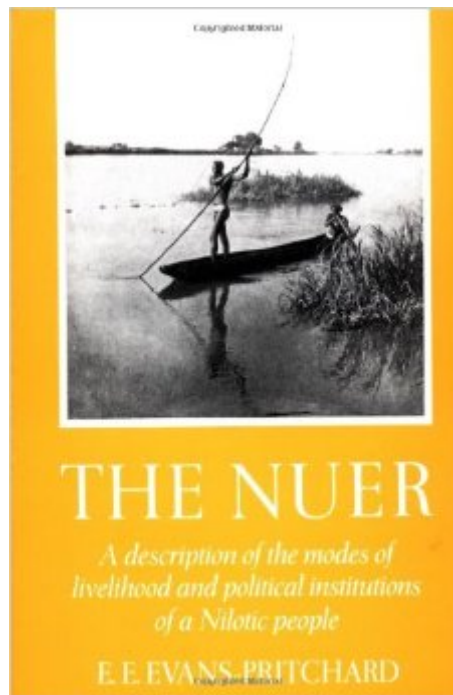


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The Nuer: A Description Of The Modes Of Livelihood And Political Institutions Of A Nilotic People



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Customer Reviews

This book is one of the classics of ethnography - indeed, one of the works which defines what ethnography and anthropology are. The Nuer is an account of a group of pastoralists living in the Sudan as Evans-Pritchard knew them when he did field work in er... uh... the late 30s early 40s. The first half of the book is a detailed and lively (for an academic) account of their way of life, the seasonal rhythms of the year, and their intense interest in cattle. The second half of the book then deals with the main subject of the book: the social organization of the Nuer. E-P moves to a greater and greater level of abstraction, creating a more and more crystalline view of the patterns of kinship and marriage that underlie Nuer life. The main structure is the lineage system - a group of people all related from a common ancestor through an unbroken line of male succession. This book is famous because of E-P's account of the lineage system. The concept of the lineage and descent became

key in anthropology, and E-P's Nuer materials helped provide the perfect example of the lineage as theorized by Radcliffe-Brown, E-P's teacher. As a result of this book, anthropologists spend the next two decades running around all over the world looking for lineage systems. As it turns out, this sort of system is not particularly widespread across the world - at least not in its pure form. Indeed, it turns out that E-P's formulation was too neat and clean and too crystalline. As one pundit put it, "not even the Nuer are like The Nuer". So one drawback of the book is the false clarity that it provided. This was useful in the forties and fifties, but meant that eventually the study of kinship and social organization would have to move out of the paradigm E-P had set up. Another problem with the book is the fact that it takes place in a vacuum. It is easy not to notice that the Nuer are under the sway of British authority and had recently been bombed when E-P arrived. The colonial context of the book is suppressed. There are other criticisms that could be made of the book - it is now a half-century behind the times - but it stands up today as a good read and a fascinating argument. The fact that reactions to it have been so extreme - overwhelming enthusiasm, abiding hatred, quizzical puzzlement, cow obsession - point to the fact that a book doesn't have to be loved forever to be read forever. Like all classics, The Nuer both good to read and good to think.

The Kindle edition is illegible. The diagrams and photos are unavailable and the footnotes are placed in the middle of the text, sometimes separating a paragraph by a few pages ... and sometimes even separating words. If I paid more than \$0.99 I would be asking for my money back. Now the semester is started and I have to rush order a physical copy in order to complete my assignments. I KNEW the price was too good to be true.

This e-book has a number of flaws that make it absolutely worthless, except as a case study in how NOT to release a classic work in an electronic edition. The first problem you will notice is that the pages are oriented 90 degrees from proper. This may not be so much of an issue for those reading on a Kindle device (who can simply rotate the device appropriately), but for those of us reading it using the PC app that alone makes it useless, at least until decided to include a "rotate page" feature. To make matters worse, instead of being OCR'd text (which would make it highlightable, selectable, copy-and-pasteable, annotatable, etc.) each "page" of this e-book is simply a direct, unmanipulated image scan of the page of the original work, which in addition to making the file size much larger than it should be, renders the usual Kindle text tools (highlight for definitions, etc.) useless. But the worst part? The "pages" in the book are cut off in the middle of the original source pages, often times literally in the middle of a line of text, so that the top half of a letter might be on

one page while the bottom half is on the next. Reading this e-book is simply not a pleasant experience. You probably do not want to buy it, unless you've had a bit too much to drink with your friends and you want something inordinately silly to laugh at. Even then, you can watch "literal movie trailer" parodies on YouTube for free.

The complexity of Nuer relations with their environment, because of herding cattle, is detailed in the first chapters. (Nuer name their cattle and can distinguish scores of them.) In the later chapters Evans-Pritchard takes us through how herding leads to patrilineal descent and the formation of lineages and clans. This social organization dictates whom a man will marry, how the bride price will be paid, and how most disputes are settled. The work helps us understand the nature of feuds, both their negative aspects and their positive ones. The social organization is further shaped by conflict with the Dinka, a neighboring tribe. The analysis gave us a paradigm for how lineal organization works leading to important insights in North America as well as Africa where clan organization is common. Both Nuer and Dinka are in today's news because of the conflict in southern Sudan. Their earlier "wars" are hardly more than quarrels by the standards of northern Sudan's brutality. It's not uncommon to meet Nuer refugees in Tucson because of war's ravages.

I disagree completely with the "reader from Washington" who wrote it is a boring book. Probably he/she didn't read more than the first two, more descriptive chapters. This book became "a classic" because it was a turning point in the history of Anthropology, specially because of its analysis of the political system of the Nuer.

The Nuer is a challenging but supremely rewarding study of a people who, with minimal technology and living a way of life that is very primitive by the standards of Westerners, achieve a perfection of ecological harmony with their environment. Evans-Pritchard's (E-P) description of the Nuers' rich and multifaceted relationship with their cattle is unforgettable. E-P writes with elegance, brilliance, compassion, and respect for the proud and dignified Nuer who, because of this great monograph, are among the most famous people ever studied by anthropologists.

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