Unit 14

Lévi-Strauss': Totemism

Contents

Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- describe totemism;

- outline Levi-Strauss' method;

- provide Levi-Strauss' analysis; and

- discuss totemism and classification.

14.1 Introduction

Lévi-Strauss is a well-known French anthropologist known for his contribution to the development of structural anthropology, which incidentally also happens to be the title of one of his popular books (of 1969, published in two volumes). Born on 28 November 1908 in Brussels (Belgium) as the son of an artist, he belongs to an intellectual French Jewish family. Lévi-Strauss studied law and philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris. However, he did not pursue the study of law and got through the public service examination in 1931 studying philosophy. After that he taught at a secondary school. In 1935, he accepted the offer to be part of a French cultural mission to Brazil. From 1935 to 1939, he taught sociology at the University of Sao Paulo. During this period, he read the 1920 edition of Robert Lowie's *Primitive Society*, and decided to conduct his first fieldwork in the Mato Grosso and the Amazon Rainforest. First, he studied Guaycuru and the Bororo; and then, several years later, his fieldwork was with the Nambikwara and Tupi-Kawahib. During the Second World War, he spent most of his time in New York. From 1942 to 1945, he taught at the New School of Social Research. Along with intellectuals like Jacques Maritain, Henri Focillon and Roman Jacobson, he founded the École Libre des Hautes Études, a university-in-exile for French academicians. His friendship with Jacobson, who was one of the leading exponents of linguistic structuralism, helped him shape his own anthropological structuralism. In the U.S.A., he also came in touch with the anthropology and field notes (and other materials) of Franz Boas.

Further Biography

Lévi-Strauss returned to Paris in 1948. He then submitted 'two theses' (one 'minor' and a 'major') for the award of a doctorate from the Sorbonne. They were respectively titled *The Family and Social Life of the Nambikwara Indians* and *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. It was the latter that established him as an important anthropologist, for this book was reviewed favourably in a number of leading journals. In

1950, he occupied the Chair of the Religious Sciences of the École Pratique des Hautes Études, which he re-named 'Comparative Religion of Non-literate Peoples'. In 1959, he assumed the Chair of Social Anthropology at the Collège de France. He established the Laboratory for Social Anthropology (for training students) and a journal, *L'Homme*, for publishing their findings.

Lévi-Strauss was elected to the Académie Française in 1973, which is the highest honour accorded to an intellectual in France. The same year, he also received the Erasmus Award. The Meister-Eckhard Prize for philosophy was conferred upon him in 2003. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and has received several honorary doctorates from universities such as Oxford, Harvard, and Columbia.

For Lévi-Strauss, structuralism implies a search for deep, invisible, and innate structures universal to humankind. These unapparent and hidden structures manifest in surface (and conscious) behaviour that varies from one culture to the other. Conscious structures are a 'misnomer'. Therefore, we have to discover the underlying 'unconscious' structures, and how they are transformed into 'conscious' structures.

In his work on kinship, Lévi-Strauss proposed what has come to be known as the 'alliance theory' ('alliance' is a French word for marriage). It was set against the 'descent theory', which British anthropologists, particularly A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, had put forth. For Lévi-Strauss, incest taboo is the essence of culture. It leads to the formation of relations between groups that exchange spouses (the 'wife-givers' and 'wife-takers'). Lévi-Strauss distinguishes between two kinds of exchange – restricted and generalized. When two groups exchange their spouses over time, it is called restricted, but when more than two groups are related in a cycle of exchange, it is generalized. The implications of both the exchanges in terms of the formation of groups are different.

Lévi-Strauss's seminal work on kinship was succeeded by a widely read account based on his Brazilian fieldwork called *Tristes Tropiques* (1955). Then came two outstanding contributions to the study of classification: *Totemism* (1962) and *The Savage Mind* (1962). After that he devoted himself to the study of myths. Between 1964 and 1970, four volumes of *Mythologiques* appeared, respectively titled *The Raw and the Cooked*, *From Honey to Ashes*, *The Origin of Table Manners*, and *The Naked Man*. In these volumes, he followed a single myth from the tip of South America and followed all its variations from one group to another up through Central America, and eventually into the Arctic Circle. He thus traced the myth's spread from one end of the American continent to the other, and offered its structural analysis.

Lévi-Strauss created a stir in anthropology. Some scholars set aside their own line of enquiry for the time being to experiment with his method, whereas the others reacted more critically to his ideas. But nowhere was his impact total and complete – he could not create an 'academic lineage'. His idea of 'universal structures' of human mind has been labeled by some as his 'cosmic ambition', generalizing about human society as a whole. While British anthropologists (especially Edmund Leach, Rodney Needham) in the 1950s and 1960s were impressed with Lévi-Strauss, they were not in agreement with his abstract search for universal patterns. They tended to apply structuralism at a 'micro' (or 'regional') level. Another example is of the work of Louis Dumont, a student of Marcel Mauss, who in his work *Homo Hierarchicus* (1967) presented a regional-structural understanding of social hierarchy in India. The approach of applying structural methodology at a micro level is known as 'neo-structuralism'.

14.2 Lévi-Strauss' *Totemism*

Lévi-Strauss's *Totemism*, as mentioned earlier, was published in French in 1962. A year later came its English translation, done by an Oxford anthropologist, Rodney Needham, and it carried a more than fifty pages of Introduction written by Roger C. Poole. In appreciation of this book, Poole (p. 9) wrote:

In *Totemism* Lévi-Strauss takes up an old and hoary anthropological problem, and gives it such a radical treatment that when we lay down the book we have to look at the world with new eyes.

Before we proceed with Lévi-Strauss's analysis, let us firstly understand the meaning of totemism.

Box 14.1 Totemism

Totemism refers to an institution, mostly found among the tribal community, where the members of each of its clans consider themselves as having descended from a plant, or animal, or any other animate or inanimate object, for which they have a special feeling of veneration, which leads to the formation of a ritual relationship with that object. The plant, animal, or any other object is called 'totem'; the word 'totem', Lévi-Strauss says (p. 86), is taken from the Ojibwa, an Algonquin language of the region to the north of the Great Lakes of Northern America. The members who share the same totem constitute a 'totemic group'. People have a special reverential attitude towards their totem – they abstain from killing and/or eating it, or they may sacrifice and eat it on ceremonial occasions; death of the totem may be ritually mourned; grand celebrations take place in some societies for the multiplication of totems; and totems may be approached for showering blessings and granting long term welfare. In other words, the totem becomes the centre of beliefs and ritual action.

Reality of Totemism

Lévi-Strauss does not believe in the 'reality' of totemism. He says that totemism was 'invented' and became one of the most favourite anthropological subjects to be investigated with an aim to find its origins and varieties, with the Victorian scholars in the second half of the nineteenth century. By contrast, Lévi-Strauss's study is not of totemism; it is of *totemic phenomena*. In other words, it is an 'adjectival study', and not a 'substantive study', which means that it is a 'study of the phenomena that happen to be totemic' rather than 'what is contained in or what is the substance of totemism'. At his command, Lévi-Strauss has the same data that were available to his predecessors, but the question he asks is entirely new. He does not ask the same question that had been repeatedly asked earlier by several scholars, viz. 'What is totemism?' His question is 'How are totemic phenomena arranged?' The move from 'what' to 'how' was radical at that time (during the 1960s); and Lévi-Strauss's interpretation of totemism was a distinct break with the earlier analyses of totemism (whether they were evolutionary, or diffusionistic, or functional). It is because of this distinctiveness that Poole (p. 9) writes that with Lévi-Strauss, "the 'problem' of totemism has been laid to rest once and for all."

Action and Reflection 14.1

Describe what is totemism. Can you give an example of totem from your environment? Note down your answer in a notebook.

Lévi-Strauss offers a critique of the explanations that had been (and were) in vogue at that time. Firstly, he rejects the thesis that the members of the American school (Franz Boas, Robert Lowie, A.L. Kroeber) put forth, according to which the totemic phenomena are not a reality *sui generic*. In other words, totemism does not have its own existence and laws; rather it is a product of the general tendency among the 'primitives' to identify individuals and social groups with animal and plant worlds. Lévi-Strauss finds this explanation highly simplistic. He also criticizes the functional views of totemism; for instance, Durkheim's explanation that totemism binds people in a 'moral community' called the church, or Malinowski's idea that the Trobrianders have totems because they are of utilitarian value, for they provide food to people. Malinowski's explanation (which Lévi-Strauss sums up in words like 'totems are good to eat') lacks universality, since there are societies that have totems of non-utilitarian value, and it would be difficult to find the needs that the totem fulfils. Durkheim's thesis of religion as promoting social solidarity may be applicable in societies each with a single religion, but not societies with religious pluralism. Moreover, the functional theory is concerned with the contribution an institution makes towards the maintenance of the whole society, rather than how it is arranged. In other words, the functional theory of totemism deals with the contribution the beliefs and practices of totemism make to the maintenance and well-being of society rather than what is the structure of totemism, and how it is a product of human mind.

14.3 The Method

Lévi-Strauss's *Totemism* is principally an exercise in methodology. He does not look for the unity of the phenomenon of totemism; rather, he breaks it down into various visual and intellectual codes. He does not intend to explain totemism, rather he deciphers it – its arrangement. In the first chapter of his book (p. 84), Lévi-Strauss summarizes his methodological programme, which is as follows:

1) Define the phenomenon under study as a relation between two or more terms, real or supposed;

2) construct a table of possible permutations between these terms;

3) take this table as the general object of analysis which, at this level only, can yield necessary connections, the empirical phenomenon considered at the beginning being only one possible combination among others, the complete system of which must be reconstructed beforehand.

We may give here a simple example to understand this from the realm of kinship. Descent, for instance, can be traced from the father or the mother. Let us call the descent traced from the father 'p', and the mother 'q'. Now, let us assign them their respective values: if the side (whether the father's or the mother's) is recognized, we denote it by 1, and if it is not recognized, it is denoted as 0. Now, we can construct the table of the possible permutations: where (1) p is 1, and q is 0; (2) p is 0, and q is 1; (3) p is 1, and q is 1; and (4) p is 0 and q is 0. The first permutation yields the patrilineal society, the second, matrilineal, the third, bilineal, and the last possibility does not exist empirically.

Let us now move to how Lévi-Strauss applies this to totemism. He says that totemism covers relations between things falling in two series – one natural (animals, plants) and the other cultural (persons, clans). For Lévi-Strauss, the 'problem' of totemism arises when two separate chains of experience (one of nature and the other of culture) are confused. Human beings identify themselves with nature in a myriad of ways, and the other

thing is that they describe their social groups by names drawn from the world of animals and plants. These two experiences are different, but totemism results when there is any kind of overlap between these orders. Further, Lévi-Strauss writes: 'The natural series comprises on the one hand *categories*, on the other *particulars*; the cultural series comprises *groups* and *persons*.' He chooses these terms rather arbitrarily to distinguish, in each series, two modes of existence – collective and individual – and also, to keep these series distinct. Lévi-Strauss says that any terms could be used provided they are distinct.

NATURE	Category	Particular
CULTURE	Group	Person

These two sets of terms can be associated in four ways, as is the case with the example given earlier.

	1	2	3	4
NATURE	Category	Category	Particular	Particular
CULTURE	Group	Person	Person	Group

Totemism thus establishes a relationship between human beings (culture) and nature, and, as shown above, this relationship can be divided into four types, and we can find empirical examples of each one of them.

Box 14.2   Nature and Culture

Lévi-Strauss says that the example of the first is the Australian totemism ('sex totems' and 'social totems') that postulates a relationship between a natural category and a cultural group. The example of the second is the 'individual' totemism of the North American Indians. Among them, an individual reconciles himself with a natural category. For an example of the third combination, Lévi-Strauss takes the case of the Mota (in the Banks Islands) where a child is thought to be the 'incarnation of an animal or plant found or eaten by the mother when she first became aware that she was pregnant' (p. 85), or what has come to be known as 'incarnational totemism'. Another example of this category may come from certain tribes of the Algonquin group, who believe that a special relation is established between the newborn child and whichever animal is seen to approach the family cabin. The fourth combination (group-particular combination) may be exemplified with cases from tribes of Polynesia and Africa, where certain animals (such as garden lizards in New Zealand, sacred crocodiles and lions and leopards in Africa) are protected and venerated (the sacred animal totemism).

The four combinations are equivalent. It is because they result from the same operation (i.e., the permutation of the elements that comprise a phenomenon). But, in the anthropological literature that Lévi-Strauss examines, it is only the first two that have been included in the domain of totemism, while the other two have only been related to totemism in an indirect way. Some authors have not considered the last two variants of totemism in their discussion. Here, Lévi-Strauss observes that the 'problem of totemism' (or what is called the 'totemic illusion') results from the 'distortion of a semantic field to which belong phenomena of the same type.' The outcome of this is that certain aspects (or the first and second types of totemic phenomena) have been singled out at the expense of others (the third and fourth types), which gives an impression of 'originality' and 'strangeness' that they do not in reality possess.

14.4   The Analysis

The fourth chapter of Lévi-Strauss's *Totemism*, titled 'Towards the

Intellect', presents the work of Raymond Firth, Mayer Fortes, Edward Evans-Pritchard, and the second theory of totemism (of 1951) that Alfred Radcliffe-Brown gave, as containing the germs of a correct interpretation of totemic phenomenon making possible a fully adequate explanation of its content and form. Radcliffe-Brown's first theory of totemism was utilitarian and culture-specific, quite like Malinowski's theory. By comparison, Firth and Fortes do not succumb to an arbitrary explanation or to any factitious evidence. Both of them think that the relationship between totemic systems and natural species is based on a perception of resemblance between them. In Fortes's work on the Tallensi, animals and ancestors resemble each other. Animals are apt symbols for the livingness of ancestors. Fortes shows that among the Tallensi, animals symbolize the potential aggressiveness of ancestors.

Lévi-Strauss applauds the attempt of Firth and Fortes, for they move from a point of view centred on subjective utility (the utilitarian hypothesis) to one of objective analogy. But Lévi-Strauss goes further than this: he says 'it is not the resemblances, but the differences, which resemble each other' (p. 149). In totemism, the resemblance is between the two systems of differences. Let us understand its meaning with the help of an example: the relationship between two clans is like the relationship between two animals, or two birds, or an animal and a bird. It is the difference between the two series that resembles each other.

Action and Reflection 14.2

Read section 14.4 and point out the views of Firth and Fortes. How do they differ from Levi-Strauss' position? Write your answer in a note book.

Undoubtedly, Firth and Fortes make a good beginning in interpreting totemism. But we have to move from external analogy (the external resemblance) to internal homology (the identity at the internal level). For Lévi-Strauss, it is Evans-Pritchard's analysis of Nuer religion that allows us to move from the external resemblance to internal homology. Among the Nuer, the twins are regarded as 'birds', not because they are confused with birds or look like them. It is because, the twins, in relation to other persons, are 'persons of the above' in relation to 'persons from below'. And, with respect to birds, they are 'birds of below' in relation to 'birds from above'. The relationship between twins and other men is like the relationship that is deemed to exist between the 'birds of below' and the 'birds of above'. It is a good example of the 'differences which resemble each other' in the 'two systems of differences'. If the statement – or the code – 'twins are birds' directs us to look for some external image, then we are surely bound to be led astray. But if we look into the internal homology in the Nuer system, then we will be closer to the understanding of the code.

At this level, Lévi-Strauss introduces the second theory of Radcliffe-Brown that has taken a decisive and innovatory step in interpreting totemism. Instead of asking, 'Why all these birds?', Radcliffe-Brown asks: 'Why particularly eagle-hawk and crow, and other pairs?' Lévi-Strauss considers this question as marking the beginning of a genuine structural analysis. In fact, Radcliffe-Brown observes in this analysis of totemism that the kind of structure with which we are concerned is the 'union of opposites.'

Evans-Pritchard and Radcliffe-Brown, thus, recognize two principles of interpretation which Lévi-Strauss deems fundamental. In his analysis of Nuer religion, Evans-Pritchard shows that the basis of totemic phenomena lies in the interrelation of natural species with social groupings according to the logically conceived processes of metaphor and analogy. In his second theory, Radcliffe-Brown realizes the necessity of an explanation which
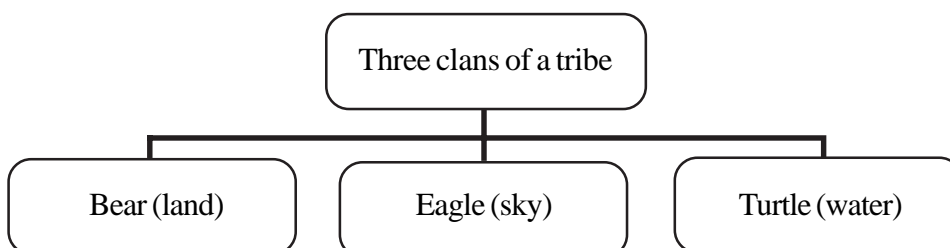
illuminates the principle governing the selection and association of specific pairs of species and types used in classification. These two ideas, Lévi-Strauss thinks, help in the reintegration of content with form, and it is from them that he begins.
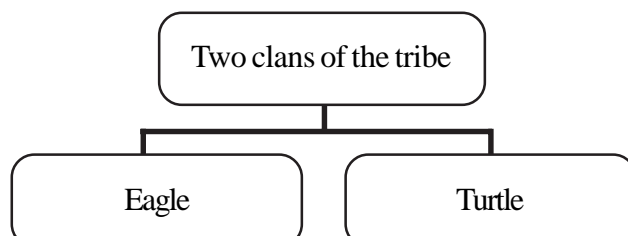
14.5 Totemism and Classification

Totemism, for Lévi-Strauss, is a mode of classification. Totemic classifications are regarded as a 'means of thinking' governed by less rigid conditions than what we find in the case of language, and these conditions are satisfied fairly easily, even when some events may be adverse. The functions that totemism fulfill are cognitive and intellectual: 'totems are not good to eat, they are good to think'. The problem of totemism disappears when we realize that all humans, at all points of time, are concerned with one or the other mode of classification, and all classifications operate using mechanisms of differentiation, opposition, and substitution. Totemic phenomena form one aspect of a 'general classificatory ideology'. If it is so, then the problem of totemism, in terms of something distinct that demands an explanation, disappears. Jenkins (1979: 101) writes: 'Totemism becomes analytically dissolved and forms one expression of a general ideological mode of classification.'
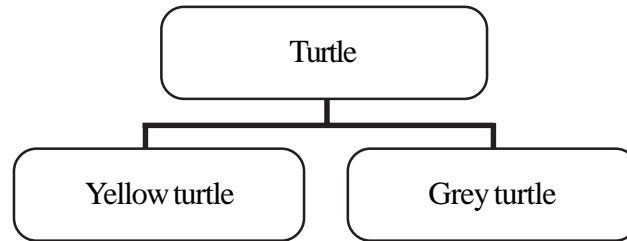
But it does not imply that totemism is static. Although the nature of the conditions under which totemism functions have not been stated clearly, it is clear from the examples that Lévi-Strauss has given that totemism is able to adapt to changes. To illustrate this, a hypothetical example may be taken up. Suppose a society has three clans totemically associated respectively with bear (land), eagle (sky), and turtle (water). Because of demographic changes, the bear clan becomes extinct, but the turtle clan enlarges, and in course of time, splits into two parts. The society faces this change in two ways. First, the same totemic association might be preserved in a damaged form so that the only classificatory/symbolic correlation is now between sky (eagle) and water (turtle). Second, a new correlation may be generated by using the defining characteristics of the species turtle to distinguish between two clans still identified with it. This becomes the basis for the formation of a new symbolic opposition. If, for example, colour is used, yellow and grey turtles may become totemic associations. Yellow and grey may be regarded as expressive of the basic distinction between day and night perhaps. A second system of the same formal type as the first is easily formed through the process of differentiation and opposition (see diagrams of the first and second systems below).

First SystemThree clans of a tribe

Second System

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┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│              Turtle             │
└─────────────────────────────────┘
         ┌───────────┴───────────┐
┌──────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────┐
│   Yellow turtle  │   │    Grey turtle   │
└──────────────────┘   └──────────────────┘
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As is clear, the opposition between sky (eagle) and water (turtle) is split and a new opposition is created by the contrast of day (yellow) and night (grey). In this way, the problems caused by demographic imbalances (i.e., extinction of a clan or the enlargement of the other) are structurally resolved, and the system continues.

14.6 Conclusion

To sum up, totemic phenomena are nothing but modes of classification. They provide tribal communities with consciously or unconsciously held concepts which guide their social actions. Food taboos, economic exchanges and kinship relations can be conceptualized and organized using schemes which are comparable to the totemic homology between natural species and social characteristics. Lévi-Strauss (1962) also extends this analysis to understand the relation between totemism and caste system. Totemism is a relationship between man and nature. Similarities and differences between natural species are used to understand the similarities and differences between human beings. Totemism, which for people is a type of religion, is a way of understanding similarities and differences between man and nature. That is the reason why Poole says that with Lévi-Strauss, the problem of totemism has been laid to rest once and for ever. To quote Poole (p. 9):

If we talk about 'totemism' any more, it will be in ignorance of Lévi-Strauss or in spite of him.

14.7 Further Reading

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