

Recensioner

Aster Akalu
BEYOND MORALS?
Experiences of Living the
Life of the Ethiopian
Nuer
Pp 85
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When social anthropologists ventured into the field to collect ethnographic data in the early part of this century it was believed that extended field studies of other cultures would provide a methodological solution to the theoretical quandries that confounded the discipline. B. Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown were the pioneers of this approach to social anthropological research. Their ethnographic data was grafted unto the sociology of Emile Durkheim and an empirically oriented school of functionalist explanation established itself in Great Britain. The chosen problem was

to identify the social mechanisms within a society that contributed to stability and cohesion and to explain how these mechanisms were structurally related. Societies were defined in advance as natural systems. When so defined the behavioral regularities that were observed in other cultures could be categorized and assigned a structural significance. Whatever was transpiring inside the skulls of individual actors was of little interest to the anthropologist who was an impersonal observer of structural phenomena. This methodological concept which is known as an *etic* approach to social anthropological analysis ensnared the fieldworker in an unconscious manipulation of data and, since disregarding native definitions or reality was a methodological device the British colonial administration could readily appreciate, it is perhaps no coincidence that so many anthropo-

logical studies of African tribal culture were transformed into etic safaris.

Anthropologists who were attempting to localize mechanisms of social control in tribal society were confronted with a number of difficulties that sociologists in complex societies never encountered. Certain nascent states in tribal Africa did possess elaborate institutions whose functioning resembled the legal machinery of Western society but there also existed societies where formal dispute settlement and political organization were unknown categories of social behavior. The seemingly unpolluted social relations of these communities had to be concealing some powerful instrument or instruments of social control that prevented them from collapsing into disorder and chaos. Anthropologists reasoned that the placid exteriors of these communities were in fact products of a rather intricate interplay of social forces whose structure was a function of local forms of kinship and custom. Forms of kinship and custom were believed to contain within themselves an implicit behavioral code whose normative regulations were as effective as any legislation when it came to enforcing conformity. These were the mechanisms which permitted stateless societies to reproduce themselves as natural systems. Variations in form were believed to be "... adaptive responses to conditions operating at a socio-cultural systems techno-economic base".¹ If a biological variable was introduced truly anomalous social phenomena and extreme variations in form could be treated as regional responses to the environmental factors that condition-

ed and constrained the evolution of all natural systems.

Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard, a veteran of etic exploration in Africa, found occasion, in 1951, to criticize the dogmatism of this position which was crippling social anthropological inquiry. Describing social anthropology as interpretive, "best regarded as an art and not as a natural science"² he believed that "societies were moral not natural systems; that social anthropology was a humane art; and that the chief task of the subject was ethnography as the translation of culture" which entailed a shift in theoretical emphasis on the part of social anthropologists "from function to meaning".³

Sir Evans-Pritchard was suggesting that the "Elephant" hanging on the trophy room wall was perhaps a "Rhinoceros" after all. He was echoing an earlier argument advanced by an American anthropologist, Franz Boas. Boas had attempted to reintroduce his colleagues to history and his methodology involved an exacting data collection in order to extract and preserve the meaning individual informants attached to the information they were divulging. Social reality was a function of shared meaning in a historically situated context which in turn implied that variations in cultural practices could not be understood unless close attention was paid to the indigenous linguistic categories in which they were formulated. The relativism of this perspective called into question the easibility of a cross-cultural comparison of classification systems. The American linguist Edward Sapir had noted that "It is impossible to say what a person is

doing unless we have tacitly accepted the essentially arbitrary mode of interpretation that social tradition is constantly suggesting to us from the very moment of our birth . . . forms and significance which seem obvious to the outsider will be denied outright by those who carry out the patterns; outlines and implications that are perfectly clear to these may be absent to the eye of the beholder."⁴

Law, religion, and kinship were perhaps terms inadequate to the task of describing the wide range of cultural practices that could be observed in societies with alien semantic imperatives. A New Ethnography that incorporated these concepts into its field methodology was suggested. This research strategy, known as an *emic* approach to social anthropological analysis, required anthropologists to abandon the safety of their base camps on the periphery of the social phenomena they were supposedly investigating. Anthropologists seeking to understand alien categories of meaning had to immerse themselves in the cultural contexts created by these categories; anthropologists worked *inside* societies and groups or at least as far in as they could get. Social anthropology was about to put on its scuba gear and dive into the ocean. The "Rhinoceros" was beginning to smell a lot like a "Herring".

This whole argument was viewed by the social anthropological Establishment as dreadfully inconvenient, and it still is. "The Scuba Divers" were in the habit of returning from their adventures with some fairly disturbing questions for the Grand Theorists of the discipline to ponder over.

For example: common sense

tells us that manslaughter, theft, promiscuous adultery, incest, and breach of contract are acts which are flagrant violations of every implicit or explicit norm generally associated with community life. The incest prohibition is believed by many social and psychological theorists to be a universal phenomenon, some theorists going so far as to assert that this prohibition was an essential ingredient in the evolution of mankind. Freud's *Totem and Taboo*⁵ discusses the social psychological repercussions of this social repression of instinctual urges. Yet here were these nasty emicists - who actually slept with the savages - regaling the scientific community with tall tales of patriarchs in remote villages along the tributaries of the Amazon who engaged in sexual intercourse with their kindred without anybody in the encampment so much as raising an eyebrow. These were communities where murder, rape, and felonious assault were also ritualistically interwoven into the fabric of social life. Something had to be forbidden, for gods sake. No morals, no society went the reasoning; that's where the difference between monkeys and men first made itself apparent. The rapid disappearance of technologically simple, acephalous communities from the face of the earth (= ethnocide + acculturation) made emicist claims that "objectively immoral" communities could not only survive and prosper but that they also seemed to be enjoying it, difficult to verify. How was group cohesion maintained?

Beyond Morals?, an emic account of the special consensus of the Nuer, a Nilotic tribal culture, examines the functionalist ques-

tion with phenomenological spectacles. This remarkable volume, an extended field study of the Nipnip, a patrilineal clan of the Ethiopian Nuer, combines the rigour of the functionalist schools empirical method with a historically situated exercise in lived hermeneutics. The anthropologist, herself an Ethiopian, brings to the art of cultural translation a clarity of vision seldom encountered in the academic desert of contemporary social anthropology.

The "opportunists and even charlatans who peculiarly infest the discipline"⁶ can hardly be expected to appreciate the searing realism with which Aster Akalu depicts life in the Nipnip encampment. Her methodological innovation affords us a rare glimpse into the heart of a world very few people have ever had the *privilege* to experience. This in itself is a testimony to the depth and breadth of her ethnographic skill for, make no mistake about it, what she has accomplished with her unorthodox methodology is a prodigious feat of cultural translation.

The pragmatism that informs her field work has been honed into a precision instrument enabling her to penetrate the gloss (linguistically determined perceptual modes) of Nuer culture and to grasp the cognitive imperatives that contribute meaning to the Nipnip way of life. This is a world of open-ended metaphor where sociological laws evaporate before our very eyes and if you find that this abrupt transition to anti-structure makes you feel a bit queasy take comfort in the fact that Europeans rarely perish from the after-effects of cultural shock; fragile acephalous communities quite often wither and die.

The arrival of an anthropologist usually means that the Federales have decided to initiate some "development program" aimed at transforming these self-sufficient communities into "wards of the court." The Nuer communities in the Sudan were probably none too happy to see Sir Edward Evans-Pritchard turn up on their doorstep. For Sir Edward had come to find out how they had managed to survive for so long without the amenities of a decent police station (no inside plumbing, either). Now the Nuer had been known to exchange an unkind word with one another and they did love their cattle (private property) so it was assumed that some form of dispute settlement must inevitably put in an appearance. The egalitarian Nuer communities in the Sudan lacked formal political organization yet Sir Edward was convinced that a negative feedback mechanism that exerted implicit political power did exist and that this mechanism was essential to the stability of "the system". What Sir Edward had discovered was the "Leopard-skin chief."

The Nuer tribes and their segmentary lineages were believed to resort to arbitration in order to resolve intratribal conflict. When blood was shed the patrilineal kin of the slain party sought revenge. The function of the Leopard-skin chief was to negotiate a settlement in cattle which would disperse tension that would otherwise escalate into "civil war." The Leopard-skin chief possessed no formal authority; his legitimacy resided in the fact that his "office" was a "symbol" that transcended the tribal lineage system. Now at the time the idea of a powerless leader was considered quite novel and

much of the later criticism of Evans-Pritchards study of the Nuer questioned the propriety of pronouncing leaders "powerless." Etic safaris in the early 70s (Haight, 71; Gruel, 71) returned with the news that Sir Edward had botched his fieldwork; the Leopard-skin chief was in reality a shrewd political power-broker. He was a wealthy lobbyist whose job it was to mobilize coalitions within the tribe. The office of the Leopard-skin chief was merely the structural response of an ecologically programmed system that was in the process of expanding its territorial boundaries (the Nuer had been invading the lands of the Dinka before being rudely interrupted by the colonialists).

Evans-Pritchard may well have met someone who called himself the Leopard-skin chief but Aster Akalu suggests that what he was seeing was a reflection of his own culture. The Nuer needed some one to deal with the colonialists (you dont say "no" to Her Majesties civil servants) so why not a mighty Leopard-skin chief?

Aster Akalus methodological critique pinpoints the problem with devastating accuracy: "... researchers have organized their fieldwork in a way that directly prevented them from penetrating and understanding the thought and the emotional life of the people. In consideration of this it is very uncertain if their accounts are correct."⁷

There is a grave accusation concealed between the lines of these innocent looking sentences. This little woman is consigning 90% of this centuries social anthropological research to the rubbish bin of history. Which is exactly where most of it belongs.

Garbage and waste disposal is however not this papers thematic concern, what interests us here is what Aster Akalu found in the Nipnip encampment and how she found it.

Under the Nipnip tree

Functionalists explain social facts (observable manifestations existing independently of any individual that shape or limit behavior) in terms of the ends they serve (teleological explanation). Norms and moral rules act to bind society together. Societies cohesive principle - solidarity - is a product of a moral consensus. Classification systems however abound with anomalies; things, events, and experiences which contradict basic assumptions. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests that unless a similarity in linguistic background exists observers are not led to draw the same conclusions concerning social reality, conceptual systems being functions of social-psychological conditioning based upon shared agreements as to meaning. "We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated."⁸

Edward Sapir considered language to be not only a way of describing the social world but believed that cognitive processes are themselves a property of language with grammatical forms containing their own implicit and unique view of the world. The proposition that "semantic units carry variable and even opposite

meanings depending upon cultural context"⁹ suggests that extraordinary caution must be exercised by anthropologists in their investigations if they are to avoid completely misrepresenting and misinterpreting alien cultural modes.

Aster Akalu questioned the correctness of assuming that all societies are erected upon a firm foundation of normative behavior and to test her hypothesis she visited a local descent group of Ehtiopian Nuer to conduct an extended field study. She brought to her studies a most unusual methodological concept; to enter as far as possible into the daily routines of living the Nuer life and to interpret these routines in terms used by the Nuer themselves. Familiarity with the language is of course a necessity when undertaking an investigation of this kind but equally important is the ability to divest oneself of years of accumulated ethnocentric prejudices about what one should "see" or "be". Discarding ones clothes can sometimes be a lot easier than ridding oneself of the effects of the built-in prejudices of Western enculturation.

The questions Aster Akalu had set herself the task of answering were these:

1. Do the Nipnip think in moral terms?
2. Do the Nipnip react in common against certain patterns of conduct?

Unless you are inclined to accept the sensibleness of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that first question will have to remain unanswered because as far as can be ascertained the Nipnip do not possess linguistic categories which would enable them to express or

formulate moral judgements. In the Nipnip encampment "moral judgements" are as rare as "ice-cream cones". Conduct is not sorted automatically into categories of either "good" or "bad". Unpleasant social manifestations such as manslaughter, promiscuous adultery, and breach of contract are certainly considered inconvenient but they elicit no collective condemnation.

Now if you are still wondering why anthropologists find a community of this type so interesting you would do well to consider the social implications of the preceding paragraph; under the Nipnip tree authoritarian personalities simply do not put in an appearance, no one is going to tell you what to do, no one is going to tell you how to do it and no one is going to care if you do "do it". Marooned in this atmosphere without a life support system the personality structure of your typically neurotic civil servant would most probably disintegrate and you would have to carry him out in a strait-jacket. "Social deprivation" - no norms - would probably produce a reaction similar to the acute panic reported by subjects in sensory deprivation experiments (see Suedfeld, *Sensory Deprivation: Fifteen Years of Research*, New York, 1969, Fubek, ed. for a discussion of the effects a radical shift in environment can have upon human consciousness).

Aster Akalu defines moral norms as negative reactions within a social group (a number of individuals living and working together) towards certain types of behavior. Her definition of what could be interpreted as a "negative reaction" is as broad as Gods blue sky; any subtle disapproval re-

gularly expressed. Moral norms do not appear to play any role whatsoever in the maintenance of Nipnip group cohesion.

This is a culture whose "inner boundaries" are extremely elastic; they know all about Nuer kings and Leopard-skin chiefs and what they do though they have never actually seen one of these fabulous creatures. Even the basic supposition that Nuer group identity is synonymous with a system of patrilineal affiliation is not left unquestioned; the Nyanjany "count their descent from a woman as the name indicates."¹⁰ The Nipnip have no word for incest in their vocabulary. Exogamy appear to be popular only because the Nipnip seem to feel that "variety is the spice of life." Bridewealth (cattle) is exchanged, but don't hold your breath waiting for it.

Nipnip society does not appear to possess an elaborate metaphysical superstructure either. The Nipnip do not indulge in unnecessary supernatural speculation and their lives are unfettered by ceremony and ritual.

The special consensus of the Nipnip community requires nothing of its members beyond a certain minimum capacity to imitate and reproduce the harmonious interaction that is a natural characteristic of daily life in the encampment. What is it then that is producing group cohesion?

Aster Akalu summarizes a number of factors which she believes contribute to the cohesion of the Nipnip group, and here she is retreating to what appears, at first glance, to be the safety of a conservative functionalist explanation. With no rules or expectations to use as social yardsticks the Nipnip themselves cannot ex-

plain how their cultural boundaries originally solidified. Aster Akalu explains group cohesion in terms of how external circumstances produce a need for solidarity. The Nipnip collective exists to meet the exigencies of defence, care of cattle, food production, and seasonal migration. The observable effect these needs produce is cooperation between individuals.

The anthropologist is straddling the fence with a great deal of finesse as she asserts that ultimately Nipnip group identity is inseparable from the meaning the individuals themselves attribute to their collective actions. Only a member of that community can know what it means to be a member of that community and why it is so attractive. The fact that the Nipnip group has meaning for those who identify themselves with it is the "glue" that unites the individualistic Nuer into functioning collectiveness.

The secrets these meanings hold for the Nipnip are their private property and it would be very unneighbourly of us to press this inquiry further.

The people who sit under the Nipnip tree return regularly to its shade and if their reasons for being there should happen to include such unscientific and banal intangibles as love and friendship is that really such a crime?

Lets hope not.

William Miller

Notes

1. Mark Kline Taylor "Symbolic Dimensions in Cultural Anthropology" in *Current Anthropology* Vol 26 No 2 April 1985

2. Ibid. p 169
3. Rodney Needham *Essential Perplexities* An Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1978, p 8
4. Reprinted in Pelto & Pelto, *Anthropological Research; The Structure of Inquiry* Cambridge: 1978, p 55
5. The Oceanic Austronesian word *tapu/tabu* may have been mistranslated. "Sacred" or "forbidden" connotations attributed to this verb are most probably figments of an overexcited ethnographic imagination.
6. Rodney Needham, op. cit. p 27
7. Aster Akalu *Beyond Morals?* Malmö: LiberFörlag 1985, p 22
8. *Language, Thought and Reality; Selected Writings of Benjamin Whorf* (J. B. Garroll, ed) Boston: 1956, p 214
9. Rodney Needham *Primordial Characters* University Press of Virginia 1978, p 46
10. Aster Akalu, op. cit. p 36

Tove Stang Dahl (red)
KVINNERETT I & II
Pp 191 + 263
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Kvinnors rättsliga ställning är genomgående sämre än mäns och några kvinnogrupper är särskilt diskriminerade. Kvinnorätt sprider kunskap om hur rättsreglerna kan och bör förändras för att öka kvinnors självbestämmande och frihet och hur man kan uppnå större rättvisa mellan könen i samhället.

Det är nu 10 år sedan kvinnorätt blev ett eget ämne för jurister vid universitetet i Oslo. Tillsammans med sex medarbetare lägger juristen Tove Stang Dahl fram en kvinnorätt i fyra avsnitt samt en fyllig presentation av ämnet i böckerna *Kvinnerett I* och *II*

Ända sedan kvinnorätten började ta form som självständigt ämne har det förekommit en diskussion om kvinnorrättens speciella karaktär i förhållande till övrig rättsvetenskap.

Kvinnorätt tar sin utgångspunkt i persongruppen kvinnor och beskriver och värderar rätten utifrån kvinnors perspektiv. Kvinnorätten är tvärjuridisk och kryssar över gränserna till all slags rätt. Detta beroende på att kvinnor som kategori ej är lika avgränsningsbar som andra grupper. Kvinnor återfinns i alla åldersgrupper och i de flesta livsområden och situationer. Den norska "riktningens" definition av ämnet kvinnorätt är följande: "Kvinnorrättens ändamål är att beskriva, förstå och förklara kvinnors rättsliga ställning i rätten och i samhället, med syfte att förbättra kvin-