Evans-Pritchard and Segmentary Structures Amongst the Nuer: a Reappraisal

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Introduction

Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, — E-P as he was affectionately known — was one of the most renowned and influential anthropologists of his time (1902-73). Social anthropology was his passion and he remained truly committed to the advancement of social anthropology. E-P is, as one of his Oxford colleagues commented, “the one figure with whom more than anything else, all that is creative in Oxford Social Anthropology had come to be identified” (Jain 1974: 3). This opinion is reaffirmed in the remark of another scholar that “it is bound to be said more than once that his death (1973, Sept 10th) marked the end of an epoch in Social Anthropology” (Lienhardt, 1974: 304). Beidelman writes that E-P made important contributions in varied fields ranging from the anthropology of politics, kinship, and history, to economics, religion and folklore (1974: 559). Among the many themes with which he is associated, the ‘segmentary’ interpretation of Nuer society takes a place of honor. I quote: “The problems on which he left a really profound mark are those of the lack of centralized order among the Nuer, and those of the lack of reason among the Azande” (Gellner 1981: xiv).

The objective of this paper is to assess the general contribution of E-P’s analysis of segmentary structures among the Nuer. The paper consists of three parts. The first provides a very brief life-sketch of E-P. The second focuses on E-P’s analysis of segmentary structure among the Nuer. The final section attempts at a critical appraisal of E-P in the light of the preceding discussion.

1. A Brief Life-Sketch

E-P was born in Sussex in 1902, the second son of late Rev. Thomas J. Evans-Pritchard. From Oxford University where he took a B.A in modern history, he attended the London School of Economics where he obtained his doctorate in Anthropology under Prof. E.R.A. Seligman, and subsequently taught from 1928-36. Indeed, it was Seligman who was responsible for launching him on his anthropological career.

E-P was influenced by C.G and B.Z Seligman, B. Malinowski and A.M. Hocart, and E. Durkheim. He virtually ignored Max Weber throughout his career, despite their common concern with religious and political institutions. He rejected Radcliffe-Brown’s quest for a science of society and what he regarded as the latter’s simplistic functionalism although he owed a debt to the French sociological tradition. Social anthropology, for E-P was a moral and natural science and he considered that the role of the anthropologist was akin to that of the historian (Beidelman 1979: 176-77; Srinivas 1973: 323).

E-P’s distinguished academic career included services in various capacities to the Fuad University of Cairo (Fuad), as well as Yale and Cambridge. In 1946, he succeeded Radcliffe-Brown as Professor of Social Anthropology at Oxford, only retiring from that Chair in 1970. M. N. Srinivas remembers him as “a stimulating teacher though his methods were unorthodox” (1973: 323). A recipient of many honors, including a knighthood in 1971, he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy, a Member of the Institute of Francaise de Socologie, and Foreign Honorary Member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

E-P was a prolific writer and published in an immensely varied number of journals from 1927-71. Considering ethnography as the true measure of one’s worth as an anthropologist, he produced rich ethnographic accounts of the Azande and Nuer, an innovative study of the Sanusi, a study of the Anuak and numerous research papers on other peoples.

His first major work, Witchcraft, Oracles and Sorcery among the Azande (1973), is “one of the most profoundly original and influential studies in all Social Anthropology” (Beidelman 1979: 172). It was this remarkable work that established his reputation as an anthropologist of the first order. But it was The Nuer -A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People (1940) that is undoubtedly E-P's the best known book among his Nuer trilogy. M. N. Srinivas describes it as “a model of descriptive analysis of the social structure of a transhuman people in relation to their ecology and modes of subsistence” (1973: 322). His other important works include Social Anthropology (1951), Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer (1951 Nuer Religion (1956), Essays in Social Anthropology (1956 Theories of Primitive Religion (1965) and The Position of Women in Primitive Societies and Other Essays in Social Anthropology (1965).

Dumont compliments E-P's style saying that he wrote with ‘the elegance born of precision and clarity’ (1975: 329). However, Beidelman remarks that E-P's “style also merit consideration, for while the prose is forceful, it is also deceptively lucid, terms often being pregnant with ambiguities... his works conceal values which are revealed only through intensive and repeated consideration” (1979: 180).

2. E-P's Analysis of Segmentary Structure among the Nuer

Though E-P's field work with the Nuer lasted about six months, his publications on Nuer are a tribute to the impressive quality of his fieldwork and his energy. He opens the book The Nuer by raising the question: ‘how a society can have law and order without the conventional institutions of governance.’ In answering this question, Mary Douglas asserts that E-P worked out a model because “there was nothing else to use from existing political theory or anthropology to explain an ordered society kept in being without the exercise of centralized coercive power” (1980:64).

2.1 The Social Idiom of the Nuer — A Bovine Idiom

The Nuer are pre-eminently a pastoral people who tend to define all social processes and relationship in terms of cattle. E-P asserted that their social idiom is a bovine idiom and calls the relationship between cow and Nuer “symbiotic,” because “cattle and men sustain life by their reciprocal services to one another” (1968: 36). In simple words: “Where his cattle are, is the Nuer’s home. Nuer's life is of necessity migratory and transhumance. The rhythm of their migration is modulated by three problems namely, scarcity or excess of water, vegetation and abundance of insect life (E-P 1968: 63).” “It was evident that the Nuer, having a very simple material culture, are highly dependent on their environment...the pursuit of a pastoral life in difficult conditions made a fairly wide political order necessary if they were to maintain their way of life. This political order is provided by the tribal structure” (1990: 102).

2.2 “Ordered Anarchy”

The Nuer are interesting in that amongst them the kinship ties that usually provide order to society are from a political point of view extremely fluid. Some might say that they represent a very primitive form of human social organization. In fact, E-P described the Nuer social system as ‘ordered anarchy’. He described Nuer social life in this term because in spite of the absence of the absence of evolved governing institutions, kin-based or otherwise, he found that their social life was actually strongly regulated. Order existed amongst the Nuer on the basis of a remarkable variant of what the early Romans called mores. Mary Douglas paraphrases the Nuer’s regulated social life in the following words:

Every man knows what is due to him. A tally of compensation for insults and injuries is known, any transaction in rights is affirmed by a corresponding transfer of livestock. If a debtor fails to pay, his creditor can walk into a strange camp unhitch a beast of corresponding value, and safely walk away with it, no friends of the debtor lifting a finger to harm or stop him (1980: 64).

Douglas proposes further that this social regulation has to be analyzed at three levels: 1. The diffusion of power over balanced segments 2. The maintenance of the balance 3. The supportive thought system that values each individual self (1980: 65).

2.2.1 Diffusion of Power Over Balanced Segments of the Tribe
The system by which power is diffused among the Nuer is summarized in the phrase ‘structural opposition’. It stands for the way in which the units of the society are divided according to clearly known orders of magnitude from the highest level to the smallest political units i.e., the local communities. In the smallest political units, when a Nuer feels insulted or wronged he does not take advice or seek arbitration but challenges the man and invites him to a duel. As there is no other way of settling the dispute, a man’s courage is his only protection against aggression. Consequently children grow up to regard skill in fighting the most necessary accomplishment and courage the highest virtue.

There are many conventional regulations which moderate day to day life. They include among others that spears be used in a fight between different villagers, but no participation of a third person in a fight or in initiation ceremonies is permitted by a ‘man of the cattle’ (Douglas 1980: 65; Fortes and Patterson 1975: 10).

Nuer tribes are split into segments. The largest segment is the primary tribal unit. These may be conceptually divided into secondary tribal segments, and the latter in turn consist of territorial segments. The tertiary unit comprises a number of village communities composed of kinship and familial groups. Thus the tribe is divided into segments and each segment shares the characteristics of the tribe itself: “Each has its distinctive name, its common sentiment, and its unique territory... so that the spatial divisions of the rains are maintained and may be accentuated during the drought... The smaller the tribal segment, the more contagious its members, the more varied and intimate their local ties, and the stronger therefore its sentiment of unity” (E-P 1968: 142). The elementary principles of Nuer organization, according to E-P, were: 1. Political cohesion varies with variations of political distance and is also a function of structural distance in genealogical terms. 2. Each segment is further segmented. 3. There is opposition between all the segments of parts (Douglas 1980: 66).

**Political Cohesion**

E-P defined political groups in terms of values, “by the relations between their segments and their interrelations as segments of a larger system in an organization of a society in certain social situations (E-P 1968: 149). Therefore political groups are not to be seen as parts of a fixed framework within which people live. He describes their political system as:

An equilibrium between opposed tendencies towards fission and fusion, between the tendency of all groups to segment and the tendency of all groups to combine with the segments of the same order. The tendency towards fusion is inherent in the segmentary character of Nuer political structure, for although any group tends to split into opposed parts these parts must tend to fuse in relation to other groups, since they form part of a segmentary system (E-P 1968: 147).

Thus fission and fusion in political groups are two constitutive aspects of the segmentary principle. The Nuer tribe is to be perceived as an equilibrium between these two contradictory yet complementary tendencies. As E-P explains:

“Physical environment mode of livelihood, poor communication, a simple technology, sparse food supply — ecology — to some extent explain the demographic features of Nuer political segmentation. But the tendency towards segmentation must be defined as a fundamental principle of their social structure” (E-P 1968: 147). On the basis of the above analysis of the Nuer political group, we can deduce the following fundamental principles of Nuer political structure.

i. A man can be a member of a group and yet not a member of it. Political relations are relative and dynamic. They tend to confirm to certain values in certain situations. The values are determined by the structural relationships of the persons who compose the situation. Consequently a man’s place in a dispute depends on a particular structural position of his group.

ii. The nearer the people are to the Nuer in mode of livelihood, language and customs the more intimately the Nuer regard them, and the more easily they respect them (E-P 1968: 131). Accordingly the structural cleavage is the least between Nuer and Dinka, wider between Nuer and Shilluks and still wider between Nuer and Koma and Burun.
iii. The smaller the local group the stronger the sentiment uniting its members. Consequently the village sentiment will be the strongest and the tribal sentiment will be the least. (E-P 1968: 157).

The force of law is not the same for all Nuer, but weakens with the structural distance between parties to the dispute. E-P illustrates the relative nature of Nuer laws with reference to the payment of blood-cattle and the settlements of feuds. He describes:

Feuds are settled with comparative ease in restricted social milieus where the structural distance between the participants is narrow, but they are more difficult to settle as the milieu expands to reach the intertribal boundaries where no compensation is offered or expected. The degree of social control over feuds varies with the size of the tribal segment (E-P 1968: 157).

2.5 Each Segment is Further Segmented

This can be illustrated by reference to the Nuer clans. A clan is the largest group of agnates who trace their descent from a common ancestor and between whom marriage is forbidden and sexual relations are considered incestuous. The clan is a highly segmented genealogical structure and the genealogical segments of a clan are its constituent lineages. These lineages are distinct groups only in relation to each other. ‘M’ is a group only in opposition to ‘L’, and ‘H’ exists in opposition to ‘I’, and so on. As there is constant fusion of collateral lineages with each other, E-P says, “lineage values are essentially relative like tribal values....The structural form of clans remain constant while actual lineages at any point in time are highly dynamic, creating new bifurcations and merging old ones” (E-P 1968: 199-200). In fact Nuer organization is segmentary in the sense that higher levels of political organization are achieved through integration of equivalent lower-level parts.

2.6 The Opposition Between All the Segmented Parts

The third elementary principle of Nuer organization is that there is opposition between all the segmented parts. E-P describes how under a system of complementary opposition among local lineage segments in one dispute between parties A and B, all those more closely related to A than to B would stand with A against B, and vice versa, but at another time they could be fighting among themselves, while at yet another time they could all be combining against a third party. E-P calls this opposition between segments a principle of contradiction in political structure. The essence of this principle is that “there is always contradiction in the definition of a political group, for it is a group only in relation to other groups. “A tribal segment is a political group in relation to other segments of the same kind.” (E-P 1968: 147).

2.2.2. Maintaining the Balance of Regulation

The blood-feud, E-P points out, is a structural relationship between the political segments through which the form of Nuer political system is maintained. He describes a feud as “a relation between parties between whom there is an unsettled debt of homicide which can be settled either by vengeance or by payment of compensation” (E-P 1968: 159). The feud among the Nuers, maintains the structural opposition, defines the units, identifies the borders of lasting solidarity. However, applying the recurrent principle, it can be stated that “the likelihood of a homicide developing into a blood-feud, its force, and its chances of settlement are thus dependent on the structural inter actions of the persons concerned” (E-P 1968: 158).

Despite its relatively low level of complexity as a means of governance, kinship is nevertheless basic to Nuer social organization. As E-P says, kinship values are “the strongest sentiments and norms in Nuer society and all social interrelations tend to be expressed in a kinship idiom” (E-P 1968: 228). Generally, community relations are kinship relations, and may be modified by Adoption, Assimilation or by Mythic belief. On the structural unity and distinction E-P writes:

In the absence of political institution providing central administration in a tribe and co-ordinating its segments, it is the system of lineages of its dominant clan which gives its structural distinction and unity by the association of lineage values, with a common agnatic structure, with the segments of a territorial system. In the absence of a chief or king, who might symbolize a tribe, its unity is expressed in the idiom of lineage and clan affiliation (E-P 1968: 236).
2.2.3. The Supportive Thought System

The Nuer thought system channels personal pride into the defence of political boundaries amidst the proliferation of social segments. As E-P says:

The ordered anarchy in which they live accords well with their character, for it is impossible to live among Nuer and conceive of rulers ruling over them. The Nuer is a product of hard and egalitarian upbringing, is deeply democratic, and is easily roused to violence. His turbulent spirit finds any restraint irksome and no man recognizes a superior...That every Nuer considers himself as good as his neighbor is evident in their every moment. They strut about like lords of the earth, which, indeed, they consider themselves to be. There is no master and no servant in their society, but only equals who regard themselves as God’s noblest creation (E-P 1968: 181-82).

The preceding quotation aptly notes that Nuer pride knows no limits. However, the Nuer live in a routinized tension of pride and humility, because the relativity of their moral code places them in ambiguous and conflicting situations.

2.3 The Absence of any Accumulation of Power

In the preceding sections, we have explained how the ‘segmentary principle’ involves a process of social fission and fusion at various levels. The essence of the segmentary structure among the Nuer is that there is no accumulation of power at any point in their social structure. There is no social contract limiting individual liberties, but regulation is there all the same. There is no accumulation of power but power is diffused throughout the whole system (Douglas 1980: 64). As E-P noted, some situations might appear to represent ‘accumulation of power’ but in reality they are not.

2.3.1 Social differentiation

The social categories of diel, rul and jaang create social differentiation among the Nuer. For instance, the diel have prestige rather than rank and influence rather than power. However, it must be remembered that this social differentiation is on a ritual and domestic plane rather than a political one, and that social differentiation is only indicated in certain situations. As far as the political structure is concerned all members of a segment are essentially undifferentiated in relation to other segments.

2.3.2 The Age-Set System

E-P perceives the Nuer age-set system as “a fuller exemplification of the segmentary principle which is so evident a quality of social structure. The structural distance between any two age-sets is the social relation between those sets and the determinant of behavior pattern between their members” (1968: 255). The points worth noting here with reference to age-set system are the following:

i. Though there are behavioral differences between the sets there are no specific political function attached to them.

ii. The local community appears to outsiders as an unsegmented whole, but individuals see themselves as members of exclusive units (age-sets) in relation to others.

iii. There is a degree of mobility among the age-set groups, which as a natural consequence falls within the over all ‘relative’ nature of segmentary structure.

2.3.4 Prophets and Priests

E-P reports that there is a consensus among the Nuer that prophets are of recent origin. He sharply distinguishes priests from prophets. However, it must be noted here that the prophets do stand out within the segmentary structure of the Nuer. E-P writes:

For the first time [in the case of prophets] a single person symbolized, if only a moderate degree, and in a mainly spiritual and uninstitutionalized form, the unity of a tribe, for prophets are tribal figures....They
were not a mechanism of tribal structure...but were pivots of federation between adjacent tribes and personified the structural principle of opposition in its widest expression, the unity and homogeneity of Nuer against foreigners (1968: 189).

Methodological Significance

In the light of E-P’s analysis of segmentary structure among the Nuer, anthropologists speak of the following methodological significance of E-P’s approach.

2.4.1 The Shift from Function to Meaning

David Pocock characterizes the new anthropological approach that arose from E-P’s works as a shift from function to meaning (1971: 74). Louis Dumont acknowledges this shift as E-P’s most essential and least questioned contribution to anthropological theory (1975: 333).

The social aspect of the Nuer language provided a clue to this new kind of analysis. The researcher examines the relativities implicit in the language of the Nuer. What is meaningful and systematic to the Nuer becomes apparent to the observer. For instance, the word cieng gets its meaning from the context in which it is used. It is significant that the word is defined in terms of “the relativity of the group values to which it refers. The emphasis is not on the one correct meaning for the word here but the point of reference/meaning to be understood in their relatedness as constituting meaningful system.” (E-P 1968:135). It is here that one realizes the shift from function to meaning.

2.4.2 A Structural Model

The essence of E-P’s structural method is

“to make some part of the social life intelligible by showing how it is integrated with other parts” (Pocock 1971: 104). E-P illustrates his analysis of Nuer concepts of time as a kind of structural analysis. Time is, among the Nuer, “a conceptualization of the social structure, and the points of reference in the system of reckoning are projections into the past of actual relations between groups of persons. It co-ordinates relationships rather than events” (Pocock 1971: 104).

Time reckoning among the Nuer is determined by the rhythm of their social activities. The daily tasks of kraal, seasonal movements like weeding are the points of reference for each day and for longer periods respectively. Therefore, they have no abstract system of time reckoning but conceive the passage of time as, “the succession of activities and their relations to one another....The larger periods of time are almost entirely structural” (Pocock 1971: 103). Consequently, E-P says that “intervals between events are not reckoned in time concepts as we understand them, but in terms of structural distance, of the social difference between groups of persons” (Pocock 1968:103).

2.4.3 The Meaning of ‘Opposition’

E-P speaks of opposition between segments of Nuer society. But this opposition is not to be understood as antagonism or conflict. To say that a given group defines itself in opposition to another does not necessarily mean that these groups are in conflict. The opposition that E-P refers to stands mid-way between Radcliffe-Brown’s understanding of it as antagonism in an analytical sense and Levi-Strauss’ understanding of it as ‘complementary opposition’ in a dialectical sense.

Critical Assessment

One of E-P’s central achievements is precisely in the location of order in seeming pre-state anarchy. E-P brought the Nuer onto the anthropological map and made a significant contribution in coining the phrase ‘ordered anarchy,’ which aptly summarizes the situation of Nuer. Over and above his general contributions that we have already mentioned from a methodological perspective, we intend to, merely add a few more reflections in this chapter.

3.1.1 Improvement on Durkheim’s Notion of Segmentation
Ernst Gellner acknowledges that E-P had improved on Durkheim’s notion of segmentation by adding a vertical dimension to it. In segmentary societies, according to Gellner, resemblance is not merely seen at horizontal level but on the vertical level also. Larger units also resemble their own segments and they resemble their sub-segments. Gellner adds that Durkheim “did not quite see that unless segmentation was both lateral and vertical it could not be credited with solving the problem of the maintenance of order in societies largely devoid of political (and other) specialization and division of labour. E-P effectively completed this supremely important argument” (1981: xiv).

3.1.2 E-P’s Work as a Forerunner of Political Anthropology

Louis Dumont considers The Nuer to be the starting point of a vast literature on the political organization of tribal societies, revealing as it does kinship roles at a low level of political development. He points out that E-P, unlike Mauss who spoke of ‘politico-domestic organization’, understood system as a set of relationships between groups, especially between territorial and political groups and descent groups (clans and lineages). Consequently, Dumont argues that E-P has succeeded in extending the category of politics to societies which have no differentiated political institutions: in a given territory there can be order without rule (1975: 336).

3.1.3 Echoes of E-P’s Study of the Nuer

One can easily discern the influence of E-P in the work of a number of renowned sociologists and anthropologists. Two great authorities on the ‘caste system in India’ have rightly acknowledged the influence and the contribution of E-P’s analysis of segmentary structures on their understanding of castes. Dumont’s understanding of castes as ‘parts of a very particular type of hierarchical whole’ can be traced partially to E-P’ (Appadurai 1988: 43). For instance, in Homo Hierarchicus, Dumont writes: “Sometimes we are concerned with one caste opposed (in fact and idea) to another. Sometimes we see the same caste become segmented into sub-castes etc. For this reason we shall employ the words ‘segments’ and ‘segmentation’ only to designate the division or subdivision of a group into several groups of the same nature but smaller scale” (1970: 42). In another place he admits that the idea of dominant caste came to him from studying the dominant lineage in Africa.

M.N. Srinivas has also acknowledged that the toponymic roots of the segmentary nature of Indian castes come from E-P’s analysis of Nuer a society. A reflection of ‘segmentary principle’ is noticeable in what Christine M. C. Ellis says about Mahajan Jatis: “Although there is a tendency for ourselves to perceive the Mahajan Jatis as more or less unitary, each is subdivided into further, smaller groupings with segmentation proliferating according to the spatial context of the social relations under consideration.” It is further noticeable in her general sociological hypothesis that ‘the greater the degree of segmentation the less the stress upon hierarchy as a principle of integration’ (Carrithers and Humphrey 1991: 83). One can easily trace the impact of E-P’s Nuer while reading N.K. Singh’s observation that “other communities do not perceive Jains as divided since they view all Jains as one collectivity. This creates a duality in which the perception by others tends to regard all Jains as a ‘whole’, while the Jains themselves emphasize the ‘parts’ more than the whole (Carrithers and Humphrey 1991: 141).

The same can be said for nearly all castes and religious traditions in India, but one must remember that in Indian society the caste is hierarchical and a there is a ring of permanency about the with sub-castes.

3.2 Critics of Evans-Pritchard’s Work

A few criticisms have been aimed at E-P’s work.

3.2.1 Nuer or Naath?

Hardly worth mentioning in this context is Aidan Southall’s claim that the name ‘Nuer’ is incorrect. E-P admits that he used that name because it was hallowed by a century of use, although as Southall points out ‘Nuer’ is what the Dinka call the Nuer. The Nuer call themselves as Naath i.e., people (1976: 483).

3.2.2 Convergence between Priests and Prophets
E-P insisted on the sharp distinction between Nuer priests and prophets, but other observers have argued that in reality there was a great measure of convergence and that the two categories overlap. Beidelman’s conclusion seems more from the grass root level: ‘priest can become prophet and vice versa. The former moves to increase authority through charisma while the latter moves to confirm and legitimate his power through routinized status’ (Southall 1976: 484).

3.2.3 A Probable Tautology

Sahlins makes a general observation that the relations between the parts of a system does not account for the existence of the system (or its parts) — unless one accepts the tautology that the system is what it is because that is the way it is. He goes further to protest that E-P does not seem to break out of the tautological circle, and quotes the following two references from E-P to illustrate his claim that E-P seems to be saying that the Nuer have a segmentary organization because of the segmentary principle of their organization:

Physical environment, way of livelihood, mode of distribution, poor communications, simple economy, etc., to some extent explain the incidence of (Nuer) political cleavage, but the tendency towards segmentation seems to be inherent in the political structure itself ....

.... to some extent explain the demographic features of Nuer political segmentation, but the tendency towards segmentation must be defined as a fundamental principle of their social structure (1961: 383).

In general, however, few scholars have accepted Sahlins’s criticism.

3.2.4 Some Unfortunate Consequences of The Nuer

Dumont regrets that The Nuer opened the way for a trend in contemporary anthropology which in his view is inadequate. The tendency to identify and describe ‘political systems’ as a separate category of anthropological explanation of the organization of simpler societies has unfortunately, in Dumont’s opinion, led the way for too simplistic an approach amongst subsequent ethnographers (1975: 338), who have tended to underplay the link between kinship and political organization in the evolution of tribal societies. E. L. Peters’ objection can also be included here. His objection is that the lineage system was for a while elevated above its true status as a component of social life to a position of universal dominance in all kinds of social relationships that Fortes came to claim, when writing of the Tallensi, that every sociological problem ‘hinges on the type of lineage system’ (1967: 279). I will leave it to the readers to evaluate this criticism for themselves.

3.2.5 Change of Emphasis from Synchronic Study

Writing on the current fashion in social anthropology, Southall comments that there is a shift from the synchronic study of structural relations between groups to an interest in processes and in individuals, with an effort to find formulations and frames of reference within which all three targets of research can be seen as meaningfully integrated. E-P’s work differed from the current theoretical fashion in that it was rooted in a synchronic study of structural relations between groups (1976: 488), and I would suggest that there is still a need to keep this methodological approach in mind.

3.2.6 Robertson Smith’s Influence on E-P

At times Mary Douglas appears too naive in her book on Evans-Pritchard, published under that name (Douglas, 1980). For instance, she writes, “He worked out the model because there was nothing else to use from the existing political theory or anthropology to explain an ordered society kept in being without the exercise of centralized, coercive power” (1980: 64). But the available evidence goes against her assertion: his approach was not wholly new, although his work popularized it. Thus, Beidelman writes that E-P — verbally — conceded that the (Nuer) model derived largely from W. Robertson Smith’s Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia (1855) (Beidelman 1979: 178). Secondly Paul Dresch categorically rules out any doubt that The Nuer owes a great deal to Robertson Smith. Basing himself on Beidelman’s review, he points to the similarities of analysis such as the identity of collectivities in terms of agnation,
division and cohesion according to circumstance, the recurrence of the same organizing principle at each level of collective identity, and the definitional importance of blood-feud (1988: 53).

4. From 'Professional Assertions' to 'Personal Affirmations'

Approaching the last leg of my paper, I would like to conclude by saying that my own opinions coincide with the observations already expressed by three other scholars. These are: G. Lienhardt’s opinion that Social Anthropology was not merely a hobby but indeed was E-P’s passion; E. Gellner’s view that he (E-P) left a truly profound mark on the problem of the lack of centralized order among the Nuer. This may well represent an important stage in the evolution of tribal from band type societies; and that along with A. Southall I see this article, as he saw his article, as offered in further homage to the creative richness and continuing stimulus of the work of a great contributor to ethnography and anthropological theory, Edward E. Evans-Pritchard.

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