

E-P and his legacy:

E-P was, as Moore said, the “errant son of British Social anthropology.”

By this, Moore meant that he began his career as a loyal follower of Radcliffe-Brown (R-B), but later on began to rethink his commitment to structural functionalism (for reasons linked to the critiques below).

To clarify, although E-P was a student of Malinowski (M), he always distanced himself from him and when he began to publish he made no connection to M’s ideas.

Later, Moore points out that E-P enjoys more respect than the other structural-functionalists such as R-B. This is because he changed his tune to stress human agency and history. He also offered an incredibly sympathetic view of witchcraft, which stressed the logic of this system of beliefs. This was very influential to those studying non-Western belief systems.

Review of structural-functionalism and how E-P was a structural-functionalism:

s-f examines-- a) the underlying structure of a society, generally through analysis of kinship structures. I

→ In this sense, E-P’s work on witchcraft was not particularly structuralist. But his work on the Nuer (see below) was a brilliant examination of Nuer social structure.

b) the continuity of this structure, or an analysis of how society continues to cohere over time. This involves a focus on stability, cohesion, homeostasis, solidarity, and equilibrium.

→ In this sense, E-P’s work on witchcraft was quite insightful (many details on this can be found in the exegesis):

◆ Witchcraft was a mechanism of social control: people were afraid to offend others who might secretly be witches. Also, people were afraid of being accused of being a witch. Since witches were often greedy, stingy, loners, people took pains not to engage in such anti-social traits. Thus, people acted in cooperative, kind ways towards their kin and neighbors, allowing society to operate smoothly and not be disrupted.

◆ Witchcraft, with the elaborate rituals (see film) that surround it, enables people to air grievances and work them out in a socially appropriate way. The public venting of animosity, which inevitably builds up in small-scale societies where people live closely together, is very healthy. The rituals involve calling on a witch-doctor, consulting a poison oracle, and calling on the accused witch to make a public offering on behalf of the victim. This institutionalized way of enabling people to bring simmering tensions to light prevents more socially harmful outcomes such as break-up of the group or even murder.

Other ways in which E-P functionalist—case of Nuer structural opposition:

*you must come see me so I can explain this!

Critiques of structural-functionalists:

1. Although they believed that society was a coherent, integrated whole (see R-B's organic analogy), they tended to produce works that factored out particular practice as their principle focus (joking relationship with mother's brother, witchcraft). Thus, their work did not live up to the ideal of the holistic approach.
2. There was no concept of change over time: if social beliefs and practices worked so well (i.e., they were "functional" and served to maintain structural continuity), then how could one explain change and transformation? VERY synchronic.
3. In line with this, structural-functionalists tended to see societies as bounded and self-contained. They ignored evidence of outsiders who were forcing change upon the people they were studying and gave an idealized but false picture of a pristine culture. They not only ignored colonialism and its damaging effects, but often worked with and for colonists—were called "hand-maidens to colonialism"
 - i. R-B worked in a place ravaged by syphilis and other diseases, where there was a large penal colony, and hordes of British colonists. He got most of his data on kinship from Andaman men in a colonial-run hospital. But he paints a picture of an idealized past that he reconstructs from individuals now living a very different reality.\
 - ii. E-P worked for the colonial government: he provided information on Nuer political organization to British colonists interested in indirect rule (see film). But again, this is not made evident in the clean, untainted analysis he gives of Nuer life.
4. The emphasis on solidarity, cohesion, integration meant that there was no way to explain "dysfunctional" behaviors, or to conceive of the unhealthy and damaging ways that power-holders advance certain beliefs and practices for their own benefit. It is assumed that everyone is on par with one another, and less savory aspects of culture, such as inequality and oppression, were not accounted for.
5. There was such a de-emphasis of the individual that there was no way to discuss human agency—the ability of innovative or rebellious or free-thinking individuals to change the structure over time. There is inordinate stress placed on structural determinism.
6. They tended to see societies as rooted in a specific territory. There was no concept that cultural forms and social groups could be spread across space in a non-contiguous pattern, or that peoples who did not live face-to-face in a bounded space could identify with one another and share cultural traits.
7. They were, like Boas, salvage anthropologists obsessed with documenting cultures that were on the verge of extinction. As stated above, their structural-functionalist theories could not explain change. So without a conceptual framework for looking at contact and change over time, they assumed that outside influences could only lead to the break-down and destruction of traditional ways of life (death of the organism). There was no sense that non-Western societies could survive and selectively take on Western beliefs and practices while continuing to assert their cultural uniqueness.