

Is that a myth? A dilemma for Malinowski

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Abstract. This paper quotes a story about Bronislaw Malinowski trying to find out a myth and extracts a dilemma from it. The story content seems related to self-referential puzzles.

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“Here comes the boastful one

—I shall shun.”

In one of his books, Max Gluckman presents us with a story from Malinowski: He describes there how he was recording a myth from an informant, when this informant started boasting that the myth belonged to his clan, and that he alone had the right to tell this myth. The informant kept boasting. Malinowski says it took him some months before he realized that this right of particular persons to boast that telling the myth was their privilege, constituted a most important element in it. (1965: 26)

There is a self-referential quality to proceedings which makes one think of philosophical puzzles, but I shall not make any such connection below. I shall present what happened as a dilemma for Malinowski.

The informant boasts that only he has the right to tell the myth. Let’s suppose that this includes telling it by means of writing. On the one hand, if Malinowski takes the boast to be true, then he should not be trying to record the myth, since the purpose of his doing so is to

communicate it to others. On the other hand, if Malinowski takes the informant's boast to be false, then he has no reason to look further for a myth. Malinowski: "Tell me your myth. Informant: "The myth was made by my clan and only I have a right to tell it." The informant's response here, or a slight elaboration, counts as a myth by our standards: this is the myth of the myth that only he can tell.

The text by Gluckman is not explicit about the dilemma and from the next sentence, it is rather unclear that he meant to convey one. It begins with:

From this he worked out that myth might not be an intellectual response of men,
puzzled by the mysteries of the world... (1926: 65)

On my depiction, it seems the sort of thing clever tribesmen might come up with as an intellectual response to a fellow such as Malinowski. "When he asks for a myth, keep saying this and let him work it out!" There is something very amusing about the situation, as if he travelled all the way to the Trobriand Islands and encountered an examination much like one set by a Polish professor.

Reference

Gluckman, M. 1965. *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.