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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State by Sharon A. Hutchinson

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Source: *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (May, 1997), pp. 491-492

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the American Anthropological Association

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/646791>

Accessed: 07-03-2019 15:33 UTC

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the exclusively male associations that fight witchcraft, theft, and other wrongdoing.

The contributors are all friends, students, and collaborators of De Heusch, whose spirit (or, less generously, special preoccupations) presides over the whole. A gradient can be discerned from concerns that are primarily documentary, historical, and curatorial, to those that ascend to an empyrean of cosmology, metaphor, and aesthetic rapture, as in R. Devisch's pursuit of the multiple associations of the Yaka diviner's slitdrum. This kind of writing—lacking the discipline that might be imposed by respect for indigenous commentaries, including myths—arouses the kind of unease that is also aroused by high-art photographs of African objects, striking though they are. Filters and careful lighting appeal to a particular aesthetic and compensate for the loss of the sort of emotional energy that in the real world such objects, like rituals and cosmologies, derive from the human problems with which they deal; the seductive results are nevertheless reinventions and appropriations.

De Heusch concludes the volume with a detailed analysis of Tetela and Nkutsu traditions of origin from an area of the forest north of the Songye. He seems to be settling scores with authorities who have misattributed Songye masks to the Tetela, and perhaps with other scholars as well, but his discussion leads into an account of the use by the Tetela of certain figures used in the rituals of the *nkumi* association, and to the elaborately painted faces—virtual “masks”—of its dancers.

Finally, A. B. West's translations from the French are both colloquial and unidiomatic, with frequently disconcerting results. The remaining translations by Michael Novy are much easier to read.

***Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State.* SHARON A. HUTCHINSON. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. xviii + 408 pp., illustrations, appendix, bibliography, index.**

SALLY FALK MOORE
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This is a remarkable book that makes innovative contributions, both informational and methodological. It not only tells us what Sharon Hutchinson observed of Nuer life at the time of her fieldwork (a 21-month period in the early 1980s with some brief revisits in 1990 and 1992), but it also tells us a great deal about what the Nuer themselves have to say about their situation. More than that, Hutchinson's book fills some of the historical space between Evans-Pritchard's field data and her own with an artful use of materials that draw both on Howell's work and on a variety of official records, including some rich data from the courts. But as if this were not enough, she does more, pointing to striking contrasts between the Eastern and Western Nuer, and explaining these contrasts on the grounds of differing historical experiences.

Since all Africanists and many other anthropologists know E. E. Evans-Pritchard's classic ethnographic work backwards and forwards, this new

material will be of wide professional interest. Evans-Pritchard's trilogy (*The Nuer* [Oxford: Clarendon Press 1940], *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951], and *Nuer Religion* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956]), based on fieldwork done during the 1930s, is deep in the consciousness of the profession. Thus Hutchinson has set herself the daunting task of providing a running commentary on the difference between her “now” and Evans-Pritchard's “then,” her own reflections and interpretations of these contrasts, and how they came about. The great thing that she does at the same time is to give us a rich sample of the self-reflexive commentary of her Nuer friends and acquaintances.

What emerge are the contradictory practices and convictions that exist side by side. In one of Hutchinson's minor examples, for instance, the sons of the literate political elite refused to submit to the scarification of initiation (p. 270). The wider community continued to require this ritual. There were clearly different views of what it meant to be initiated, what it meant to be a man, and what rejecting scarification signified. Nevertheless, the very fact that a powerful group was against the practice must have let skepticism seep into the atmosphere. Cultural and social assumptions once tranquilly accepted by most people became points of speculation, disagreement, and contention.

Hutchinson has made these “disturbed assumptions” her focus, and therein lies the striking originality of her book. This is a brilliant device: it is a means by which cultural transformation may be depicted in process, permitting many quite different types of information to be integrated into the story. It permits Hutchinson both to give specific details about actual events and sequences of change with dates and places when she has the details, and to leave it at “then” and “now” when she does not.

The focus on “disturbed assumptions” not only saves Hutchinson from a year-by-year history that most likely cannot be reconstructed anyway, but also saves her from other totalizing efforts, such as trying to describe the workings of the larger economy or the polity of the Southern Sudan. But Hutchinson is not all poetics. She interrupts the vivid language and the metaphors of the Nuer to address the reader directly with horrifying information—intermittent reminders of tragedy and struggle: civil war, death and fighting, modern weapons, repeated shortages of food, high infant mortality, massive losses of cattle, and the increasing role of migrant labor and cattle markets. Hutchinson also never lets the reader forget that these unending crises and radical changes were accompanied by deeply unsettling ideas.

The thematic technique of presentation in *Nuer Dilemmas* is a spectacular tour de force. Hutchinson is dealing with many different time periods, many different types of evidence, and many inevitable gaps; and the populations among which she worked had been radically disrupted by the first civil war (1955–72) and, later, by the resumption of the civil war (1983). As Hutchinson reminds us, this was not a conflict innocent of economic motives: there were considerable oil reserves in the South. The North-South hostilities have their ethnic and

cultural dimensions as well. At various times the North has forcefully sought to Arabize the South and to “civilize” it by imposing its own version of *sharia* law, because the Northern government considers that southerners do not have proper language or religion. Thus the Christianization of the eastern Nuer must be seen as a political act as well as an act of faith. These upheavals have been compounded by various administrative reorganizations and labor regulations that the South has resisted. The story is a tragic one, and it is not over.

Meanwhile, as the Nuer go about their everyday business of surviving, they never stop thinking about the meaning of life, and the meaning of their own lives. Hutchinson makes what they say about this central to her project. This book does not present the history of a localized and durable community. Instead, it is an account of the ways in which certain themes in Nuer culture—themes all readers will recognize from Evans-Pritchard—have been transformed during 60 years of upheaval. It also tells us how Nuer culture has domesticated new experiences by incorporating them into old paradigms. That cash has found its way into Nuer bridewealth practices will come as no surprise to the reader. That guns have also become a desired part of bridewealth, however, comes as a shock.

Given that this fine, gracefully written, richly informative book has given us such a wealth of new knowledge, and in such a lively way, it is perhaps ungrateful to make two complaints. First, the index is seriously inadequate. Anyone trying to find, or re-find, a piece of information will have to reread the entire book. Second, on a point of more substance, Hutchinson states explicitly that the distinction she makes between blood- and nonblood-associated spheres of exchange “is entirely my own construction” (p. 74). The idea of “blood” figures pivotally in her lengthy interpretations of economy and gender. But when is it her metaphor and when is it theirs? It would have been preferable if she had been more literal and used the “hybrid categories” of the Nuer themselves, however multiple, subtle, and intertwined.

This point aside, one cannot but admire the way Hutchinson has dealt with the complex double project of reconstruction and observation. The boldness with which this book carves out its intellectual territory is impressive, and the sense it conveys of the brave and lively individuals who people its pages is nothing short of remarkable. Hutchinson has given us, in both the historical and the emotional sense, a moving ethnography.

***Romancing the Real: Folklore and Ethnographic Representation in North Africa.* SABRA J. WEBBER. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991. xxviii + 293 pp., figures, maps, photographs, appendix, references, indexes.**

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Sabra Webber has written an extremely interesting ethnography of the oral history of a folk com-

munity in Tunisia. She situates her analysis at the fertile intersection of a critical theory influenced by such literary critics as Jameson, Cuellar, Ricoeur, and Todorov and a traditional anthropology that seeks to unveil the cultural reality of daily existence behind recitations of oral history. Webber's community is a northeastern Tunisian coastal town, where she has engaged in fieldwork for more than 20 years. The stories, recited in colloquial Arabic, relate not only specific local realities of the political and cultural life of this Tunisian community, but also something of the cultural poetics of a more generalized Mediterranean worldview.

Webber is one of a growing group of Middle Eastern anthropologists who have sought to redeem folkloric material from the anecdotal periphery to a more central location as an analytic device. Sharing a territory already developed by Abu-Lughod, Crapanzano, Duvignaud, Eickelman, Fernea, Lacoste-Dujardin, and others, she has explored the ways in which simple narratives reveal the contours of local mentalities and show how people think about themselves and others, yesterday and today, and place and value.

Each of the stories is a witnessing, a privileged moment of ethnographic revelation. Webber is well aware that her very presence taints the witnessing, as the observer always alters the reality of those under observation. Undoubtedly, some of the stories take on a different coloration because of the presence of a stranger. But we need to take into account the fact that the audience is always part of the tradition of storytelling, whether the ideal audience is composed of millions watching television programs or a half-dozen in a small Tunisian café. Stories are meant to be created versions of reality, often idealized images of what the storyteller would like the world to be. These stories often represent ideals of virtue, justice, and goodwill. This is part of the constructed “real” of these people's lives, part of the process through which the community poetically defines itself by relating its past history to its present concerns. This is a present that is not simply bound up in the local Arabic tradition but is linked to a larger world in which events in Paris, Los Angeles, or Bosnia share in shaping a consciousness.

At the purely aesthetic level, Webber reminds us that these people live in an imaginative world in which art is evoked to talk about life, and to gain some sort of foothold on truth. In a world disenchanted with its own powers of creativity, it is no small pleasure to spend an evening in a Tunisian café, sipping tea, and listening to men live their aesthetic discourse, unburdened by ratings and unfettered by an impatient audience ever ready to zap them into infinity.

***Cotton Is the Mother of Poverty: Peasants, Work, and Rural Struggle in Colonial Mozambique, 1938–1961.* ALLEN ISAACMAN. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996. xx + 404 pp., figures, plates, notes, bibliography, indexes.**