

Structuralism

Lévi-Strauss and E. Leach

Introduction

Structuralism emerged as one of the most influential theoretical approaches in 20th-century anthropology. Originating in linguistics, it was brought into anthropology mainly through the work of **Claude Lévi-Strauss**, a French anthropologist. He proposed that beneath the surface diversity of human cultures lie universal structures of the human mind. Later, British anthropologist **Edmund Leach** expanded and critiqued Lévi-Strauss's ideas, adding dynamism and flexibility to the structuralist approach.

1. Intellectual Foundations of Structuralism

Structuralism in anthropology did not appear in isolation. It was shaped by a rich intellectual heritage that came from **linguistics, sociology, and philosophy**. Claude Lévi-Strauss, the pioneer of structuralist anthropology, drew deeply from these disciplines to build a theory that could explain the **hidden logic behind cultural practices**.

a. Ferdinand de Saussure's Structural Linguistics

Saussure, a Swiss linguist, radically changed how scholars understood language. He proposed that **language is not just a collection of words**, but a **structured system of signs**. Each word (or *sign*) has two parts:

- **Signifier** – the sound or written form (e.g., the sound "bat")
- **Signified** – the idea or concept it refers to (e.g., the flying mammal or sports bat)

Saussure emphasized that meaning is **not derived from individual words in isolation**, but from their **relationships with other words**. For example, the meaning of "bat" is shaped by how it differs from "cat", "rat", or "mat".

This principle of "**difference**" as the basis of meaning became central to Lévi-Strauss's anthropology. Just like words derive meaning from contrast, Lévi-Strauss believed that **cultural practices gain meaning through their position in a system of differences**—for instance, raw vs. cooked, male vs. female, sacred vs. profane.

b. Émile Durkheim's Concept of Society and Social Facts

Durkheim, a key figure in French sociology, introduced the idea that **society is more than just a group of individuals**. It has its own **reality**—a set of rules, values, and collective representations that exist **outside the individual** but deeply shape their behavior.

He called these collective patterns "**social facts**". Examples include customs, religious beliefs, and laws. These are not personal opinions; they are **shared norms** that are **passed down through generations** and followed by members of society.

Lévi-Strauss built on Durkheim's idea by suggesting that these social facts are not just rules to follow, but **expressions of deeper mental structures**. For example, the taboo on incest found in many societies is not just a social rule—it reflects a structural need to form alliances between different groups through marriage.

Durkheim also emphasized the **stability and cohesion** of society. Lévi-Strauss took this further by proposing that myths, kinship systems, and rituals help **maintain this stability** by organizing human relationships according to unconscious patterns.

c. Marcel Mauss's Concept of Total Social Facts

Marcel Mauss expanded on Durkheim's legacy by looking at how **single practices can express multiple aspects of society simultaneously**. His most famous work, *The Gift*, analyzed gift-giving among indigenous communities of the Pacific and North America.

He argued that **gifts are not just economic transactions**—they are loaded with meaning. A gift involves:

- **Economic exchange** (something is given and expected in return)
- **Legal obligation** (there are rules about who gives to whom)
- **Religious and moral meanings** (refusal to accept a gift can be an insult or taboo)
- **Social bonds** (gifts build relationships between clans or tribes)

He called such practices "**total social facts**" because they touch every aspect of life.

Lévi-Strauss was deeply influenced by this holistic view. He believed that **myths, marriage systems, and food rules** are also total social facts. They are not random customs, but **symbolic acts that reflect the deeper logic of society**.

d. Lévi-Strauss's Synthesis: Binary Oppositions and Mental Structures

Drawing from Saussure, Durkheim, and Mauss, Lévi-Strauss developed a powerful idea: that the **human mind works through structured oppositions**, and that this logic is **universal across cultures**.

He proposed that **deep cognitive structures**, based on **binary oppositions**, underlie the way we think and organize society. These oppositions include:

- Nature / Culture
- Male / Female
- Raw / Cooked
- Life / Death
- Self / Other

These binaries are not always visible on the surface, but they shape **myths, rituals, kinship, taboos, art, and social rules**.

For example, in Amazonian mythology, stories often show a human turning into an animal or vice versa. This reflects the opposition between **nature and culture**, and myths serve to **mediate and resolve these tensions**.

Lévi-Strauss argued that just as **grammar organizes language**, these mental structures **organize culture**. Every culture, no matter how different, operates with **rules that create meaning through contrast and structure**.

2. Claude Lévi-Strauss: Core Ideas

Claude Lévi-Strauss revolutionized anthropology by suggesting that human cultures, no matter how diverse they appear on the surface, are structured by the same basic cognitive processes. He believed that **our minds are wired to think in terms of opposites**, and this binary logic shapes not just how we speak but also how we live, relate, and imagine.

a. The Mind as a Structuring Agent

Lévi-Strauss held a fundamental belief: **the human brain naturally organizes experience through opposites**—such as hot/cold, light/dark, raw/cooked, male/female. This binary thinking, he argued, is universal and unconscious. We do not invent it—we inherit it as part of being human.

This mental tendency is not limited to science or logic—it appears in **rituals, myths, kinship rules, totemic systems**, and even food practices. For example:

- In many indigenous societies of North and South America, animals are classified as either **“wild” or “domesticated”**, **“male” or “female”**, or **“sky” or “earth”** creatures.
- In African rituals, such as those among the Dogon of Mali, oppositions like **dry/wet, pure/impure**, and **living/dead** structure the entire ceremonial order.

Thus, Lévi-Strauss proposed that **culture is not chaotic or random**, but ordered by invisible mental structures—just like language is governed by grammar.

He called this approach **structuralism**: a method of studying cultures by uncovering the underlying logical relationships beneath surface customs. His goal was not to

document isolated facts, but to **map the mental blueprints** that guide cultural creation everywhere.

b. Structural Analysis of Kinship

One of Lévi-Strauss's earliest and most influential works was *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949). In this book, he argued that kinship is not just about blood relations or inheritance laws—it is about **symbolic communication** between social groups.

According to him, the most basic form of kinship is **the exchange of women between groups through marriage**. This practice, which he called the “**alliance theory**”, turns biological reproduction into a **social contract**. When a man marries a woman from another group, it creates a lasting bond between their families or clans.

He drew a parallel between **kinship rules and linguistic rules**. Just like grammar shapes how we form sentences, marriage rules shape how societies build alliances.

Case Study: Australian Aboriginal Cross-Cousin Marriage

Lévi-Strauss was particularly fascinated by **Australian Aboriginal societies**, which had intricate kinship systems. In many of these groups, a man is expected to marry his **mother's brother's daughter**—a practice known as **cross-cousin marriage**.

At first glance, this may seem like a strange custom. But Lévi-Strauss showed that this rule:

- Promotes **reciprocity** between different clans
- Ensures **circulation of women**, avoiding hoarding within one group
- Maintains **social equilibrium**, as every group both gives and receives

These alliances, he argued, were **not driven by economics or biology**, but by a **deep structural logic**—just like how a sentence is shaped by unseen grammatical rules.

Even in non-Aboriginal societies, we find similar principles. In some South Indian castes, rules of **preferential marriage** and **endogamy/exogamy** reflect this idea of building alliances through structured rules of exchange.

c. Myths and the Structural Logic of the Human Mind

After kinship, Lévi-Strauss turned his attention to **myths**, which he believed were a window into the deepest structures of human thought. His famous series, *Mythologiques*, especially *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964), analyzed hundreds of myths from the Amazonian tribes of South America.

He discovered that, beneath their colorful and varied surface, myths **followed predictable structures**. These stories were **not random or spontaneous**, but carefully organized to **resolve basic oppositions** in human life.

Core Idea: Myths as Cognitive Maps

He argued that every myth tries to **bridge a contradiction**—such as:

- Nature vs. Culture
- Human vs. Animal
- Life vs. Death
- Order vs. Chaos

These myths act like a **mental tool** for societies to process and resolve tensions.

Case Study: The Raw and the Cooked

Lévi-Strauss focused on how Amazonian myths contrasted “**raw**” and “**cooked**” food to symbolize the transition from **nature (untouched wilderness)** to **culture (domesticated order)**.

- **Raw food** = nature, chaos, wildness
- **Cooked food** = culture, control, civilization

A myth about a man stealing fire from the gods to cook his food is **not just a story**. It is a **symbolic expression** of how humans moved from natural existence to cultural life—how we crossed the boundary from being like animals to becoming fully human.

These myths, he argued, are **structured like language or music**. Just as music has recurring themes and variations, myths use a kind of **symbolic grammar**.

Lévi-Strauss introduced the concept of “**mythemes**”—the smallest meaningful units of myth, like phonemes in language.

For example, in stories from Native American groups in Canada and Brazil, a hero may journey from a wild place to a village, fight a monster, marry a local girl, and bring back a gift. These narrative steps repeat across geographies but express the **same underlying logic—transformation through structured opposition**.

Summary of Core Ideas

Concept	Explanation	Example
Binary Opposition	Human mind thinks in opposites	Life/death, male/female, raw/cooked
Kinship as Structure	Exchange of women = symbolic alliance	Australian cross-cousin marriage

Myths as Structure	Myths resolve deep mental contradictions	Raw vs. Cooked in Amazonian myths
Mythemes	Smallest unit of myth structure	Hero's journey steps (departure, test, return)
Culture as Grammar	Like language, culture is governed by rules	Kinship rules = syntactic system

3. Edmund Leach: Structuralism with Flexibility

Edmund Leach, a prominent British anthropologist, was deeply influenced by Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism but introduced a more dynamic and historically sensitive approach. While he accepted the core idea that human culture is structured by binary oppositions and symbolic logic, **Leach rejected the idea that these structures were timeless, static, and universally fixed.**

Instead, Leach argued that **structures change, rituals are politically charged, and myths reflect real social transformations.** In this way, he added **movement and flexibility** to structural anthropology.

a. Political Systems and Rituals: The Case of Highland Burma

One of Leach's most important contributions came through his ethnographic work among the **Kachin and Shan communities of Highland Burma** (present-day Myanmar), which he described in his famous book *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954).

Shifting Between Social Forms

Leach observed that the Kachin society did not always maintain a fixed structure. Instead, it **oscillated between two major forms:**

- **Egalitarian Gumsa system** (associated with the Kachin): decentralized, relatively equal, governed by consensus and kinship networks.
- **Hierarchical Gumlao system** (associated with the Shan): centralized, ranked, resembling feudal kingdoms with hereditary chiefs and rigid status lines.

These were **not two separate societies**, but two **phases of the same society**. Over time, Kachin communities would shift between them depending on external pressures (like war, migration, or trade) and internal tensions (such as disputes over status or resources).

This insight challenged the structural-functionalist idea (like Radcliffe-Brown's) that **societies are stable, self-equilibrating systems**. Leach showed that **social structures are fluid**, shaped by political strategies and historical change.

Rituals as Instruments of Change

Rituals, in Leach's view, were not merely symbolic enactments of structure (as in Radcliffe-Brown), nor were they just expressions of deep oppositions (as in Lévi-Strauss). Instead, **rituals were used by people to shift between structures, to justify power, or to contest hierarchy**.

For example:

- **Kachin chiefs** used **ritual sacrifices and elaborate feasts** to assert their authority and transform a more equal society into a more hierarchical one.
- Conversely, **egalitarian factions** used **other rituals to de-legitimize hierarchy** and emphasize communal solidarity.

Thus, rituals were part of the **politics of structure**, not just its reflection. Leach brought attention to how **people use symbols strategically**, not just unconsciously.

b. Structuralism in Myth and Symbolism

Leach did not reject Lévi-Strauss's approach to myth entirely. In fact, he agreed that **binary oppositions** were central to myth-making. However, he believed that **meanings in myths are never fixed or universal**—they depend on **context, power, and historical change**.

Myths in South Asia: Ramayana and Mahabharata

Leach explored well-known epics such as the **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata**. He demonstrated that these epics, although filled with rich narrative variation, also reflect **underlying oppositions**:

- **Order vs. Chaos**
- **Obedience vs. Rebellion**
- **Purity vs. Pollution**
- **Kinship vs. Individual Will**

For instance, in the *Ramayana*, the central conflict between **Rama (order, duty, dharma)** and **Ravana (chaos, desire, adharma)** plays out as a structural opposition. But Leach was quick to point out that **regional versions** of the *Ramayana* (such as in Southeast Asia) often **reinterpret these binaries**, sometimes even presenting Ravana as a noble figure.

This proves that **myths are not frozen codes**. They are **flexible narratives** that communities reshape depending on social, religious, or political needs.

The Bible as Myth: Genesis and Structural Analysis

In *Genesis as Myth* (1969), Leach applied structuralist analysis to **Judeo-Christian texts**, particularly the Book of Genesis. He argued that, just like tribal myths, the Bible also functions through a structure of oppositions:

- **Obedience (Adam before the fall) vs. Disobedience (Eve and the fruit)**
- **Purity (Garden of Eden) vs. Sin (Exile and human struggle)**
- **Life (Creation) vs. Death (Fall, punishment, mortality)**

He demonstrated that the Biblical myth of creation does **not lose its mythic structure just because it is part of a major religion**. It functions to explain cosmic and social order through binary opposition, just like Amazonian or Indian myths.

But again, Leach stressed that **meanings change**: the way Genesis is interpreted in **modern America** differs significantly from how it was understood in **medieval Europe** or in **Jewish Rabbinic traditions**. Context is everything.

Key Differences from Lévi-Strauss

Concept	Lévi-Strauss	Edmund Leach
Structure	Deep, universal, timeless	Flexible, shifting, historically contingent
Function of Myth	Resolves contradictions in thought	Reflects and shapes political and social changes
Role of Ritual	Symbolic expression of mental order	Strategic tool in political transformation
Binary Oppositions	Central and unconscious	Present, but influenced by context and variation

4. Case Studies and Examples

a. Totemism: Ordering Society through Symbolic Difference

Totemism is a social system in which human groups, especially clans, associate themselves with specific natural elements—usually animals or plants—believed to have spiritual or symbolic significance. This practice is widespread among **Australian Aboriginal societies** and **Native American tribes**, among others.

Lévi-Strauss, in his book *Totemism* (1962), challenged earlier anthropologists who assumed that **totems were chosen because of specific characteristics of animals** (such as bravery, strength, or fertility). Instead, he argued that **totems function to structure society symbolically**, not to imitate the natural world.

Symbolic Oppositions, Not Animal Behavior

In one example from **Australian Aboriginal tribes**, clans might identify with different animals:

- One clan may be associated with the **eagle**, a sky-dwelling predator.
- Another with the **crocodile**, a water-dwelling creature.

This contrast is not about actual relationships with these animals but about **organizing symbolic differences**:

- **Sky vs. Water**
- **Predator vs. Ambush hunter**
- **Above vs. Below**
- **Day (eagle's flight) vs. Night (crocodile's stealth)**

These **binary oppositions** are then mapped onto **social divisions**—such as which clans can marry, what rituals they perform, or how they relate to one another in ceremonies. Thus, **totemism becomes a system of classification** that helps people think about **difference, relation, and balance** in human society.

b. Myths from South America: Transformations of the Same Structure

Another powerful demonstration of Lévi-Strauss's method comes from his multi-volume work *Mythologiques*, where he studied hundreds of myths from **South American Indigenous communities**, including the **Bororo, Mundurucu, Tukano**, and **Tupinambá** peoples.

He noticed that **different tribes told different myths**, but many had **similar deep structures**. These myths **transformed into one another** like variations of the same sentence in language—what linguists call **paraphrases**.

A Mythical Transformation: Man into Jaguar

One such myth tells the story of a man who gradually transforms into a **jaguar**—a fierce and dangerous animal that lives in the forest and hunts at night. This transformation is not merely a magical event but a **symbolic resolution** of a deeper contradiction in society.

The opposition here is:

- **Human (culture, kinship, rules)**
vs.
- **Animal (nature, wildness, instinct)**

By turning into a jaguar, the man **crosses a boundary** between social life and wild nature. The myth explores what happens when **order gives way to chaos**, or when **cultural norms break down**.

But instead of telling us this abstract idea directly, the myth “**says it**” through **symbols and transformations**. In the same way that grammar lets us say the same thing in multiple ways (e.g., “The boy chased the dog” vs. “The dog was chased by the boy”), **myths rearrange their parts**—characters, events, symbols—while preserving **the same underlying logic**.

Lévi-Strauss called the smallest meaningful unit of a myth a **mytheme** (like phoneme in language). These mythemes—such as man, animal, transformation, taboo, food, kinship—combine and rearrange to express how the human mind **mediates contradictions** between opposites: life/death, male/female, raw/cooked, self/other.

6. Criticisms

a. Overemphasis on Universality

Structuralism assumes that all human minds organize the world through binary oppositions (like nature/culture or life/death). However, many anthropologists argue that not all societies follow this logic. Cultural meanings are diverse, fluid, and often non-binary. Boasian and post-structural scholars highlight variations in worldview and symbolism. This critique warns against flattening rich cultural differences into universal templates.

b. Neglect of History and Social Change

Structuralism treats cultures as timeless systems, focusing on static patterns. It downplays the effects of colonialism, capitalism, and political change. Societies evolve through struggle, adaptation, and historical experience. Anthropologists like Eric Wolf and Sherry Ortner called for historically grounded approaches. Without attention to history, structuralism risks becoming ahistorical and abstract.

c. Eurocentrism and Western Bias

Structuralism reflects European rationalism—drawing from Saussurean linguistics and French philosophy. Its logic-based model may not apply to all cultures equally. Indigenous cosmologies often blur categories rather than oppose them. Critics argue that structuralism imposes Western ways of thinking onto non-Western societies. This raises concerns about ethnocentrism and theoretical dominance.

d. Ignoring Human Agency

Structuralism portrays people as passive followers of cultural codes. It neglects how individuals interpret, manipulate, and transform structures. Raymond Firth and Marshall Sahlins emphasized creativity and decision-making in everyday life. People are not just products of structure—they are also its makers and critics. This view paved the way for practice theory and more dynamic models of culture.