

The Treatment of the Environment and Ecology
in *The Nuer* and *Pigs for the Ancestors*,
differences and similarities

Pearce Paul Creasman
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In E.E. Evans-Pritchard's ethnography, *The Nuer* and in Roy A. Rappaport's ethnography, *Pigs for the Ancestors* there exists two forms of modernist study. While Evans-Pritchard emphasizes the importance of "social structure," Rappaport's focus is on an ecosystemic approach. These two basic structures lend themselves to some similarities and differences concerning Rappaport and Evans-Pritchard's treatment of the environment and ecology. As a whole, Roy Rappaport's work is obviously more concerned with the environment and humans' involvement with it, while it would be fair to say that E.E. Evans-Pritchard's work just cites environment relative to the group. A good place to start would be to draw the difference between environment and ecology. For the purposes of this paper I will take environment to be, "the combination of external physical conditions that affect and influence the growth, development, and survival of organisms" and ecology to be, "the science of the relationships between organisms and their environments" (www.dictionary.com). These definitions satisfy both Evans-Pritchard and Rappaport's use of the words.

Since Roy Rappaport, in his study of the Tsembaga people of New Guinea, focuses so strongly on the interdependence, and even combined system, of humans and environment and E.E. Evans-Pritchard just notes the conditions of the environment in his study of the Nuer people of the Sudan, there is much more room for contrast between these two ethnographies than comparison. This is evident in Evans-Pritchard's conspicuous absence of a systemic point of view in *The Nuer*, where an ecosystemic approach is clear in *Pigs for the Ancestors*. Evans-Pritchard could, theoretically, take a group out of their environment and study them, whereas Rappaport would quickly

refute even the suggestion that removing a group from their environment would allow them to be studied or evaluated accurately. For Rappaport human groups are part of a larger system, including flora, fauna, climate, spirits, trade and many other aspects, but for Evans-Pritchard the environment does not determine what humans can do, it may only suggest or persuade certain events.

More obvious differences can be noted between the two ethnographies just by comparing subtitles and chapter headings. In *Pigs for the Ancestors*, the subtitle reads, “Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People,” as compared to *The Nuer’s*, “A Description of the modes of livelihood and the political institutions of a Nilotic people.” Immediately an obvious difference can be seen in the two ethnographies. The focus of Rappaport’s work is focused on ecology and the environment but Evans-Pritchard’s study is centered on political and social context. A revealing difference of how both authors treat environment is in the chapter titles. Evans-Pritchard devotes only one chapter to “Oecology,” and Rappaport has four chapters directly inclusive of environment and ecology, and another two that are more indirect. In Evans-Pritchard’s chapter on “Oecology” the tone and purpose is mostly descriptive in nature. Most of the chapter reads like a narrative; “Excess of insufficiency of water is the first problem that faces the Nuer” (57). In the case of Rappaport most of this descriptive or narrative form is dispersed throughout several chapters, with in-depth discussion in select parts like chapter six “Ritual and regulation of Ecological Systems” (224).

E.E Evans-Pritchard portrays the environment much like a tool for the Nuer people; when you need something you can turn to it for help. “Nuer seek pasturage as well as drinking-water and they take the cattle to where they know that both can be

obtained” (59). This quote illustrates the status in which Evans-Pritchard holds the environment; it is there to be utilized. Rappaport would take exception to this interpretation of Evans-Pritchard’s work because for Rappaport there is a much more clear distinction between ecology and environment. Evans-Pritchard might be accused of blurring the line of ecology and environment by a dedicated follower of Rappaport. Rappaport’s environment is best summed up as, “information concerning climate, soils, and vegetation” (33), as well as some other aspects like land, fauna and spirits. The ecology that Rappaport differentiates is the relationships between organisms and their environment. Rappaport says, “fully coherent [ecological] systems are those in which a change in the state of any single component immediately results in proportional changes in the states of all other components” (227-228). Evans-Pritchard may be inclined to refute this statement as a constant, but there is not enough direct information in *The Nuer* for me to feel comfortable solidly confirming such a position. The nature of Evans-Pritchard’s work and his ability to remove a group from their environment and still have confidence in a study of that group leads me to this belief.

Although there are many more differences in Evans-Pritchard and Rappaport’s works relative to the treatment of environment, the similarities are just as important, if not more revealing. E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s ethnography is directed toward the study of “social structure.” Evans-Pritchard holds that, “structural relations are relations between groups which form a system” (262), while Rappaport’s emphasis is on “the homeostatic function of ritual, and upon the ways in which it links subsystems” (232). The overall purposes of these two ethnographies include the connection of systems. This is, obviously, an important connection. Inasmuch as Rappaport’s focus is on environment

and Evans-Pritchard's is on social structure, neither would have progressed far without the inclusion of systems. Included in those "systems" for both is the importance of the environment. The subsistence of the cattle for the Nuer people is obviously reflective of the environment in which they live at the time. The Nuer's "life is of necessity migratory" (57), in order to find suitable environment in which to live and sustain their cattle. This migratory pattern of life is elucidated by Evans-Pritchard as one of the most crucial aspects of Nuer life. The Nuer's "social idiom is a bovine idiom" (19), according to Evans-Pritchard, so they must be focused on the survival of said cattle. Rappaport's dependence on systems is much less ambiguous than Evans-Pritchard's. "The Tsembaga ritual cycle...operating to maintain the values of a number of variables within [the system]" leads to "perpetuation of a system" (224). Since Rappaport clearly states that "The place of ritual in the ecology of the Tsembaga has been the focus of this study" (224), reason (via *modus ponens*) allows me to conclude that without the idea of a "system" Rappaport's conclusions and ethnography would fall apart. The system to which both Rappaport and Evans-Pritchard ultimately refer to is the environment. Although Evans-Pritchard directly refers to "social structure," ecology is explicitly included.

An important similarity in these works is the time devoted to gathering physical, or "scientific" data representing the environment and conditions in which both groups lived. This information, assuming it was collected accurately, can be used to make graphs and charts from which further studies or comparisons can be obtained. Evans Pritchard did not use statistics as frequently as Rappaport, but when Evans-Pritchard did use numbers as support they were more noticeable. Rappaport, though often criticized for it, included

numbers and statistics frequently in his ethnography as support for his conclusions or inferences. This was an important contribution in the history of ethnography and anthropology.

The relation between environment and ecology in E.E. Evans-Pritchard's, *The Nuer* and in Roy A. Rappaport's, *Pigs for the Ancestors* is hard to analyze because of Evans-Pritchard's inadvertent combination of the two, but as I have shown can be done. These two ethnographers share a common link in the base of their conclusions that is shown throughout and developed within their works. For Evans-Pritchard's social structure comes first, but his approach looks materialistic because of an ecological focus. Rappaport's focus on ritual is explicitly linked to the ecology of the Tsembaga, as his whole ethnography builds on that idea. Both works are modernist texts, but have proportionately more differences than similarities. It is amazing that these two works are classified in the same style and period when they do not share much in the nature of theoretical framework or methodology. Procedure is somewhat the same, as are oral reports and observation, but the extent to which Rappaport used oral reports greatly outweighs Evans-Pritchard. Neither the method, procedure nor theoretical framework should diminish the historical importance of these two works. The study of cultures or social structures is of a progressive nature and both these works made leaps and bounds, whether it was Rappaport's use of both observer and folk models or Evans-Pritchard helping anthropologists understand why not to use reification.