

## Rezensionen

**Akalu, Aster:** *Beyond Morals? Experiences of Living the Life of the Ethiopian Nuer.* Malmö: CWK Gleerup, 1985. 85 pp., fig., maps, photos. (Papers of the Royal Society of Letters at Lund, 2)

If this booklet were merely the outcome of incompetence, it would merit little notice. Unfortunately, the author's gross ineptitude is also mixed with what appears to be considerable disdain toward anthropologists, a misleading presentation of her own purported competence, and, most alarming, a presentation of conclusions which do serious disservice to the Nuer people whom she describes and claims to admire.

The abstract at the beginning of this work clearly indicates its gist. The easiest way to indicate what is amiss is to cite this in full and then follow it with critical commentary on the points I raise above: "It is a common assumption, within Social Anthropology as well as general Sociology, that moral norms and ideas exist in all social groups and that they form the basis of group unity. The author questions the generality of this assumption by referring to her experiences in a field study of the Ethiopian Nuer. In contrast to most anthropologists she has lived and worked with the people as one of them. On linguistic grounds, and by analyzing her observations of their reactions to untraditional or damaging acts and their upbringing of the children, she arrives at the conclusion that the Ethiopian Nuer lack moral norms and ideas. The divergence of this result from E. E. Evans-Pritchard's description of the culture of the Sudanese Nuer is explained by the fact that the Ethiopian Nuer up to now have been unaffected by Western culture, and that authoritative elements such as chiefs or elders and even authoritative attitudes are totally absent in their lives. The study concludes by some reflections on what produces cohesion among this extremely individualistic and yet egalitarian people" (8).

Akalu assumes that "people on simple cultural levels do not think or verbalize in general typified terms" (9). Drawing selected bits (out of context) from Lowie, Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Furer-Haimendorf, and the British legal anthropologist Simon Roberts, she concludes that we cannot assume but must verify whether indeed all preliterate peoples have moral norms. She views the Nuer as a test case. To study them she decided to approach fieldwork uninfluenced by any preconceived methodological principles. Instead, she would work "spontaneously." This con-

sisted of a pilot study of two weeks in 1976, two months in 1979, one month in 1981, and three months in 1983. She claims that since she had already learned Nuer earlier as a girl the linguistic obstacle was already solved so little time was needed to be wasted there. Furthermore, she found that prolonged living amongst the Nuer was arduous.

Akalu suggests that Evans-Pritchard failed to collect proper material since he did not live as a Nuer, even though he resided in the midst of Nuer camps. This is because he wore shoes and clothing, slept on a camp-bed in a tent, and wandered around taking notes and making formal enquiries rather than hunting and gathering, milking and herding cattle, fishing and cultivating. In contrast, when Akalu reached Nuer country, she discarded her shoes and clothing, donned a loin-cloth (apparently much to the consternation of local African officials), and moved into a Nuer settlement. She claims ethnographic authority and insight by having gone about with Nuer in this fashion, collecting data in spontaneous conversations and by random observations. She does not appear to have seen any sacrifices, funerals or marriage ceremonies, though she does claim to have witnessed male initiation. This apparently supports her assertion that real Nuer lack most forms of ritual and supernaturally oriented behaviour.

Akalu's findings go against the grain of material collected by every other person who has ever worked with the Nuer: Evans-Pritchard, Howell, Huffman, Crazzolara, and Kiggen (the last three uncited), as well as Hutchinson (whose fieldwork was nearly contemporaneous with Akalu's), not to mention many others. All these workers spent longer time with the Nuer, some spending several years.

Not surprisingly, given the brevity of this volume (after photographs, illustrations, and tables of content are deducted, less than 60 pages of reportage remain) her material is extremely thin, consisting mainly of vague generalizations and bald assertions, supposedly sustained by scattered personal anecdotes and odd quotations from her conversations with Nuer.

What Akalu reports conforms to nothing convincingly reported for any preliterate society we know anywhere. (I discount Turnbull's bizarre and questionable "Mountain People.") According to Akalu, Nuer lack all forms of personal authority, leadership, all