

Political terms and leopard skin chief



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Discuss the institution of the feud among the Nuer as analyzed by E-P. Why did E-P argue that it played a necessary role in the segmentary political system of the tribe? The institution of the feud among the Nuer as analyzed by Evans Pritchard, is settled by a special person known as a “ leopard skin chief”. A “ leopard skin chief”, has ritual powers that deal with the Nuer social life and nature, including the power to bless and curse. Only certain lineages have “ leopard skin chiefs” and not all lineages use their ritual powers.

His function is political affairs between political groups which are regulated through him, but he is not a political authority controlling them. For example, when a man has committed murder, he must go to a chief, who cuts his arm so that blood may flow. Until the mark of Cain has been made, the slayer can't eat or drink. If he fears infliction of punishment, which usually always happens, he stays at the chief's home. Within some weeks the chief will bring forth from the slayers kin that they are prepared to pay compensation to avoid a feud and he persuades the dead man's kin to accept the payment.

During that time neither family (group) can eat nor drink from the same vessels as the other. The chief collects the cattle; forty to fifty cattle. The cattle is then taken to the dead mans home, where sacrifices of penitence and cleansing take place. This is the process of settling a feud. He does not judge the case because he does not have the authority to do so. The “ leopard skin chief”, forces the kin of the dead to accept with the compensation if they are not willing to he will threatened to curse them. The moral settlement on both sides helps avoid further aggression from the incident.

Evans Pritchard believes that we must recognize that feuds are settled more easily in smaller groups. Such as when a man kills a near kinsmen or a close neighbor, the issue is easily settled by compensation. When a homicide occurs within a village general opinion demands an early settlement. When a homicide occurs between primary or secondary sections of a tribe, there is a small chance of an early settlement and also because of distance retaliation is not taken as quickly, so the unsettled feuds build up. Such homicides are usually the result of intertribal fights in which several people are killed.

This not only makes the settlement more difficult, but continues tension between the two groups to fight, in which their groups of people become involved. The kinsmen of a dead man are close enough to try to fight a kinsmen of the slayer and far enough from them to allow a temporary problems between the local communities to where they belong. However, their members are, as a rule, closely related by family ties must assist them if there is an open fight. The feud takes on a political feature and expresses the hostility between political segments.

Evans Pritchard believed that the balanced hostility of political segments is maintained by the institution of the feud which permits a state of latent hostility between local communities, but allows them to form a larger group. He says that hostility is latent because even when a feud is being acted against there is no attempt to exact punishment, but the kinsmen of the dead may take any opportunity that presents itself to accomplish their purpose; and, also, because even when compensation has been accepted the feud may, in spite of settlement, start up again.

The “ leopard-skin chief” does not rule or judge, but acts as mediator through communities wanting to end a feud or make peace. The feud, including the role played in it by the chief, is a way by which the political structure maintains itself in the form known to America. “ The leopard-skin chief” may also act as mediator in disputes concerning ownership of cattle, and he and the people on both sides may express their opinion on the case. But the chief does not have the authority to force obedience.

All he can do is go with the plaintiff and some people of his community to the home of the defendant and to ask him and his kinsmen to discuss the matter. That’s only if both sides are willing to handle the situation in a civilized manner. Also, although the chief, after a meeting with the people, can give a decision, his decision is finalized by agreement of the people. The Nuer doesn’t have a law. There is no enforcement of governmental power.

There are payments considered to someone who has suffered certain harm such as adultery, theft, murder, and fornication. There is no constituted or impartial authority who decides on the rights and wrongs of a dispute. In the Nuer community, if a person has been done wrong by another, they will receive support from their kinsmen and they are prepared to take matters in their own hands, especially, if they live near one another. The usual way of obtaining one’s due is to go to the debtor’s and take his cattle. If the person who owes refuses to go along with the repayment it could turn into a feud until the point someone could be harmed. How and whether a dispute is settled depends mostly on the people concerned in the kinship and age-set systems and the distance between their communities (tribes). Since the Nuer doesn’t

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have a government or law. The “ leopard- skin chief” is not a political authority, the “ Man of the Cattle”, totemic specialists, rain-makers, magicians, diviners and others. They have no political function or status, not saying to some people they may be important and feared.

The heads of joint families, especially when they are rich in cattle, and have strong qualities seem to uphold importance but like all the other statues they have no power over another. With that being said, every Nuer basically regulates their affairs as they please. No Nuer who has natural gifts or not can be said to have political power or represent it. No local groups, apart from the prophets can be said to symbolize, or represent importance in the community. As Evans Pritchard argued institution of the feud among the Nuer played a necessary role in the segmentary political system of the tribe.

As he described and analyzed in the section of the Nuer called “ Political Systems”. He talked about the intertribal relations and the relations between tribal segments. Evans Pritchard summarizes how those relations define the Nuer political system. The political system has also been related to environment and their methods of living. We can only say, in conclusion to his observations through his anthropology studies of the Nuer that they were basically perceived as a political structure.