

## Anthropoetics in Evans-Pritchard. “The Nuer”

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### Introductory Remarks

This essay concerns the domain of anthropoetics, i.e. the link between anthropology and discursive methods. Etymologically derived from ancient Greek, *poiesis* (ποίησις) implies the process of weaving a texture, a structure, a context. From this concept, we deduce construction, fashioning, “tricot”; and furthermore: mosaic or literary tapestry-creation. Thanks to the textual combining potential, weaving is at the heart of social studies discourse. The Latin-derived verb “combinare” implies the interweaving itself. Traditionally, metaphors of textual interweaving include the sewing process used to repair a garment or the process of fashion design. In these practices, performativity surpasses the initial idea of primary elements.

Interweaving dissonant pedagogical approaches, anthropologists combine stories from the field and re-narrate them to various interpreters. By going into unknown environments to mix with locals thanks to participation, observation, immersion (Malinowski 1922), they formulate confessional texts, which form the basis of anthropological monographs. By empirically classifying field utterings, anthropologists organize the data for value-meaning. Conceived as an epistemological process, anthropology specializes in the art of collecting social facts. Data is indeed extracted from observing foreign societies. It is subsequently injected into panoramic contemplations. Emotions are imbricated, in these texts, with philosophical insights. A rhizomic pastiche of impressions is the result of cultural writerly projects.

According to Barthes, anthropology is linked to weaving texts. His hyphology dictates: “Si nous aimions les néologismes, nous pourrions définir la théorie du texte comme une hyphologie; hyphos, indique le tissu et la toile d’araignée” (Barthes 1973: 1527).

The study of anthropos targets systems of connotations, gathered from observations of social behavior. Human sciences concern man’s place among other men. Thanks to contact, collaboration and conflict, the giving and tricking power of networks is revealed. This textual web is scripturally represented by disciplinary discourse. It aligns theories, constructs alternative points of view and lays out synoptic maps of field-based ideas. The famous

web, whose representamen is the polyphonic conversation of man about man, crafts the human(e) discourse of anthropology.

Social science discourse consists of non-fiction writing inspired by imaginary vision. It is conveyed through ballads, aloof poetry as well as heart-felt diary outpourings. These fictional productions are discretely contingent on the subjectivity contained in the anthropologist’s “visualism” (definition: preferential and interest-based vision of reality based on personal experience; Fabian 1983). Oscillating around differences between signifiers, anthropoetics combines the study of man with a structural identity. Anthropoetics are underscored by syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships. The extra-textual horizontal axis is set amid the vertical axis of substitutional/associational/differentiation-based relations (Saussure 1983: 121; 1974: 122). Semiotics dictates the structural forms through which signs are organized into codes. Anthropoetics challenges and interprets these codes in relation to theories of social identity, human evolution and social construction. Code-building has some history in anthropology. Lévi-Strauss provides an example of an anthropologist who advanced knowledge of structural kinship relationships between signs in actantial models of indigenous societies.

French anthropology offers, in this regard, many useful insights. Georges Condominas is one of the French pioneers, whose research in Vietnam has led to the redefinition of otherness in South-East Asia. In “We Have Eaten the Forest,” he shows that indigenous people use metaphoric holds on reality to describe the agricultural return to slash and burn strategies. The intricate process occurs after a tribe has depleted the soil’s nutritive content and moved on to other terrains to harvest crops. Metaphoric conceptions of the slash and burn migration facilitate the understanding of the tribe’s mythical return to the original territory of residence. Once all the land has been used for crops, the tribe returns to the original point of departure to initiate the process of slash and burn strategy anew. Anthropology retraces the steps made by generations to promote ancient methods of livelihood. While Condominas does not resort to semiotics in a direct way, his vivid portrayal of the migratory resettlement of indigenous tribes establishes, through structural signifiers, actantial models of social behavior. These models become strongly impregnated in the subconscious of anthropology students. In French anthropology, Michel Leiris is another contributor who enriches authorial strategies of diary-writing in the African continent (Leiris 1968). Leiris questions motifs of lyrical expression. French social studies are inbred with an evidence-

based link to literary anthropology. On the North-American front, anthropologists such as Ruth Behar play on the meaning of field precepts to promote the inclusion of the human. Behar achieves her project thanks to “vulnerable” observation, which substitutes for participant observation (Behar 1998), the term originally coined by Bronisław Malinowski in the “Argonauts of the Western Pacific” (1922).

Semiotics opens a Pandora box of possibilities for boundless, unlimited interpretation. The discursive strategies are related to the flexibility of signifiers and adapted as permutations of greater signifying systems. Premised on collective psychology and bound by common language, anthropologists rely on semiotics to define cultural terms. Anthropoetics challenges the codes of society at two levels. This is accomplished, on one hand, at the level of social fact (Durkheim 1927). Anthropoetics asks questions about social reality: ways of people’s behavior, expression, custom and exceptions to the rule – anomalies, deviance, originality. Social fact is the *raison d’être* of anthropology. Consisting of the reality that is not biological, or genetic, these field truths are born out of the cultural inter-relation between humans, which cannot be accounted by natural sciences. Human studies are created out of a fusion of the individually psychological (subjective) and the social (collective). These emerge from a relation to voluntary and involuntary co-existence of primary cultural elements.

Emanating from the impossibility to fully capture cultural phenomena, social fact concerns the unspoken behavior between collaborating and opposing groups. Anthropologists study gestures of social presence that do not hold a physical natural shape, but whose existence is experientially unmistakable. Sociology studies the invisible structures of being notwithstanding the existence of performativity. Performativity appears to be surreal: it results from unwritten collisions in society; it is often reported thanks to the usage of narrators who privilege the outsider’s perspective. There is a trend, however, to consider the perspective of insiders, who peek at their own societies from the double position of being in-group and out-group members. Jomo Kenyatta and Xiatong Fei, Malinowski’s thesis-students, had described, in their monographs, the insider perspective regarding conditions in Africa and China, while holding successful political aspirations for their nation-states. Social sciences are indeed consumed with the pursuit of social fact. Although it seeks perpetual scientific self-justification, social fact is paradoxically unscientific.

While social fact pretends to be characterized by scientifically circumscribed features, anthropoetics

constructs its fine critique at the level of semiotic grasp on reality: a surface-level approach. In spite of the division between surface and deep-structure signification, semiotics aspire to realize a scientific treatment of language. They coordinate knowledge by modelling it. They privilege the abstract behavior of signifiers. By outlining how the vividness of reality is captured by translation, anthropoetics bridges modes of reasoning. Anthropoetics justifies the usage of literary strategies because narration is the subject matter extracted from the work of immersion in fieldwork, participant observation, surveys, censuses. These tales are arranged in a scriptural form to form stylized bodies, representing the truth of “being there”; inadvertently, providing insights on cultural origins.

So while social reality “is”, the aphorism of Marshall McLuhan that “the medium is the message” reflects the partiality of the anthropologist’s role as interpreter (McLuhan 1964). Medium as message implies that writing carries the message. Truth and justice are obtained by the work of philosophers who steer the boat, as is the case in Plato’s “Republic.” Contained within the subjectivity, the intimacy, the uttermost spirit and the sense-différance of writing, stylistics distinguish the anthropological masterpiece. They personify social fact as the message itself. They anticipate Clifford Geertz’s thesis that the anthropologist is author (Geertz 1988).

In spite of the rigorous objective evidence, based on hypothesis building and ruminations over data-collection, *écriture* and *réécriture* permeate Knowledge – paradoxically thanks to the human appeal to the inner self. This statement emerges from three aspects of Evans-Pritchard writing: a) Lévi-Strauss’ application of the concept of the bricoleur/artiste in Nuer foundation myths; b) Vico’s concept of fantasia extracted from the lyrical aspects of field-song composition; c) “cattle poetry” grammatically conjugated using Roland Barthes structural narrative theory.

A close reading of these three story-building semantic fields establishes that ethnographic genius is linked to literary creation, suggesting reception-based aspects of cultural fission. By buttressing ethnographic discourse with a human face – for I would not dare let say: heart – these texts paint vignettes of a dominant story line. In so far as they communicate secret codes of being-in-the-world, these signs make anthropological data accessible. Writing about societies is linked to the elaboration of a value-laden linguistic machinery, which transforms messages from the crude reality of fieldwork. Evans-Pritchard’s texts are the signifiers of the anthropological imagination.

## Nuer Foundational Myth Building

Accounting for society's genesis, resistance and claims to power, symbiotic mother-to-child nourishment and self-indulgence, myth building concerns story telling. Nuer myth telling shows, in particular, that the crafting of narratives invites a semiotic mechanism, which benefits from the mosaic combination of psychological elements: fear of reprobation, threat of war, subjectivity. Identification with mythical figures and the belief in the will to power complete the narrative point of view. As pre-contemporaries of Modern man, Nuer men are, after all, real men.

In his writing, Evans-Pritchard makes deliberate use of Claude Lévi-Strauss's bricoleur/engineer metaphor (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 16–33). This metaphor juxtaposes mythopoeitics of bricolage with the domesticated thought of engineering. It ascends to disclose the freedom position of artiste. Because Lévi-Strauss' work relates to raw, naïve art, produced without the idea of providing a contextual framework, the craftsman/bricoleur sculpts words, concepts, fieldworks: "reaching brilliant unforeseen results on an intellectual" (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 17). As simultaneously an engineer of anthropological concepts, Evans-Pritchard nevertheless scientifically "questions the universe". The difference between mythical thought in Lévi-Strauss and that of science consists of the following typology: a) mythical thought concerns building structures by fitting and arranging bribes and morceaux, résidus and débris d'événements; while b) science, creates its means and results in form of events, thanks to the structures which it is constantly elaborating and which are its hypotheses and theories (Lévi-Strauss: 22). Epistemological dualism between science and poesis pierces discourse. The exit strategy lies with art, which "lies half-way between scientific knowledge and mythical or magical thought... There, we are informed: scientists change the world by means of structures, bricoleurs change the world by means of events" (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 22).

An observer experiments with social fact, the author produces intellectual débris, sublimated in notes, manuscripts, cultural monographs, witchcraft studies, time reckoning analyses, etc. Myths are, in that universe, systems of abstract relations and objects of philosophical contemplation (Lévi-Strauss 1962: 25). Reiterated in *Le cru et le cuit*, Lévi-Strauss advocates that ethnographic observations and empirical categories unveil abstract notions: "Le but ... est de montrer comment des catégories empiriques, telles que celles de cru et de cuit de frais et de pourri, de mouillé et de brûlé,

etc. définissables avec précision par la seule observation ethnographique et chaque fois en se plaçant au point de vue d'une culture particulière, peuvent néanmoins servir d'outils conceptuels pour dégager des notions abstraites et les enchaîner en propositions" (Lévi-Strauss 1964: 1).

Abstract ethnography is revealed through an analysis of events (case in point: bricoleur) and through an analysis of structures (case in point: engineer). Creative élan allows a synthesis, which subjectively underscores the monograph. Myth making consists of extracting images from structures. Science generates the syntactical grammar of these at an abstract level. Bricolage and engineering are intertwined in anthropological discourse.

Let us examine a brief sample of Nuer myth, which alludes to this qualification. The mythical origins of Nuer society are organized to express the nature of the society: their characteristic of hostility, their lineage as well as their political relations. My analysis proceeds in light of these categories. I link the construction of Nuer myth-making to the anthropologist's stylistic flair of expression. In his position as the artist, Evans-Pritchard does not provide lyrical transcriptions of myths. Those are obstructed by the conspicuous translation process and the informants' failure to narrate myths legibly for the project to take off. Yet, some notion of poetry transpires within the mythical figures narrated through "The Nuer." The myths express the underlying drama of a society: its war-like tendencies, its pastoral nurturing of cattle, its intricate lineage system and its time-reckoning abilities. Nuer myths are architechtonic bed-time stories for adults: their intricate cleavages connect lineage plots into objects of fantasy beyond the predictable grid lines of kinship. Representing stories of a pre-society, they model the imagination of man antecedent to modernity.

Evans-Pritchard's inscription of Nuer myth represents a systematic ploy for the systematization of scientific knowledge, the ontological premise of anthropology. As a first stage in the construction of these narratives, Nuers are portrayed as being bucolically linked to their cows. A bond of love and hatred, rapprochement and tension, its genetic link stretches across endless interactions: grazing the fields, sensuous milking, birth-giving and suckling. In the Nuer language, cattle determine the lifestyle of people. All causal explanations of the life-cycle are made in terms of cattle. Myths are formed to explain the warrior mentality of Nuer men. Nuer say that cattle destroy people, for more people have died for the sake of a cow than for any other cause. Evans-Pritchard's narrative substantiates this rela-

tionship by telling the story of remorse at the slaying of the mother of Cow and Buffalo: “They have a story which tells how, when the beasts broke up their community and each went its own way and lived its own life, Man slew the mother of Cow and Buffalo. Buffalo said she would avenge her mother by attacking the men in the bush, but Cow said that she would remain in the habitations of men and avenge her mother by causing endless disputes about debts, bride-wealth, and adultery, resulting in parricide. The feud between Cow and Man is continuous: day by day Cow avenges the death of her mother by occasioning the death of men. Nuer say hence of their cattle: they will be finished together with mankind for men will all die on account of the cattle, such that cattle will cease together” (Evans-Pritchard 1960: 49).

The proverbial finish-line of this account of origins demonstrates the enmeshment of Nuer men with sacred beasts. Life-worth is determined by one’s relationship to cattle: men are ready to die for them. Meaning is derived from the cattle principle. Incarnated in a semantic cluster, this principle coins social functions parceled between cow-rearing, cow-grazing, cow-milking, cow-suckling. These categories are draped in symbolic gestures of adoring admiration.

As Evans-Pritchard explains, Nuer ride the Dinka for cattle, to plunder. Native equivalents of barbaric warriors, the Nuer project to expand the ownership of beasts. They fight among each other to compensate for debts. The raids performed on the Dinka are exerted on the basis of the power of the stronger. They are assertions of Nuer identity (1960: 50). Evans-Pritchard’s delineation of cow myth unveils important aspects of anthropoietics: it conveys stylistic elements, which relate to human affects through surface semiosis. The story is not only about Evans-Pritchard recounting a myth. The story is about him telling the story for a ready reader-reception among his students, who become charmed by its evolving imaginary sensibility.

While the story is alien to students at Oxford University, Evans-Pritchard’s discursive strategies render it easy for readers to grasp. He cannibalizes the narrative for critical analysis. By negotiating access to the foreign aspects of these images, Evans-Pritchard constructs subtle transitions, which initiate readers in the labyrinths of savage society. Evans-Pritchard does not establish the “who is who” diagrams for his stories, nor gridlines for understanding their mechanical construction, but he has a way with words. He eases new contexts into the subconscious of readers and invites criticism of this social moment. The mixture of sensibility and style

becomes inscribed in the masterpiece with *amplour*. Evans-Pritchard crafts the just solution for the writer’s power as mediator between bricolage and engineering. In the role of the investigator-vulnerable-observer, the British author cuts short the discussion about structure. He notes that in Nuer society, social structure – understood as a set of interrelationships – is collapsed, substituted instead by a rhizome-like web of multiple connections:

Beyond tradition lies the horizon of pure myth which is always seen in the same time perspective. One mythological event did not precede another, for myths explain customs of general social significance rather than the interrelations of particular segments and are, therefore, not structurally stratified. Explanations of any qualities of nature or of culture are drawn from this intellectual ambient which imposes limits on the Nuer world and makes it self-contained and entirely intelligible to Nuer in the relation of its parts. The world, peoples, and cultures all existed together from the same remote past (1960: 108). A consideration of Nuer time is pivotal to understanding their mythology because the relationship between man and past times is different than in contemporary Western society. Time does not accumulate in a linear way. Time is calculated as a relationship between relative and distant points, which critically determine time-space: “It will have been noted that the Nuer time dimension is shallow. Valid history ends a century ago, and tradition generously measured, takes us back only ten to twelve generations in lineage structure, and if we are right in supposing that lineage structure never grows, it follows that the distance between the beginning of the world and the present day remains unalterable. Time is thus not a continuum, but is a constant structural relationship between two points, the first and last persons in a line of agnatic descent. How shallow is Nuer time, may be judged from the fact that the tree under which mankind came into being was still standing in western Nuerland a few years ago!” (1960: 108).

So it is interesting that the Nuer have indeed constructed a mythology for themselves, if they cannot reach more than 12 generations back in history. Their time-concept does not allow for a mythology to be even constructed! This explains that the existent mythology is sparse. It is also not necessarily as lyrical as the equivalents to which anthropologists might have been accustomed to in their Western Charles Perrault and Brothers’ Grimm tradition. Nevertheless, Evans-Pritchard’s delineation of Nuer myths touches upon existential aspects of life within coordinates of lineage and political relations: primordial food supply, time and space continuum and

popular customs. The portrait is vivid: real, bloody facts only (Malinowski 1922). Evans-Pritchard is a pioneer because he has collected these myths. He established the link between social fact and literary narrative. He recounts myths like an impressionist painter. While Evans-Pritchard's writing is guided by his hypotheses (engineer), his sketch is immediate. He uses a top-down approach to social theory. He decrypts the roots of human behavior and he reconstructs the genesis of tales. He uses the tales as justification behind the people's being-in-the-world (artiste). In writing, mythopoiesis and social engineering are two equally valid undertakings. They both produce objects of knowledge.

While the author stylizes his texts, he eclipses subjectivity from the text. There is no trace of a sense of self in his objective monograph, nor any trace of a personal diary in his archive at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. Nevertheless, his coordination of the surface semiosis conveys a unique stylistic appeal. Evans-Pritchard is the omniscient Narrator of Nuer mythology and we trust in him.

### The Lyrical Aspects of Field-song Composition

Semiotics comes across strongly through my second proof: mainly, the aesthetic appeal of the lyrical aspects of field-song composition. As always, Nuer song appears rough, crude, and bare. It certainly is difficult to compare this literature to Western acquisitions in music and underlying poetry. Nevertheless, Nuer song establishes a link between music and its folklore origins. It substantiates Nuer essence of being. It justifies Nuer existence: myths, triumphs, sorrows. By telling stories and underscoring them with tunes, Evans-Pritchard actualizes the Nuers' self-determination.

Concerning lyrical aspects of field-composition, I validate my hypothesis of the anthropoietic nature of ethnographic texts by linking Evans-Pritchard's song-composition to Giambattista's concept of "fantasia". My proposition is hypothetical: it is unclear if Evans-Pritchard had read Vico. I could not trace this evidence. I would even say that it is unlikely that he did. Yet, the appeal of fantasia as a universal human principle is a stimulus to thinking anthropology with the open-mindedness of reason. Fantasia introduces the subjectivity of the author and connects him to the reader; dialogic interpretation and invisible intimacy become manifest. In primo tempo, Vico asserts that fantasia is more robust than rationality (Vico 1725). The author's inner fiber determines the reading of the text. Coupled with inventive finesse, the personalization of data wins

the day: "La fantasia tanto è più robusta quanto è più debole il raziocinio" (Vico 1725: 95).

The robustness of imagination is present in Evans-Pritchard's narrative. It constructs the exceptional. The relationship between signs and signifieds can be analyzed at the level of the isotopies which run through these transforming formulae. Nostalgia and romanticism are present. They call for the reliving of experience. Awareness of the nature's greatness is expressed with amazedness and awe: *Wirawira!* ("My wind!"). Qualifying the wind with the possessive adjective emphasizes belonging and ownership. These cries for joy indicate that the Nuer own the wind, as they own cattle. Children of wind, they are the children of cattle. While the repetitive poetic turns are oversimplified, their without-borders signifieds outrun each other to create deep-seated time-space anchors in the forefathers' territory. Evans-Pritchard elaborates Vico's point by validating the next assertion, namely that fantasia makes sublime poets, based on their identification as fanciulli in the heart: "Il più sublime lavoro della poesia è alle cose insensate dare senso e passione, ed è proprietà de' fanciulli di prender cose inanimate tra mani, e trastullandosi, favelarvi come se funsero, quelle, persone vive. Questa degnati filologico-filosofica ne approva che gli uomini del mondo fanciullo per natura furono sublimi poeti" (Vico 1725: 95).

A sort of fanciullo, Evans-Pritchard is a naïve anthropologist. He meets alterity and austerity. He reconstructs field folklore. As much fanciullo as a lot of the readers who are interpreting his work, he imagines the unwritten tales of a society thanks to the imaginary spirals of fantasia. The bareness of his narrative strategies conveys the so-to-speak primitive structure of the works: poor frequency of metaphors and forced language, a language that is trying-to-be literature when it is only ethnography. All together, this poetic nakedness constructs an unseasoned semi-fictional writerly identity. Inspired by curiosity for diversity, which had exported him to Sudan, Evans-Pritchard copes with completing the demands of both literature and sociology. The song's simplicity is an asymmetrical reflection of Nuer myth complexity. Spiritual understanding has recourse in fantasia: "Lo che noi pur tuttavia facciamo, al contrario, delle cose dello spirito; come della facoltà della mente umana, delle passioni, della virtù, de' vizi, delle scienze, dell'arti, delle quali formiamo idee per lo più di donne, ed è quelle riduciamo tutte le cagioni, tute le proprietà e 'nfine tutti gli effetti che a ciascuna appartengono: perché, ove vogliamo trarre fuori dall'intendimento cose spirituali, dobbiamo essere soccorsi dalla fantasia per poterle

spiegare e, come pittori, fingerne umane immagini” (Vico 1725: 172).

Step by step, Evans-Pritchard deploys a machinery of visual traces. The development of the song establishes the general markers of the discursive strategies. The narrative exposes a reflexive undercurrent by posing the question: “Where does it blow to?” – as if implying the old-age question: “To be or not to be?” The angular and reductionist form of signifiers foreshadows an existential shudder. The Nuer choose this undefined direction to carry them to the river bank, upholding an old-age metaphor to represent the sanctuary of life. The Nuer imply that the shorthorn “carries its full udder to the pastures”, positing differently that the cow refuses to be milked. Cow meets man in unity. The actantial program of the song suggests that Nyagaak milks her to fill man’s belly with her milk. Sweetened by a happy ending of full-bodied bounty, the plot thickens. An enticing element in this narrative is the feeble notion of seduction, the author pronounces: “I am not a man whom girls can refuse. We court girls by the stealth of the night.” Nevertheless, desire is erased with the indulgent link to cows, sublimated as an after-thought, the affirmation of one’s link to territory. Alfred Korzybski (1995) pleads: the map is the territory. Evans-Pritchard draws the map of Sudanese imaginary.

The consideration of memory in the fantastic day-dreaming is another important aspect which links Giambattista Vico and Evans-Pritchard. Initiating a bounce-back of reminiscences, fantasia links to the mother of the Muses: “Ma la fantasia altro non è che risalto di reminiscenze, e l’ingegno altro non è che lavoro d’intorno a cose che si ricordano... Quindi a ragione i poeti teologi dissero la Memoria esser ‘madre delle muse’, le quali sopra si sono trovato essere l’arti dell’umanità” (Vico 1725: 353). The appeal to memory is illustrated in Evans-Pritchard’s song through a passage which recounts the blood feud with incoming foreigners. Natives are pillaged. The drama of Nuerland is explained using characterizations of bewilderment and aberration at criminal complicity: “They throw our ornaments into the river.” Perplexed by the threat of foreign invasion, the Nuer’s last line of recourse lies with prayer to divine powers: “We gaze at the stars of Gods.”

Vico is considered as a forerunner of modern ethnology, also because of his rejection of Cartesian observation. His insistence on creativity, as the way to facilitate induction, embodies the *verum factum* principle. This idea was first formulated by Vico in 1710 as part of his “*De antiquissima Italorum sapientia, ex linguae latinae originibus eruenda*” (“On

the Most Ancient Wisdom of Italians, Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language”). The principle states that truth is verified through creation and not, as had argued Descartes, through observation. By constructing himself as the writer behind Nuer history, Evans-Pritchard is not only the participant observer but the creator of discourse, who thrusts his sense of self on the collected data. While it is Geertz who formulates the thesis that anthropologists are authors (Geertz 1988), anthropology is haunted by the division between the observation and the reporting of facts. Fantasia entices the anthropologist to embark upon the quest to create himself as the Subject. The anthropologist’s creative genius imparts upon the narrative subtle infinite meanings.

### Cattle Poetry as Interpreted by Barthes

In this last section, my intention is to “sew inside the cloak of the text” a structural analysis of narrative relative to the cattle poetry segment in the Nuer. I intend to illustrate how anthropoietics advances ethnographic depth, using theories from Roland Barthes. The critic proposes a reading of literature, in light of generative grammars, premised on structural aspects of narrative theory. By eclipsing the key pillars of his article on “*L’analyse structurale du récit*,” evidence emerges in support of an anthropoietic reading of “The Nuer.” Semiotics applies to life in general, thus also to anthropology. They extend to international, transhistorical, transcultural expositions of life, from which the narrative emerges, “because it is there, like life”: “Le récit peut être supporté par le langage articulé, oral ou écrit, par l’image fixe ou mobile, par le geste et par le mélange ordonnée de toutes ces substances; il est présent dans le myth, la légende, la fable, le conte, la nouvelle, l’épopée, l’histoire, la tragédie, le drame, la comédie, la pantomime, le tableau peint (que l’on pense à la Sainte Ursule de Carpaccio), le vitrail, le cinéma, les comics, le fait divers, la conversation. De plus, sous ces formes presque infinies, le récit est présent dans tous les temps, dans tous les lieux, dans toutes les sociétés; le récit commence avec l’histoire même de l’humanité; il n’y a pas, il n’y a jamais eu nulle part aucun peuple sans récit; toutes les classes, tous les groupes humains ont leurs récits, et bien souvent ces récits sont goûtés en commun par des hommes de culture, différente, voire opposée: le récit se moque de la bonne et de la mauvaise littérature: internationale, transhistorique, transculturel, le récit est là, comme la vie” (Barthes 1966: 1).

Barthes’ article emphasizes the functionality of

narratives – the need to piece them apart and to re-arrange them in sequences, to code complex chains or webs with underlying syntactical structures. Evans-Pritchard toys with such *découpages* in order to organize a portrait of the slice of life, which he had experienced during field immersion in Sudan. The narrative is the unit, which serves as a premise for his argument for Nuer anthropology. It services the construction of cultural knowledge. The narrative unit is an illustration of his theory, a validation of the engineering hypothesis, in which the demonic author sculpts the existence of a social system of relations, pointedly supportive of Nuer livelihood. Obtained through observation, this system manifests an absence of physical quantifiable features: fact cannot be divorced from the imaginary, subject replaces object. The system exists only as a personalized I-person narrative experience, an interactional intersubjectivity, a non-verbal performative. Passed on from generation to generation through tales of common destiny, oecological practices, social perception of time and space, political relations and age-set system, this composition incarnates a model of social fact in Nuer Society. Evans-Pritchard exports a strategy from literature to deploy epistemological truths.

The cattle poetry section establishes the frail, invisible tonus of Nuer soul. The pastoral texts paint Nuer allegiance, preferences, bonding values, aesthetic out-sourcing. Cutting narratives open, like ripe mangos in the month of March, Evans-Pritchard underscores Nuer textual and social fabric. In a narrative, everything has a function till the last little detail: “Il n’y a pas d’unité perdue, si long si lâche, si ténu que soit le fil qui la relie à l’un des niveaux de l’histoire” (Barthes 1966: 8). The search for clusters includes: functions and indices. Beyond the substance of content, functions are cardinal and take the form of catalysts, culminate in knowledge kernels, which embody the cores of discourse (Barthes 1966: 9). Functional syntax is represented by narrative grammar. The functional combinatorio resultant from a study of Nuer society can be summed up in the following ethnological summary, where it is linked to establishing the relation between Nuers and their cattle:

1. In speaking of age-sets and age-grades, we find ourselves describing the relations of men to their cattle, for the change from boyhood to manhood is most clearly marked by a corresponding change in those relations at initiation.

2. The network of kinship ties which links members of local communities is brought about by payment of cattle and every phase of the ritual is marked by their transference or slaughter. The legal

status of the partners and of their children is defined by cattle rights and obligations.

3. Each son in order of seniority reaches the age of marriage, he marries with cows from the heard. The bond of cattle between brothers is continued long after each has a home and children of his own, for when a daughter of any of them is married the mothers receive a large portion of her bride-wealth.

4. Kinship is customarily defined by reference to these payments, being most clearly pointed at marriage, when movements of cattle from kraal to kraal are equivalent to lines of a genealogical chart.

5. The importance of cattle in Nuer life and thought is further exemplified by personal names. Men are frequently addressed by names that refer to the form and colour of their favourite oxen, and women take names from oxen and from cows they milk (Evans-Pritchard 1960: 17f.)

According to Barthes, narratives are atemporal: “Le récit et la langue ne connaissent qu’un temps sémiologique; ‘le vrai’ temps est une illusion référentielle, réaliste” (Barthes 1966: 13). This is reiterated by a point made earlier concerning Nuer inability to chronologically arrange events in sequence. Nuer use instead oppositions relative to key figures or key events. The fact that narratives can be reorganized like legos gives them exclusive status. Rhizome-like ways of linking multiple connections are invoked like in a study of the *arbre de Porphyre*. This arborescent model for the organization of knowledge incarnates the taxonomy of the sciences (Deleuze and Guattari 1972: 13), mirrored in addition by Umberto Eco’s encyclopedia, where it is said to be anti-genealogical (Eco 1984: 81).

The attention paid to the structural status of characters and the problem of the hero-subject is of further value for this discussion (Barthes 1966: 16). Being participant observers, the anthropologists are implicated in the genesis of a narrative in a remotely sensible way. The author is a subject in his narrative, certainly as the engineer who is discursively laying down the hypothesis and its evidence. To this end, he cancels himself out thanks to an objective seal of confidence, while, in reality, he is present all the time “inside the facts”. His *élan vital* permeates the narration for the “*destinataire du récit*” (Barthes 1966: 23). This ambiguous level of constructing imaginary worlds closes rhizoid paths and vests itself as the *porte-parole* of a unique metalinguistic wordspeak: “Le niveau narratif de la sorte un rôle ambigu: contigu à la situation de récit (et parfois même l’incluant), il ouvre sur le monde ou le récit se défait (se consomme); mais en même temps, couronnant les niveaux antérieurs, il ferme le récit, le constitue définitivement comme parole

d'une langue qui prévoit et porte son propre métalangage" (Barthes 1966: 23).

The two levels of language are a) articulation and b) integration. Together, these levels attribute form and meaning to the narrative: "La langue proprement dite peut être définie par le concours de deux procès fondamentaux: l'articulation, ou segmentation, qui produit des unités (c'est la forme, selon Benveniste), l'intégration, qui recueille ces unités dans les unités d'un rang supérieur (c'est le sens). Ce double procès se retrouve dans la langue du récit; elle aussi connaît une articulation et une intégration, une forme et un sens" (Barthes 1966: 24). Integration is linked to the generation of narratives. Barthes does not discuss induction in relation to the scientific method, perhaps taking the point of the view that the writer is not an engineer but an artist-bricoleur. This can be sustained by his argument for the vertical dimension of narratives, which are stacked like a pyramid through mises en abyme: "La dystaxie oriente une lecture 'horizontale', mais l'intégration lui superpose une lecture 'verticale': il y a une sorte de 'boitement' structural, comme un jeu incessant de potentiels" (Barthes 1966: 27).

While human scientists operate on the x-y axis in Barthes narrative cosmology, Deleuze's and Umberto Eco's substitution of the rhizome for the classical maze usefully explains the hybridity of relations inherent in Evans-Pritchard's plot structure. As narratives flourish in the human imagination infinitely due to their concurrence, one often fails to capture their essence. Everything is a function of an adventure of language. The literary feast determines the reception: "Le récit ne fait pas voir, il n'imité pas; la passion qui peut nous enflammer à la lecture d'un roman n'est pas celle d'une 'vision' (en fait, nous ne 'voyons' rien), c'est celle du sens, c'est-à-dire d'un ordre supérieur de la relation, qui possède lui aussi, des émotions, ses espoirs, ses menaces, ses triomphes: 'ce qui se passe' dans le récit, n'est, du point de vue référentiel (réel) à la lettre: *rien*; 'ce qui arrive' c'est le langage tout lu, l'aventure du langage, dont la venue ne cesse jamais d'être fêtée" (Barthes 1966: 28).

While some people would disagree that the literary feast lies in imagining that: "(by) rubbing ashes along the back of a cow or ox one may get into touch with the spirit of ghost associated with it and ask it for assistance" (Evans-Pritchard 1960: 18), or that "(start) on whatever subject I would, and approach it from whatever angle, we would soon be speaking of cows and oxen, heifers and steers, rams and sheep, he-goats and she-goats, claves and lambs and kids," anthropological curiosity carries a specific drive, which performs surgery on collective be-

havior, even when "their social idiom is a bovine idiom" (1960: 19). The folly of this project signals the visibility of epistemological contradictions. At every moment of the creation of a cultural monograph, in his "Nuer-osis" (1960: 13), the anthropologist is bouncing back narrative structures even if those become reduced to non-Western incongruencies in social behavior: "Nuer wash their hands and faces in the urine of the cattle, especially when cows urinate during milking, drink their milk and blood and sleep on their hides by the side of the smouldering dung" (1960: 37). Because it renders the reality crude and bare, immediate and inaccessible, this defamiliarizing fragment is actually the golden key to the work. It exposes differences from the Western norm, a deviation with its own influential structure, which feeds off the reader's fantastic paranoia. The more danger there is, the higher rises the stock value of narratives, the more applause there is in the amphitheater. Through the drawing and redrawing of the landscapes, thanks to his subtle sketches, as well as a great deal of fantasia, Evans-Pritchard proves his sub-thesis of the "symbiotic relationship of cattle and man." Life "is sustained by reciprocal services to one another" (1960: 36). During post-structuralism, which rejects the binary self-sufficiency of structures, Barthes' linguistic approach appears dated. Nevertheless, in the face of scattered texts, narrative cohesion, anatomy, integration, and their vertical readings are still pertinent to the understanding of ethnographic reality. They are the only way to bring back the immediacy of the social fact antecedent to the present time. They are important tools for anthropologists facing renewed waves of hermeneutics, now concerned with the cornerstones of language and literature.

## Conclusion

Semiotic approach to Evans-Pritchard's "The Nuer" demonstrates the return to Geertz's notion of anthropologist as author. They posit the role of the complicit subject in field work as a potential engineer-artiste: the co-hero of the story. Myth making calls for the juncture of proof-validated hypotheses with the ingenious personal flair of poiesis. It is not mechanical. Giambattista Vico's concept of *fantasia* provides a lead into the meaning of the anthropological process. The Italian author brings into social sciences the importance of the robustness of imagination, identified in formulae of the semiotic relationship. By challenging Descartes on observation, Vico makes a strong argument for creativity's role in ethnographic induction. In a more



structural light, a dismantling of narratives shows finally, in Roland Barthes, the importance of generative grammars, vertical readings and integration. Evans-Pritchard's narrative is separated into units of analysis and arranged with semiotic finality at aim.

No one of these methods shed light on all parts of the process. They represent, nevertheless, important tools in deciphering the semiotic codes upon which social fact is based. Semiotics represents the means by which anthropological writings inscribe the value content of signifiers. Linked to the crafting of narratives – weaving of texts – and the subsequent boundless layers of signification, semiotics is linked to anthropoetics through the production and interpretation of signifiers. While discursive productions are qualified with an induction process, the anthropologist's creation is driven by social engagement. The fate of an original type of art is discovered. Sounds of daring rustic partitions transpire.

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