

**E. E. EVANS-PRITCHARD'S- INTERPRETIVE
APPROACH**

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TOPIC-
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E. E. Evans-Pritchard studied under C. G. Seligman and Bronislaw Malinowski at the London School of Economics. He made six major field expeditions to the Sudan and British East Africa, notably with the **Zande (Azande), Nuer, Anuak, Shilluk,** and **Luo**. He was the author of numerous books. Some of them are:

- Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande (1937)
- The Nuer (1940)
- The Sanusi of Cyrenaica. London (1949)
- Kinship and Marriage Among the Nuer (1951)
- Nuer Religion (1956)
- Social Anthropology and Other Essays (1962)
- Theories of Primitive Religion (1965)

His accounts of Zande witchcraft (1937) and Nuer politics and kinship (1940; 1951) were landmark in the British anthropology. However, some of his work- "**The Nuer**" (1940), based on less than a year with the people, has been the subject of criticism for overstating the importance of the lineage in political affairs (e.g., Kuper 1988). However, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (**Evans-Pritchard, 1937**) and *Nuer Religion* (**1956**) have fared better.

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Both of these were attempts to understand and relate the inner thoughts of his subjects. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic* is an ethnography of Zande thought processes. The author argues that Zande are so obsessed with witchcraft that to understand their belief in it and how that belief is used to explain cause and effect is to understand their society. If a grain storage bin falls and kills someone sitting under it, one cause may well be that termites have eaten the supports, but the question of why it fell at that time on that person must be answered by whose witchcraft is involved (Evans-Pritchard 1937).

Nuer Religion concerns, among other things, the definition of *kwoth*. Like Latin *spiritus*, Greek *pneuma*, and Hebrew *ruah*, it also designates 'breath'. In its metaphorical senses, it can refer to spirits of several kinds, including the Nuer entity Evans-Pritchard translates as 'God'. Throughout *Nuer Religion*, the author engages his reader in an exercise to picture and feel the essence of Nuer belief through the words, the symbolism, and the rituals which characterize the system described by the title of that book. It is worth remembering, though, that 'Nuer religion' is not itself a Nuer concept; it is an anthropologist's one (Evans-Pritchard 1956).

Evans-Pritchard's monograph, together with a similar one by his colleague **Godfrey Lienhardt** (1963) on the religion of the neighbouring Dinka, formed the foundation of anthropological studies of belief. They also focused attention on translation, both real and metaphorical. It is interesting that whereas Evans-Pritchard speaks of 'God' and 'spirits' and often uses the Nuer term, Lienhardt prefers the English 'Divinity' and 'divinities' – precisely in order to get away from the directness of the more familiar English terms. It may also be worthy of note that both these Oxford anthropologists converted to Roman Catholicism;

and this, it has been said, might have played some part in the formulation of their similar approaches to the interpretation of religious belief and practice.

Evans-Pritchard practiced his anthropology within the general theoretical framework of Radcliffe-Brown. However, he rejected Radcliffe-Brown's notion of the discipline as a science and argued the case for anthropology as an art (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1965). This marks the crucial difference between Evans-Pritchard's vision and the mainstream British tradition from which it diverged. Especially in his later years, Evans-Pritchard developed the idea of anthropology as 'translation of culture', and this became a catch-phrase in the works of many of his students. What anthropologists are supposed to do is get as close as possible to the collective mind of the people they study, and then 'translate' the alien ideas they find into equivalent ideas within their own culture. This is, of course, not the same thing as actual, linguistic translation.

Like Radcliffe-Brown's- sea shells and Levi-Strauss'- crystals, it is an analogy. Evans-Pritchard rejected the Levi-Straussian idea of a 'grammar' of culture in favour of a 'meaning' in the more subtle everyday discourse of culture. The difficulties of translation (whether to go for a literal one, or an idiomatic one) have precise analogies in ethnography. If we translate Nuer or Zande ideas too literally, then no one outside of Nuerland or Zandeland will understand them. If we translate too idiomatically, then we will fail to capture the essence of Nuer or Zande thought. Anthropology, according to this view, is forever caught in the translator's dilemma.

Whatever elements of Evans-Pritchard's writing predate *Nuer Religion*, the publication of that book marks a departure from structural-functionalism towards a new kind of reasoning about the nature of religious belief. Evans-Pritchard recalls

Durkheim more than he does Radcliffe-Brown, but the emphasis is more on seeing the spirit world as a Nuer sees it and explaining it as if to a Western theological audience, and rather less on demonstrating a relation between belief and social structure.

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