

## Some Nuer Notions of Purity and Danger\*

Dedicated to the Memory of E. E. Evans-Pritchard  
(1902-1973)

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In reality, then, there are no religions which are false. All are true in their own fashion; all answer, though in different ways, the given conditions of human existence (DURKHEIM 1915: 15).

... men have so often had recourse to the same means for solving problems whose concrete elements may be very different, but which share the feature of all belonging to 'structures of contradiction' (LÉVI-STRAUSS 1966: 95).

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First it will examine some aspects of Nuer ritual behavior as recorded by the late EVANS-PRITCHARD. Second, it will tentatively suggest an alternative interpretation of ritual behavior among the Nuer, this in an attempt to work within a theoretical framework affording comparative analysis of other symbolic systems. The work of DOUGLAS (1966), LÉVI-STRAUSS (1966) and BEIDELMAN (1966, 1968) has been concerned with similar themes, and their work bears direct relevance to my own analysis.

Before reviewing the theoretical suggestions of the above authors, I will briefly discuss some intellectual precedents apparent in EVANS-PRITCHARD's own 'theory of primitive religion'. In doing this I hope to demonstrate the reasoning behind his particular interpretation of Nuer religious practices and values.

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