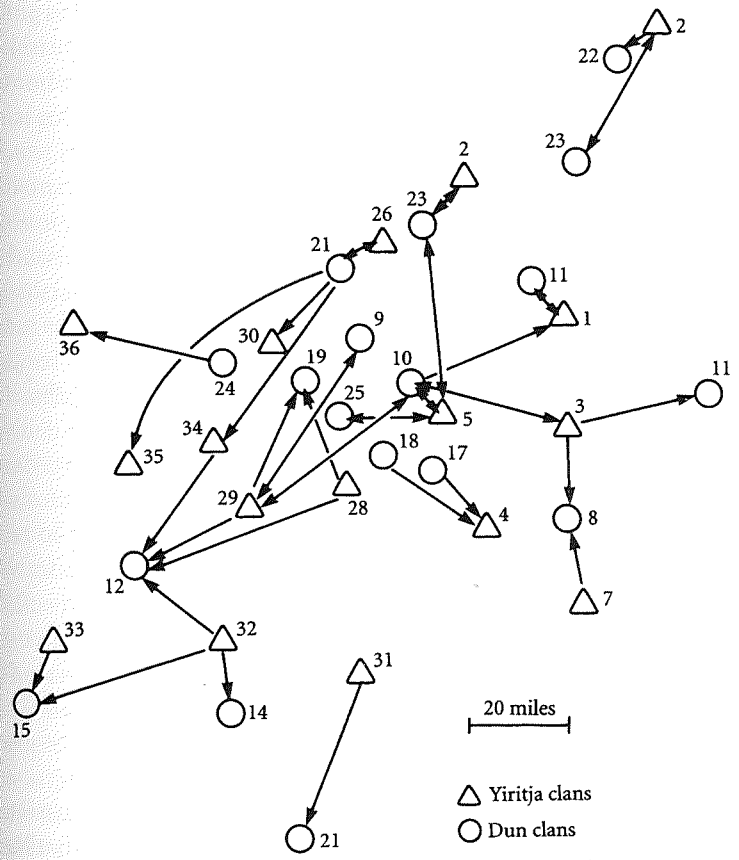


Figure 3.5 Actual marriage exchanges between 'Murngin' (Yolngu) clans

Lévi-Strauss on myth and totemism

Lévi-Strauss' earliest monograph on the structure of myth and ritual was *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962), translated as *The Savage Mind* (1966). Lévi-Strauss here develops Durkheim and Mauss' insights in *Primitive Classification* and in Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. He starts from two observations. Small-scale cultures appear to draw on the natural world in an apparently random or arbitrary way for symbols which represent ideas, values or fears characteristic of that community. There appears, none the less, to be an apparently universal desire to impose order on the world through schemes of classification.

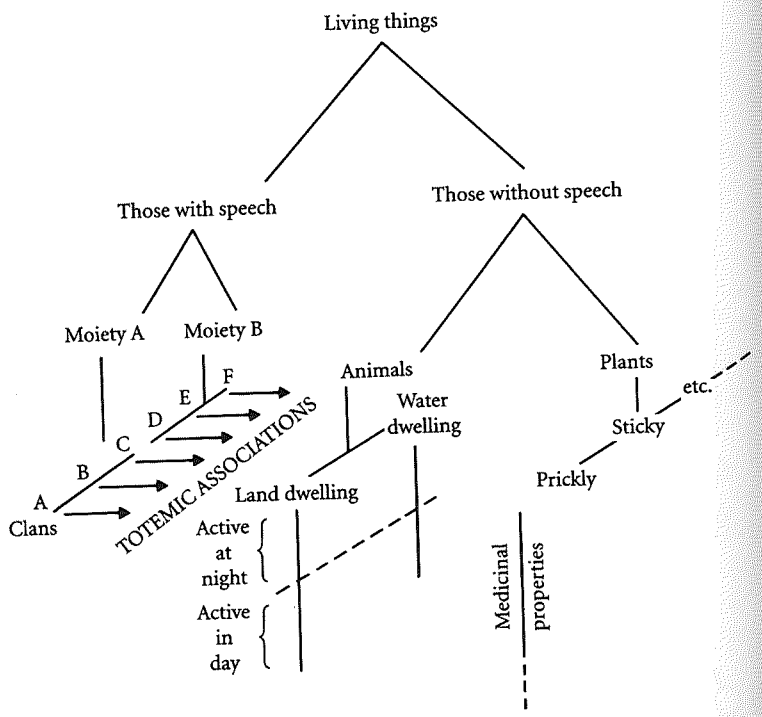


Figure 3.6 The Navaho classification of the natural world

The characteristic form of such classificatory schemes is illustrated in Figure 3.6. Lévi-Strauss outlines numerous examples of what have become known as ethno-taxonomies from traditional societies in Africa, South America and elsewhere. He notes these classifications are often botanically or zoologically accurate or, one might prefer to state, accord with Western taxonomies. The Navaho classification appears quite unlike Western taxonomies, however, in the existence of another order (or axis) of classification, by means of which the Navaho draw equations or correspondences between living beings such as animals and plants, and natural entities such as sky, sun, mountains and water. The sky is associated with the crane, the sun with a songbird, the mountains with the eagle and water with the heron. It is on the basis of such correspondences that plants and animals are used in ritual. Different cultures construct different sets of correspondences, and each particular set appears arbitrary. The Iban of South Borneo, for instance, contend that the cry of the crested jay sounds like the crackling of burning wood and so, if it is heard, is taken to signal success in clearing forest for swidden cultivation. The alarm cry of the trogon, another bird, is said to sound like a dying animal, and therefore to signal good hunting. As Lévi-Strauss observes, many other systems of the same type would have been equally coherent, and no single system of divination from bird calls could be chosen by all cultures. Only the history of the culture can explain why certain associations have been chosen over time; to understand why the Osage of North America associate the eagle with the land rather than the air, we have to know that eagles are associated with lightning, a form of fire, and fire is associated with coal, which comes from the ground. 'It is not the elements themselves but only the relations between them (i.e. the structures) which are constant' (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 53). There are no archetypal, universal symbols. If the same symbols appear among different cultures, it is either through diffusion, or because the intrinsic properties of the symbolic objects have suggested the same associations to members of different historical traditions. Lévi-Strauss concludes, following Durkheim, that the place in which objects are put within any system of significance is more important than their intrinsic properties. The same object may be used in very different ways.

Somewhat contentiously, Lévi-Strauss concludes that 'primitive' people are driven by an insatiable desire to impose order on the world, an argument developed by Douglas in her book *Purity and Danger* (1966) and, to a lesser extent, by Sahlins in *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976a). Any disruption to their system of classification will cause the system to be readjusted, in order to avert the primeval cognitive chaos which threatens to overwhelm them. Lévi-Strauss poses a hypothetical example. Suppose there were a totemic society with two clans called the Bears and the Turtles. If the Bear clan died out, and the Turtle clan increased in size then, in order to restore the two-part structure, the Turtle clan would split into two, known by two different species of turtle (perhaps as freshwater and saltwater turtles). Totemic classifications are, as Durkheim realised, codes for conveying messages in which social groups can be represented in terms of their animal emblems (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 76).

Ethnography shows that such symbolic associations can be expressed in a number of ways; in native North America, clanspeople may be said to be like their totem in behaviour (the Fox clan is cunning, the Moose clan timid) whereas, in Australia, clanspeople may be forbidden from

eating their totem since that would be tantamount to eating their own kin. Lévi-Strauss termed such rules 'totemic operators' which function to maintain the significance of the symbolic equations. It is the 'operators' which turn the cognitive structures into structured interaction.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter of *The Savage Mind* is that in which Lévi-Strauss shows that totemism and the Indian caste system, despite their association with very different social systems, have logical structures which are similar in their organisation. They differ in that one is the mirror image, or converse of the other. Both the exchange of women and the exchange of food between groups can be seen as logical 'operators' which maintain the distinctiveness yet interdependence of the groups. In a society based on totemic clans, each clan is exogamous (that is, it exchanges marriage partners with other clans), and avoids eating its totemic emblem. The totemic species is the animal guardian, or transformation, of the clan's founding ancestor. In the Indian caste system, each caste is endogamous (marriages take place within the caste), and associated with a particular occupation: farming, making pottery, weaving and so forth. In the same way that the totem is emblematic of the clan, the occupation is emblematic of the caste. Yet, instead of exchanging women in marriage, the members of the castes exchange the products of their labour.

Through ritual, rather than practical work, the totemic clan exploits its special relationship with its totem to perform 'increase rites' which its members (mistakenly, from a Western perspective) suppose will increase numbers of the totemic species to benefit other clans. In a contrary fashion, by supposing that higher castes will be polluted by contact with the occupations of lower ones, the Indian culture artificially creates a system of occupational interdependence between the castes present in a local community.

Both cognitive systems postulate that the division of society into groups is paralleled by a division of the non-human world into species or the products of work. Yet in one case the species are natural, and wrongly thought to be subject to increase through ritual, whereas in the other the artefacts are genuinely human-made. In one case, women provide the means of linking groups in alliance, in the other they are kept within the group. In one, all clans are equal in status, in the other castes are ranked.

The comparison of caste and totemism shows that the same type of logical thought or *modus operandi* can be found behind social structures traditionally regarded as totally dissimilar. The European folk tales portraying animals as *individuals* with the characters of humans (the wise owl, the timid rabbit) can, Lévi-Strauss proposes, be seen as yet another variation or transformation of this type of thought. Other cultures use the parts of the human body to represent aspects of the environment, such as the points of the compass, or kinship relationships.

Lévi-Strauss' analysis of South American mythology

In his later work on South American mythology, Lévi-Strauss looked in considerable detail at the myths of neighbouring peoples across the Amazon Basin. The parallels that he found between such myths convinced him that the symbolic systems they revealed were not, as he had earlier thought, completely arbitrary but 'motivated' by their natural properties or the way they were commonly used by the peoples of the Amazon. Animals eat raw food, but people cook it. The invention of cooking thus becomes a metonym (i.e. a part exemplifying the whole) for the origin of culture. Animals mate at random (Lévi-Strauss believes) but people construct marriage alliances; thus the first men to exchange their sisters also originate culture. Marriage exchange also becomes a metonym for culture. Lévi-Strauss did not suppose that such myths had any historical validity. It was, indeed, irrelevant to a myth's cognitive value whether it related a genuine historical event or an imaginary one. In this, Lévi-Strauss agreed with the Functionalist rejection of history.

Lévi-Strauss identified a number of mythical themes which recurred throughout lowland South America, each culture having a distinct variant. Some South American bees make deliciously sweet honey, 'so much so that the eater of honey wonders if he is savouring a delicacy or burning with the fire of love. These erotic overtones do not go unnoticed in myth' (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 52). Honey has another property: it is eaten raw. To cook honey would be to mistreat it. Cooking honey is therefore sometimes equated in myth with incest. Equally, refusing to give honey to someone else is associated with incestuous behaviour. The exchange of food parallels the exchange of marriage partners (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 27, 43). Tobacco is another unusual substance. It has to be burnt to be consumed. In one sense, then, honey and tobacco are conceptually opposed: one is untreated by culture, the other is over processed. A three-part cognitive structure

Table 3.6 *Lévi-Strauss' model for the symbolism of food*

Nature	Culture	Spirits
Honey	Cooked food	Tobacco
Promiscuity	Cross-cousin marriage	Incest

can thus be imagined, in which honey, cooked food and tobacco each stand for more general ideas (see Table 3.6).

One myth recounted by Lévi-Strauss depicts the jaguar as the giver of a wife to the first men. He behaves courteously, protects his brother-in-law and allows men to steal his fire; whereas the men keep all the meat they have hunted for their own use and indulge in unrestrained intercourse with the wives they have been given. The animal behaves like a cultured human; the humans behave savagely. By inverting normal behaviour, cultural categories are thrown into relief. Another myth describes how honey was acquired while people were still animals. This is what one might anticipate, as honey does not have to be cooked. The myth extols hunting and gathering. While cooking meat epitomises the origin of culture, people who exceed the bounds of culturally accepted behaviour are burnt alive. One myth describes how the villains are burnt alive in a prison into which tobacco smoke is injected while, in another, tobacco originates from the ashes of a hero burnt on a funeral pyre. Inhaling tobacco instead of exhaling it for the spirits causes people to be turned into animals.

There is no doubt Lévi-Strauss was able to show striking parallels between the symbolic oppositions found in different cultures. In fact, he appears to have a Midas touch, so that whatever he reads falls into a universal scheme of oppositions and equivalences. Leach pointed out that the history of the kings and queens of England can be retold in the form of Lévi-Straussian structural oppositions. Henry VIII was a strong man, who had many wives, while Elizabeth I was a strong woman, but celibate. Elizabeth was succeeded by James, a weak man with one wife. One of the most memorable moments in my Australian fieldwork was, none the less, when Sam Woolagudja, a Worora man of the Western Kimberleys, told me the myth accounting for moiety exogamy:

> There were two men called Wodoy and Djunggun. They agreed to give each other their sisters in marriage. Wodoy started ceremonial exchange by giving Djunggun a sacred object he had made, and telling Djunggun he must fetch him honey in return. But Djunggun was lazy, and immediately reciprocated with another sacred object to discharge the debt. Then Djunggun started cooking wild honey to eat himself. Wodoy said, 'that's not the way... you're spoiling good tucker'. Wodoy took a stick and killed Djunggun, and they were both transformed into birds (Owlet and Spotted Nightjar).

Although Lévi-Strauss' structural oppositions sometimes appear artificial or strained, he has undeniably drawn attention to widespread patterns in culture.

Cognitive anthropology

During the 1920s the Prague school of linguists, including Jakobson and Trubetzkoy, developed Saussure's theory of the structure of language. Jakobson, who emigrated to the United States, influenced both Lévi-Strauss and the American school of cognitive anthropology (Lévi-Strauss was himself in the United States during the Second World War). Jakobson argued that the sounds of speech are organised into opposed pairs. We intuitively distinguish *fitter* from *sitter*, or *fitter* from *fibber* by identifying which of the alternatives *f/s* or *t/b* the speaker has articulated (Jakobson and Halle 1956: 3). Jakobson thus revived Durkheim and Mauss' hypothesis that the earliest and simplest cognitive structures were based on binary oppositions, a view which harmonised with the development of computer languages based on a binary code. Jakobson further proposed that speech could explore two types of structural relationship. Metaphoric relationships are based on similarity between ideas drawn from different realms. The relationship between a clan and its totem is a metaphoric one. Metonymic relationships are based on what Jakobson called 'contiguity', in which a part stands for the whole: 'the crowned heads of Europe' stand for kings and queens (cf. Jakobson and Halle 1956: 76–80). Leach pointed out that Jakobson's distinction is similar, but not identical, to Saussure's concept of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships (Leach 1976: 15).

The American cognitive anthropologists applied Jakobson's Structuralist concepts to the analysis of kinship terminologies and indigenous taxonomies, thus paralleling the work of Lévi-Strauss without apparently being influenced by him. D'Andrade's history of cognitive anthropology, for example, makes very little reference to Lévi-Strauss

(D'Andrade 1995: 248). The work of the cognitive anthropologists is illustrated by Lounsbury's work on Crow-Omaha kinship terminologies and Frake's study of the classification of illness among the Subanam of the Philippines.

Crow-Omaha kinship terminologies exemplify what Lévi-Strauss referred to as 'intermediate' kinship systems. The society is made up of a determinate number of kin groups, but ego can only apply kin terms to those groups into which s/he or their close relatives have married. Within such related groups, however, ego often calls relatives of different generations by the same term (see Figure 3.2). Thus, if descent is traced through men, ego's mother will come from a different group. All members of the mother's group, regardless of generation, may be called 'mother' and 'mother's brother'. Radcliffe-Brown had interpreted this as an expression of the solidarity of the lineage, that is to say, if ego has the same rights and obligations towards all members of his or her mother's group, all members will be called by the same terms. Lounsbury pointed out that Radcliffe-Brown's functional explanation accounted for the presence of Crow-Omaha terminologies in societies with corporate lineages, but not for their occurrence in other types of society, nor for the fact that many societies with corporate lineages do not have Crow-Omaha kinship terminologies. Lounsbury argued that such terminologies must be understood as expressions of a logical system of thought which could be applied in various functional contexts, and showed that the system could be reduced to a set of three rules for classifying different relatives under common terms (Lounsbury 1964: 353, 384).

Frake describes how disease is a frequent topic of conversation among the Subanam. When people were ill they often sought others' advice to try and diagnose their illness. Frake, who eventually recorded 132 Subanam names for diseases, realised that he would never be able to participate in daily conversations until he had mastered the Subanam classification. The same word could have different meanings when used in different contexts. Frake found that the Subanam classified complaints in a structural hierarchy, part of which is reproduced in Figure 3.7.

Many terms such as 'sore' had a more or less specific meaning, depending on the term to which they were opposed. Frake found that people rarely disagreed on what made one disease different from another. In other words, they agreed on the cognitive structure of the

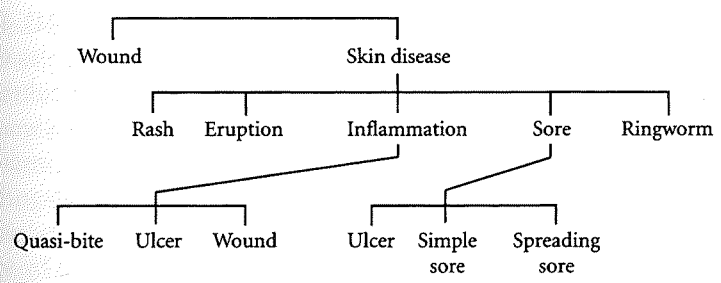


Figure 3.7 Some skin diseases in Subanam

system. If disagreement occurred, it concerned the diagnosis of a particular case: whether an ulcer was 'deep' or 'shallow', for example, or ringworm 'exposed' or 'hidden' (Frake 1961: 130).

Structuralism in Britain

The first, and most influential Structuralist analysis by a British anthropologist was Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (1966). Douglas proposed that Biblical ideas about impurity could be illuminated by studying the place of purity and impurity in the religions of small-scale societies. Douglas argued that beliefs about what is impure and how it should be handled must not be understood as an evolving knowledge of hygiene, but as a series of symbols embedded in a structural system. This was true even of our own notions of dirt: 'upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be . . . our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications' (Douglas 1966: 36).

When the Old Testament book of Leviticus defines certain creatures as unclean, the creatures condemned must be seen as elements in a cognitive scheme. Creatures that live in water but lack fins and creatures which have hands but walk on four limbs are associated with human actions which are morally crooked, or breach social categories, such as theft or incest. The fact that we respond with similar horror to shoes left on the dining table, or food in the bedroom, shows such patterns of cognition to be universal rather than specific to 'primitive' thought.

Leach developed Douglas' application of Structuralism to biblical imagery in his 1976 book *Culture and Communication.* Like the American cognitive anthropologists, Leach also drew upon the work of

Jakobson (Leach 1976: 15, 31; cf. Jakobson and Halle 1956: 81). He explicitly compares the binary opposition of human cognition to the binary code of a computer (Leach 1976: 57). The purpose of cultural logic, Leach argued, is to impose measurable boundaries on a world where, in reality, things merge into each other or change instantaneously. Because the mind depends on creating clear-cut categories and oppositions to make sense of the world, experiencing boundaries and ambiguities induces anxiety. The rites of passage studied by van Gennep impose a transitional phase between leaving the old status and entering the new one to eliminate such anxiety. The meaning of the simplest gestures and the most complex myths can only be understood by discovering the structure of opposed meanings they draw upon. Since, however, the logical operations of the human mind are universal, it should be possible to 'decode' exotic cultures and translate them into the analogous cognitive oppositions of our own culture (Leach 1976: 39).

Criticisms of Lévi-Strauss' theory of myth

How significant is variation in the telling of myth?

Lévi-Strauss' data suffer from the same weakness as Radcliffe-Brown's (see chapter 2). Just as Radcliffe-Brown failed to observe the minutiae of daily life in the field, so the South American myths Lévi-Strauss analyses are derived almost entirely from secondary sources, often from missionaries who may not have been good anthropologists. Lévi-Strauss tends to assume each culture consists of a Durkheimian 'collective consciousness' such that any member can be asked for the 'myth of X' and will give the same account or, where variants occur, they are irrelevant because the same structure is represented (see, for example, Lévi-Strauss 1970: 6–7; 1973: 56–7).

Detailed ethnographic studies have invariably shown the situation to be more complex. Biebuyck's account of the ritual expert among the Lega of the Congo (Central Africa), gives outstanding examples. The expert dazzles his audience by showing how many different interpretations he can derive from one object handled during ritual: the beak of the hornbill may be used to evoke the proverb 'the chick, the tender care of both mother and father', which tells people that even bad children should not be neglected; or the proverb 'Hornbill, the miserable one, has tried to imitate the call of animals', ridiculing a man aspiring to join the Bwami ritual association who has failed to accumulate sufficient wealth. Likewise, the spotted hide of the genet may be used to evoke 'bad kinship, here light coloured, here dark coloured', or to remind people that as the genet's coat is stained by spots, so living people are affected by the deeds of their ancestors (Biebuyck 1973).

Giddens is among those who have argued that structure and performance interact (Giddens 1979). Speech, and the performance of rituals, are real; language, or the structure of the ritual system, are inferred. If participants have learned to construe each others' intentions correctly, then the abstractions which the social scientist describes as *language* or *culture* approximate to reality. But it is through novel performances that culture is changed: each new reading of the hornbill beak or the genet's coat will change the way in which Lega participants at an initiation will understand future occasions when such objects are produced. Giddens calls this process 'structuration'.

Each time a legend is told it similarly takes a particular form which depends on the speaker's interests, and the level at which (s)he wants the anthropologist to understand its references to initiation, ceremonial exchange, clans' title to land and so forth. Members of the community share ideas about what is an acceptable performance of the legend, but there is no standard 'text' against which other performances are judged. Even in the 1950s, Kaberry and Leach showed how different parties to a political dispute in Cameroon or Burma may tell a myth of origin in different ways, so as to justify their claim, and dispute that of their rivals (Kaberry 1957; Leach 1954).

Structuralism as 'code breaking'

A more serious criticism of Structuralism is that it attempts to decode exotic cultures, to show that familiar messages can be found behind unfamiliar signifiers. Lévi-Strauss believed that, by sitting in his study in Paris and reading books about South America, he could penetrate the symbolism of exotic myths. This was because he believed the myths embodied structures that were a direct product of universal cognitive structures, by which the human mind made sense of the world: a belief taken from Durkheim and Mauss' work on primitive classification. The myths made thought possible, by clothing these universal structures in particular imagery. 'Myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact' (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 12), and can do their work equally effectively in the tropical forest or the urban study. The

same themes appearing in the myths of different people can be analysed as variants of a single myth (see, for example, Lévi-Strauss 1973: 35ff.).

Suppose, however, that Amazonian people make sense of the world in a wholly unfamiliar way: what they read into the myth will be very different. In a rather trivial sense this is illustrated by the following anecdote: during the mid-1970s, the Australian government decided that the Australian national anthem would no longer be 'God Save the Queen'. Many Australians argued that the new anthem, whatever it was, should be sung to the tune of 'Waltzing Matilda', since that was recognised throughout the world as a musical emblem of Australia. Reporting the debate, a left-wing paper (*The Melbourne Age*) summarised 'Waltzing Matilda' as 'a song about the eternal struggle of the common man against the forces of property and power', whereas a right-wing paper (*The Australian*), on the same day, characterised it as 'a song describing how a sheep thief is brought to justice by the forces of law and order'. This kind of variation, which is meat and drink to contemporary literary theory, has now been shown to be just as characteristic of Aboriginal Australian culture (Morphy 1984; Keen 1994), and its implications for anthropology will be assessed in chapter 7.

The Structuralist critique of Marxism

Structuralists have convincingly shown that human social action is meaningful because it is expressive of cognitive structures. The German sociologist Weber took issue with Marx on this point (Weber 1930) in his foundational study in interpretative sociology, asking whether people's consciousness was, as Marx had claimed, wholly determined by their place in society, or whether beliefs existed independently of the experience of social interaction. Weber asked why a devout commitment to Protestant Christianity had become associated with the growth of capitalism in Western Europe. He argued that Protestant beliefs, and the practices they advocated such as condemnation of indulgence in the arts and self-denial for future gain, already existed in the teaching of Calvin (1509–64), and were taken up by the emerging middle class during the Industrial Revolution because they could be used to validate the ethic of hard work and investment in the future which such people wished to promote. What was, in Weber's assessment, a chance coincidence of an existing set of beliefs and new economic practices led to the paradox that a class of people engaged in intense material economic activity also became deeply religious.

Despite having published a Marxist analysis of social processes in *Stone Age Economics* (1974), Sahlins turned to a Structuralist analysis of social process two years later, in *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976a). Marvin Harris traces Marshall Sahlins' interest in Structuralism to the time he spent with Lévi-Strauss in Paris between 1967 and 1969, while writing *Stone Age Economics* (Harris 1979: 233). Sahlins contends that 'individuals and social groups, in struggling against one another, transforming nature, or organising their life in common, bring into play a system of concepts which is never the only possible one and which [none the less] defines the very form of their action' (Sahlins 1976a: 20). The environment or subsistence economy can never wholly determine the form of a people's beliefs and values, and yet the way in which they interact will be determined by their values and beliefs. Sahlins considers that non-Western societies pose this problem for analysis in particularly acute terms since, in contrast to Western society, 'Archaic' societies appear relatively unchanging, or impervious to history. How can this be? Sahlins takes the example of the culture of island communities in eastern Fiji, where he had himself conducted fieldwork.

Sahlins found the structure of eastern Fijian culture to be characterised by pairs of opposed concepts. Among the most important were the opposition of chief and commoner, in which the commoners own the land, but the chief protects it and is therefore given tribute, and the opposition between sea and land, in which chiefs are associated with the sea and commoners with the land. A third structural opposition exists between patrilineal descent and matrilateral kinship. Secular authority is transmitted in the male line, but ritual authority is held by the children of women born into the group.

When a Fijian house is built, its form reproduces the structure of the culture in microcosm. It has, for instance, a 'chiefly side' facing the sea, and a 'commoner side' facing the land. Representatives of the chiefly category build the 'noble' side; representatives of the commoner category build the landward side. If only the members of one settlement are involved in building the house, who will all belong to the same moiety, a subdivision of the moiety comes into effect: the higher-ranking semi-moiety takes the part of the chiefs, the other that of the commoners. If more than one community is involved, all members of the chiefly moiety work on one side. 'The house functions as the medium by which a system of culture is realised as an order of action' (Sahlins 1976a: 36).

The same is true, in Sahlins' assessment, of economic exchange. Goods are classed into spheres of exchange according to whether they are considered chiefly or common, sea or land, male or female. The economic basis of society is therefore not determinative of the social order but on the contrary becomes the realisation of a given meaningful order. Economic transactions express and perpetuate culturally ordered social relationships. 'Any cultural ordering produced by the material forces presupposes a cultural ordering of these forces' (Sahlins 1976a: 39). When a new village was created in the late nineteenth century it was founded exclusively by master fishers attached to a chief who were all 'sea/chiefly' people, but the villagers achieved the reproduction of the dual structures of the culture by deeming the first arrivals more landward, and therefore tantamount to commoner, than those who came later.

The approach of Structural Marxism attempts to reconcile Marxism and Structuralism (see chapter 5). Sahlins claims that, in his earlier writing, Marx would not have wholly disagreed with the Structuralist argument. A mode of production includes concepts of exchange and property rights. Marx considered that becoming a slave, or using machinery as capital equipment is only possible within certain social formations (Sahlins 1976a: 133). In Sahlins' assessment, Marx's material determinism grew as he became increasingly committed to bringing about a transformation of society. Although Marx may appear to be referring to mental constructs when he writes of becoming a slave, or an entrepreneur, Sahlins' reading of Marx is an unlikely one. Marx's early writing was explicitly directed against Hegel's theory that social change is driven by transformations in human ideology. Marx's argument was that one can only experience the condition of being a slave or a factory owner where the material conditions of society allow (see Marx 1973 [1857–8]: 156; Marx and Engels 1970 [1845–6]: 42).

Although Sahlins contended in 1976 that the structure of the culture defuses or emasculates the impact of historical change, his later analysis of the colonisation of Hawaii takes a position closer to that of Giddens, conceding that Hawaiian cultural structures entered into a dialectic with the economic and political exigencies of colonial conquest. 'Culture is a gamble played with nature' (Sahlins 1985: ix). Sahlins argues that Captain Cook's first two visits to Hawaii coincided with the feast of the god Lono, which celebrated the regeneration of nature. The Hawaiians' reaction to Cook and his crew, which appeared

bizarre from a Western perspective, was entirely comprehensible when interpreted in the light of Hawaiian belief. The outcome of their behaviour, in particular the spread of venereal disease and the influx of anxious Protestant missionaries who sought to eradicate what they regarded as twenty forms of illicit intercourse, was entirely beyond the Hawaiians' control and ultimately compelled a radical restructuring of Hawaiian culture.

The Structuralists are, however, undoubtedly right in claiming there is an essentially arbitrary dimension to human culture. In the course of human social evolution, patterns of social interaction have been extended well beyond the limits of biological kinship, and languages have developed as elaborate but arbitrary codes for transmitting information by means of sounds made with our mouths. Mary Douglas has applied Structuralist theory to an understanding of economic behaviour in the West. She argues that all advances in social anthropological theory have come about through cutting interpretation free from the material and biological level of existence (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 59): 'Forget that commodities are good for eating, clothing, and shelter; forget their usefulness and try instead the idea that commodities are good for thinking; treat them as a non-verbal medium for the human creative faculty' (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 62).

Cultures have come into being because different communities within the same (human) species have, by consent or negotiation, accumulated distinctive sets of conventional strategies in the organisation of behaviour and the attribution of meaning to actions. This, in Douglas' view, is the proper level for social anthropological analysis. 'Instead of supposing that goods are primarily needed for subsistence... let us assume that they are needed for making visible and stable the categories of culture' (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 59). Sahlins argued that North Americans avoid eating horse and dog because they are classed as almost human, named and loved by their owners, and not because it is uneconomic to eat them. It is, however, questionable whether the freedom to use goods to think with is absolute, and the limits which may be imposed upon it will be considered in the following three chapters.