Reading The Nuer

by Ivan Karp and Kent Maynard

The sub-title announces the book's twofold aim: on the one hand to describe the environment and the way of life it imposes, on the other to present a system of concepts and. Anthony's which owe nothing to the environment... Perhaps, since the reader is free to stress one side or the other, this accounts for the book's popularity among the professionals. [Dumont 1975:329-30]

However unsatisfying in some respects, it is a brilliant tonic, and in the best sense of the word, an irritating book. No anthropologist can afford to miss it. [Richards 1941:52]

E. E. Evans-Pritchard's 1940 monograph The Nuer has provoked controversy from the start. The irritating quality pointed to by Richards above derives in part from its intellectual style; the paucity of references to its forebears allows its assimilation to a variety of theoretical traditions. Perhaps its capacity to stimulate us theoretically is rooted as well in the apparent inconsistency of Evans-Pritchard's approach to Nuer society. The status of The Nuer as a classic in anthropology may derive from the freedom of the reader to stress different elements to which Dumont, in his preface to the French edition, calls attention. Pocock (1971:75) may be referring to this ambiguity in his statement that The Nuer "signals a shift from the concept of function to the concept of meaning." Pocock sees in the work of Evans-Pritchard, with its emphasis on semantic relativity, a significant departure from the structural-functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown. There can be few stronger statements about the importance of attending to the linguistic in the social than Evans-Pritchard's assertion that "values are embodied in words through which they influence behaviour" (1940a:135). The difficulty is that the concepts of function and meaning appear to maintain an uneasy coexistence in this crucial argument. Do values lead unproblematically to the maintenance of Nuer social order, or does Evans-Pritchard attempt to develop a semantically oriented pragmatics? Further, are values to be explained by reference to ecological adaptation—the material conditions of production—or are they understandable only in relationship to principles of social structure? The awkward mix of these ideas which seems to result from Evans-Pritchard's account has led to a veritable small industry of interpretations.

Our purpose is twofold in this paper. First, we wish to show that the different constructions of The Nuer made by scholars with diverse theoretical perspectives are the result of a tendency to privilege one factor or another of what is in reality a multicausal explanation. This is not entirely intended as criticism, since, as John Berger tells us, "certain events may not easily be known because they are experienced too soon." Readers interpret a text against the background they bring to it. We can no longer read The Nuer innocently; we turn to it made sensitive by the interpretations we have read. Our argument that The Nuer has not been treated as a whole will be successful only if our reading has benefited from prior readings. It is not so much a case of "the reader in the text," as a recent popular work would have it (Suleiman and Crosman 1980), as of the text in the reader.

Second, we want to suggest that the discrepancies found in the appearance of theoretical insularity characteristic of some of the anthropological literature is due in part to matters of literary style. Pitt-Rivers (1974:xii) notes in his preface to the second edition of The People of the Sierra that he originally intended the work to be explicitly theoretical. His publisher, however, urged him to excise the theoretical discussion in favor of the ethnographic analysis. Concerned by this prospect, he sought the advice of Evans-Pritchard, who reassured him that "such scholarly trappings are mainly either mystifying or redundant."

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 79th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, D.C., in 1980 as part of a symposium organized by W. Arens entitled "The Re-Analysis of Nuer Ethnography." We would like to express our appreciation to W. Arens, Thomas O. Beidelman, Charles Bird, Ronald Cohen, Jane Cowan, Joyce Hendrixson, Michael Herzfeld, Robert Hefner, Leonard Jordan, Martha Kendall, Michael Kenny, Emilio Moran, David Parkin, Dan Sperber, Aidan Southall, Bahram Tavakolian, Roy Willis, and Bonita Wright for their insightful comments on drafts of the paper. We alone, of course, must bear the responsibility for this reading of the text.

1 The appearance of theoretical insularity characteristic of some of the anthropological literature is due in part to matters of literary style. Pitt-Rivers (1974:xii) notes in his preface to the second edition of The People of the Sierra that he originally intended the work to be explicitly theoretical. His publisher, however, urged him to excise the theoretical discussion in favor of the ethnographic analysis. Concerned by this prospect, he sought the advice of Evans-Pritchard, who reassured him that "such scholarly trappings are mainly either mystifying or redundant."
the literature on The Nuer can be resolved by a closer reading of The Nuer itself. The apparent disparity of its arguments is often said to reside in the difference between the two halves of the book—in the emphasis first on “modes of livelihood” and second on “political institutions” pointed to by Evans-Pritchard himself (p. 94). Yet, as Dumont (1971:329–30) suggests, the tendency to see “two sides” to The Nuer, materialistic and idealistic, is a matter only of “first sight.” We will argue that embedded in this dichotomy is a far richer concern with three distinct elements: the physical and, to a certain extent, social environments associated with the material factors involved in production, the values which provide the content of Nuer cultural systems, and the logical principles which organize all such values. The thread that ties the text together as a single argument is the necessary relationship between social order and human agency. Social order enables Nuer to act, while human agency constitutes the dynamic whereby social order is reproduced. The concept of human agency is central for understanding Evans-Pritchard’s analysis of labor in a pastoral economy as the medium that relates the ecological and material conditions of Nuer life to both the structural principles of Nuer society and cultural models of segmentation. Constraints and interests, on the one hand, and structural principles and cultural idioms, on the other, form “a reticulum of cause and effect” (in Bateson’s [1936] phrase) in which neither can be reduced to the other.

Understanding The Nuer has been made more difficult by the tendency in anthropology to identify authors as representatives of particular schools. This may have the advantage of promoting cooperation and communication within existing working groups, but it also produces a narrow parochialism in which competing positions that might provide illumination are dismissed as moribund. A process of stereotyping occurs in which subtle arguments may be overlooked in favor of preconceived notions about theoretical positions. The social organization of contemporary theory in anthropology resembles the segmentary opposition of societies such as the Nuer, in which outsiders classify members of other groups at a higher level of taxonomic contrast than the latter classify themselves. Nowhere does this stereotyping occur more than with respect to the mass of literature relegated to the now derogatory category of “structural-functionalism.” Perhaps no other modern orientation has been so maligned. An examination, however, of the work of even a few of its presumed proponents, such as Evans-Pritchard or Meyer Fortes, demonstrates an absence of fit between their work and the caricature presented of it. It is with this in mind that we hope to show that Evans-Pritchard’s work has relevance for theoretical issues in contemporary anthropology such as the reproduction of sociocultural systems.

For this reason we cannot agree with Alfred North Whitehead (cited in Merton 1957:5) that “the science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost.” Lack of familiarity with our ancestry prevents significant advances in anthropology. An appreciation of the achievements of our predecessors is essential for current thinking. We would prefer therefore to borrow our metaphors not from Newton, but from Wittgenstein, and see these thinkers as the “underlaborers” of modern social anthropology who have cleared the space in which we work.

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE NUE R

The Nuer is a classic both of ethnography and of social thought. Without an understanding of The Nuer we cannot appreciate the preoccupation with segmentary opposition which structures the argument of even those scholars, such as Barth (1959) and Leach (1954), who protest against the unthinking application of segmentary models to other societies. Asad’s (1970) excellent analysis of the development of authority among the Kababish Arabs is scarcely comprehensible unless we set it in the context of Evans-Pritchard’s arguments. On another, deeper level The Nuer influences even those scholars who have not read it carefully or are unaware of its connections to earlier work such as Smith’s Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia (1956 [1885]).

Interpretations of The Nuer have variously treated it as a model of structural-functionalism, as the foundation for a “true cultural ecology” (Sahlins 1976), or as a forerunner of what Fortes (1978) has called “Gallo-structuralism.” Three distinct but related questions have emerged in commentaries on The Nuer:

1. Is Nuer society best explained by its ecological adaptation or mode of production or as the result of a segmentary principle of social structure?
2. What is the relationship between the jural norms of Nuer culture and patterns of action in Nuer society?
3. Should the social structure of the Nuer be located analytically in the observable relationships between groups or in inferred cognitive contrasts underlying Nuer thought?

Commentators on The Nuer of a materialist or ecological bent have principally been concerned with infrastructural or environmental causes of the segmentary lineage system. The claim of Evans-Pritchard (p. 148) that segmentation is a “fundamental principle” of Nuer social structure has been construed as a rejection of economic and ecological factors in favor of an ethereal idealism. Both Leach (1961) and Sahlins (1961), for example, use The Nuer as a foil in their arguments against “mystical” or “tautological” references to a specifically sui generis, normative principle of segmentation. Leach (1961:8, 298) treats jural rules as epiphenomena and actual practices as “direct” adaptations to the environment. Sahlins (1961:322) ignores any disparity between rules and behavior to argue that segmentary lineage organization is an adaptive mechanism found only at the tribal level of sociocultural organization. While he later advocates a partial determination of adaptation by cultural logic (Sahlins 1976), he continues to make little distinction between models and practice.

Because ecological approaches such as those employed by Sahlins and Leach locate the causes of Nuer social structure outside the system, they provide no dialectical understanding of Nuer society; they perceive no conflict between ideology and action or between various structures within Nuer society. Yet by focusing on the second question raised in reanalyses of The Nuer—the divergence of patterns of action from agnicentric ideals—Gough (1971) points to important internal contradictions in Nuer society. She suggests (p. 105) that Evans-Pritchard is far more aware in The Nuer than in his later works of the economic bases of village cooperation, the precedence of residential over agnatic ties in most social affairs, and the essential role of cognition in establishing socioeconomic networks and congruence of interests within villages. She offers evidence (p. 94) from Evans-Pritchard’s own accounts that among the Eastern Nuer the agnicentric principle predominates only among aristocrats, for whom there are socioeconomic and political advantages to membership in patrilineal groups. Commoners, either captive or immigrant Dinka or alien Nuer uprooted by warfare or for economic motives, can acquire these strategic assets only by stressing cognatic and affinal ties to aristocratic patrilineal groups. Gough demonstrates that the social upheavals of Nuer warfare and expansion have led to departures from the jural rules of agnation for many Nuer and proposes in effect an elegant reversal of Sahlins’s conclusions. Whereas Sahlins regards conformity to the norms of patrilineal segmentation to be a crucial adaptation for successfully competing in...
warfare with the Dinka, Gough concludes that departures from Nuer agnatic ideals are “necessitated” by the same warfare and expansion. The attempts of Gough and others to analyze the divergence of Nuer actions from the rules of descent are complicated by difficulties in locating the ontological grounds of social structure. Ardener (1971) points out that social structure is usually defined either as “syntagmatic,” that is, observable, surface relationships between groups or as “paradigmatic” sets of cognitive contrasts which lie outside of time. Many of the discussions of *The Nuer* define social structure in terms of observable surface relationships and not in terms of cognitive, eidetic, contrasts. Pocock (1971), however, points out that Evans-Pritchard’s definition of structure as “relations among relations” in *The Nuer* is of a fundamentally different order from the conceptions of observable relations among groups. He argues that Evans-Pritchard is interested not so much in particular features and functional relationships of Nuer social life as in the semantic contrasts that make the former intelligible. In this view, Evans-Pritchard is more concerned with the cognitive oppositions exhibited in the feud than with patterns of conflict.

We have reservations about Pocock’s association of Evans-Pritchard with Lévi-Strauss’s shift in emphasis from “function to meaning.” While both are concerned with logical principles, Evans-Pritchard does not share Lévi-Strauss’s interest in generating meaning from the human subconscious. As Dumont (1975:333–34) observes, he has not relinquished a concern with interaction among social forms in his emphasis on the territorial and political dimensions of groups. Dumont avoids the interactional dimension by reducing the political subsystem of the Nuer to the principle of unilineal descent (1975:336; 1971:70–72). Yet this would surely violate the “great sublety” which Dumont (1975:331) himself sees in *The Nuer*, the gradual “continuum” in which first ecology and then structure are shown to form “an intricate mesh of mutual dependence.” As Gough (1971) repeats throughout her analysis of Nuer social structure, the territorial dimension of Nuer life—the socioeconomic and other interests which unite villages in contrast to other groups—is not simply an epiphenomenon of the agnatic ideal. Where Dumont (1975:342) would resolve the “radical ambiguity” of *The Nuer* in favor of structuralism and others would reject it for the functional nuts and bolts of political or ecological relationships, perhaps the real merit of *The Nuer* lies in preserving both its relational and interactional components.

The three issues in terms of which the different commentaries on *The Nuer* are organized seem to us to be variations on a single theme: what is the relation between the ideal and the material in society, and how does each influence or determine the other? Most of the assessments of *The Nuer* assume that this is the single most important question Evans-Pritchard addresses. In our view this is an oversimplification. The opposition between material and ideal is a Procrustean bed into which Evans-Pritchard’s analytical concepts are fit. This can be seen most clearly in the most thorough and wide-ranging reanalysis of the Nuer material to date, that of Holy (1979a, b).

Holy’s interpretations are directly related to the problem of material and ideal elements in *The Nuer*. Holy describes the relationship between the political and the lineage system in terms of Caw’s (1974) distinction between representational and operational models. Representational models refer to what actors say about the nature of social reality, whereas operational models refer “to the way they respond or act.” While this app-

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1 *Kuper* (1982) cites Evans-Pritchard’s earlier papers on the Nuer to show that the thrust of his analysis changed between fieldwork and the publication of *The Nuer*. His earlier analyses are evolutionary, as Kuper demonstrates, and anticipate Gough’s reanalysis.

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The importance of claiming membership in dominant lin-
eases is even more apparent when this passage is related to Evans-Pritchard’s remark that only members of a dominant lineage will be offered compensation in a tort (p. 219). In spite of the absence of case studies, Evans-Pritchard presents clear evidence of the strategic value of representing political relations in a lineage idiom. The representation function that Holy quite properly assigns to lineage ideology is also part and parcel of the political process. When Nuer “give spatial value to lineage segments” in the diagrams they draw in the sand, they are engaged in a process of classifying and identifying that is intrinsically political. The very act of identification classifies allies and opponents in the construction and management of disputes. The genealogical process of classification does not merely legitimize political action; it helps to formulate it. The representational model, then, does more than mask deviance from a norm; it provides an index of the actors’ hopes, aspirations, and strategies in their political relationships.6

Because Holy radically severs territorial affiliation from agnation, relegating the first to the operational model and the second to the representational model, he obliterates from his account one of the media through which political interests can be realized. Both territoriosity and cognatic kinship, on the one hand, and descent reckoning, on the other, have representational and operational dimensions or functions. They both mask and reveal the relationship between structure and “lived reality” in Nuer life (cf. de Heusch 1981 on this relationship). They are indeed ideologies, as Holy argues, but not in his sense of a posteriori justifications of conduct which serve only to reproduce an existing order. Instead, they are ideologies in Giddens’s (1979:182–83) sense—not particular kinds of ideas, but any ideas that are predicated as instruments of action.

Thus, in spite of the attention he gives to cognitive factors, Holy’s interpretation of The Nuer does not differ significantly from the materialist one exemplified by Sahlin’s 1961 article. Both take such statements as “the tendency toward segmentation must be defined as a fundamental feature of their social structure” (Evans-Pritchard 1940a:148) to be an assertion of some actual determination of political action by agnatic values, Sahlin accepting this interpretation and Holy denying its empirical validity. It is difficult to reconcile this interpretation with Evans-Pritchard’s observation that segmentary opposition is found among the Oxfordshiremen of England as well as among the Nuer (p. 136). No commentator has yet to assert that Evans-Pritchard believes Oxfordshire has segmentary lineages; yet behavior in both places can exhibit segmentation. As Dumont (1975) and Ardener (1971) have pointed out, it is opposition that is expressed in a lineage idiom, according to Evans-Pritchard, and opposition is not determined by descent.

While Holy’s transformation of the distinction between ideal and material into representational and operational models has much to recommend it, it still does not do justice to Evans-Pritchard’s analysis. It remains necessary to distinguish three rather than two analytical dimensions: the logical principles in terms of which relationships may be ordered, the cultural idioms (values) in which they are expressed, and the conditions under which they may be realized. We know of no account of The Nuer which explicitly recognizes all three. The existing accounts either conflate logical principles and cultural idioms, as in the case of Holy and Sahlin’s, or they conflate cultural idioms and social conditions, as in the instance of Dumont, and oppose them to logical principles.

6 Holy’s distinction between models as justification and models as transaction corresponds to the dichotomy implicitly assumed by Gruel (1971) between normative and rational modes of action. As Evens (1978) has shown, this dichotomy is specious. Action is always a matter of self-interest and altruism: “society is at some point to choose between self-interest and other interest, and correlatively to judge in terms of these interests our choices” (p. 112).
Cattle," Evans-Pritchard presents a wide-ranging body of material to demonstrate the paramount importance of cattle in the conduct of everyday affairs, the organization of sentiment, and conceptual life. Throughout he is concerned to point out two types of connections: on the one hand, cattle keeping operates as a constraint on the conduct of Nuer political and economic life; on the other hand, the accumulation and exchange of cattle are the paramount and conscious motive in most Nuer social relations. This second point is critical for understanding the remainder of the book. Evans-Pritchard shows, for example, that cattle "are links in numerous social relationships" and that "Nuer tend to define all social processes and relationships in terms of cattle" (p. 19). His phrase "their social idiom is a bovine idiom" can be related to the distinction Nuer draw between potential kin and the effective kin with whom they exchange or share rights in cattle (p. 19). He further points out that conflict among the Nuer, especially violent conflict, often involves cattle (pp. 48–50).

The use of the term "interest" in the chapter title instead of the more conventional "value" is in our opinion of theoretical importance and not accidental. The use of an actor-oriented, vectorial term underscores Evans-Pritchard's view that the accumulation of cattle is a primary goal of Nuer action as well as the motive force behind Nuer political behavior. This is not intended to indicate that Nuer political values push them in the direction of cattle. Dyson-Hudson's (1965) distinction between the political and the politically relevant is useful for interpreting Evans-Pritchard's arguments. Interest in cattle is politically relevant because it determines specific political goals such as the protection of territory. Since territories incorporate natural resources necessary for cattle husbandry, the political interests of the Nuer in territorial expansion are consistent with their interest in the accumulation of cattle from the neighboring Dinka (cf. Marx 1977, but note that he extends his model to account for ecologically determined interdependence at the most inclusive levels of pastoral territorial organization, which Evans-Pritchard specifically denies for the Nuer).

The case for interest in cattle as the dynamic by which human agency is related to structure is made even more forcefully in an earlier publication (Evans-Pritchard 1937), in which both political and lineage systems are situated in the necessities of pastoral production: "Political fission and cohesion of segments are closely bound up with the life of the herds in relation to natural resources. What has been said of the tribe may be said also of the clan, for ownership of natural resources by tribes and tribal segments are [sic] expressed generally in terms of clans and lineages . . ." (1937:235).

This relationship between the mode of livelihood and social order is apparent in Evans-Pritchard's (1940a) account of the role of the environment. Nuerland is subject to extreme but highly regular fluctuations of climate; the flooding of the wet season and the distance between water points in the dry season make transhumance a necessity. The result is the movement between village and cattle camp and the requirement for social solidarity between members of tertiary sections. Movements between village and cattle camp also enable them to coordinate raids at certain times of the year. Adaptation to the environment, thus, is a fundamental determinant of scale of political action and level of social cohesion, the mediating factor being the cooperation enjoined by interests in cattle. Nuer territorial organization is adjusted to fit the needs of the production system, we would now say, and the processes of production and exchange determine the use of the natural environment. Because a threat to territory is a threat to resources for cattle husbandry, and given Nuer readiness to engage in violent retribution when interests in cattle are threatened, the political significance of territorial organization becomes apparent. This situation is not to be understood, as Holy (1979a:18) would have it, simply as a "functional" integration of the political and segmentary systems of the Nuer; rather, it is the use of both in interaction as metaphors and indices of the pursuit of economic interests (Evans-Pritchard 1937:210–11).

While Evans-Pritchard clearly states the relationship between environment, society, and culture, he does not make Nuer society and the principles of organization that it exhibits simple epiphenomena of productive relations and environmental constraints: "Nor do I wish to suggest that their social life is entirely a function of their productive relations. Nevertheless it is certainly to a large extent determined by economic considerations, particularly by their dependence on their herds" (1937:215). This is to be understood, however, only as "determination in the last instance," a limitation of possibility which does not preclude the influence of a fundamentally different order, the social: "In describing the life of simple peoples we have to pay constant attention firstly to their ecological relations, their economic dependence on nature, and secondly to their social relations, their moral dependence on the community" (1937:215). These orders are neither functions of each other nor polar opposites, but mediated by the productive activities of human social groups. In an insight which parallels that of Marx and Engels in The German Ideology, interest in cattle is seen as the primary means by which Nuer relate to both the natural and the social. Evans-Pritchard phrases this in terms of cattle themselves (1937:215):

Among a pastoral people like the Nuer cattle belong to both orders, for they are part of man's environment through which he is indirectly influenced by inanimate nature and also, in a very real sense, they are part of the human community, dwelling in the closest intimacy with their masters between whom also they are social links.

For Evans-Pritchard, then, interest is not solely a utilitarian concern, but a combination of Weber's formal and substantive rationalities. Cattle for the Nuer are obviously both of utilitarian value and of great social value for prestige. They are also "a cultural end" and have both aesthetic and affective importance (1940a:40). It should be emphasized, therefore, that while Evans-Pritchard's focus is on the consequences of utilitarian interest in cattle for political life, his conception of the actor is not that of a one-dimensional, rational being. The Nuer may fight for rights over cattle, but they also create poems about them (p. 48).

In emphasizing, therefore, the role of modes of livelihood in shaping Nuer social life, we are not suggesting that Evans-Pritchard was in any sense a closet Marxist. There is no indication in his work that he was influenced by Marxist thought. Rather, the parallel with the early writings of Marx and Engels suggests common sources of influence. We think the tradition of thought stemming from Vico and Herder to Croce through his Oxford interpreter Collingwood may be the more immediate source. Indeed, Vico's assertion that we may only understand the human world because it is a human product can be found echoed in both Evans-Pritchard and Marx (Berlin 1977).

In spite of its sophistication, Evans-Pritchard's conception of praxis has a number of difficulties. Principally, the emphasis on cattle neglects the productive activities of women (Marx 1977). Though Evans-Pritchard notes the importance of sorghum among the Nuer, he does not analyze its relationship to social forms, a serious omission in the light of Gulliver's (1955) report that for Jie women "sorghum is the cattle of women." Burton (n.d.) has recently argued that fishing is significant among the Nuer and that symbols associated with fishing are important in Nilotic societies in general. Evans-Pritchard's emphasis on cattle herding as subsistence may well have its roots in Nuer gender and political ideology, in which men's activities predominate. While Evans-Pritchard redressed
this imbalance in *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer* (1951), the latter account is largely cultural in emphasis and focuses primarily on the meaning of customs. More valuable data can be found in his little-read paper *Some Aspects of Marriage and Family among the Nuer* (1945), but the totality of his published materials does not come to grips with nonpastoral subsistence activities.\(^4\)

A number of consequences flow from this gap in the ethnography. Evans-Pritchard really does not provide an adequate account of the developmental cycle of domestic groups or of sex roles, either in domestic-group formation or in ritual and symbolism. Richards (1941) was the first to point to this failing, but Gough (1971) also provides important evidence. Further, though he notes the unequal distribution of wealth, Evans-Pritchard does not systematically relate it to household formation and, as a consequence, underplays the presence of inequality in Nuer society. Both Gough (1971) and Bonte (1978) point to his failure to examine the processes by which privileged economic positions are maintained and the relationship between this and Nuer expansion and inequality. A related problem is Evans-Pritchard’s lack of concern for variation among the Nuer and its impact on social processes (cf. Richards 1941). In 1950, in an article intended to supplement the analysis of the political system made in *The Nuer*, he asserted, “I have also attempted to correct the distortion of the reality of Nuer social life to which the abstractions made in that analysis necessarily, and intentionally, led” (1950:385).

Evans-Pritchard’s neglect of the interrelationship between production, exchange, social reproduction, and inequality led him to an overly systematic view of Nuer society, one which masks possible internal contradictions and sources of structural change. The argument could be made, for example, that the Nuer are an incipient class society in which expansion is part of the process of class formation. Bonte (1981), in particular, has argued persuasively that in pastoral societies such as the Nuer there is a contradiction between herding, which occurs at a family level, and the appropriation of pasturage, which requires the cooperation of the community. He notes (p. 204) that segmentary lineage organization can cope with these conditions of pastoral production insofar as it allows “the maintenance of the autonomy of the families who control the herds while at the same time assuring their integration into a large community structure which guards the rights of access of each of the families to collectively utilized resources.”

For Bonte it is this double characteristic of pastoral production, rather than environmental determinism, which leads to the expansion of the Nuer into Dinka territory. Pastoral production leads to the unequal accumulation and increasing social differentiation displayed by the dominant “aristocratic” lineages of the Nuer. The flexibility of the segmentary lineage structure, manifested in the absorption of stranger and commoner Nuer and Dinka, operates to inhibit the development of social classes. This inhibition of class formation has as a consequence territorial expansion. In order to permit access to resources to a greater number of people, the Nuer must continuously seek new sources of cattle and pasturage. This interpretation may be offset by Gough’s comment that the incorporation of new members into an aristocratic lineage is in part an attempt to replenish a group reduced in numbers by warfare. Yet Bonte’s (p. 211) point is well taken that the Nuer segmentary system “has a tendency to export to its peripheries the contradictions which the increasing economic and social differentiation produces within the system.” Evans-Pritchard’s reproductive model and overly simplified description of labor processes among the Nuer does not accommodate this incipient process of class formation. It must be recognized, however, that criticisms such as these are possible in hindsight and that a concern with long-term changes that contravene short-term processes of reproduction is recent in social anthropology (Lockwood 1964, Southall 1976).

We are better prepared, in light of Evans-Pritchard’s (1937) early account, to understand his views on the relationship between material interests and social order. Cattle, and through them the productive work of the Nuer, are the medium in terms of which society is grounded in nature. Cattle, however, are as much a metaphor as they are the sources of sustenance. They are not just beasts which require so much productive labor, but the loci of models through which the Nuer evaluate social relationships. Indeed, the Nuer draw parallels between the place of the person in the family and the organization of herds of cattle, and in the settlement of disputes they equate people with cattle: “All over Nuerland Nuer and Dinka were differentiated by assessment of their value in blood-cattle, though the definition of a Dinka in this respect varied in different tribes. Among the Lar the practice was to reckon aristocrats and strangers together at 40 head of cattle” (1940a:218). Once such metaphors become models for the conduct of social life, they achieve a certain independence from their economic base. Fortes (1969, 1979) has shown, for example, in his criticisms of those who would reduce kinship to territorial propinquity or economic interests, that cognatic kinship and agnatic descent also influence production decisions (cf. Goody 1958). Evans-Pritchard remarks, in this vein, that “when a herd has reached a certain size the owner—if one may speak of an owner of a herd in which many people have rights of one kind or another—is morally bound to dispose of a portion of it by either himself marrying or by assisting a relative to do so” (1940a:91). Cooperation, then, is not simply a matter of territoriality, but one of kinship. Kinship, descent, and the political system are all metaphorically related to social practice and twisted in its image, while at the same time affecting its outcome.

In the next chapter, on time and space, Evans-Pritchard moves carefully from an exploration of the effect of environment and mode of production on concepts of time and space to a discussion of the role of those concepts in the production of social relations. Evans-Pritchard’s antideterminism is apparent (cf. Beidelman 1970), while his position reflects that of Mauss and Beuchat’s *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo* (1979 [1905]). He expresses reservations about the complete determination of time-space concepts by either environment or social organization. Certain conceptions of time and space, such as the reckoning of seasons and migrations between camps, are influenced by the environment of which they are a part. A number of conceptions of time and space, however, are taken from social relations, specifically lineage organization and territoriality. Such conceptions, which he designates as “structural,” not only affect social action, but influence Nuer perceptions of the environment.

It is the “structural” aspects of time and space that relate the two halves of the book: “This chapter is . . . a bridge between the two parts of the book, but we cross it in one direction only” (Evans-Pritchard 1940a:94). The key relationship is between structural time and structural space (fig. 1). According to Evans-Pritchard (p. 108), “structural time is a reflection of structural distance”; while relationships between individual and collective actors are reckoned in terms of spatial concepts, it is spatial and social distance that determine the selection of the terms in which those relationships are expressed. For instance, shared rights in pastoral resources and the residential propinquity that permits the exercise of those rights are critical in the choice among the possible ways in which relationships can be defined. The definitions, however, are derived from systems for computing relationships, such as agnation, that utilize a temporal idiom. Thus spatial relationships are expressed as relationships between persons who share

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\(^4\) The potential importance of nonpastoral subsistence activities for understanding Nuer social structure has been pointed out to us by Ronald Cohen and Aidan Southall.
a common ancestor closer or more distant in time relative to a third person.

At this point in his argument Evans-Pritchard makes a crucial observation: While it is reasonable to suppose that with the passage of time lineages will grow larger, lineage structure “may be considered a fixed system” (p. 107). Some process seems to operate to create a system that exhibits a statistical tendency toward stability. For Evans-Pritchard, as for Fortes following him, this is a critical issue. As he shows later, because lineage concepts are articulated in political discourse, they are shaped to conform to “political actualities.” The “conformation” of time is made to fit the “configuration” of space (terms Jackson [I978] was later to use to describe the Kuranko of Sierra Leone). Lineages tend to be stable in depth and span because genealogies are continually fitted to the political contexts in which they emerge.

This much is well known. What is important to stress is the relationship between the systemic properties Evans-Pritchard is concerned to describe and the actions from which they emerge. Elucidating this relationship calls for a distinction that we think is glossed over in Evans-Pritchard’s account. Evans-Pritchard ends his discussion of concepts of time and space with an account of Nuer “values” as they are expressed in the concept cieng, “home.” In a sentence that seems worthy of Talcott Parsons, he remarks (p. 135) that “values are embodied in words through which they influence behaviour.” What he describes in the passages immediately following, however, is not the way in which an internalized standard determines behavior, but the structural properties of terms of identity (Maynard 1981). Values are said to exhibit relativity; the structural relationships among actors vary with the situation. We would interpret this process in more specifically interactional terms. The notion of relativity refers to the contextual application of concepts that are primarily referential in use. The logic that is invoked is not the logic of internalized norms or beliefs, but the logic of practice. Relativity and opposition are logical principles in terms of which action may be organized. In order for action to utilize these patterns the Nuer must have a set of terms for discriminating among situations and actors. These terms have or embody value; i.e., they enable actors to order options. Thus, in acting politically Nuer judge other Nuer as more closely or more distantly related in spatial terms and express this judgment in temporal terms. The process that Evans-Pritchard describes is not one of values determining Nuer behavior, but one of Nuer making judgments in a common language of time and space, a process we call evaluation. In his term “value” Evans-Pritchard has collapsed both the standards in terms of which evaluations are made and the process whereby one Nuer judges another Nuer to be an ally in relationship to a third. It is through evaluation, in his account, that agents reproduce their structure in action. As value terms are invoked they are altered, “manipulated,” to form an unintended system that exhibits constancy of form over time. The significant point is that Evans-Pritchard’s approach recognizes a dialectic between structure and human agency. “Values” are terms which contain cognitive contrasts and can be used by actors to make classifications in situations.

Once we distinguish values and evaluations in Evans-Pritchard’s chapter on time and space and subsequently in the book, his account of the Nuer begins, surprisingly, to display Giddens’s (1976, 1979) notion of the “duality of structure”—the idea that structure is both medium and outcome of action, that it enables as well as constrains action. While he shows how agents reproduce structure through action, however, he does not specify a similar process whereby “values” control behavior. Instead, he assumes it. This will become even more apparent in our discussion of his analysis of the political system.

The chapter on concepts of time and space reveals a second dimension of Evans-Pritchard’s concept of action. Agency, as a number of writers have pointed out, is a subjective concept; it is related to the “goal-rational elements” in action. There is another dimension in terms of which actors attempt to make their actions accountable to self and other (Schutz 1962), and this is the intersubjective one, objectified for the Nuer in the languages of time and space. Among the Nuer, relationships in space have meaning because they imply or are related to extension in time. Because multiple links are possible among many persons, the choice of a time-space relationship is negotiable, even though intersubjective agreement about the meaning of the relationship is not negotiable once it is decided upon. The intersubjective dimension of action, the time-space element in relationships, provides the link between human agency and the reproduction of structures in The Nuer because the positioning of actors with regard to one another is continually changing at the same time as they express and contemplate the changes in a relatively stable language.

The first half of The Nuer, as we have seen, examines “modes of livelihood,” the environment in which the Nuer are situated, and the spatial and temporal modes through which social organization and environment are articulated. In his discussion of the political system in the next chapter, Evans-Pritchard argues for social interdependence as an ecological necessity and

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1 The apparent similarity of Evans-Pritchard to Parsons here is in the presumed relation of values to conduct, not in their definitions of “values.” Evans-Pritchard appears to use the term not to mean all emotionally laden evaluations, but in the narrower sense of social identity. Political values, for example, are “the common feeling and acknowledgment of members of local communities that they are an exclusive group distinct from, and opposed to, other communities of the same order, and that they ought to act together in certain circumstances and to observe certain conventions among themselves” (p. 263).

2 There is difficulty with passages such as this in which “structure” begins to stand for too many aspects of a system. As we intend to show, Evans-Pritchard operates at a number of levels simultaneously. For example, such as “structure is both medium and outcome of action” collapse into one term a number of analytically discriminable elements. Thompson (1981:143–49) argues that Giddens, on whom we rely, is moving toward the distinction of several senses of “structure,” among them social institutions as specific constellations of social relations and their associated material resources (Evans-Pritchard’s “system” or Fortes’s “social field”) and social structure defined both as conditions necessary for their persistence and as elements that define the limits within which a structure may vary. This last element (one of the limits of variation) seems to correspond somewhat to our meta-cultural logical principles. We would add, however, that these are exhibited in specific cultural idioms, which are found associated with social institutions or fields. Ideally we would like to link them from “structure” to the activity of applying logical principles to order or provide consistency to human productions. From this perspective the key issue is the transformation that these principles undergo in different contexts, in neighboring societies, and under novel conditions. Following Parkin (1978, 1981), we call this perspective “transformational” (see also Southall 1971, 1976).
shows that political action is intimately related to the interests and goals of socioeconomic action. Following the chapter on the political system are chapters on the lineage system and the age-set system. In the first, Evans-Pritchard examines the principles of segmentary opposition and relativity as they are expressed in the lineage system. He shows that the phenomenal form that the system takes is the product of its interdependence with the political system. In the next chapter, Evans-Pritchard describes the age-set system as a third conceptual system of the Nuer that exhibits the principles of structural relativity. He argues, however, that it is not used metaphorically in the same way as the lineage system because it is not interdependent with the political system.

The discussion has two purposes. The first is to examine the nature of the polity among the Nuer. From this perspective, *The Nuer* contributes a negative example to the theory of the state (see Evens 1978). The second is to show the complex relationships between the principle of segmentary opposition, the idioms in which it is articulated, and the conditions under which they are realized. A fundamental theme is that while the phenomenal form of a system is determined by its relationships with other systems, the logical principles underlying the system are not determined by social interdependence or material and ecological conditions. Instead, they are inherent in the human condition or universal proclivities of social practice (cf. Needham 1963, 1974). (In a later work, *Nuer Religion* [1956], Evans-Pritchard argues, similarly, that the essential features of Nuer cosmology are not socially determined, but artifacts of the imagination [cf. Karp 1980].)

The chapter entitled “The Political System” is concerned to provide an equilibrium analysis of group formation in the conduct of disputes. A central problem of description that faces Evans-Pritchard is to relate the relativity of identity terms or “counter-levels” groups that have described in the previous chapter to patterns of group formation and dispersal. The territorial system is political because social units which are territorial in nature are the basis not only for aggression and defense and for most socioeconomic activities, but also for the sharing of sentiments.

The processes by which such groups form and disperse, termed “fission” and “fusion,” tend to parallel activities associated with cattle husbandry, raiding, and warfare. The scale of segmentation is due particularly to factors such as “physical environment, mode of livelihood, poor communication, and sparse food supply” (p. 148). All these affect segmentation and aggregation at the lower levels of territorial organization. At the higher levels, more specifically political interests, such as raiding and warfare, affect the pattern of segmentation. Critical for this argument is Evans-Pritchard’s conclusion that the more mundane aspects of cattle accumulation, husbandry, inheritance, and exploitation of common pasturage have a greater effect on the integration of social units than the political activities uniting higher-level units. If there are interests that motivate actors to modify disputes in favor of social integration at lower levels, Evans-Pritchard asserts, these and counter-levels are balanced by factors which would motivate actors to dispute and disintegrate socially at the same levels (pp. 149–50, our emphasis):

It has been noted that the smaller the local group the more cohesive it is and the more contacts of various kinds its members have with one another. There is less solidarity the wider we extend the circle from a village to adjacent tribes. It might be assumed, therefore that there is always greater opposition between two groups than between the segments of either and that the segments are held together, as it were, by this external pressure, but we cannot admit that this view accords with the facts because greater hostility appears to be felt between villages, groups of villages, and tertiary tribal sections than between larger tribal sections and between tribes. . . . we arrive at the conclusion that the more multiple and frequent the contact between members of a segment the more intense the opposition between its parts.

We are not concerned to defend the equilibrium argument made in this passage. What is significant to us is the role of human agency in the account of the system and the implicit importance given to actors’ interests in the production of behavior. Territorial groups generate their own tendencies toward fission and fusion; it is not pressure to combine from a higher level that generates cohesion. The smaller the group, the greater the requirement for cooperation; the greater the need for cooperation, the more the social contact; the more the social contact, the greater the possibility of conflict over rights in cattle. Hence, the interests of actors lead to actions which are socially positive and socially negative; they tend to balance each other out. The equilibrium, if one exists, must be very tenuous indeed.

Because Evans-Pritchard recognizes that social integration is the product of human agency, it becomes very difficult to maintain that *The Nuer* is a standard structural-functional account, whatever that might be. It is precisely because the processes of fission and fusion, though they embody a structural principle, are the product of actors’ pursuit of interests that a social system emerges recursively over time. As Giddens (1979) would have it, the structure is immanent and not imposed by observers out of a positivist urge to create ideal groups. Fortes (1969:75) makes the point nicely:

He [Evans-Pritchard] takes the morphological concept of segmentary organization from Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, but shows that it subsumes the structurally counterposed processes of “fission and fusion.” . . . Morphology is exhibited as present in process, and process is shown to shape morphology. . . . we might compare Evans-Pritchard’s contribution to the discovery of the reproductive mechanisms such as mitosis and meiosis which bring about the segregation and combination of genes and link them to the constitution of the organism as a whole.

The analogy is apt in a double sense. The parallel between segmentation and genetic mechanisms underscores Evans-Pritchard’s concern with reproduction. It also betrays his tendency to view the moment of reproduction as unproblematic. Unlike genes, human agents are not themselves part of an unambiguous code which dictates the process of reproduction. The interests and goals of individuals are related to preexisting institutional forms, but in a way which requires interpretation and choice. Neither the intentionality of individuals nor the cultural systems within which they act are a straightforward translation of an underlying formal logic. Dilemmas of interpretation and choice are not much in evidence in *The Nuer* because Evans-Pritchard does not clearly distinguish between real social situations and structural types or between individuals and socially defined actors.

Evans-Pritchard appears to argue that Nuer conduct is clear-cut, any contradictions being systematically produced. This would seem to be the case when he discusses his orientation to the “structural plane” (pp. 265–66, our emphasis):

To avoid misunderstanding . . . we would remark that the contradiction we have alluded to is on the abstract plane of structural relations and emerges from a systematization of values by sociological analysis. It is not to be supposed that we mean that behavior is contradictory or that groups stand in contradiction to one another. It is the relations of groups within the system that constitutes and exemplifies the principle.

He does not, however, simply equate social practice with relations of groups or the individual with a rule-governed homunculus. He immediately adds a clear methodological warning (p. 266, our emphasis):

There may sometimes be conflict of values in the consciousness of the individual, but it is structural tension to which we refer. Likewise when we refer to the relativity of the structure we do not mean that a group is anything than an actual mass of people who can be seen and counted and plotted in space and time. We mean that *on the plane of structural relations* its position in a system is relative to the functioning of the system in changing situations.
Whether Evans-Pritchard intends a dichotomy between ideal models and the realities of person and conduct is unclear to us, but his excision of many of the vagaries, false starts, and failed efforts of daily experience results in an uncertain picture of the actors' work involved in the "instantiation" of structure in the moments of Nuer existence (cf. Giddens 1979).

Evans-Pritchard's failure to examine the often contradictory and conflicting relationships between structure and life has been explored in a series of essays reinterpreting Nuer collective representations by Beidelman (1966, 1968, 1971, 1981). Beidelman's orientation has much in common with the structuralism of de Heusch (1981). Both see the relationship between structure and "lived reality" as complex and manifold. Structure may mask at one moment and enable at another. In all instances it is a simplification and exhibits contradiction. According to Beidelman (1981:154),

The categories of society and the beliefs in which these people's feelings and things are embedded are necessary for orderly and sustained management of their world; indeed, they form the components of that world. Yet life involves process, change; it transcends and defies such categories even as it is apprehended through them. Categories and groupings must contradict one another in some ways if they are to contain a myriad world.

While this position might seem to echo Evans-Pritchard's argument that contradiction exists on a structural plane, it shows precisely where The Nuer is flawed. Evans-Pritchard's model of the management of reality, the negotiation of order, is oversimplified. This is the essence of Beidelman's conclusion that Evans-Pritchard failed to achieve "a deeper structural synthesis" (1981:128). The relationship between structure and the confusions of everyday life is not displayed sufficiently in The Nuer. Evans-Pritchard was too good an ethnographer, however, to omit it entirely. Beidelman has been able to uncover contradictions between personal ambition and social responsibility (1966), conflict between norms in situations (1968), how symbolic inversion and role reversal may be used to create new social capacities (1971), and general attitudes toward the limitations of life (throughout, but especially 1981).

Beidelman's essays demonstrate that the congruence between "ideas and feelings attached to words" is much more complex than Evans-Pritchard assumes. There are other hints as well. The general impression given by Evans-Pritchard is that the Nuer act in accordance with their interests and that disputes are the result of rational calculation and the unreflexive following of the rules that define the situation. Yet Howell begins his Manual of Nuer Law (1954) with a description of "young hotheads" rushing off to war, and Evans-Pritchard (1951:2, 54) tells us in Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer that dances tell us in Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer that dances trigger unintended fights among the participants. Many dances are held during complex marriage negotiations in which it is in the interests of the parties to settle disputes, not provoke them. Affect seems to override the rules of conduct in ways that Evans-Pritchard does not take into account. Beidelman shows that the Nuer do, however, pay lively attention to these issues—that they are imaged in their symbolic forms.

The result of this underemphasis on the vagaries of process in the second half of The Nuer is that the actors seem excessively rule-governed in Evans-Pritchard's account of the two key po-

11 Gluckman (1956) does a better job than Evans-Pritchard of showing how conflicting interests and social demands result in strategic compromises that produce social order. Gluckman, however, focuses only upon one sector of social relations and tends to confuse social integration and system integration, conflict and contradiction, and solidarity and coherence. These difficulties stem from a conception of social structure that is actual, not virtual (Giddens 1979). Structure for him, as for Radcliffe-Brown (1952), is "actually existing social relations" rather than models that exhibit tendencies in action (cf. Fortes 1949). (This is not the position Gluckman takes in later work (1968)).
quickly forgotten, only some lines of descent being recognized as forming lineages. Descent groups tend to form a segment particularly around brothers, who are an ideal and effective unit of migration. Lines of descent are remembered, however, only if they become associated with an economically and demographically viable group. “A minimal, and then a minor, line of descent in a lineage which has only ritual status towards the other lineages of its clan, whereas with the people in whose village and district its members have grown up it has a mutuality of interests and community of experience” (p. 210). Numerically weak descent groups attach themselves to such powerful lineages in order to achieve economic and political ends, thereby reinforcing the dominance of a few lineages (cf. p. 200). This aspect of political discourse is elaborated by Gough (1971), who makes the important addition that forms of marriage may very well be used by dominant lineages to maintain demographic superiority and reproduce their dominance through the assimilation of stranger Nuer and Dinka.

While recognizing the difficulties of translation, Evans-Pritchard (1940a:215) uses the term “aristocrats” in speaking of *dil*, and this has led to considerable confusion in the literature. *Diel* refers to the members of prestigious clans which are thought to have been the original inhabitants of a territory. Smaller, lower-level territories, in particular, become associated with the names of *dil*. Members of other agnatic groups may become members of the clans in question through adoption or other forms of affiliation but are not considered *dil*, a term restricted to those who can trace actual agnatic descent. *Dil* status is not a social identity acquirable through metaphoric extension. While members of a client lineage may affiliate with the *dil* and acquire rights in pasturage and other economic benefits, they do not acquire the political status of *dil*, true descendants of the patrician.

Evans-Pritchard (p. 179) notes that the Nuer with the most political influence are elders who are *gaat tuoot*, “children of bulls.” “Such a man is called a *tut*, bull, and in strict usage this is equivalent to *dil*, tribal aristocrat” (p. 179). A *dil*, therefore, exercises political influence not only because of his position within an economically powerful lineage, but because of his agnatic relationships. Descent, as Fortes (1979) has shown, gives leaders their credentials and provides a fiduciary basis for social order. This is made even clearer in Evans-Pritchard’s suggestion that *dil* need not be numerically dominant in a territory to exercise political influence (p. 215). Nuer descent, then, is not entirely the outcome of territoriality and economic interests. Agnatic descent also shapes community values through the presence of the *dil* who leads the division of both economic and descent ties. “If you are a *dil* of the tribe in which you live, you are more than a simple tribesman. You are one of the owners of the country, its village sites, its pastures, its fishing pools and wells. Other people live there in virtue of marriage into your clan, adoption into your lineage, or of some other social tie” (p. 215). It is important to note, however, that Evans-Pritchard is speaking of “bulls” as equivalent to *dil* “in strict usage.” In some cases members of lineages affiliated with an aristocratic lineage as “daughter’s children” can become “bulls” because of their economic dominance and through their metaphorical use of agnatic ties (cf. Bonte 1981:210; Gough 1971).

That agnation is not solely an epiphenomenon of either economic or political factors does not imply that even as ideology it resembles a perfect Linnaean taxonomy. Genealogical knowledge is always partial and is more elaborate among Nuer who are *dil* than among others. A series of overlapping genealogies tends to form a system organized in a manner that is polythetic, the result not of systematic ordering, but of piecemeal fitting of genealogies to situations. But “the whole of the Nuer are brought into a single kinship or pseudo kinship system and all the territorial segments of Nuerland are interconnected by that system” (p. 240). Lineages need not have this “totalizing” capacity. They can also be a medium for differentiation, as among the Dinka; Southall (1976) makes precisely this point. The Nuer and the Dinka express different logical possibilities inherent in the segmentary system. Differences of environment and historical circumstances help to explain why one system emphasizes the unity of territories while the other tends to display their disjunction. We might say that there exists a range of possibilities and that at certain historical junctures some principles are placed in the foreground at the expense of others. The themes of unity and diversity are expressed segmentally among the Dinka and in a “totalizing” manner among the Nuer.

Segmentary opposition is expressed in the form of lineage fission, but the association of genealogy with the whole of the Nuer in mythology permits the lineage system to take the form of a complete segmentary system. This is the purpose of Evans-Pritchard’s repetition of his triangular diagram on p. 248 (fig. 2). This diagram shows a tendency for genealogies to follow the form of territorial organization. The Nuer have a collective self-image in which they are a political whole. This image is expressed in their form of history, the genealogy, which assumes a shape that tends to fit the structure of the territorial system.

Immediately before the conclusion of the chapter on the lineage system, Evans-Pritchard introduces a paragraph that has the form of a paradox, the sort of rhetorical expression to which Schneider (1965) has objected. Lineage fission, according to the Nuer, stems from the division between children of different mothers and the same father, between *gaatgwan*, children of the father, and *gaatman*, children of one mother. “A lineage bifurcation is a polygamous family writ large” (p. 247). 12 This division does not determine the points at which segmentation will actually take place but is the source of it in the Nuer view. The principle of segmentation appears, then, to be inherent in the lineage organization and not imposed upon it by its association with the political system. Given Evans-Pritchard’s earlier assertion that Nuer concepts of space also exhibit the principle of structural relativity, we can only conclude that structural relativity is found in two separate but interdependent spheres of Nuer collective life—lineage organization and territorial affiliation.

![Diagram of lineage and territorial segmentation](redrawn from Evans-Pritchard 1940:248)

12 We may say that segmentary opposition is articulated in an idiom with two aspects, descent and matrifiliation. Descent asserts common identity, while complementary filiation asserts division in the face of unity. This seems to us the point of the paradox that “it would seem may be just because the agnatic principle is unchallenged in Nuer society that the tracing of descent through women is so prominent . . .” (p. 28). When Evans-Pritchard adds “and matrilocality so prevalent” he seems to be conflating a cultural idiom with a pattern of choice; perhaps this is what confuses Schneider. Our point is not that idiom has no influence on residence choice. As our earlier discussion has indicated, Evans-Pritchard shows that ideology can have myriad influences on action. What Schneider fails to recognize is that residence patterns are not rules, but decisions based on a multiplicity of factors. Evans-Pritchard’s lack of clarity on this issue is resolved in Fortes’s (1958:3) formulation: “The alignments of residence are determined by the economic, affective, and jural relations that spring from these primary factors [kinship, descent, marriage, and citizenship], and it is fallacious to analyze them in terms of ostensibly discrete rules or types which come into effect at marriage.”
This interpretation is supported by Evans-Pritchard's account of the system of age-sets in the next and final chapter. His concern is to show that the age-set system also is organized in terms of structural time but that its form is not fitted to the political system. Because the age-set system emerges primarily in local community settings, it utilizes the categories of cognatic kinship to describe relations between age-sets. As a result, the age-set system organizes relationships only in limited situations. In intracommunity situations it is structurally irrelevant. Thus, it does not have the same relationship to the political system as does the lineage system. While the territorial and lineage systems remain in the same relationship to each other, the age-sets continually change their position "in relation to the whole system, passing through points of relative juniority and seniority" (p. 256). While all three systems exhibit movement, only the movements of the territorial system and the lineage system are coordinated. That is why these latter systems tend to exhibit the same form. Evans-Pritchard concludes: "Whilst the age-set system is combined with the territorial and lineage systems in the same social cadre and is consistent with them, the consistency is not an interdependence" (p. 257, our emphasis). Of what, then, is this consistency composed? All three systems exhibit the principles Evans-Pritchard terms structural relativity and complementary opposition. In the case of the age-set system the relativity is exhibited in the segmentation of the system into opposed groups on the basis of age. Since the age-set system is not interdependent with the others in any context, they cannot be interpreted as causing this feature to appear in it.

The discussion of the age-set system is an important demonstration of the preceding analysis. On the one hand, Evans-Pritchard shows that the primary orders of Nuer social life all display the same principles. On the other hand, he shows that these principles are not the result of one system's dominating another, although features of specific systems can be shown to be the product of structural causality. The principles of structural relativity and complementary opposition both lie behind and are necessary conditions for the production of the three idioms in which they are expressed. It is relativity and opposition that allow Nuer to assume enough consistency in social relations to achieve the interest in cattle that produces interdependence among people. Because the Nuer articulate their territorial interests in agnatic terms, they bring these two "systems" together in shared situations, and this results in an "interdependence" whose consequence is a tendency for the two to exhibit the same form. In contrast, the "consistency" or homology between the age-set system and the other two cannot be the result of their having a common nexus. The interdependence-consistency distinction is one of the most important and most understated issues raised in The Nuer. It is essential for understanding the dialectic of human agency and structure that organizes this work. A closer examination of this analytical opposition shows the part played by the human agent in the production and reproduction of the systems that Evans-Pritchard describes. The distinction may be made clearer by showing a parallel with the views of the art historian Baxandal (1972) on Italian Renaissance painting. Baxandal shows that the same principles that order accounting procedures in business also order or are displayed in painting. He does not suggest any direct relationship between commerce and artistic production and appreciation. Instead, he concludes that the principles of one are consistent with the principles of the other. What relates them is not a common nexus, but the application of the same skills acquired in everyday life by painters and their audience (in formal schooling, for example) to the ordering of two separate domains of social experience. The act through which this ordering is achieved is transformative in nature. Logical principles are expressed in new media, media which may differ so radically from the original ones that the principles will be unrecognizable in phenomenological or surface terms.

Operating within an entirely different tradition, Baxandal arrives at a conclusion strikingly similar to Evans-Pritchard's; that logical principles are tools used by actors to perform transformations within cultures—and, the anthropologist would add, translation between cultures. The translation of concepts is possible precisely because logical principles are not cultural, but metacultural, transcultural in Maussian terms, hence universally available to anthropologists and actors alike. This is what we take Needham (1963) to indicate when he asserts that they are the theoretical capital of social anthropology, "contentless and relational." They are not experienced as contentless and relational, but are organized in cultural idioms (Needham 1974). They are located analytically through induction and abstraction; the proof of the analysis that elicits them is that they order some body of cultural data more efficiently than another hypothesis and that data collected subsequently conform to the analysis (Sperber 1974:68-72). This is the position taken by Evans-Pritchard when he asserts that segmentary opposition occurs both among the Nuer and in Oxfordshire.

What is significant for understanding the relationship between structure and human agency is not so much the logical principle as the transformation it undergoes in the hands of the agents as they move from context to context. The transformative method is not only an analyst's activity, but also an element in the production of ordered activities by members of society. It is because transformative activity is located in the work of both agent and observer that parallels can be drawn between Evans-Pritchard's concern with the relationship among simultaneously and such different orientations as structuralism and the praxis theory of Marx (see Mepham 1973). They all rely on a more or less explicit concept of human agency to explain the emergence of structure.

To the degree that he makes claims for the existence of structural principles independent of specific cultural forms, Evans-Pritchard is a structuralist, influenced by Marcel Mauss. It is Mauss's special achievement that he "envisions the stuff of which society is fashioned, people and objects, as . . . also affecting and modifying social categories and processes, even as these act upon them" (Beidelman 1970:507). These "total social phenomena," as Mauss terms them, are ordered in terms of metacultural logical principles. For Evans-Pritchard the most significant object in the experience of the Nuer is cattle. Cattle provide a focus for the creation of totalities. If we may follow up on Evans-Pritchard's famous "Nuerosis" pun, cattle provide the Nuer with the vehicle for stock taking; they enable Nuer to identify themselves with an object which they are not as well as being objects of utilitarian value. Their interest in cattle allows Nuer to stand outside of themselves, to reflect upon their own productions. The engrossment of Nuer in cattle is simultaneously engrossment in themselves.

To the degree that Evans-Pritchard sees systems as deriving their form from interconnections, "interdependence," he is a structural-functionalist. The categories of structuralist, functionalist, transactionalist, and so on are fundamentally misleading, however, when they direct the reader of a complex work such as The Nuer to emphasize one element of the analysis at the expense of another. We have reached the point in the development of social and cultural anthropology where classification has degenerated into stereotype. The Nuer has become a victim of this process, and our grasp of both the development of the discipline and the significant issues in social analysis is weakened.

Evans-Pritchard does not entirely resolve the relationship of structure to human agency, but the manner in which he poses the issues clears the way for further work. For Evans-Pritchard, the signs of Nuer life, their knowledge and norms in regard
to cattle, their social and natural environment, and the explicitly symbolic models of political and agnatic segmentation are always related to experience. The idioms which define the models and the particular social alignments which reproduce and modify them emerge in the context of human work and survival. The words through which Nuer values and Nuer social identity are expressed are embedded in the circumstantial but not reducible to it. This was the great achievement of the work of Evans-Pritchard: exposing the contingent but necessary mutual dependence of structure and human agency. Clearly, there are shortcomings in that work: there is a lack of appreciation for the problematic nature of social reproduction, and other questions are left unanswered. We can learn from both its achievements and its failures, but we will not learn from the failures until we have mastered the achievements. Perhaps *The Nuer* is a classic whose time has come.

**Comments**

**by John W. Burton**

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"Human agency" in the present usage seems fundamentally similar to the notion of social accountability: namely, that individuals make choices and have to suffer or reap the consequences of their actions. At a low level of abstraction, this view suggests that all social activity is political, though no loss or gain is permanent. Stressing as they do that social norms can be either realized or evaded, the authors portray a social world in which one advances one's interests (a seeming passion for cattle) by deviating from the norm, by seeking self-advance-ment at some other's expense. One who does not know this people firsthand will realize that the Nuer are not a book, but a social environment of individuals. But that the Nuer, as individuals, might be prone to act differently from the way they conceive of their behavior is hardly a novel insight. The authors seek to create a world of social discourse prefaced by human agency within a monograph that was designed, one can argue, purposefully to exclude individuality from the analysis. As any reader of this essay will know, Evans-Pritchard concluded this book on the Nuer by asserting that the "science" of anthropological would make no progress at a low level of abstraction. That he later made public his lack of enthusiasm for the Radcliffe-Brownian program of a "science" of society is a matter of intellectual history; that in *The Nuer* he chose to abide by Radcliffe-Brown's dictum that the "actual relations" of Jack and Jill were of little value in the final analysis is abundantly clear. Radcliffe-Brown's "influence on the theoretical side of my work will be obvious to any student of anthropology," wrote Evans-Pritchard in his preface to *The Nuer*. Since the authors have chosen not to provide a definition of structural-functionalism, one wonders why this is mentioned at all. If reading *The Nuer* in 1983 demands that we do so through the evolving lexicon of social theory, the present essay is indeed timely. The authors make a good case for keeping our classics abreast of contemporary theory. By the same token, it is to be expected that a future generation of practitioners will rediscover this classic through a newer vocabulary. By that time *The Nuer* will have long since become an artifact of historical anthropology—a true snapshot in the classic structural-functional sense.

Depending upon one's specific interests within the discipline, one might point to either major or minor flaws in the present analysis. To ignore, for the most part, women's roles in social reproduction simply because Evans-Pritchard did the same seems to me to leave fundamental gaps in any model of any society. Given the authors' predominant focus on pastoralism and agnation with reference to space and time, Nuer women are once again invisible. In *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer* Evans-Pritchard (p. 127) noted, "As boys grow up they attach themselves more and more to the [cattle] byre, but each remains, both in sentiment and by social alignment, also a member of his mother's hut." In other words, the promise of history begins with children of distinct women. A smaller flaw is the absence of an informative discussion of the Nuer "age-set" system. Since age-sets or age categories appear to have little direct relevance for the more embracing political process in Nuer social life, one has to wonder why Evans-Pritchard chose to include this discussion in a monograph on ecology and political organization. It is evident from the published ethnography on neighboring peoples that age classification is intimately associated with the regulation of marriage; given the central significance of marriage and bridewealth exchange as total social phenomena, an account of Nuer social reproduction which does not make more explicit reference to this association can, I think, be seen as deficient.

**by Peter Harries-Jones**

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Karp and Maynard invoke Giddens's "new rules" in their rigorous examination of *The Nuer* and request us to accept them as standards for evaluating a classic. While I accept the rules, I do not believe that they should be applied retrospectively. Evans-Pritchard wrestled with freedom and determinism long before developments in science, history, and anthropology had made new rules necessary. He treated the question of structure and human agency within the confines of an equilibrarian and universalistic science, an ideographic history, and an idealist anthropology. Today science awards a Nobel Prize for studies of nonequilibrium thermodynamic systems incorporating the principle of "order through fluctuation" (I. Prigogine); nomothetic interpretations have become so common in history that E. P. Thompson has recently denounced the whole as constructions of an orrery, while anthropologists attribute to sheiks decisions not only about peace in the feud, but also about mode of production.

The problems would be less daunting if the concept of human agency in Evans-Pritchard's work were satisfactory. It is not. The study of agency begins and ends with experiencing relations. This enforces dialectics; but as a cognitive act in accord with experience dialectics must be far more than a discourse between individual actions and logical principles. Further, it cannot be confined to issues of polarization or complementarity, but must be broadened to embrace several dimensions of action.

Second, from the viewpoint of agency dialectics continually breaks frames of reference and reorders them. As Georges Gurvitch has said, dialectics as an ordering principle "escapes us when we think we have it; we are duped by it when we have penetrated its secret." The concept of human agency requires that stabilities in society be treated as mere artifacts, structured only by our own interests. Among the most important of these are our interests in time and space. As ordering patterns, time and space are subject to a collective definition; yet the concept of agency argues that social interactions are not coincident with any collective definition. In fact, the domain of agency is largely hypothetical, highly uncertain, and biased in the "realities" it selects and interprets. A study of agency is a study of how individuals come to experience relations of order, especially time and space, and how in so doing agents change those relations. This is the postulate of social reproduction. The circularity of this process leads the anthropologist interested in human agency to consider reflexive monitoring of frames of meaning a central question. Yet, as Giddens points out, this
has traditionally been treated as a mere nuisance. If The Nuer had recognized the circularities inherent in coming to know about order and breaking the existing frameworks of order, or if Evans-Pritchard had examined the question of reflexive monitoring, then the cultural idioms of Nuer life would have been treated quite differently. The media of Nuer life—cattle, tools, kinship, and resources of the environment—would have been seen as just that: media. Cultural idioms would have been represented less as principles organizing values and more as channels of human communication. Communication itself would have been viewed as the social matrix of Nuer society. Instead, in the tradition of Western scholarship, Evans-Pritchard treated the media of Nuer life as causal chains linearly linked in time. His notion of lineal causality is antithetical to the notion of mutual causality that the concept of human agency requires.

Two scholars who broke with the orthodoxy of Comte and Durkheim on the question of social determinism and pursued a conceptualization of agency were Gurvitch (a lineal descendant?) and Bateson (a collateral?). Gurvitch's (1950) methodology of "hyper-empiricism" is a systematic attempt to relate experience to social frameworks of thought. Bateson's (1972[1949]) "ecology of mind" is a thoroughgoing exploration of how immanent control emerges from the apprehensions of patterns and order in circular communications. Both scholars were antistructural and opposed to organismic functionalism. Though they were their contemporaries, Evans-Pritchard was indebted to neither.

by Robert W. Hefner
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Karp and Maynard are to be applauded for drawing our attention to the relevance of Evans-Pritchard's analysis for problems in contemporary social theory. They are correct, I believe, in insisting that Evans-Pritchard's analysis of fission and fusion forced him to confront the problems of what we now call social practice and reproduction. The Nuer analysis demonstrated that the formal logic of political idioms can never encompass all that is involved in actual social practice. As the authors note, Evans-Pritchard thus turned to the analysis of human interests and agency, although he never managed to free his account entirely of rule-governed stereotypes of social practice. That problem is very much with us still today.

The key issue here seems to be just what human agency involves, and on this point the authors raise some very difficult questions. On the one hand, they emphasize the need to link our analysis of agency to "actor-oriented" terms such as "interests" and "interpretation." They then note in addition that in social action agents apply logical principles (embodied in different cultural media) to diverse social fields, thereby providing order and consistency to action. This latter point appears to me to risk obscuring the importance of the former. No doubt social action may involve something akin to this projection of logical form into fields of social action. The question remains, however, how much does this really tell us about human agency? By itself, this claim leads us back to the well-worn structural imagery of agency as an exercise in classification application. Surely action and interpretation involve far more.

Karp and Maynard seem sensitive to these difficulties. They acknowledge the role of interests, interpretation, and choice. In the end, however, their discussion shies away from questioning what these processes involve and instead affirms that social anthropology's richest "theoretical capital" lies in our appreciation of "metacultural logical principles." This conclusion seems excessively conservative, above all given the subtlety of the authors' earlier investigation of Nuer social process. What seems required here is greater attention to the dynamics of interpretation and choice involved in the practical "skill" to which the authors refer in citing Baxandall. The skills required for an actor to evaluate the demands of social context, formulate an appropriate course of action, and then (at least in certain situations) justify that action within the terms of recognized cultural idioms far exceed anything we can describe in terms of even immanent logical principles (at least those of the order of generality discussed by Evans-Pritchard). Such social practice seems more an exercise in what Bourdieu and others have called "fuzzy logic" (Bourdieu 1972:111; Gilsenan 1982:188), which is to say a practical logic which has an economy and cognitive complexity far richer than that of metacultural logical form.

I am reminded that at least two lines of divergence emerged after the dissolution of classical British social anthropology. The first, pioneered by such figures as Evans-Pritchard, concerned itself with the underlying logic of action and meaning and would eventually find much common ground with French structuralism. The second, represented in Leach's (1954) Burma work but earlier anticipated in Firth's long-standing concern for values and rationality, also sought to go beyond rule-governed models of behavior but did so by stressing the elements of interest and choice involved in social action. There was something of this latter concern in Evans-Pritchard's work as well, although it seems to have diminished in his later writings. Other decision-making approaches to social action inevitably incorporated simplistic neoclassical premises into their analysis of human wants (Hefner 1983). They seemed hopelessly simplistic because they were incapable of showing just how human wants are themselves informed by sociocultural process. The point here of course is that it seems that Evans-Pritchard's greatest insight lay here, in recognizing the linkage between social reproduction and the social formation of actors' interests and in insisting that the analysis of these interests could only be done within the larger social context. Ultimately, I suspect, this theme of the Nuer work may subvert the other one concerned with underlying logical form. As we today refine the cognitive and sociological concepts involved in understanding human agency, I suspect that our earlier emphasis on immanent logical principles will begin to look like a cover term for what is in fact a variety of complex and interacting cognitive, cultural, and practical processes. We may then have to deconstruct our concept of structure a bit more and shift some of its analytical efficacy back to social agents—reasoning, deliberating, and pursuing courses of action which themselves serve to constitute the context in which human interests are sustained.

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I congratulate the authors on providing the finest overall analysis of The Nuer available and on leading us through the blind channels of the Sudd of anthropological interpretations of Evans-Pritchard's 1940 study.

Implied in Karp and Maynard's review of these interpretations is a serious indictment of modern social anthropology. In The Nuer, Evans-Pritchard presented complicated ethnography and complex theoretical ideas in plain English. His description and analysis of Nuer life strike a difficult (and imperfect) balance among the roles of cultural ideas, social institutions, and natural environment. While stressing the importance of social structure, the book adheres to a conviction that individual actors are the force that actually shapes larger social forms. The Nuer is assiduously nondeterministic.

Most of the interpreters discussed by the authors use a more complex language and one more reliant upon specialized jargon than that of Evans-Pritchard. Yet with this supposedly professionally enhanced language, they systematically fail to grasp the totality of the original argument. Karp and Maynard show
how most reinterpretations fail because they stress only one side or one level of Evans-Pritchard's original multilayered and multilevel analysis. If anthropologists cannot absorb the degree of complexity contained in an English-language book by a colleague, what sorts of analyses are they creating from their direct field experiences of the multidimensional realities of the peoples they study?

The following reflections derive from recent experiences of research among the Dinka.

First, the Nuer are often interpreted as somehow representing minimally organized pastoral societies. However, northern Nilotic social organization is complicated by almost any standards. There are four overlapping, fully corporate institutions: lineage, age-set, territory, and priest/chiefdom. Among the various tribes of the Nuer, Dinka, Anuak, and Shilluk peoples these four corporate institutions take on different styles; yet social structure in any one group consists of relationships among all four institutions worked out by active individuals.

Second, Karp and Maynard note that Evans-Pritchard did not devote much space to the topic of agriculture. This is true, but it is worth noting that his brief comment on sorghum growing (1940:75-81) is a fine and incisive analysis of the agricultural constraints in the clay plains of southern Sudan. He stresses the critical roles of slope, soil texture, and drainage, and he correctly specifies the most critical problem as that of sowing in the face of the uncertainty of the early rains (see Huntington, Ackroyd, and Deng 1981).

Third, one afternoon at the end of the unusually long dry season of 1980 we were camped with Dinka cattle camps close to the Nuer area. Three very young Nuer youths wandered provocatively down the almost dry Amadagora riverbed that was serving as the last remaining pasture for several large camps of Ngok, Twic, and Rek Dinka. These Nuer boys put on a silent show of admiring and coveting the finest of the Dinka cattle, and they flaunted an aggressive masculinity before a group of Dinka girls. There must have been over 75 sturdy Dinka men among the camps, but these three Nuer electrified the area. That night around the campfire our Dinka hosts jumped at every slight noise in the darkness. (They were far less nervous about the lions reported in the area, which killed several herdsmen a week later.) Against this background I applaud Karp and Maynard for stressing the very important point that “territory” in the Nilotic context refers to access to pasture and, further, for pointing out that Evans-Pritchard overemphasized the rationality of the Nuer. Although Dinka calculate, reason, talk, and litigate, the Nuer exhibit a different style of action. They can be aggressively silent, and they characteristically throw themselves into an activity with a verve and an intensity that one believes only upon seeing, and yet one is at a loss to comprehend this within the theoretical framework provided by Evans-Pritchard.

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I found this a demanding and difficult article, perhaps because it is a very abstract treatment of Evans-Pritchard’s monograph. I do not understand what a “structure from structure and life” is, but then neither, it seems, did Evans-Pritchard, who failed to examine it. Inevitably comparison will be made with Verdon’s recent rethinking of Nuer social organisation, but maybe this is to miss the point of Karp and Maynard’s essay, which is less about the Nuer than about teasing out Evans-Pritchard’s sociology. Did the old ethnographer prefigure the current theoretical interest in the interrelationship between history and society, what Giddens calls “structuration”? No doubt he did, but then so did many others. For example, Leach’s study of the village of Pul Eliya, which Karp and Maynard describe as illustrating an “ecological approach,” demonstrates that the major constraint on and product of human action in Pul Eliya is the irrigation system, a historical (not natural) and quite human creation which nevertheless appears as a factor existing independently of the human beings who continually create and recreate it.

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Karp and Maynard do something beyond commending The Nuer to us, and something beyond recommending a particular reading of it: they advocate a theoretical perspective, one which they believe they share with Evans-Pritchard and which they believe overcomes the blinkered viewpoints and restricted awareness of other current frameworks. Their position is identified initially in the prefatory quotation of Dumont and then in referential but also approving statements about “a multicausal explanation” and about the view that “constraints and interests, on the one hand, and structural principles and cultural idioms, on the other, have the ability to form an intricate mesh of multilevel analysis. If anthropologists cannot absorb the degree of complexity contained in an English-language book by a colleague, what sorts of analyses are they creating from their direct field experiences of the multidimensional realities of the peoples they study?”

The multicausal and dialectical theoretical perspective of Karp and Maynard is not labeled by them or set out as the creed of a new faction or school. On the contrary, the authors despair at the stereotyping of ethnographic analyses and theoretical positions that result from segmentary opposition among anthropologists and they rightly ridicule theoretical name-calling, such as the historically irresponsible and contentless use of the term “functionalism” to label alleged error of whatever nature (n. 3). And yet their theoretical position is distinct, and they cannot avoid stressing their differences from one-sided, reductionist, and monist positions taken by some other interpreters of The Nuer.

The multicausal and dialectical theoretical perspective of Karp and Maynard is not labeled by them or set out as the creed of a new faction or school. On the contrary, the authors despair at the stereotyping of ethnographic analyses and theoretical positions that result from segmentary opposition among anthropologists and they rightly ridicule theoretical name-calling, such as the historically irresponsible and contentless use of the term “functionalism” to label alleged error of whatever nature (n. 3). And yet their theoretical position is distinct, and they cannot avoid stressing their differences from one-sided, reductionist, and monist positions taken by some other interpreters of The Nuer.

Consequently, I read this paper as containing for the reader a challenge—implicit and even unconscious though it may be—to take up the theoretical position presented by the authors, setting aside monist and reductionist perspectives in favor of one which recognises and respects the multiplicity in human life, and to refine and advance this position as a theoretical framework. In my view, nothing could be more timely or welcome than this challenge.

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In the work of which the title “Reading The Nuer” is an echo, Marx’s Kapital is treated on its own, whereas Evans-Pritch-
ard’s *The Nuer*, epoch-making though it was, requires reference to many of his other works to understand it fully, as Karp and Maynard’s quotations show. The very structure of the book that proposed complementary opposition to the world is itself appropriately founded upon it, and the authors argue that social anthropology itself is structured by exaggerated complementary oppositions with too little synthesis. I am grateful to them for enforcing a more careful reading of *The Nuer*. Brevity compels me to concentrate on criticism, omitting praise of the many features I like. I will concentrate on two general issues, one logical and stylistic, the other theoretical.

The conceptual framework used to analyze *The Nuer*, and largely derived from it, is repeated unnecessarily yet with confusing variations. We are thrice told that previous commentators have focused upon the idealist/materialist distinction but that this is an oversimplification masking or embedding three rather than two analytical dimensions or elements: “logical principles in terms of which relationships may be ordered, cultural idioms (values) in which they are expressed, and the conditions under which they may be realized” or “patterns of action.” But the latter two alternatives are surely not equivalent, and, if Evans-Pritchard is criticised for conflating values and evaluations, values and idioms should not be conflated either. The three dimensions or elements are also given in yet other terms and in a reversed order: “the physical and, to a certain extent, social environment, associated with the material factors involved in production, the values which provide the content of Nuer cultural systems [how many are there?], and the logical principles which organize all such values.” But the physical and social environments associated with the material factors involved in production are not equivalent to patterns of action or conditions of realization. Having dismissed the dichotomies as oversimplification, they end up with awkwardly shifting dichotomies of their own: “the necessary relationship between social order and human agency” and “constraints and interests, on the one hand, and structural principles and cultural idioms, on the other.” Yet they blame Holy and Sahlin’s for conflating logical principles and cultural idioms.

My theoretical disquiet is that the authors consistently impose on Evans-Pritchard’s interpretation a symmetrical, functionalist balance he never gave it. I pay tribute to them for sharpening my appreciation of Evans-Pritchard’s determinist materialism, but having thus been alerted I cannot accept the manner in which they evade the issue. They seem to equate mode of production with Evans-Pritchard’s “mode of livelihood,” whereas the latter is included with physical environment, poor communications, simple material culture and technology, sparse food supply, and sparsity in his large concept of oecology (pp. 89, 148), which “to some extent explains the demographic features of Nuer political segmentation,” while “the tendency toward segmentation must be defined as a fundamental feature of their social structure” (p. 148). Even the social system is within the oecological system (p. 94). Evans-Pritchard keeps referring to the influence, and even the determining effect, of oecology (pp. 89, 92, 94, 104, 109, 135), which is his nearest approach to the Marxists’ mode of production. The social system is “partly dependent on it and partly existing in its own right” (p. 94). While oecology influences political and other institutions, social structure influences only the conceptualization of oecological relations. These may not be finally satisfactory statements, but they cannot be equated with the authors’ “necessary relationship between social order and human agency” or with “a ‘reticulum of cause and effect’ in which neither can be reduced to the other.” They are asymmetrical, not mutually interdependent. Evans-Pritchard tries to define the limits of determinism: “there is a point at which . . . time concepts cease to be determined by structural interrelations, being no longer a reflection of man’s dependence on nature, but a reflection of the interaction of social groups” (p. 104). Yet, structural time is a reflection of structural distance (p. 108), which is “always influenced and, in its political dimension, to a large extent determined by oecological conditions” (p. 109).

The authors try to explain away the extent of Evans-Pritchard’s determinism by arguing that cattle and productive work are the media in terms of which society is grounded in nature and that cattle are as much a metaphor as sources of sustenance. But Evans-Pritchard does not say this. He does say, as the authors recognize, that social life is to a large extent determined by economic considerations, though not entirely a function of production relations. The authors call this “only determinism in the last instance,” not precluding the influence of the fundamentally different social order. But Evans-Pritchard does not say this either. He says that we must pay attention first to oecological relations, economic dependence on nature, and secondly to social relations, moral dependence on the community. He puts this second advisedly, for he has already derived this moral dependence on the community, the solidarity of the kinship group, from the necessity for cattle to be herded by a group of kinsmen (1937:211).

The authors then state that the two orders, of nature and society, are neither functions of each other nor polar opposites, but mediated by the productive activities of human social groups. Here again, the emphasis is shifted significantly away from that of Evans-Pritchard, whose oecology consists of human relations and cannot be equated with nature. They actually compare this insight to *The German Ideology*, without citing any passage but presumably referring to the following sequence (Marx and Engels 1976:41–42, 36–37), which I paraphrase for brevity:

The *first* premise of all human existence and all history is that men must be able to live in order to be able to make history. Living is before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing, and various other things. The *first* historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs (cf. Malinowski, cited in Piddington 1957:34), the production of material life itself. The production of life, both of one’s own in labor and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a twofold relation, on the one hand natural, on the other social (in the sense that it denotes the cooperation of several individuals). It follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of cooperation, or social stage, and this mode of cooperation is itself a “productive force.” The aggregate of productive forces accessible to man determines the condition of society. Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc., that is, real active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these. The phantoms formed in the brains of men are also, necessarily, sublimes of their material life process. Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology and the forms of consciousness corresponding to these thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their actual world, also their thinking and the products of their thinking. It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness.

I agree that Evans-Pritchard was not a closet Marxist, but the sequence in which he treats the material and ideal, the natural and the social, is much closer to that of Marx and Engels than to that of Karp and Maynard. I fail to see how they can invoke the above passages with apparent approval and then proceed to an analysis which flatly contradicts them.

Evans-Pritchard “crosses the bridge one way” (p. 94), from oecological relations to social structure. Karp and Maynard cross it the opposite way, putting first the logical principles, second the cultural idioms, and third the conditions under
which they may be realised. This order trivializes Evans-Pritchard’s concept of the ecology, which ends up as “human agency”—a concept he never used.

The fact that Evans-Pritchard could approximate so nearly to a Marxist interpretation is of great significance for anthropology today. There may be a much simpler interpretation of it than the intellectualist, philosophical one Karp and Maynard give. I think his materialism reflected his devastating fieldwork experience and the indelible impact made upon him by the harshness of the Nuer environment: “from a European’s point of view Nuerland has no favourable qualities, unless its severity can be counted as such, for its endless marshes and wide savannah plains have an austere, monotonous charm. It is throughout hard on man and beast, being for most of the year either parched or swamp. But the Nuer think that they live in the finest country on earth...” (p. 51). He was so deeply impressed by the stark force of Nuer ecology that he derived from it the narrowing of social ties and drawing together of people in a moral sense, making them highly interdependent and their activities joint undertakings. “Material culture may be regarded as part of social relations, for material objects are chains along which social relationships run, and the more simple is a material culture the more numerous are the relationships expressed through it” (p. 89). He then actually states the concrete material basis of the simple family, the household, the joint family, the village community, and kinship groups. We have to entertain the idea that he was driven by the intensity and authenticity of the field experience to make, perhaps unwittingly, what amounted to an almost Marxist interpretation, one which he would not have dreamed of making of his own society. We must also remember that Marx’s writings on pre-state societies were largely unavailable when Evans-Pritchard wrote, and therefore he may have been unaware of the Marxist look of his analysis.

I fully agree with the authors that structural-functionalism has been greatly maligned, while continuing to lurk, unrecognized, in many contemporary analyses. I also agree that Evans-Pritchard neglected the productive functions of women and may have failed to appreciate the true balance between herding, cultivation, and fishing in Nuer survival and that he dealt more with rule-governed behavior than with individual variation and divergence. This latter was to be expected from the harsh conditions and brevity of his fieldwork.

Karp and Maynard exhibit a tendency throughout their article to equate ecological adaptation with the mode of production. Cultural ecology, as it has developed within anthropology, and the Marxist notion of mode of production have very different senses apart from the superficial emphasis on the material conditions of life. The mode of production is a dialectical concept that involves both the application of technology and the social relations through which production is organized. It is a process that incorporates simultaneously the transformation of the natural environment and that of human society, thereby synthesizing instrumental and practical reason. Karp and Maynard’s reference to the Althusserian “determination in the last instance” only serves to champion the cultural ecologist’s reading of The Nuer by both reducing political organization to the logic of production and establishing human agency as the vector or conduit in a virtual social system (Thompson 1978).

Karp and Maynard suggest that Evans-Pritchard’s dualism of ecology and political organization, as unified by human agency and structure, should be recast to incorporate production, cultural values, and logical principles. I believe that their recasting reinforces, rather than transcends, Evans-Pritchard’s dichotomy. Logical principles are presented as universal and subject to transformation from context to context. If this were true, the surface meanings displayed by human agency would be reducible to a universal generative logic—the very reason Karp and Maynard reject the Lévi-Straussian reading of The Nuer. A reformulation of human agency according to the concept of material social being (Williams 1977) would assist the authors in overcoming the dichotomy between production and cultural values or human agency and structure. Material social being implies that all action on the part of co-subjects is communicative in the sense of symbolically mediated social praxis. It is patterned or intersubjective in that it is codetermined by history and cultural tradition and forged by human agency into an emerging totality. The necessary mediation of communicative social praxis enables us to grasp the difference between the actor’s interpretations and unconscious processes woven into human action in the social round. The concepts of human agency and social structure, furthermore, must be grasped as historical, arising in the context of the Renaissance with the concept of subjective self-assertion (Heller 1981).

In emphasizing the importance of commentaries with respect to current interpretations of The Nuer, Karp and Maynard address only one side of the hermeneutic relation to the text. A more fully developed hermeneutic must address the social and historical processes that accounted for the generation and transformation of Nuer society. Missing, for example, from Karp and Maynard’s discussion is an analysis of the role of colonialism with respect to Evans-Pritchard’s study. In spite of these oversights, Karp and Maynard have presented a fresh and rewarding reinterpretation of an important anthropological classic.

**Reply**

*by IVAN KARP and KENT MAYNARD*

**Hamilton, N.Y., U.S.A. 20 v 83**

The title of our essay echoes, ironically, Althusser and Balibar’s *Lire le Capital* (1971). In that work Marx’s writings are interpreted as displaying an “epistemological break” between the early Marx of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and the mature Marx of *Capital*. While this interpretation is no longer generally accepted, a parallel assessment has been made within anthropology of Evans-Pritchard’s *The Nuer*. The break between the first and the second half of the book has been thought to exhibit the difference between an ecological orientation and structural-functionalism, or between an unwar-
ranted determinism and an incipient structuralism, or between an emphasis on culture and a concern for social organization. It has been our purpose to show that the two halves form a whole argument whose uniting thread is based not on the assumptions of ecological determinism, normative functionalism, or cognitive structuralism, but on a recognition of the interaction of human practical activity and social forms. These are the key concerns of Evans-Pritchard’s social theory.

We are pleased to note that, in spite of some reservations, most of the discussants generally agree with our characterization of The Nuer. Many of their reservations reveal major differences in explanatory priorities, and we find ourselves criticized on the same point from different directions. This seems to us a healthy sign. Much of what passes for theory in social and cultural anthropology consists of the abrupt dismissal of alternative claims without serious consideration of the similarities and differences in positions. As a result, discourse is often impossible amongst the oppositions. If common grounds for debate can be identified, then serious evaluation of competing claims may replace the superficial denigration exemplified by the dismissal of The Nuer as “structural-functionalism.”

We do recognize, even assume, that intellectual debate tends to be a segmentary process, that reading can never be neutral, that interpretation is relative to both the theory and the interests of the reader. We continue to believe, however, that interpretation is underdetermined both by theory and by the interest situation of the interpreter and that it is possible, even necessary, to modify interpretations in the light of alternative readings of a text. While all interpretations are provisional, they are not all equal. The Nuer is a classic and, like all classics, has compelling ambiguities in it. We do not accept Burton’s assertion that it will be seen in time as a relic of structural-functionalism. The great works of social theory, by Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, are all ethnographic in intent. They describe particular social formations, are situated in time and place. Their very historicity allows us to draw upon them and modify them at the same time. Because The Nuer is a classic work of theory in the ethnographic tradition, it will remain continually relevant and continually subject to reinterpretation.

One feature of a classic is that it raises diverse theoretical and substantive issues. This is apparent in the comments. Disparity and conflict are exhibited in the treatment of a number of themes, ranging from our interpretation of the text and background influences on Evans-Pritchard’s thought to the current interpretation of the Nuer social formation and the adequacy of our conceptual framework.

The first issue raised is whether our account of The Nuer in terms of its interest in examining the mutual dependence of structure and agency fits with the organization of the book and Evans-Pritchard’s “implicit sociology.” Burton and Harries-Jones question our interpretation, while Hefner, Huntington, Salzman, Southall, and Ulin agree that it is a valuable reading of the work, even if they disagree with matters of emphasis. Jeddrej doubts the value of the exercise and argues that concepts such as structure are prefigured by many other writers. Both he and Harries-Jones have their own candidates for theoretical predecessors: Bateson, Gurvitch, and Leach. Burton and Harries-Jones see The Nuer as firmly entrenched within the positivist tradition of structural-functionalism represented by Comte, Durkheim, and Radcliffe-Brown. Ulin interprets it as a liminal work, between positivist and phenomenological approaches. For some of the commentators the disagreements relate to disputes with our assessment of “structural-functional” analysis. While Southall and Salzman agree that the category has been so distorted as to have little remaining value, Burton chides us for failing to define it. We do not see the use of repeating a catalog of distortions that led generations of students to fail to build on real achievements. In another context Leach has referred to this dismissive attitude as “millenarian.” We agree.

If Burton feels that he can dismiss The Nuer as irrelevant to contemporary issues because it is a “structural-functionalist” account, he should define the term rather than demand that it be defined by persons who see no substantive content in the characterization. He has had ample opportunity to do so in his many comments on Evans-Pritchard’s Nuer material (see, for example, Burton 1980).

On the one hand, Southall expresses appreciation for our placing The Nuer in the camp of “deterministic materialism” but goes on to dissent from what he identifies as our emphasis on “first the logical principles, second the cultural idioms, and third the conditions under which they may be realized.” This interpretation leads him to suggest that we are excessively multicausal. On the other hand, Huntington and Salzman express enthusiasm for just such an approach. Ulin would not agree with Huntington and Salzman; he thinks that our reference to “determination in the last instance” suggests an orientation that is overly deterministic, making human agency simply a “conduit” for the social system. He would, however, agree with Hefner that our reliance on metacultural cognitive principles restricts agency to the role of playing out either rules or mental structures. They do not note the distinction we draw, following Bourdieu (1972), between the “logic of thought” and the “logic of practice.”

These differences fall into three categories: (1) Evans-Pritchard’s theoretical position; (2) human agency and its place in analysis; and (3) the analytic status of metacultural cognitive principles. We will examine these in the context of the different discussions of our paper.

Burton seems to point to an obvious omission: that Evans-Pritchard remained fundamentally influenced by Radcliffe-Brown’s conception of anthropology as a natural science and of social structure defined as form. The intellectual debt to Radcliffe-Brown was stated by Evans-Pritchard, although he did express his early reservations at the end of his career. This interpretation fails utterly, however, to account for the pattern of his publications before The Nuer, especially the lectures delivered while at the University of Cairo. It is fundamentally misleading in suggesting a correspondence of the positions of Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard in being oriented to a “science” of anthropology focused exclusively on the “abstract plane of structural analysis.” This obscures our point that The Nuer is a work in which a break is made with positivist orthodoxy. In a recent article, Evans (1982) has shown that the hermeneutical thrust of Evans-Pritchard’s later work was prefigured in The Nuer: “Although it was written at least a decade before Evans-Pritchard made public his notorious repudiation of the received disciplinary view, The Nuer, with its brilliant analysis of time and space, and its incipient structuralism . . . is richly precocious in that heterodox turn of mind” (p. 213). The distinction Evans draws between the two views of moral systems in The Nuer parallels our account of the contradictions in that work. We stress the role of interests in cattle to a greater degree.

Evans (1982), Pocock (1971), Dumont (1975), and Lienhardt (1974) all make it abundantly clear that in The Nuer Evans-Pritchard was influenced by a neo-Kantian epistemology and conception of the social sciences. What about his concern with human agency? Burton maintains that we have sought to “create a world of social discourse prefaced by human agency in a monograph that was designed . . . purposefully to exclude individuality.” Ulin suggests that the “deemphasis of concrete historical subjects” is indicative of Evans-Pritchard’s alignment with the Durkheimian tradition. An emphasis on idealized actors is not limited to positivist sociology. Ulin notes the reliance

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1 Evans notes that in the Marett lecture Evans-Pritchard actually referred to his approach as “hermeneutics.”
on early Dithney and correctly points out the difference between Evans-Pritchard's and Marxist and phenomenological approaches. In spite of the lack of attention to concrete historical subjects, *The Nuer* has more in common with these than with the stereotype of structural-functionalism presented by Burton. Evans-Pritchard portrays the Nuer as knowing actors whose conceptions of interest and assessment of social situations are fundamental for the emergence of social forms. A concern with individuality is not the only indication of an interest in agency.

Burton is even more off the mark when he asserts that our concept of human agency is fundamentally similar to the concept of accountability. We presume that he believes we derive our ideas from either Douglas (1980) or Garfinkle (1967), although he cites neither. There are two errors involved here. First, he conflates agency and accountability. Although the two are obviously interrelated, the former is more concerned with the relationships among action, order, and change and the latter with the interpretation of action, judgments, and management of interaction. Thus agency is the higher-order concept. Accountability has much in common with Gluckman's (1972) notion of "the allocation of responsibility," a theme he examines in the context of Evans-Pritchard's work. Second, he mistakenly attributes to us a definition of accountability that transforms an interactionist concept into an individualist one, thereby depriving it of its analytical value. In Burton's hands accountability is turned into transaction. This vulgarizes both Douglas and Garfinkle. Harries-Jones seems to recognize the importance of accountability in social action in his reference to the "reflexes in an interaction. He charges that this element is neglected in Evans-Pritchard's work runs counter to Douglas's view of the matter. Burton is entirely correct in stating the obvious, that the distinction between ideals and behavior is not novel. Nowhere in our paper do we suggest this. We hold that the concept of human agency does not simply imply the capacity of individuals to circumvent norms. We argue that norms themselves owe their existence to the carrying out of intentions in action, just as action is dependent upon structure (Giddens 1979).

Burton's confusions about basic concepts are repeated in his criticisms of the ethnography in *The Nuer*. His assertion that women are invisible in it is contradicted by the reanalyses of Gough (1971) and Hutchinson (1980). Hutchinson shows that Nuer cosmology exhibits an orientation to problems resulting from limitations in the reproductive capacities of both men and women. While we did say that women's productive activities were not well described in *The Nuer*, we did not assert that women were invisible. Burton appears to have been led to this conclusion by his assumption that a focus on agnation automatically ignores women. That women are agnates, too, is a major point of Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer, and Tavakolian (1982) shows with even greater force how segmentary systems depend upon the agnatic status of women. As for the age-set system, we specifically argued that a treatment of it was a necessary part of Evans-Pritchard's argument. He recognizes that the age-set system is involved in the regulation of marriage and the definition of social situations (pp. 249, 257, 258, 260) and notes that age-set organization can have political influence through its relationship with the kinship system: "It is this action of the age-set system, in establishing ties between members of local communities and in giving them a kinship value, that we chiefly stress in a political context" (p. 260).

Through an examination of the double idiomatic relationship of age-sets to kinship to community value, Evans-Pritchard shows that the political system and the age-set system are not interdependent. Whereas age-sets express local (community) ties, Nuer political life operates without making use of the language of seniority embodied in the age-set system.

We did not argue that Evans-Pritchard's model of agency is entirely satisfactory. As Harries-Jones notes, it remains tied to the concept of equilibrium in *The Nuer*. How a physics based on "order through fluctuation" escapes equilibrium assumptions is unclear to us. We are also uncertain how it differs from the equilibrium theory of, for example, Fortes, who defined a Taliensi lineage as a "sum of processes in time." Equilibrium assumptions do have heuristic value, even for Nobel Prize-winning physicists. We know of no form of social analysis that does not make use of them. The issue is whether the concept of equilibrium is "actual" or "virtual." We think the movement in the tradition of studying social organization stemming from Evans-Pritchard and Fortes is towards virtual conceptions of structure and equilibrium. This is a major contention of Fortes in his call for statistical models of social structure (1949). In contrast, the tradition stemming from Firth's radical separation of social structure and social organization (1970) reproduces the Comtean separation of statics and dynamics, much as Sausure distinguishes between langue and parole (see Kelley 1978 for discussion of this issue).

In spite of Evans-Pritchard's tendency to treat equilibrium as actual rather than virtual, our most important conclusion about agency in *The Nuer*, as Henner notes, was that Evans-Pritchard's "analysis of fission and fusion forced him to confront the problems of what we now call social practice and reproduction." Harries-Jones rejects the significance of this conclusion on the grounds that it fails to consider the mutual causality of a situated subject mediating the conditions of Nuer life—that Evans-Pritchard organizes his analysis in "causal chains."

Harries-Jones's argument that in *The Nuer* "cultural idioms [as principles organizing values] are tools or skills with which actors organize their interests, communicate, and so forth. Evans-Pritchard treated them just as Harries-Jones tells us they should be treated, as media. Harries-Jones tends in these remarks to conflate cognitive principles and cultural idioms, as do many other readers. When he tells us that Evans-Pritchard treats agency as "a discourse between individual action and logical principles," he seems to suggest that for Evans-Pritchard principles such as complementarity and opposition provide the measure of action. Evans-Pritchard takes considerable pains to distinguish between principles and idioms, to show that they are interrelated but not reducible to each other. This was a major conclusion of our paper. It is through the various media of Nuer life, most particularly interest in cattle, that the Nuer structure stabilizes out of social action. This position seems entirely in agreement with Harries-Jones.

We disagree, however, over the status of media. Harries-Jones tells us that "the media of Nuer life—cattle, tools, kinship, and resources of the environment—[should] have been seen as just that: media." In this statement the concept of media changes from cognitive resources to material objects and social relationships. These media affect the construction of relationships. Rather than being simply imagined or socially constructed, they exist independently of human action, and action conforms to their contours. The dialectical unity Harries-Jones calls for cannot be achieved with a physical object or a social relationship. Their very otherness makes them appropriate objects for metaphoric predication. We can draw analogies between them and some other precisely because they are not that with which we compare them. This seems to us to be an essential precondition for the process of the breaking and reordering of frames of reference to which Harries-Jones refers and which we see in *The Nuer*.

There are difficulties in *The Nuer*, but they stem more from a lack of consideration of change than a neglect of social reproduction. If Evans-Pritchard had considered the colonial context more, he would have been better able to highlight the problematic nature of reproduction. Ulin suggests as much in his comments. One anthropologist thinks that the Nuer may have been in the most raided ethnic group in colonial Africa (Bodley 1982:45). Even though Evans-Pritchard tended to ig-
none change in *The Nuer*, his discussion of prophets and colonial rule is instructive. He argues that prophets did not arise automatically, but became spokespersons for a preexisting “opposition among the people which led to their emergence and was personified in them” (p. 189). Again he argues that it is the interest situation of members of a population that leads to action.

This emphasis on the role of interests in action leads to concern with media. “The transformations of interests into practices is the central problem for any adequate theory of history” (Levine and Wright 1980:58). Media provide the stuff out of which the transformations are made. At the same time, they act back upon the very interests themselves. This seems to us the key in Hefner’s invoking the idea of “human wants.” Evans-Pritchard showed that human wants are not universal, but formed and reformed through the translation of interests into practices. Interests are limited by the media through which they are achieved, just as the material in which artists work affects how and to what degree they may carry out their intentions. Cattle are living objects whose needs and qualities become part of the calculation of interest by Nuer as much as they (the needs and qualities) are interests of the Nuer. An essential feature of Evans-Pritchard’s cultural ecology was his recognition of the effect of the material qualities of the Nuer environment on Nuer action.

In this regard we believe his “implicit sociology” to be superior to that of Gurvitch and Bateson and certainly not tied to the sort of Durkheimian orthodoxy that Harries-Jones describes. Bateson, for example, might be seen as closer to Durkheim than Evans-Pritchard. For Bateson the persistence of “that abstract organism—the society” is due not to the translation of interests into practices, but to the needs of groups. Rather than beginning with an examination of the interrelationship of environment, modes of livelihood, and human wants and interests, as does Evans-Pritchard, Bateson starts with cultural configurations and their role in standardizing cognitive and affective aspects of the personality (1958:33–34). In his original concern (1936) with describing personality in terms of stimulus and response and his subsequent use of cybernetic theory based on mechanical analogies (1958:274–87) he is at least as concerned with the description of causal chains as Evans-Pritchard. A concern for the “reticulum of cause and effect” does not preclude an interest in establishing causal chains.

Ulin also addresses the issue of causality. He criticizes our invoking an Althusserian “determination in the last instance,” but our reference was to Engels’s 1890 letter to Bloch (Tucker 1978:760) rather than to Althusser. We firmly reject the Althusserian assumption (see Abercrombie and Turner 1978) that the economic base will determine which “instance” of the superstructure—kinship, economics, or religion—will be dominant in a social formation. In Althusser’s work, agency is presented as unproblematic and finished in what is, in effect, a Radcliffe-Brownian conception of social order. By invoking “determination in the last instance” we wanted to suggest that the forces of production are not entirely created by labor, that the material world upon which we work and which we transform is external to us. We agree with Ulin that a mode of production must be understood as a process involving the simultaneous transformation of the natural environment and human society. His blanket denunciation of cultural ecology is too broad, however. Recent developments show a real awareness of the issues involved. One problem, exhibited in our paper as well as in much cultural ecology, lies in the conception of “nature” as situately outside of human practical activity. Marx’s position is more subtle. Mankind exists in nature, “appropriating from it, and yet also capable of controlling it” (Ellen 1982).

This position is not incompatible with a concept of adaptation which assumes the active intervention of human agents in the creation of their livelihood. With Evans-Pritchard and Marx, we assume that the natural environment is prior to human agency which acts upon it as well as reacts to it. “The initial conditions of production cannot initially themselves be produced” (Marx 1964[1857–58]:36). We do not see our position as fundamentally different from the one Southall stakes out for Evans-Pritchard and himself, although we do differ over how to introduce determination into an analysis. As he says, there is a real area of overlap between Evans-Pritchard’s concept of a mode of livelihood and a mode of production. Southall, however, does not take this to be our position. He argues from the direction opposite to Ulin, criticizing us for not being sufficiently deterministic. In contrast, Salzman sees the denial of a monocausal framework as the greatest strength of our article.

There are two issues involved in Southall’s criticisms, the nature of the deterministic argument in Evans-Pritchard and his contention that, like the latter-day Hegelians, we stand Evans-Pritchard on his head and “descend from heaven to earth” rather than “ascend from earth to heaven.”

Southall dislikes the way we shift terms continually throughout the paper. What he sees as stylistic “confusion” we like to think of as a device for showing that underlying the “professionally enhanced language,” as Huntington aptly terms it, is a common set of issues. We also deliberately set out to display differences in causality by using a variety of terms for determination. Evans-Pritchard’s analytic subtlety consists in showing a variety of causal relationships that are exhibited over time and space. Nor is he alone in this strategy. Cohen (1978:278) points out that in the preface to the *Critique of Political Economy* Marx moves through a variety of terms of determination, from “correspond to” and “rise on” to “is conditioned by” and “is determined by.” The variety of relationships that Marx asserts bears a remarkable resemblance to the different causal arguments put forward in *The Nuer*. We do not think that use of different terms reflects confusion and repetition in the work of Marx or Evans-Pritchard or in our own.

Certainly a critical issue is the priority assigned to the three analytical dimensions we distinguish in Evans-Pritchard’s framework. Southall believes that our listing logical principles first is an indication that we assign greater causal priority to that aspect of the analysis. Hefner argues much the same. We are at fault here in not having clearly distinguished between an “analytical” use of a concept and an “explanatory” use of it (Falding 1968). Analytical concepts have heuristic value. They point the way towards further analysis. They do not aid in the explanation of the causes or conditions of action or structure. As Falding shows, Weber’s ideal types were analytical constructs against which were measured the actions of living historical subjects. In order to explain *situated* activities, analytical concepts, in the form of ideal types, are turned into real types, often bearing the same name. Their meaning is transformed in the transition from analytical to explanatory theory. Explanatory theory strives to specify the conditions under which actions are performed, structures reproduced, etc. Analytical theory specifies the elements of the explanation. In anthropology, for example, lineages are often treated as ideal-type constructs, sets of relations characterized by certain rights, duties, qualities, and so on. When anthropologists discover that lineages are not organized as they are described or that they contain persons who are not supposed to be members, they are often driven to deny the existence of lineages (see Holy 1979c, Kuper 1982). What they fail to recognize is that as an ideal type the notion of a lineage is a way of exhibiting what Weber called the “strivings” of members of a society that are represented in analysts’ constructs. The best anthropological work on lineage organization moves from ideal type to real type in analysis and shows how segmentation is the product of the articulation of lineages with nonlinear situations and interests. Thus the lineage as an ideal is transformed into the lineage as...
a compromise with social situations, on the one hand, and a form that enables action, on the other (see Karp 1978). We can say that in the movement from analytical to explanatory theory the task of anthropological analysis is to show how interests and ideals (a form of interests) are translated into practices. Explanatory theory is always historical. Because it specifies the conditions under which action emerges and structures are reproduced, the issue of the kind and quality of determination is always open (Karp 1978:16–17). This is precisely the stance Weber took at the conclusion of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1958:183): “it is, of course, not my aim to substitute for a one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal explanation of culture and of history. Each is equally possible, but each, if it does not serve as the preparation, but as the conclusion of an investigation, accomplishes little in the interest of historical truth.”

Evans-Pritchard was no Weberian sociologist, but he recognized the force of Weber’s position in his own anthropology. In spite of Southall’s assertions to the contrary, it is easy to show that he continually “crossed the bridge in both directions.” His metaphor of a bridge implies the possibility of working both ways, and in the remainder of the paragraph quoted he provides examples of how the bridge might be crossed the other way, such as the classification of birds on the basis of lineage organization. This is precisely the strategy he followed in Nuer Religion. The Nuer clearly prefigures the later work.

Evans-Pritchard’s materialism recognizes a complex relationship between the produced and the given dimensions of the environment. In his discussion of time and space, for example, he shows that naturally given temporal rhythms and spatial arrangements are aspects of the environment with which the Nuer must come to terms but that they also transform into social constructs through which they organize their relationships. These natural factors are “relative constants” upon which we build social worlds (Fuller 1980, Williams 1978): “Ultimately most, perhaps all, concepts of time and space are determined by the physical ambient, but the values they embody are only one of the many possible responses to it and depend almost completely on structural principles, which belong to a different order of reality” (1940/94). Evans-Pritchard continually refers to multiple “orders of reality,” and Southall, in his comments, tends to reduce them to one or two. He transforms the treatment in The Nuer on p. 148 in a revealing way. The original reads “the tendency towards segmentation must be defined as fundamental principle of their social structure.” In Southall’s reading “principle” is replaced with “feature.” The quote provided above shows that Evans-Pritchard would assign a feature to a different “order of reality” than a principle. Southall overstates his case.

In spite of this tendency in his remarks, we are at fault for implying that the Nuer’s reliance on nature is opposed to their reliance on the moral community. These are not two different orders, as we state, but aspects of the same order, which is natural and social at the same time. This does bring Evans-Pritchard closer to the Marxist framework in his orientation, although we still believe that the influence was Vico. Southall’s suggestion that Evans-Pritchard’s experience of Nuer conditions of existence during his fieldwork resulted in his materialist orientation is interesting but too monicausal. The intellectual influence was already there, and the experience could easily have strengthened it. His point that the conditions of fieldwork led Evans-Pritchard in the direction of a rule-following model of social order is also good, but it does not explain the correspondence between the orientation of The Nuer and his adherence to a neo-Kantian emphasis on pattern to the neglect of process in his more programmatic writings. Again Southall tends to reduce complex patterns of causality to single-factor explanations.

Given all the above, we do not think we have explained away Evans-Pritchard’s materialism, although Southall’s challenge has brought us to a sharper appreciation of it. To say that Nuer life is to a large extent determined by the environment, as Southall does, simply avoids problems of structure and human agency. The failure to consider them fetishizes material forces in a way that Marx opposed. Far from “trivializing” Evans-Pritchard’s analysis, an examination of the concept of agency is central to understanding how forces of production are articulated with social organization. By suggesting that cattle both are essential to subsistence and can serve as metaphors of social relations we are not suggesting that the two relationships are equal. An asymmetric relationship can also be one of interdependence, as Marx and Engels both realized. In the same text from which we took our unhappy quote about “determination in the last instance,” Engels states the issues nicely (Tucker 1978:765):

> What these gentlemen all lack is dialectics. They always see only here cause, there effect. That this is a hollow abstraction, that such metaphysical polar opposites exist in the real world only during crises, while the whole vast process goes on in the form of interaction—though of very unequal forces, the economic movement being by far the strongest, most primeval, most decisive—that here everything is relative and nothing absolute—this they never begin to see. Hegel has never existed for them.

The relationship between ideal and material that provides the tension in the argument of The Nuer is repeated throughout the comments made on our paper. Nowhere is it more prominent than in the reservations expressed by Hefner, Ulin, and Southall about the importance we attribute to metacultural logical or cognitive principles in Evans-Pritchard’s analysis and in social anthropology in general. Hefner points to the conservative implications of our idealism, and Southall sees it as a distortion of Evans-Pritchard’s framework. Hefner is particularly concerned that we have neglected the polythetic or “fuzzy set” qualities of classificatory systems. Following Bourdieu, he suggests that this is the product of action rather than of contemplative thought. Evans-Pritchard obviously does not use contemporary terms in his analysis. He does consider the polythetic qualities of Nuer genealogies, however. As we note in the paper, he argues that it is precisely because they form a series of overlapping categories that Nuer can be united in a whole. The polythetic nature of Nuer genealogies is the form that makes possible the totality in this instance. A preliminary answer to Hefner’s concern over the far too great importance attached to oppositions in structuralist thought is that oppositions seem to emerge in situations and polythesis is an artifact of the movement from situation to situation. In this movement some sets of oppositions are put in the background and others foregrounded. Thus the “order of orders” is itself ordered by a logic of practice in which the principles are an artifact of the changing definitions of the situation made by actors. This interpretation is suggested in Turner’s (1969) analysis of planes of classification in Ndembu ritual as well as in the work of Bourdieu. Lakoff (cited in Crick 1982:294) calls this a “natural system of logic.”

In our view, metacultural logical or cognitive principles simply enable Nuer to construct cultural idioms. They do not tell us what those idioms will be. Their value in social analysis is heuristic; they belong to the realm of analytic theory. They aid to analysis. We have argued that they are “social anthropology’s theoretical capital.” The problem may lie in the reaction to structuralism now prevalent in Anglophone anthropology. References to that tradition seem to be taken as an assertion of determination by some form of “deep structure.” Our position is much simpler. We believe in the discrimination of metacultural cognitive principles as an aid to analysis. We have argued that they have no existence independent of the cultural idioms whose pattern of order they exhibit. The only universal structure we posit is reason (the
capacity for ordering) "as the underlying framework or abstract apparatus of all grammars [forms of thought]" (Arsleff 1982:106).

Evans-Pritchard's position is, we argued, ambiguous with respect to the causal powers of deep structures. On the one hand, his language often refers to principles "controlling" behavior through values. This is consistent with the view of social reproduction as unproblematic that he sometimes took (1940:263). On the other hand, he cites numerous cases to show that his understanding of Nuer social life is not that it is the surface manifestation of generative principles. At the very end of *The Nuer* he refers to his own analysis as "abstrait" and calls for the intensive study of social situations. We have attempted to develop this second perspective.

We agree with Hefner that a position which conceives of actors as projecting logical form into action denies the creative aspects of human agency. We sought to emphasize in our conclusions that logical principles are related to the reflexive nature of interaction, capable of providing frames for interaction yet also often denying those frames. It is in the conflict between "structure and life" that Jedrej does not understand that one can discover how frames are established, denied, and sometimes even broken. As Beidelman shows in his Nuer essays, lived experience overflows the categories in which we try to contain it. Thus Hefner's reference to "fuzzy sets" is particularly relevant, though we have reservations about his reliance on Bourdieu. Bourdieu relates "fuzzy sets" to the concept of *habitus*, which he takes from Mauss. *Habitus* refers to the unreflective taking on of society, the embodiment of the social self. *Habitus* and "the situations which combine synchronically to constitute a determinate conjuncture are never wholly independent, since they are engendered by the objective structures, that is, in the last analysis, by the economic bases of the social formation in question" (Bourdieu 1977:83). This is determination in the last instance with a vengeance. We see little place for human agency in this formulation (cf. Maynard 1981:66).

Taking human agency seriously requires complex analysis. Not only interests, but the means through which they are translated into practices must be taken into account. It suggests that action is reasonable in Schutz's sense of the term, not as the product of calculating man, but as deriving from the sense-making activities of knowledgeable actors. This seems part and parcel of Huntington's observations on the differences between Nuer and Dinka styles of action, which have to be related to culturally formulated ways of making sense. We must move towards a form of analysis that treats culture as praxis. Style is not just esthetic window dressing, but an essential ingredient in how actors establish themselves. Practical reasoning in defining and acting in situations (such as being obdurately silent about one's intentions) can be culturally determined in the sense that it is either a goal or a means to one.

And agency must be taken seriously. Without an account of agency it is not possible to understand social reproduction, either order or change. We agree entirely with Salzman that *habitus*, *field*, and "the situations which combine synchronically to constitute a determinate conjuncture are never wholly independent, since they are engendered by the objective structures, that is, in the last analysis, by the economic bases of the social formation in question" (Bourdieu 1977:83). This is determination in the last instance with a vengeance. We see little place for human agency in this formulation (cf. Maynard 1981:66).

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Prizes

The German Association for Semiotic Studies announces a prize of DM 5,000 for the best article or book on the topic “Why and How Do Sign Systems Change?” Presentation of the award will take place at the fourth congress of the association in Munich in October 1984. With this prize, the association encourages young scholars of all disciplines within the social sciences, the humanities, and the life sciences to overcome overspecialization and isolation and examine the semiotic foundations of their fields. All works that further our knowledge of the principles of code change are welcome. Works submitted may be based on experiments or other sorts of empirical evidence or may examine and systematize the empirical results of others. They may include case studies and investigations in the history of culture or the evolution of nature. Description is valued as highly as theory. The executive board of the association has appointed a jury including Martin Krampen (Ulm), Hans-Heinrich Lieb (Berlin), and Kuno Lorenz (Saarbriicken); all its decisions will be final. Texts must be written in German, and authors must be no older than thirty-five years on April 1, 1982. Works by more than one author are eligible. Applications, containing the author’s name, date of birth, profession as of April 1, 1982, address, and institutional affiliation and address (if applicable), must be received before April 1, 1984, by the Executive Board, German Association for Semiotic Studies, Institute of Semiotics and the Theory of Communication, Free University Berlin, Malteserstr. 74-100, D-1000 Berlin (West).

The Amaury Talbot prize, which is awarded annually and which in 1982 amounted to approximately £400, will be awarded to the author or authors of the work which, in the opinion of the judges, is the most valuable of the works of anthropological research relating to Africa submitted in the competition. Only works published during the calendar year 1983 are eligible for the award. Preference will be given to works relating in the first place to Nigeria and in the second place to any other part of West Africa or to West Africa in general. Works relating to other regions of Africa are, however, eligible. All applications, together with two copies of the book, articles, or other work in question, are to be received by January 31, 1984, by the Trustees, Barclays Bank Trust Company Limited, Central Trust Office, Radbroke Hall, Knutsford, Cheshire WA16 9EU, England. Please quote reference number 611888. Entries will not be returned to candidates, but will be at the disposal of the judges.

The second Royal Anthropological Institute Film Prize of £250 will be awarded in 1984 for the most outstanding film on any branch of anthropology or on archaeology first shown on or after January 1, 1982. Both specialist academic films and films intended for the general public are eligible. The judges appointed by the institute will give greater weight to content than to technical expertise. The prize will be awarded to individual film makers (not the organisation they work for, if any). The prize is international, but either the commentary (if any) or subtitles must be in English or fully translated English transcripts must be made available. Films must be submitted in the form of 16mm combined optical prints or (if this is not possible) either Sony U-Matic or VHS tape. They must in principle be available for noncommercial educational use. No award need be made if the judges do not consider the quality of the films submitted sufficiently high. Commendations may be made to films not awarded a prize. The prize is biennial. The first prize (1980) was awarded to David and Judith MacDougall for *The Wedding Camels*, the second (1982) to Kim McKenzie for *Waiting for Harry*. The closing date for entries is March 1, 1984. Submission forms with full rules and conditions are available from the RAI, 56 Queen Anne St., London W1M 9LA, England, and should be read carefully. Films shall on no account be submitted unless accompanied by properly completed forms. In their own interests (to save themselves possible trouble and loss), entrants from overseas should follow exactly the procedures for submission and postage of films set out in the forms.