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Nuer Dilemmas: Coping With Money, War, and the State

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At the time of publication, author Heather J. Sharkey was associated with the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Currently, she is a faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Comments

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Sharon E. Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. xvii + 408 pp. Bibliography. Index. Maps. Figures. Photographs. \$18.00 paper.

In the 1930s the eminent anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard began to publish works on the Nuer peoples of the Southern Sudan, in which he presented a smooth and timeless picture of "traditional" Nuer society. These studies became so influential that they achieved the status of anthropological classics. However, as later anthropologists began to grow increasingly sensitive to the historical dynamics of societies, doubts and dissatisfactions emerged about the very tidiness of Evans-Pritchard's studies. How homogeneous could Nuer society be, and what changes did history bring to its culture?

When Sharon E. Hutchinson went to live among the Nuer in 1980, she began to mull these questions over. In some sense, she conceived of *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State* as a follow-up on Evans-Pritchard's work, i.e., as an examination of Nuer society from the 1930s to the 1990s. But at the same time she used the project to reevaluate Evans-Pritchard's work, by questioning the assumptions of social equilibrium and unity that guided his research, and by inserting historical change as a dynamic in Nuer society. In the process, Hutchinson grew to envision "Nuer society" not as a singularity, but as a plurality or collective, including cultural variations according to region, gender (between men and women), and more.

Long periods of violence have marred Nuer history in the twentieth century. In the 1910s and 1920s, during Anglo-Egyptian period (1898-1956), the British led "pacification campaigns" to force the Nuer to submit to colonial government control. Later, one year before the Sudan achieved independence in 1956, civil war broke out between the North and the South and ripped into Nuer societies from 1955 to 1971. In 1983, shortly after Hutchinson's first round of fieldwork came to a close, a second civil war assaulted the Nuer. Civil war rages on, uprooting Nuer families through killings, migration, famine, and associated disease.

Hutchinson considers how the social changes and upheavals of the past decades have affected cultural values regarding money, wealth, and cattle; guns and homicide; food, power and authority; incest and exogamy; and more. Whereas Evans-Pritchard smoothed over the conflicts and dissonances in Nuer worldviews, Hutchinson points them out. Culture is not a constant; instead, she declares, it is "up for grabs" (p. 28), shaped and re-shaped by individuals whose outlooks are influenced by their age, wealth, and gender, as well as personal experience.

Hutchinson plays a role in her own narrative. She inserts herself in the action or in dialogues, identified by her Nuer name "Nyarial", or as "I". She inserts herself even more strongly in the footnotes (by elaborating anecdotes, justifying conclusions, and buttressing claims); she is even featured in two of the book's photographs. Hutchinson openly addresses this self-insertion, for example, by emphasizing her effort to make her work a Nuer collaboration. The Nuer were not only informants, but "critical commentators." "While in the field," she explains, "I discussed many of the book's main themes with numerous Nuer men and women living deep within the countryside." (p. 29) She also had university-educated Nuer read her draft chapters. Whereas Evans-Pritchard always kept his distance from the Nuer in his writings (and perhaps, to some extent, in the field), Hutchinson drew close to the Nuer and sought out their input for her writings. Both anthropologists were following the mores of their changing professional society.

Because of its intriguing analysis of cultural concepts and values, and because of the dialogue it offers with the works of Evans-Pritchard *Nuer Dilemmas* will appeal broadly to anthropologists. Because of its thoughtful assessment of the impact of war, *Nuer Dilemmas* will also appeal to historians -- to specialists of Nuer (or Sudanese) history, to Africanists, and to those interested in post-colonial studies. In short, the audience will be broad for *Nuer Dilemmas* because it is a beautiful book, blending intellectual rigor and human compassion with a graceful, smooth-reading style.

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