

Hillo! Frazer and a last resort attempt to catch something in one's net

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Abstract. J.G. Frazer tells us about a last resort technique which Cambodian hunters use when they have caught nothing in their nets. The “technique” is they act as if they themselves have got caught in the net. Frazer explains this as the consequence of magical thinking, but I propose a different explanation.

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*“It’s open day: look at all the fishes in my net
—I mean all the children and parents I’ve met!”*

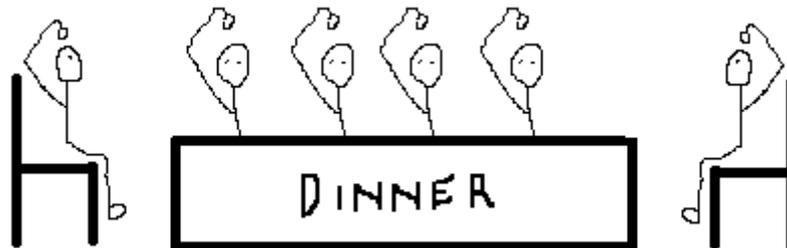
Sir James Frazer, in his ever enchanting book *The Golden Bough*, presents a technique used by Cambodian hunters who have failed to catch anything:

When a Cambodian hunter has set his nets and taken nothing, he strips himself naked, goes some way off, then strolls up to the net as if he did not see it, lets himself be caught in it and cries, “Hillo! What’s this? I’m afraid I’m caught.” After that the net is sure to catch game. (1894: 10)

Frazer takes these actions to be done on the basis of a highly general belief that causes resemble effects, a belief that Frazer regards as magical thinking and as false (1894: 11).

But hunters who use this last resort technique to catch something need not have this general belief or any belief in magic. More precisely, it seems consistent for

them to lack such beliefs. Have you ever noticed that if you go to a dinner party and perform a strange gesture, others do as well? Before investigating the matter carefully, there is a question of whether it works across species. Maybe animals – or non-human animals – will do what you do as well. Why not try and see if that works?



This line of thought, or one much like it but with something slightly different from a modern dinner party as the initial prompt, can give rise to the last resort technique described. “Let’s see if we can catch things like this!” Even if one finds that it is often not successful, having tried normal hunting methods one is still stuck without food, so it is not a bad idea to at least try this. (But Frazer describes the Cambodian hunters as believing that it is sure to work.)

Reference

Frazer, J.G. 1894. *The Golden Bough, Volume 1*. New York: Macmillan.