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Comparative Anthropology and Evans-Pritchard's Nuer Photography

Photographic Essay

John Hutnyk

what has been achieved by use of the comparative method... Certainly little
(Evans-Pritchard 1963:24-5)

In spite of the continually changing style of anthropology, a recurrent set of problems underlies all anthropological endeavor. One such problem concerns the relation between the anthropologist's description of particular cultures and societies and their generalization about human culture and society (Holy 1987:1)

For all the heat generated in the debates about the authenticity of ethnography, it seems that anthropology goes on in pretty much the same ways as always. A major theme that can be traced, in some manner or other, through all anthropological pronouncements, is that of comparison. There can be no doubt that this singular but massively broad interest informs various manifestations of anthropology from Herodotus onwards. There are many forms of comparison - self compared to other, other to other, and so on - and there has been in the past much discussion of the problems of comparison, the validity of comparisons, and of the generalizations, with varying degrees of boundedness, to which comparisons so often give rise. Why then does it seem that comparison, theory, generalization (I am not suggesting these as synonyms, but as linked in important ways) have not attracted the same degree of attention that ethnography, in its 'crisis of representation', has attracted?

Things have become so difficult in anthropology that we are no longer able to be sure of our descriptions, let alone having time to worry about what we might or might not make of what we describe. Of course at first this will look like a false separation to writers who have long learnt that every description is already an interpretation - but since interpretation has been going on, with considerable prestige, and immunity from the doubts raised - even doubts raised by 'master' interpreters like Geertz (1988) - it does seem that it will be

necessary to 'extend' the critique of ethnography, the crisis of representation, to areas of anthropology not yet subjected to this kind of review.

All this may be just another way to get at the cross-cultural, mixed, or hybrid nature of all 'anthropological' knowledge. To ask how descriptions feed into comparisons is to look closely at two levels of what it is that anthropologists do. Certainly they write, as so many writers have recently pointed out, but they write more than singular descriptions of 'the native's point of view' no matter how, or when, you look at it, and no matter how rhetorical, constructed or textual those descriptions will be - one way of 'crossing' cultures. Another kind of mixed aspect of anthropological writing is how impressions of indigenous realities are fed into impressions of various degrees of human reality - what it is to be Balinese, Nuer, African, North American, male or female, young or old, or simply alive on this planet (in the past, the present or various post-modern futures), what it is to perform, to believe, to initiate, to domesticate, to construct, to mythologize, to romanticize, to narrate. What it is, in short, to do things that humans tend to do - this is always, except in the (impossible) purest forms of ethnocentric exclusivism, a 'cross-cultural' thing. None of these mixtures should be thought to be without complications, without complex power relations, struggles, prejudices and privileged points of view - anthropology would be nothing without its unbalanced history - but nonetheless, there can be no doubt that anthropology is always somehow 'mixed up'.

Descriptions are always already comparative. Otherwise why describe? One thing we have learnt, surely, from our cherished 'crisis of representation' is that there can be no "non-comparative analytic description", even if some authors still write as if that were their ideal (Holy 1987:8). This can be illustrated by simply drawing attention to the kinds of images that are used in analytical description, for example, our descriptions of the knowledge of others is so often geographical, following a dominant habit of our own thought, as Salmond has pointed out (1982), that we cannot consider the idea of 'fields' of knowing to be abstract analytical categories, but specifically cultured ones - leaving open the debate as to whether geographical conceptions of knowing need be 'universal' - which, I have argued, they are not (Hutnyk 1987).

comparison between systems can only be useful if the facts are truly comparable, and we cannot know what facts are comparable until the facts themselves are adequately described (Tyler 1969:15)

Comparison and interpretation are difficult when cultural realities are recognized as complex, they become near to impossible when description of those 'realities' is recognized as a thoroughly subjective textualized event. Little wonder that popular anthropological discussion has shied away from these difficulties. Cultural or social 'facts' are interpretations, made by anthropologists and by those that anthropologists - to varying degrees - listen to. Interpretations can always be disputed, and so, the second or even third level, or higher (deeper? thicker?), interpretations that appear in comparative theoretical work are all the more worthy of close examination.

Comparisons, generalizations and theory are, of course, not always, if ever, the same, and sometimes they might lead to quite different problems. Comparisons, for example, can be made to stress irreducible differences between something in one place as against something in another, generalizations might well be ironic, merely heuristic, or radically bounded in ways that limit

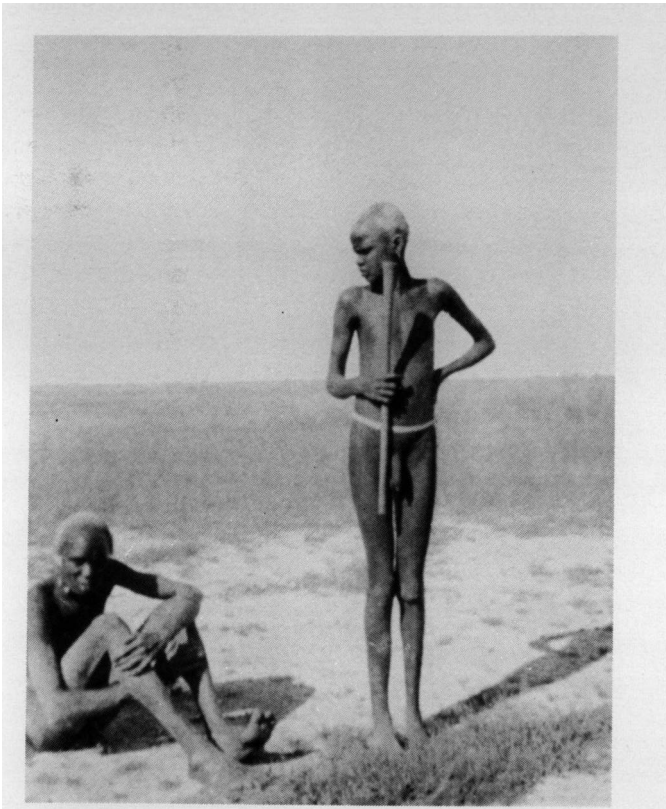


photo 1

their generality to a point where they can be thought of as hardly general at all (is localized comparison better than global varieties? could we have relativist evolutionary schemes? and would there be any point to them?), theory too can be variously defined and has quite recently been liberated from the obligation to provide total explanations, and yet much of anthropology uses all three of these terms in very conventional ways. Whatever limitations there are in looking only at the common or conventional (convenient) usages of such concepts, it is still useful to attempt some close analysis of their popular and populist implications.

cross-cultural and intra-cultural comparisons aim to discover the cultural logic that underlies, articulates or generates the observable diversity of cultural forms and patterns (Holy 1987:12)

Whatever the ambition of comparison, even when it is not aimed at identifying generalities, there must at some level be a shared context or framework within

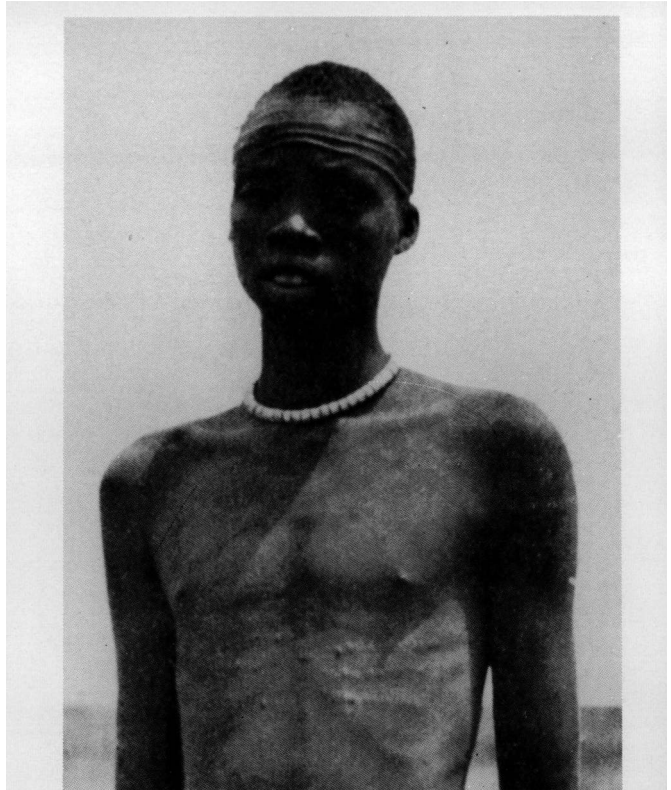


photo 2

which differences may be articulated. It seems that there is always an outside, always some space from which, or upon which, the whole project will be - usually without acknowledgement - anchored. What, then, are the signs of this 'anchorage' in anthropology?

Mark Hobart suggests that comparison "underpins - explicitly or implicitly - almost all the ways of talking about other cultures" (Hobart 1987:22), he goes on to show how the analysis of political systems presupposes both the comparability of forms of power and the "generality of systems" (ibid), and how terms like ritual and religion "commonly imply universal criteria of rationality by which [we] distinguish true knowledge from symbols or ideology" (1987:22-3). He ties all this to a confusion that links anthropology to something called science, and with the idea that it is facts that anthropologists compare, rather than competing discourses (1987:23). Instead what we need is a 'poetic realism' with multiple perspectives and reflection upon how

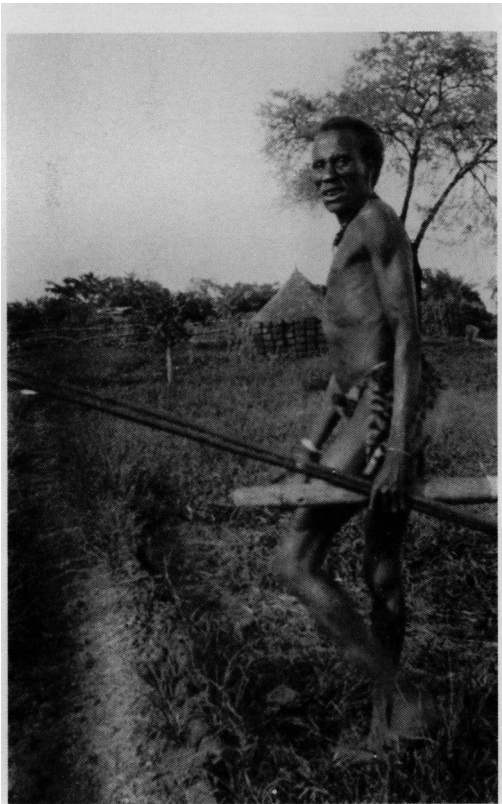


photo 3

discourses overlap. It is not clear just how overlapping is to be so different from comparison, but the work Hobart envisages can be taken as part of a necessary 'clearing' work that anthropology must apply to its most sacred conceptions - ritual, religion, power, system, science and the like.

It is often supposed that when anthropologists compare, they do so by treating societies and institutions as distinct 'things'. In looking at the language they use, however, we find that they rely heavily on key metaphors to make sense of likeness and difference. The result of such metaphorical linking is that they tend to see continuity in phenomena, a kind of chain-of-being (Parkin 1987:52).

Parkin goes on, beyond these heavy keys and linking chains, to describe a broad metaphorical history within anthropological theory. Society as a body was inadequate - who was the head and who the limbs? - followed by the machine metaphor of interrelated parts - which left out the mind - followed by structuralism - too rigid - replaced by society as infinitely interpretable text



photo 4

- graphically too rigid - and at last the dynamic of dialogue (Parkin 1987:53). Each metaphor is more than just a word, they refer to the particular perspectives of the various moments of anthropological theory. The small core, or key, metaphor unlocks the secrets of whole viewpoints. Whether 'discourse' is to be the culmination of this series (perhaps because with this anthropology peters out into 'mere' talk) remains undecided. It is clear however that some things have not changed so much, as Parkin shows: "discourse is itself implicitly and sometimes explicitly comparative" (1987:54). Responses, obviously enough, are to a degree matched (compared) by speakers to the statements to which they are replies: even a reply which contradicts is founded on a comparison since to compare may also be to find difference. Hence, dialogue is inherently comparative.

Towards the end of his article, Parkin writes that "the idea of culture as a constantly reworked product would not have led us into the blind alleys of

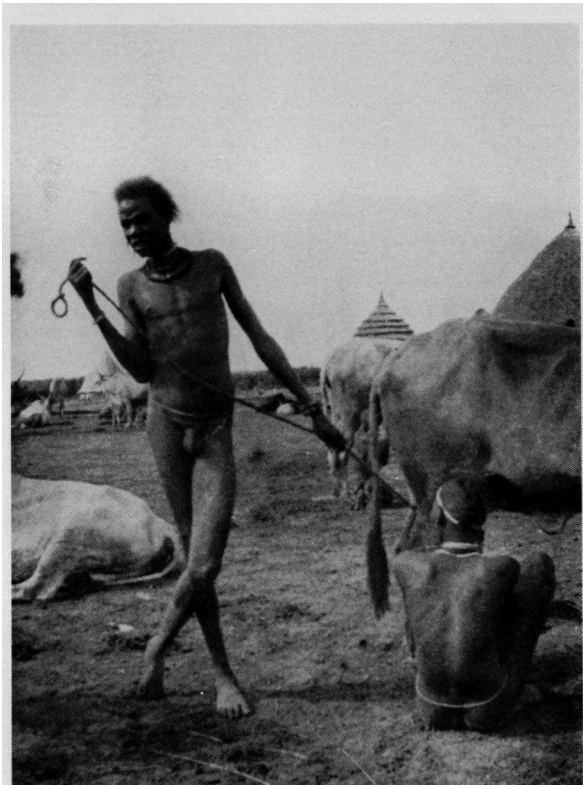


photo 5

relativism and universalism" (Parkin 1987:66). With this in mind, along with another suggestive statement: "metaphor is comparison is metaphor" (ibid), it might be useful to consider the relationship of, say, the particular and the general, the described and the compared, the ethnography and the theory - with the expectation that the 'picture' of anthropology that emerges might well be quite different, perhaps incomparable, to that with which we commonly think we work.

To do this, it might be feasible to start with the work of the very famous, to start with the hardest case in the most (currently) conventional way. Evans-Pritchard is said to have been very skeptical about the possibilities of comparison. His ethnography *The Nuer* is among the most popular of those subjected to the rereading of the 'crisis of representation' promoters. Therefore, to follow the procedure of 'crisis criticism', with the intention of leading towards a consideration of comparison, seems to offer the best possibilities.

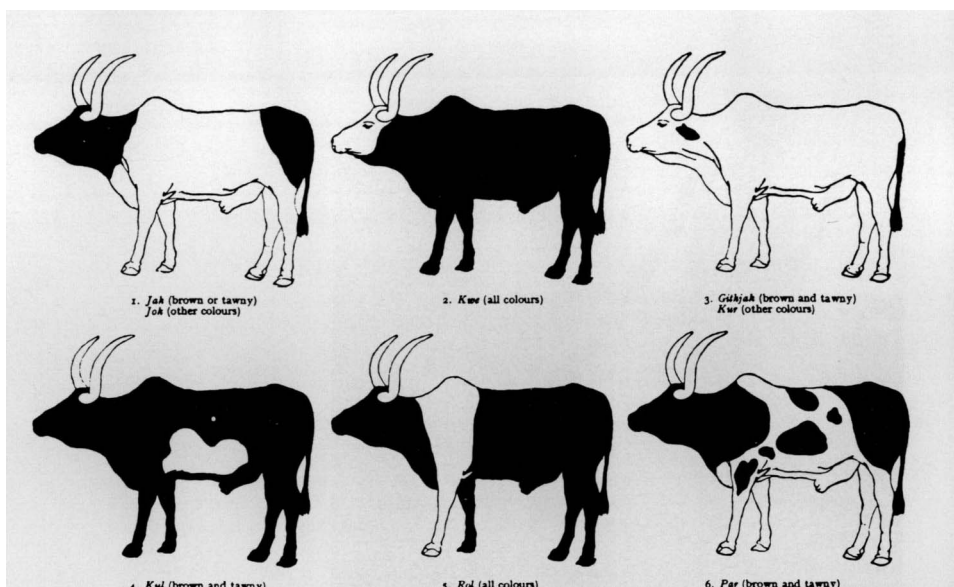


illustration 1

The Nuer is a foundational text in the discipline, given to numerous undergraduate and introductory reading classes, 'conjured' with in so many comparative and theoretical discussions, the model of a monograph - there is every reason to begin 'clearing' in the Savannah environment of the Sudan. And since it was signs, images of reality, and viewpoints, that were considered in the foregoing discussion, it will be with the most image-like images of Evans-Pritchard's book that the examination proceeds.

Anthropologists do not claim to be great photographers, but there is no reason why their photography cannot be subject to critical review. Perhaps the rules of interpretation need to be different, perhaps the aesthetical and technical registers will need to be set with lower expectations, perhaps anthropological photography is not 'art' (but, of course, it is, or what's art?), but certainly there are ways to 'read' ethno-photo-graphic presentations.

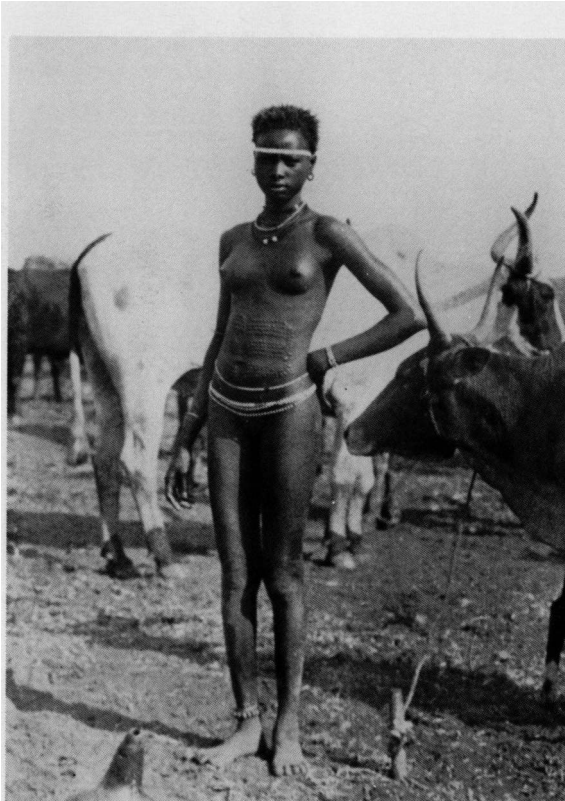


photo 6

Evans-Pritchard's 1940 monograph includes numerous representative examples. What follows is 'instamatic anthropology'.

Facing page 68 (photo 1) photograph captioned: "Sandy Ridge with Cattle Byres on the Horizon" shows two males (full frontal nudity making interpretation of gender less than subtle) who, although far more visible than the byres on the horizon - absurdly so, we have to take the author's word that those grey dots are byres, what else might they be? - these men do not rate identification in the text. These anonymously foregrounded natives are species 'Nuer', undifferentiated, ready for comparison. The creation of a general identity of the unit of study is an early necessity. Impersonal generalization achieves this with the ceremony of naming - the title identifies the collective Nuer, allowing soon after the glosses: "Nuer say...", "Nuer believe...", "Nuer do...". One of the stranger, unexplained, things that they do is sit around and pose for snapshots miles away from cattle or byres.



photo 7

Facing page 256 (photo 2) the photograph captioned simply: "Youth", and facing page 262 (photo 3), captioned: "Man", make these generalizations even more profound. It is Man in general, Youth in general, that is captured naked here. Man is identified carrying weapons in a 'warrior type' stereotypification recently questioned by Johnson (1981). Note especially the facial expression and ask how this snap was achieved, how attention was gained, how spontaneous it all is?

Facing page 8 (photo 4) the smiling warrior doing something exotic with his friend, captioned "Youth (Eastern Gaajok) fastening giraffe-hair necklace on friend". The generic types here are 'Youth' and 'Friend' - early in the monograph the common humanity of friendship is located alongside the uncommon context of giraffe infested Africa, with necklace charm linking the images together.

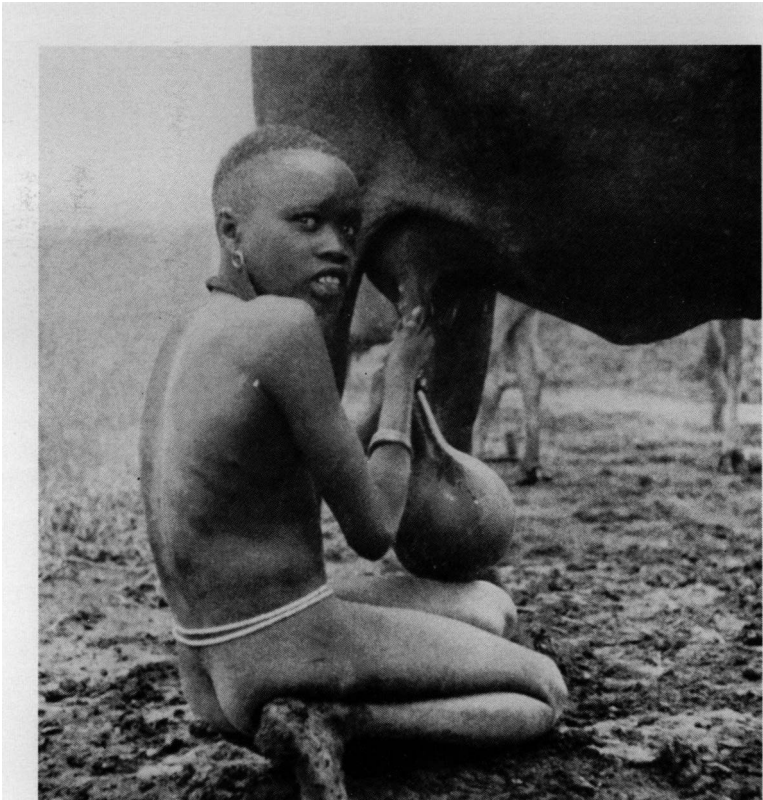


photo 8

Facing page 22 (photo 5), "Milking a Restless Cow" shows anthropological camera skills far inferior to Evans-Pritchard's descriptive brilliance with his evocation of the dominant symbol in Nuer life - cattle. Again the indigenous full frontal male doesn't rate a mention, the positions of the Nuer man, one standing, another sitting, replicate the pose of the first image discussed, a peculiar continuity. The double page spread of "Diagrammatic Representations of Colour Distributions" - in black and white! - pages 42-3 (illustration 1), at least holds the cows in focus, even if somewhat two dimensional, we get the idea. The idea is that colour distributions among Nuer cattle can be linked to world wide comparative colour classification systems - an ever popular theme. Clifford Geertz has referred to the "Black-and-White-in-Colour charm" (Geertz 1988:55) of Evans-Pritchard's prose - a reference with a hint, perhaps, of a racist reference to European - African relations? The

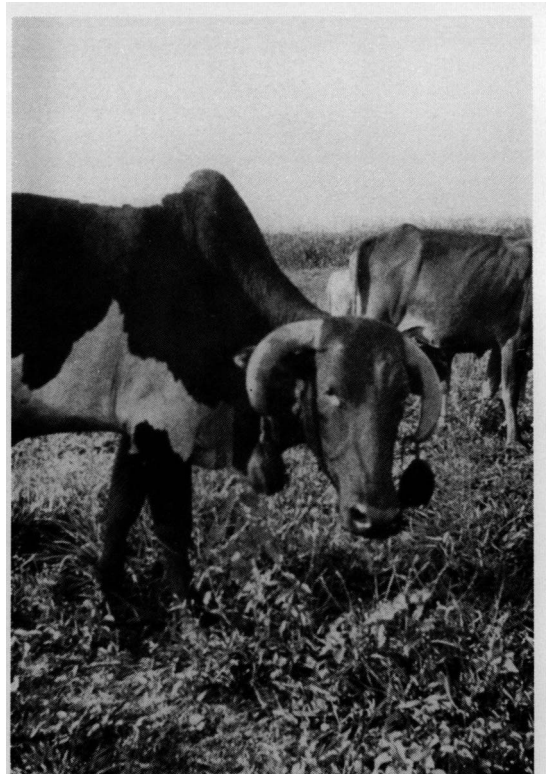


photo 9

photographs may well be charming, but there is something more than the simple 'making visible' of a people at work in these shots.

Facing page 16 (photo 6), which is the opening page of chapter one, appears "Girl in Kraal". It is not so easy to accept this as yet another poor shot of restless cattle who refuse to remain in focus. It may be disingenious to suggest that this photograph of a near naked in full frontal in focus young woman is no more than a carefully contrived titillation for 'the reader's back home', but there is something ironic about the appearance of this female in a kraal on the second page of a chapter entitled "Interest in Cattle" - a phallic gourd at the foot of the photo/photographer, analogous to the horns of the big bulls. How much choice did 1940's publishers allow an author in the placement of images within the text? The obvious feminist and Freudian readings must apply.

Facing page 104 (photo 7) a "Girl in Millet Garden", in a chapter called "Time and Space" suggests that the only generic female available to the



photo 10

anthropologist's voyeuristic gaze was 'girl', never 'woman', and never identified except through exotic (which simply means not usually European) location in Kraals and fields. What kinds of comparisons would Evans-Pritchard be setting up with these two photographs? Again, with the photograph of "Girl Milking", facing page 36 (photo 8), the restless cow syndrome has left only the close focus upon the 'girl'. What is the expression in this subject's eyes? Fear? Annoyance? The return of the techno-imperial-voyeur stare?

Aren't photographs the paradigm of comparison? If we consider what things can be compared it is likely that simple models will seem the best candidates, comparison becomes increasingly difficult as complexity and detail become involved. Comparison thrives on simplicity. A snapshot is just a moment, and just one facet, of something which we understand is far more complex, but we accept as two-dimensional, reduced, representation. For some, a photograph of any individual being may seem a bit flat, but for



photo 11

comparison's sake... A simple model of a complex entity is easier to handle, easier to paste into books. Isn't this the paradigm of all signification, the symbol is a necessary simplification, reduction, model, which exists over against other symbols in what might, forgetting or simplifying other debates, be called a sign system - that is, it exists comparatively surely? Photographs are signs to be compared.

Eventually, facing page 30 (photo 9), a cow comes squarely into shot, and even the anonymous Nuer have gone. "Ox with Tassels Hanging From its Horns" reminiscent of Nuer with necklace perhaps? Facing page 250 (photo 10), more anthropological generic terms gain a mention with "boys" and "initiation" - the symbols of colonial and anthropological lumpen categorization. Initiation deserves the same critical appraisal that Lévi-Strauss meted out to totemism, the label "boy" needs no explication of its contextual racism. Facing page 78 (photo 11), "Harpoon Fishing in Shallows" catches, in action

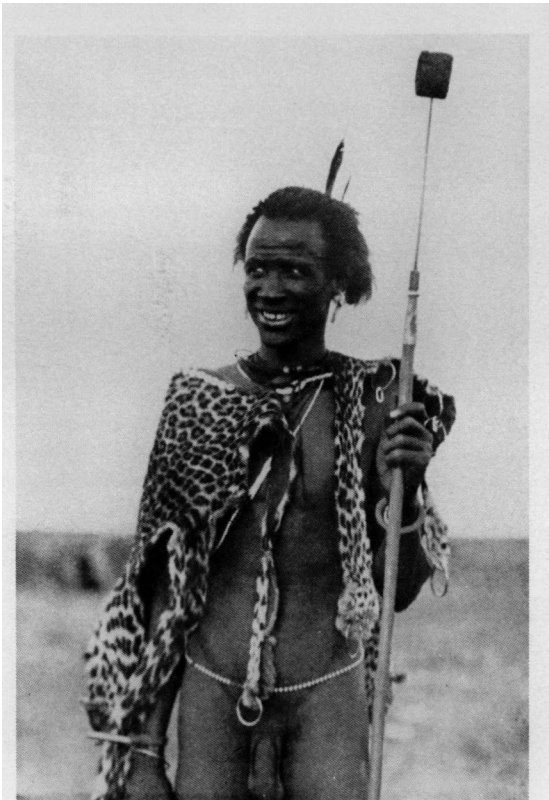


photo 12

sports photography style, the native doing something native, doing something 'outdoorsy', a "boys" own adventure. And also open to comparison with all images of subsistence, hunter-gatherers, pre-commercialized economies.

Facing page 222 (photo 12), "A Leopard Skin Chief", one of the few not quite so general identifications. Was this character easier to separate out from the others because of his colourful leopard skin spots? At the edges of the frame the penis in focus and the marshmallow impaled on the spear ready for toasting. What images did the wartime readership associate this figure with? And with war in mind, facing page 146 (photo 13) there is an airforce 'map' "Air View of Villages - Royal Air Force Official Crown Copyright Reserved". While Evans-Pritchard rarely mentions his colonial obligations, although Geertz has made something of his militarism (see below for discussion), it does seem crucially important, especially in a comparative context, to realize that the Nuer were in the process of 'being pacified' before and after Evans-



photo 13

Pritchard's stay amongst them. Evans-Pritchard went to study the Nuer with reluctance, and only "at the behest of his government" (Burton 1983:278). Arriving "on the heels of a punitive military expedition" (Clifford 1983:126), he was there to "help them settle down peacefully" (in Johnson 1981:232), as he wrote in a letter to Harold MacMichael, the civil secretary of the Sudan administration. These high level connections, and the issue of whether or not the anthropologist acted intentionally or unintentionally as an 'undercover agent' of the government, aside, it is significant that Evans-Pritchard's descriptions of the circumstances of his fieldwork contain very little recognition of the political intrigue and volatility of the situation. On page eleven of the text the reader is told that a government force surrounded "our camp" [he means the Nuer village - ethnographer's right/write of possession] and searched for "two prophets who had been leaders in a recent revolt" (Evans-Pritchard 1940:11). Hostages were taken and the anthropologist thought he was in an "equivocal position, since such an event might recur" (ibid) and so he left the field. While the reader can be asked to "feel" like a Nuer - Evans Pritchard writes: "If you were a..." (1940:215) - participant observation does not however include being bombed with one's subjects - are those craters or clearings on the 'map'?

Leaders of a recent revolt, Leopard-Skin Chiefs, and other varieties of what seems like leadership, seem to sit quite strangely alongside the major theoretical and comparatively important finding of the study - that the Nuer are an 'acephalous' society, a people without heads.

A crisis of reputation seems to haunt much of the past of anthropology, and Evans-Pritchard has been given no exemption from this necessary clearing work. It is, however, a work that should never be considered complete, nor should it be thought that it has no precedent, no history of its own. All criticisms are contextual creatures too. The "cult of Evans-Pritchard" (Burton 1983:285) has been questioned repeatedly. As examples, Newcomer (1972) and Parkin (1982) questioned the status of the separation between the Nuer and the Dinka; Arens (1979), his ideas on Divine Kingship; Johnson (1981), his stereotypification of the Nuer as fighters; and Beidelman (1981), his translation of religious concepts.

The point in question in these studies has been Evans-Pritchard's claim to 'know' the Nuer. His level of expertise rests upon the authority of the skilled observer who has lived with the people concerned. His confidence was so firm that still in 1961 he could say it was impossible for the anthropologist who:

knows what he is looking for and how to look for it to be mistaken about the facts if he spends two years among a small and culturally homogeneous people doing nothing else but studying their way of life (Evans-Pritchard 1962:83).

The crisis of reputation must be concerned with more than representation of facts, there is another dimension to be considered. Certainly Evans-Pritchard only spent a short period, perhaps just ten months, among the Nuer, but it is also significant that the Nuer were perhaps not so 'homogeneous' as they were made out to be, they were in a period of crisis with relationship to the colonial government, and that the 'facts' Evans-Pritchard could not be mistaken about fit so neatly into a framework similar to the one used to make sense of Azande culture.

Evans-Pritchard claims that "experience shows" (1940:139) that only three terms are required for definition of the segmentation systems of the Nuer. To this he adds: "and in the smallest tribes probably fewer terms are required" (ibid). What is the status of this 'probably'? What is the nature of this 'experience'? It must be suspected that the three term requirement is necessary for the definition of a theoretical model, not necessarily a Nuer reality.

Anthropological authority is founded upon the status of the professional visitor, and while this status is not really cashed in until the visitor returns home and tells the (comparative) tales, the marks of this status are displayed from the very start of the venture. The 'actual' first arrivals of anthropologists in their fields, however, is continually covered in ways identified as literary by numerous commentators. As examples consider Malinowski's "Image yourself set down...", discussed by Thornton (1985), also Hutnyk 1988a), and Firth's entry into the Tikopian lagoon made so evocative in Geertz's recent study (1988) - and perhaps Geertz's own contribution: "My wife and I arrived, malarial and diffident, in the Balinese village" (1973, also Hutnyk 1988b). The arrival anecdote, as intellectual foreplay before penetration, introduces the scientific visitor. Often these short narratives describe a comedy of errors, lost luggage (academic baggage - tools, etc.), changed plans and troublesome vehicles, while also providing a convenient opportunity to establish 'anthropological presence'. Evans-Pritchard's own version of this genre - the arrival of the European eye - is an exemplary example:

I, unlike most readers, know the Nuer and must judge my work more severely than they [!]... A man must judge his labours by the obstacles he has overcome and the hardships he has endured... I arrived in Nuer land early in 1930. Stormy weather prevented my luggage from joining me at Marseilles, and owing to errors, for which I was not responsible, my food stores were not forwarded from Malakal and

my Zande servants were not instructed to meet me. I proceeded to Nuerland (Leek country) with my tent, some equipment, and a few stores... I waited for nine days on the river bank for the carriers I had been promised. By the tenth day only four of them had arrived... On the following morning I set out for the neighboring village of Pakur, where my carriers dropped my tent and stores in the centre of a treeless plain, near some homesteads, and refused to bear them to the shade about half a mile further. Next day was devoted to erecting my tent (Evans-Pritchard 1940:10).

The arrival anecdote introduces more than the ethnographer and photographic equipment sheltering under that erect tent. Something phallic comes into phocus here also. Anecdotal telling further presumes a return which sanctifies the unity of the monograph as a record of trial and quest. A distinguishing feature of most anthropological work is that anthropologists travel. And like all tourists, they make use of maps, take photographs, bring home souvenirs, and like to tell tales of their adventures (see Crick 1985 and 1988 on the relation of anthropology to tourism). All this coming and going amounts to a heavy traffic in cultural meanings from the discipline's point of view. What might be demanded is a closer study of how anthropologist's inscribe their travelogues - remembering that Lévi-Strauss began *Tristes Tropiques* with the complaint: "I hated traveling and explorers. Yet here I am proposing to tell the story of my expeditions" (1955:15).

The storyteller in these instances retains a privileged place, the place of the king/observer/theorist up above all 'others'. It is a universalist/generalist space, a hierarchical space. The chapter arrangement in *The Nuer* is according to European thematic interests - subsistence, ecology, politics, etc. Even the terrain of Nuer life is described in loaded comparative terms when it is found to be severe, with no favorable qualities from a European point of view (Evans-Pritchard 1940:51). And after all this it might be asked how the omnipotence of the oberver relates to the utopian ideality of the acephalous life where no Nuer 'lords it' over any other? Could anthropology ever be so democratic?

From another perspective, however, it does seem that there could be some affinity between those strange Nuer and Evans-Pritchard's hierarchical European culture - although this will be seen as a political, or even overly critical, speculation. The conventional criticism of studies such as *The Nuer* is that social change perspectives cannot be considered because the society is portrayed in a static moment - Nuer as they are now, even years after fieldwork - and system and structure are lifted out of their historical setting in a way that minimizes, or excludes, variability (see Gough 1971:115). What might be

suggested while considering history and social changes is just what was happening in the hierarchies of Europe at the time in which Evans-Pritchard was writing. It may be that the World War is a static slice from history as a reference point, but the circumstances of military buildup and threat and counter threat before the war are also well known. When exactly was the book published in 1940 written?

So at the end of all this there is room, I think, for a question about the pre-war turmoil in Europe and its link to the alliance theory. Nuer repugnance for anyone lording it over others is definitely anti-'*übermensch*' in tone - an instructional drama of what allied Europe might mean for an aggressive Germany perhaps? It is possible to read some of Evans-Pritchard's statements on alliance out of context (out of Nuer context, but not all relevant contexts) in a way that disturbs.

Each segment is itself segmented and there is opposition between its parts. The members of any segment unite for war against adjacent segments of the same order and unite with these adjacent segments against larger sections. Nuer themselves state this structural principle clearly in the expression of their political values (Evans-Pritchard 1940:142).

This quote on segment alliance, presented alongside a flurry of algebraic explication (144), might be considered in its historical context - the various independent states of Europe gearing up for a war in which the notion of alliance receives a certain urgency, and great publicity - images of Churchill and the drive of British nationalism and 'allied forces' rhetoric. Even if not intended as 'instructional allegory' it would not be illegitimate to consider the importance of this 'sign of the times' as a significant factor in the book's early success. Is it enough to ask that comparative anthropology should be examined with more than its explicit comparisons in mind?

It is the wider political model building grand theory parts of ethnography and anthropology that have been ignored by a criticism that should have made 'grand theorizing' illegitimate - since it amounts to describing particularities as instances or examples of more universal general themes defined from the viewpoint of the omnipotent observer, and because there is the possibility of a hidden agenda here towards which anthropologists should have been far more alert. Anthropology is not simply a matter of loading up with Kodak and pointing the lens, we need to become more sensitized to the frames within which the discipline has developed and through which its future is projected. Ethnographies perhaps have been overexposed in all of this, while criticism of commentary remains the faded contrast. I have tried to re-focus this debate

by showing things from a slightly tangential angle, I hope that these few snapshots will not be considered too sharp. We keep on searching out new points of view. Instamatic anthropology has been one stop on the way.

The picture-album is always laid out in some kind of order, some kind of structuring theme. Is comparison a nostalgia for the coherence of continuity? What is a comparative method but a kind of politicized history? Is there one or many forms of this method? Shouldn't we talk of styles of comparison? Shouldn't we talk of contexts of interpretation? How is anthropology linked to anything else, anything so strange as a war? Are anthropologists' correspondents from the frontline? Who taught them how to shoot (film)?

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