

Hillo! Getting caught in your own net as a humiliation rite

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. I present another explanation for why Cambodian hunters catch themselves in their own nets when they have caught nothing. It is a humiliation rite, based on the premise: if you have spent your whole day hunting and have not trapped anything with the net, then the net has trapped you. The explanation reveals one of the problems with trying to work out why other people do things by placing yourself in their position: contradictory explanations.

Draft version: Version 2 (18th October 2022, “intended prey”)

For all your rules and rights

A thousand bites

What do you do when you are a Cambodian hunter and you have failed to catch anything in your net? Sir James Frazer tells us:

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)

Now Frazer was much criticized for trying to understand so-called primitive rites by putting himself in the place of the participants and figuring out why he would act as they did and then attributing the same motivations to them. What is wrong with that?

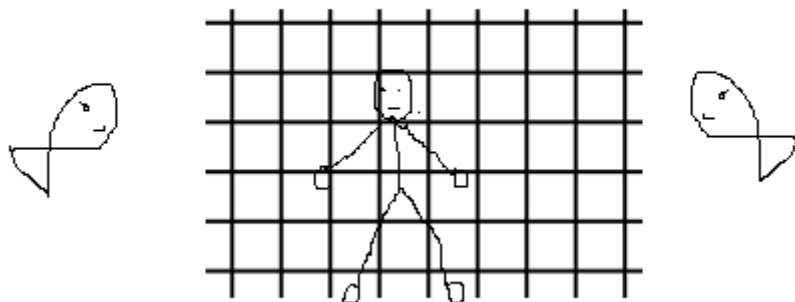
A problem is that one can arrive at contradictory explanations by using this method. There may be a practical reason for the rite described, hoping the intended prey will imitate, but it might also be a purely “symbolic” activity.

Amongst some skilled craftsman in a field, if you make a mistake there may well be a rule that you have to do something humiliating. Imagine that someone sells dodgy nets. But an experienced hunter should be able to distinguish these unsuitable nets from suitable ones. If you don't and you purchase one and you go out hunting and consequently fail to catch anything, then the situation is described thus:

You have not trapped anything with your net

No! Your net has trapped you.

Now if you have a good net, but you still fail, you are regarded as not much better, let's imagine. So one day a Cambodian hunter introduces the rule: “Then you have got to strip naked and go in your net as a public expression of what a poor hunter you are.” (Frazer depicts Cambodian hunters as believing that they are sure to catch prey, but that might just be something they say to outsiders. Would you tell the Colonialist Traveller, “This is what you have to do if you fail, as humiliation”?)



Appendix

The criticism that this method of placing yourself in the position of the native can lead to contradictory explanations has not been properly made before, to my knowledge. But I have taken inspiration from A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. He wrote:

The acceptability of a historical explanation depends on the fullness and reliability of the historical record. In the primitive societies that are studied by social anthropology there are no historical records. We have no knowledge of the development of social institutions among the Australian aborigines for example. Anthropologists, thinking of their study as a kind of historical study, fall back on conjecture and imagination, and invent ‘pseudo-historical’ or ‘pseudo-causal’ explanations. We have had, for example, innumerable and sometimes conflicting pseudohistorical accounts of the origin and development of the totemic institutions of the Australian aborigines. (1952: 3)

The main criticism here and the one associated with Radcliffe-Brown (D’Andrade 1995: 4-5; Lavenda and Schultz 2018: 180), is that the explanations offered, as explanations of why a primitive rite originated, cannot be verified owing to lack of historical records. But there is also this reference to “conflicting,” though without details provided of conflicts. That led me to conceive the contradiction criticism and leads me to envisage a dialogue.

Critic K: The credit should go to Radcliffe-Brown. And you should have included this criticism of Frazer in your earlier handout on Radcliffe-Brown’s objections to Frazer.

Me: Well, Radcliffe-Brown has clearly realized the verifiability problem – “The acceptability depends...on... historical record”, “We have no knowledge...” “Fall back on conjecture and imagination.” But the statements we would expect of someone who has also clearly realized the contradictoriness problem are absent. He does not say, “The method is incoherent,” “Applied thoroughly it leads to nonsense, such as the rite was introduced for success and for failure,” “It has the status of a square circle,” etc.

Critic K: He didn’t use typical rhetoric, but still it’s Radcliffe-Brown’s point.

Me: But he does not present any contradiction, so that we can grasp his thinking more clearly. The word “conflict” by itself is a metaphor, which I am assuming should be interpreted in terms of contradiction.

Critic K: Anthropologists at the time would have easily been able to fill out the details. Don’t you sometimes leave people to fill them out, trusting them to, in line with your intentions?

Me: Sometimes, probably I would in wartime. I am not convinced that is the best explanation here. By the way, there is another Radcliffe-Brown-inspired objection not on my handout – coming soon!

Perhaps you can anticipate the dialogue above by yourself, but what about this other dialogue?

Critic B: I can’t understand the difference between the two criticisms.

Me: Um, er, um, er... Let’s suppose, for the sake of argument, that for some reason all academic anthropologists imagine the same origin for a certain so-called primitive

rite. More strongly, strangely they cannot arrive at contradictory explanations of the origin when they apply the imagine-why-you-would-do-it method. Still Radcliffe-Brown would say that there needs to be an adequate historical record to verify their hypothesis about how the rite originated. At least that is what his words imply. In the situation we have supposed, only one of the two objections discussed applies. (By the way, probably somewhere there are attempts at *a priori* historical proofs, saying, “We lack historical data but there is no other option but this explanation.”)

At this point, critic B either says, “I still don’t understand,” or looks irritable or yawns, or says, “Okay, thanks.” (Perhaps an ambitious university plans to climb up the ranks by letting in all varieties of critic B, and no worse. A sensible plan, but I am not sure that that can work!)

References

- D’Andrade, R. 1995. *The development of cognitive anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Edward, T.R. 2022. Social anthropology summary: A.R. Radcliffe-Brown’s objections to Sir James Frazer. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWSAS-4>
- Frazer, J.G. 1894. *The Golden Bough, Volume I*. New York: Macmillan.
- Lavenda, R.H. and Schultz, E.A. 2018 (fourth edition). *Anthropology: what does it mean to be human?* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press.