

## DO MAMBILA COCKERELS LAY EGGS? REFLECTIONS ON KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF

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MANY beliefs are labile, or peripheral, invoked but never explored, let alone examined systematically. The besetting sin of anthropology is to misplace concretism (Bateson 1980: 263), and this is a particular danger when dealing with beliefs. Our very practice tends to make things precise and delimited: we write them down, and then tease at our writings to 'make sense' of them. The real challenge of anthropology, it seems to me, is to record things in a way that remains faithful to the volatility of what we are describing.

In Cameroon, the Mambila with whom I work talk of the *cho* snake that lives in rivers and pools, the sight of which brings death. This snake is said to 'blow the rainbow', a statement for which I could elicit no further explanation. The neighbouring Tikar (according to a personal communication from their ethnographer, David Price) say that rainbows are the reflection of a snake. Mambila also maintain that in caves, behind waterfalls and at the bottom of ravines live *tanyi*, goat-like animals, which like witches can metamorphose themselves, usually in order to ensnare unsuspecting people. *Tanyi* attract unwary lone travellers. Both the *cho* snake and the *tanyi* figure as characters in stories told at beer drinks. For example, a man told of a journey he made to Nigeria one dry season during which he went into a cave. He said that a *tanyi* lived in that cave during the rainy season. No one asked how he established this fact.

A further example is the Mambila belief that cockerels lay eggs. I never suspected them of holding such a belief, and I think I would still be blissfully untroubled had David Price not prompted me to ask an explicit question when I

returned to the field in 1990. Price's fieldwork was carried out in Ngambe among the neighbouring Tikar people. Among another neighbouring group, the Konja, some men also made the same claim, but I have not, as yet, been able to explore the Tikar or Konja elaborations.

Mambila, Tikar and Konja share a propositional belief that happens to be false. As such, it is on a par with claims about the existence of phlogiston, unicorns or the philosophers' stone. What is curious is that it seems to be fairly open to empirical refutation, although Lewis (1980) points to some of the ways in which this may be harder than it first appears. Our stumbling-block is our image of the scientific tradition. Mundane beliefs seem to report 'facts' which could be scientifically tested. Yet Lewis's Gnau do not sit in hides watching birds to see if they die natural deaths. Similarly, Mambila do not watch their chickens to see which bird lays what egg, nor do they dissect cockerels to establish whether they are capable of such a feat. Moreover, our belief in rare and strange (unfamiliar) objects is no different from the Mambila belief in *tanyi*. When I tell Mambila friends that a hundred years ago there were manatee in the River Mbam (possibly) or in the River Sanaga (certainly), the basis for my confidence is, on reflection, extremely slender.

When I asked an explicit question, being long-winded to be sure I was being fully understood, the answers I got were of the following form:

DZ: 'Chickens are of two sorts, female and male, hens and cockerels that crow in the mornings. Hens lay eggs, I know, but I do not know if cockerels too can lay eggs.'

Mambila: 'Oh yes, cockerels lay eggs, but small ones. You can eat them if you like, but what you should do is to weave a small basket, put the egg in it and then hang the basket at a crossroads. Then your chickens will grow well and fat and not die and they will lay many eggs.'

Most people expressed uncertainty about birds in the wild. I talked about this to two brothers (both in their twenties), one of whom keeps pigeons. They agreed that male pigeons don't lay eggs. The younger brother then said that neither do cockerels. Before I could say anything, his elder brother corrected him: 'Small eggs are cockerels' eggs.' Eggs laid without shells are described with the same terms as those used for miscarriages. Both are before term and are 'unripe'. However, cockerels' eggs are different: although small they are perfectly formed.

To the best of my knowledge it is physically impossible for male birds of any species to lay eggs, though I must confess that since a doubt was raised in my mind I have subsequently confirmed this with some friends in the Oxford zoology faculty. Granted this, two explanations are possible: (1) there are no such eggs, and no one has ever seen them nor put them in baskets as described above; (2) some aberrant hens' eggs are regarded as 'cockerels' eggs' by Mambila and are given the treatment described above.

Mambila hens are free-range, preyed upon by kites, sparrow-hawks and eagles, and prone to a wide variety of illnesses that can reach epidemic proportions. Eggs

are taken by egg-eating snakes and perhaps by small rodents. There is also a wide variety of ritual uses for chicks and chickens, quite apart from mere domestic consumption. In sum, a chicken's life is fraught with uncertainty. We are far from the farmyard inductive certainties described by Bertrand Russell (1991 [1912]: 35). The source of any eggs that may be found is also far from clear. Hence cockerels are viable candidates for the unusual source of abnormally small eggs.

On the one hand there are mythical creatures: the dwarfs, hobgoblins, extra-terrestrials and hobbits of folklore. Beliefs such as these, like the dragon described by Sperber (1982), may be consigned to a category of travellers' tales, or 'semi-propositional representations' (in Sperber's terms). This means that they occur in talk (or other actions, for one can go out to hunt for golden-hearted dragons, or golden fleeces). They are propositional in form but stand for a range of propositions, rather than implying a single proposition. For the present it suffices to note that the way in which these beliefs are used resembles the use of religious concepts. They are alike at least in so far as both are protected from immediate empirical testing. The protection is achieved not so much in the manner described by Evans-Pritchard for Zande divination (1937: 475-8) but by the conversational context: you don't argue with a story (with apologies to Maurice Bloch (1974)). Hard questioning of such stories only occurs when an ethnographer is present. Otherwise, scepticism expresses unfriendliness and a disinclination to continue the conversation. Any scepticism that may be expressed is not taken up and disseminated. The existence of mythical creatures is more newsworthy than their non-existence.

Thus for mythical beings. But, on the other hand, a few authors (such as those mentioned below) have discussed problems arising from the examination of more mundane beliefs. These are generally of the form 'the Y people believe that X'. The problems are similar to those that arise in the analysis of religion but may be seen more clearly when separated from some of the different and similarly complex problems attendant upon the discussion of religion *per se*. Religious beliefs are doubly questionable. There is uncertainty about how we should best seek to understand religion, quite apart from the problems with belief itself.

A good example of the analysis of a mundane belief is to be found in Lewis's discussion of the belief held by the Gnau in New Guinea that birds do not die natural deaths. This is, of course, identical in kind to a widely held belief that all human death is caused by witchcraft, so that in the absence of malevolent human action no one would die. More prosaic is the claim that the life of birds has no natural limit (one made implicitly by the Gnau). Lewis (1980: 137-8) has described his reactions on discovering that Gnau hold that birds do not die 'natural' deaths:

I treasure the feeling of discovery I had then for three reasons. Firstly, I had presumed that something was as obvious to them as it was to me and I was wrong. Yet I had lived with them more than two years without finding out so great a difference in the answers we would give to that question. Secondly, had you asked

me before whether I thought a particular people might have no fixed or sure answer to the question, I would have supposed it most unlikely. 'Do birds and animals die?' does not seem a question that would be left unsettled in the general knowledge provided in some culture. Two years passed until chance revealed it to me. Thirdly, the contrast between plants and animals which some people stressed led me to make clearer a distinction I was half aware of...Gnau men and women see some wild creature, it moves, is gone, and who can tell the next time whether it is the same one or another like it? Some say those creatures all must die, some say not, others are not sure.

Any dead birds which may be found are explained as having been killed. Death has external causes and is adventitious.

Gell (1975) mentions the way shadows in the forest may be seen as spirits (he thought he saw a knight in armour). A recent work of Sperber's (1982) considers the existence of dragons with golden hearts. Liam Hudson (1972) reminds us that if we accept the existence of the rhinoceros it is hard to be complacent in denying the existence of the unicorn. I read in *New Scientist* that strange new creatures have been found in the depths of the Atlantic. By accepting these reports I incorporate these creatures as part of my knowledge, accepting it as knowledge by authority.<sup>1</sup>

Anthropologists have had a long-standing fascination with beliefs that they deem to be peculiar or irrational. The whole notion of belief itself has been discussed from a variety of different standpoints. Philosophers make two useful distinctions when considering this subject: first, the difference between the objects of belief and 'what [native speakers] mean by the word that the [anthropologist] translates as "belief"' (Quine 1990: 116); second is the distinction between believing *in* something, and believing *that* something (Price 1969).<sup>2</sup> These two distinctions are particularly germane when we examine the literature discussing the perplexities of religion. Abstract and abstruse notions have been exhaustively examined, including such arcane matters as the putative identity of twins and birds among the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1956) and the numerologically satisfying and mythically complete account of the origin of the world and its contents as given by some Dogon (Griaule 1965). The question is, how should we analyse beliefs that seem to us to be empirically false?

1. Russell (1991) used the phrase 'knowledge by description' to contrast with knowledge by acquaintance, which is the results of our own experience. I prefer to use 'knowledge by authority' since it emphasizes the social factors involved in accepting a description as being authoritative, i.e. true! Anthropologists may still wonder if such a distinction underestimates the extent that people learn (from within a culture) to understand their own experiences. I share this unease but feel that at a crude level the distinction may be a helpful one.

2. This distinction is finer than it may seem at first sight (as Price illustrates). To believe *that* Jesus Christ was the Son of God is little different from believing *in* him.

Despite the caveats raised by Needham (1972) I continue to use the term 'belief'. Intentionality cannot be removed by taking a leaf from Wittgenstein's book and demonstrating the lack of clear definition for the English word 'belief'. As an analytic term it may not be the best: psychologists and philosophers often use 'intentional states' and 'representations' (which may be little improvement over 'belief' except that they are less likely to be confused with English folk concepts). Yet other cultures may have concepts that are well translated by 'belief'. Like all translations, particularly those made by anthropologists, hedges and qualifiers will be added. 'Belief' remains as a possible term for use in translation. In particular, we must beware of two stereotypes that have distorted the anthropological study of belief and belief systems. They are The Creed and the products of scientific experiment (and scientific theories based on such experiments). Both are supreme creations of an idiosyncratic literate tradition that is historically specific and not generalizable without detailed argument. The latter is all too often lacking. The Creed is an explicit statement of the content of the beliefs that constitute a particular variety of Christianity. It gives the misleading impression that the contents of belief of other religions can also be specified. Similarly, the products of science, such as may be found in any textbook, give a misleading idea of certainty and of the possibility of precise, justifiable description.

It is still worth recalling Horton's point (1967) that we all use 'traditional' thought or 'traditional beliefs' in our everyday life. It is hard work to act as an empirical scientist, and our best practitioners manage it for a very small part of their lives. We believe, and we recount what we have been told is true; and we make no attempt whatsoever to verify that information, even if the means to verify it may be readily at hand.

After further enquiry and reflection I am no more perplexed that Mambila believe that cockerels lay eggs than I am that a British Prime Minister can describe Britain as the world's first democracy, or that Dan Quayle expected Latin to be spoken in Latin America. Accepting the assurances of colleagues in the Oxford zoology department that cockerels cannot lay eggs, I now tend to explain that what Mambila call cockerels' eggs are aberrantly small hens' eggs. The basis of this prosaic explanation is that the first egg laid by a broody hen is occasionally abnormally small. Also, a cockerel may lead a hen to lay in a nest, sometimes settling in first, as if to show the way. The combination of these two observations seems to be sufficient to explain a belief that cockerels lay eggs.

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