

# Rhythm as Form of Individuation Process (part 3)

Friday 23 February 2018, by [Pascal Michon](#)

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## Rhythms of Archaic Individuation: The Nuer (Evans-Pritchard - 1940)

In his great book *The Nuer* published in 1940, Evans-Pritchard presented a whole range of new materials concerning the rhythms of individuation. For the first time, modern Europeans had access, through his work, to a complete psycho-sociological portrait of an “archaic” people based on field observation. The result was remarkable. Mauss had already shown that the idea of the inexistence of the individual in archaic societies, which was most common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was utterly mistaken and that the latter should be seen instead as a rhythmic variation of the level of independence and interdependence of the members of society. For its part, Evans-Pritchard portrayed an “archaic” population, which was in many points comparable to those studied by Mauss but where the individuals’ sentiment of their own value and the importance they attached to their autonomy were extremely strong.

The Nuer, as they appeared through the beautiful portrait brushed by Evans-Pritchard, were extremely independent and very jealous of their individual rights.

[The] Nuer is brave and will stand up against aggression and enforce his rights by club and spear [...] he has a keen sense of personal dignity and rights. The notion of right, *cuong*, is strong. (*The Nuer*, 1940, p. 171)

Each Nuer was naturally connected to a whole range of other people, but that did not stop him from developing an aloof individual-interest stance. On the contrary, the more the Nuer was subjected to social constraint, the more he opposed it.

Reliant on one another they are loyal and generous to their kinsmen. One might even to some extent attribute their pronounced individualism to resistance to the persistent claims of kinsmen and neighbours against which they have no protection but stubbornness. The qualities which have been mentioned, courage, generosity, patience, pride, loyalty, stubbornness, and independence, are the virtues the Nuer themselves extol. (*The Nuer*, 1940, p. 90)

These independence and opposition to the demands of relatives were learned very early and they

constituted, with equality, one of the fundamental principles of education.

A child soon learns that to maintain his equality with his peers he must stand up for himself against any encroachment on his person and property. This means that he must always be prepared to fight, and his willingness and ability to do so are the only protection of his integrity as a free and independent person against the avarice and bullying of his kinsmen. They protect him against outsiders, but he must resist their demands on himself. The demands made on a man in the name of kinship are incessant and imperious and he resists them to the utmost. (*The Nuer*, 1940, p. 184)

After the initiation, the Nuer became an adult and began a life composed of a succession of alliances and conflicts with his neighboring fellows but also with members of the neighboring tribal sections against exterior folks.

Boys look forward to the day when they will be able to accompany their elders on these raids against the Dinka, and as soon as youths have been initiated into manhood they begin to plan an attack to enrich themselves and to establish their reputation as warriors. (*The Nuer*, 1940, p. 126)

Since the political system was not centered on any authority, not even at the level of the village, the Nuer ruled themselves quite independently, in complete freedom and on an equal basis with their neighbors.

According to Evans-Pritchard, archaic societies, in any case the Nuer, were not organized, as it was commonly claimed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century according a kind of "primitive communism" but, on the contrary, to an "ordered anarchy."

The ordered anarchy in which they live accords well with their character, for it is impossible to live among Nuer and conceive of rulers ruling over them. The Nuer is a product of hard and egalitarian upbringing, is deeply democratic, and is easily roused to violence. His turbulent spirit finds any restraint irksome and no man recognizes a superior. Wealth makes no difference. A man with many cattle is envied, but not treated differently from a man with few cattle. Birth makes no difference. (*The Nuer*, 1940, p. 181)

The Nuer constituted a society of equals and peers.

A man may not be a member of the dominant clan of his tribe, he may even be of Dinka descent [a despised neighboring people], but were another to allude to the fact he would run a grave risk of being clubbed. That every Nuer considers himself as good as his neighbour is evident in their every movement. They strut about like lords of the earth, which, indeed, they consider themselves to be. There is no master and no servant in their society, but only equals who regard themselves as God's noblest creation. (*The Nuer*, 1940, p. 181-182)

This socio-psychological portrait of the Nuer deserves our attention. It was a fatal blow to the previous conceptions held by Frazer, Tönnies, Le Bon, and Durkheim—which unfortunately are still widespread in today’s social science, for instance in Louis Dumont’s work—according to which the members of archaic societies were entirely deprived of individuality and freedom, and totally absorbed by the “social body” to which they belonged. The postulate of “primitive communism” collapsed. More generally, this portrait contradicted the evolutionist belief that summarized the whole history of individuation in the passage (progressive for some, catastrophic for others) from a holistic to an individualistic world, from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, from Tradition to Modernity. After *The Nuer* this historical simplism was deeply shaken.

Naturally, this observation raised in turn new questions. How could this “archaic individualism” and “ordered anarchy” be accounted for? How could the existence of such a strong individuation within a segmentary system, deemed until then to absorb and dissolve any desire for autonomy, be explained? To correctly understand Evans-Pritchard’s answer to these questions, we need to understand how the Nuer society worked.

Like the Eskimo, the Nuer society followed a seasonal morphological variation partly related to the climatic cycles. During the rainy season (May to October), the Nuer were dispersed in villages perched on the back of knolls and ridges emerging from the waters that flooded the country. The villages, like islands separated from each other by stretches of swamps or running water, comprised from fifty to a few hundred inhabitants. They were often made up of farms gathered in clusters along sandy mounds and covering sometimes two or three kilometers. But as soon as the terrain permitted it, the Nuer scattered their homes as much as possible (p. 111-112): “Nuer prefer to dwell in this greater privacy and show no inclination for true village life” (p. 64). The dominant activity during the rainy season was livestock farming. However, as animals were often locked up in smoky barns to avoid mosquitoes and other insects, the Nuer also practiced horticulture, in family or domestic groups, on very small parcels of garden scattered around the farms (p. 79).

During the dry season (November to April), the dynamics were reversed. The Nuer were gradually regrouping in settlements established along the rivers and water points. These camps witnessed a growing concentration of tribal sections that could reach up to a thousand people (p. 112). The Nuer set up huts or simple windscreens “erected a few yards from water, generally in a semicircle or in lines with their backs to the prevailing wind” (p. 65). Solidarity was maximal as much for stock breeding as for the defense of the common properties (p. 17-18) or for fishing, which replaced, as side activity, the horticulture practiced during the rainy season. The daily activity was entirely collective.

Social ties are narrowed, as it were, and the people of village and camp are drawn closer together, in a moral sense, for they are in consequence highly interdependent and their activities tend to be joint undertakings. This is seen best in the dry season, when the cattle of many families are tethered in a common kraal and driven as a single herd to the grazing grounds and daily activities are co-ordinated into a common rhythm of life. (*The Nuer*, 1940, p. 89)

All these phenomena were comparable to those described by Mauss in the *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo* and—this deserves to be emphasized—had almost similar effects on the alternation of individuation.

We again emphasize that not only are the people of a camp living in a more compact group than the people of a village, but also that in camp life there is more frequent contact between its members and greater co-ordination of their activities. The cattle are herded together, milked at the same time, and so on. In a village each household herds its own cattle, if they are herded at all, and performs its domestic and kraal tasks independently and at different times. (*The Nuer*, 1940, p. 116)

In quite a Durkheimian way, Evans-Pritchard noted a concordance between “social” and “moral density.”

Drier conditions compel greater concentration and wider seasonal movements, with the result that village communities not only have a greater spatial, and we may say also moral, density in the drought than in the rains. (*The Nuer*, 1940, p. 118)

However, the situation was a bit more complex than in the cases studied by Mauss. Nuer vocabulary included two major seasons of six-month each but also “two subsidiary seasons included in them, being transitional periods between them” (p. 96). As a result, singular and collective individuation rhythms were a bit more complicated. While in the Eskimo the reshuffling of the individuation was clearly linked with the periods of concentration and its mere enjoyment to the periods of dispersion, these processes appeared much more differentiated in the Nuer.

During the rainy season, the elderly were the first to return to the villages and were not joined by the rest of the population until the second part of the season. Then began a period of three to four months characterized by a fairly strict dispersal of the population on the farms. This period was marked by feeding difficulties and isolation of domestic groups. After a few months, food production was restored with the first harvest of maize and millet. Then—and this differentiated Nuer from Eskimo rhythms—began a fairly short period of religious ceremonies, weddings, initiation rites, sacrifices and feasts, which tended to accumulate towards the end of the season when communications were finally re-established (p. 81-84). Young people could join together at a homestead to slaughter oxen and gorge themselves with meat (p. 26). They spent as much time as possible feasting, walking sometimes for miles to attend weddings at which they danced till well into the morning (p. 84). The quarrels between persons or between tribal sections, which, as we shall see, were decisive for the singular and collective individuation of the Nuer, increased considerably (p. 84). The time seemed to go faster (p. 103).

The dry season was divided too into two periods. In the first few months, only the youngest members of the group moved to water points and set up small temporary camps. Eventually, later in the season, the rest of the population of the village joined the camps and larger concentrations were established on the same sites every year (p. 93). Life in camps, which was nevertheless endowed with a more collective spirit, was, in a general way, much less festive and religious. Feasts were absent and dance “not so attractive” (p. 84). “Personal and community quarrels,” without entirely disappearing, lost much of their ardor (p. 84). Since the activities were repeated each day in a repetitive manner and were not interrupted by any significant event, the time seemed to go slowly (p. 102).

These first observations showed the limit of the Durkheimian idea—inspired both by crowd psychology and thermodynamics—of a direct and mechanical association of social density, religiosity and process of individuation. But they confirmed, on the other hand, while clarifying it, the thesis, developed by Mauss from another Durkheimian suggestion, according to which the individuation was not continuous but followed alternating rhythms, of different frequencies and levels. *In the Nuer, singular and collective individuation clearly depended on a superposition of interdependent but asynchronous rhythms.*

While the “seasonal contraction” (p. 119) of the tribal sections during the dry season seemed to slow down the daily life and to be less festive, it enabled the Nuer to forge their unity in two ways: by their mere daily collective activity and by their opposition to neighboring tribal sections or folks. Competitor sections or other Nuer tribes were attacked, or the Dinka raided, mainly during the dry season. Partly opposed to these tribal rhythms, the rhythms of village and domestic life reached their highest point in the second half of the rainy season when gatherings were again possible. Finally, these seasonal rhythms were differentiated according to age groups, since young people and older members of society did not move to camps or villages at the same time.

These analyses complexified Mauss’s perspective but they also notably added to it a political dimension that had been partly neglected by Mauss. As we shall see below in more details, the crucial factor by which the Nuer’s particular individualism, their practical autonomy and their egalitarian values, could be accounted for, involved another kind of alternation, partly inscribed in the seasonal variations which have just been described, but from a different nature: the alternation of alliance and conflict between the different segments of the social group, as well as between the group itself and its neighbors. The individualism of the Nuer was linked to the rhythms of the political life of their society, to the movement of their “ordered anarchy.” With *The Nuer*, Evans-Pritchard added a capital element to our knowledge of the rhythms of singular and collective individuation: *they were not only linked to the alternation of concentration and social dispersion, but also to those of conflict and alliance within and outside a particular society.*

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Our analysis of the research led by Mauss, Granet and Evans-Pritchard during the inter-war years reveals a series of rather unexpected convergences. Once freed from ulterior Structuralist and Systemic interpretations, all these works reappear in their original dynamics and their shared concern for the question of rhythm. Not only this notion proves essential in describing the functioning of archaic societies, but it also plays a leading role in the first theoretical body derived from it by the ancient Chinese scholars.

1. For Mauss, collective and singular individuation did not constitute linear, homogeneous and continuous processes, driven by a set of stable and synchronically describable forms, but on the contrary, they experienced more or less regular temporal alternations periodically transforming both the morphology of society and the intensity of individuation. In any society there are periods of low sociality—the long, routine periods of everyday life—during which individuals enjoy a certain degree of autonomy. Between these periods of dull sociality occur more intense periods of time, (social concentrations, feasts, potlatches, various ceremonies), during which groups and people enter a process of recasting and regeneration.

2. Evans-Pritchard completed this description by showing that the rhythms that organized the processes of singular and collective individuation were not only defined by the alternation of concentration and social dispersion: they also resulted from that of social alliance and conflict, inside and outside of society, which intersected with the former.

3. Granet's contribution was no less spectacular. The historical depth of the Chinese civilization allowed him to go far back in time and perceive the archaic polysegmental societies through a body of evidence that had been preserved by posterior societies. Everything seems to have happened as if ancient Chinese thought had elaborated, within a much more integrated society, categories related to an earlier socio-morphological stage.

Although some of his suggestions were quite daring, Granet opened several paths for posterior reflection.

1. His work allowed to relate the Chinese culture to a universal prehistoric background that contemporary anthropologists thought to be able to grasp through the last remaining "archaic" societies.

2. It also allowed to contrast the most common Western concept of rhythm with an entirely different one. Whereas, in the West, rhythm usually meant a metric alternation of strong and weak beats, organized according to arithmetic proportions, in ancient China the rhythm was conceived as the Universe's way of flowing—the Tao—and the ceaseless alternation of Yin and Yang, or, to put it differently, as the general form of the continuous processes of individuation and deindividuation that constituted the Universe.

3. In other words, Granet's discovery anticipated, in the East, what Benveniste was to discover in the West a few years later in his famous article on "The notion of 'rhythm' in its linguistic expression" (1951) (for more details, see. vol. 1, chap. 1).

4. We could even suspect that the pre-Platonic notion of *rhuthmós*, as we perceive it today through the few extant works of the first materialists, could be legitimately compared with its ancient Chinese counterpart. This is a complex study that remains to be done, but it is very likely that they share common features such as the notion of way of flowing itself but also that of progressive alternation of opposites which also existed in the West, Heraclitus being, as we know, his main proponent.

5. Hence, one of the main philosophical differences between the West and the East could have originated from the persistence, in China, of the most ancient concept of rhythm and its transformation, in Greece and eventually in the Roman Empire at the hands of Plato and his numerous followers, into a metric concept. This difference was particularly obvious in the way to treat of numbers. Whereas, from Pythagoras and Plato, numbers became in Western thought the main theoretical model of rhythm, Chinese thought went the other way by conceiving of them as mere rhythmic categories among others.

6. Finally, Granet's work confirmed what we already noticed while studying Mauss and Evans-Pritchard: social rhythms had a fundamental political dimension. In the North-West American Indian or in the Nuer, singular and collective individuation were not only linked to the alternation between social dispersion and concentration, but also to the endless swing between conflict and alliance inside as well as outside of society. In this instance, the Chinese case was particularly informative because it allowed to carefully observe the transition from a type of society in which the political order was still reproduced through the morphological rhythms, to another type in which it had become autonomous, separate and institutionalized, by concentrating the rhythmic function that previously belonged to society.

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