

Paper given at the COV&R Colloquium, Wiesbaden, June 11, 1994

NECK RIDDLES IN MIMETIC THEORY

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1 Introduction

Riddles are considered to be universally found at the beginning of a human culture. Their status hasn't been the same all the time. Let me give you an example from Scripture, the legendary visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon.

The first book of Kings (chapter 10) tells she came to test him with riddles and "Solomon answered all her questions; not one of them was too hard for the king to answer."

The text doesn't speak about the content of the riddles. Later rabbinical literature mentions the questions of the queen. One of them was:

A woman says to her son:

'Your father is my father,
your grandfather is my husband;
you are my son
and I am your sister.'

Talmud (Midrash Mishlae) from: Friedreich (1860)

Solomon gave her the answer: those are Lot's daughters - referring to Genesis 19.

(1) The answer displays the king's consciousness with incest - "not only the first sin, but also the first riddle" (a quote from a study on Apollonius of Tyre: Archibald 1991).

(2) Secondly, the riddle is a proof to test someone's wisdom concerning taboos and curious things and events. And now I turn to my proper subject.

2 Neck riddles

In the tradition of the king, or judge who had to answer enigmatic questions we find the so called neck riddle, the English term being a translation of German Halslösungsrätsel. What's the difference with 'just a riddle'?

Normal riddles are embedded in a speech event: someone tries to give an answer to an enigmatic question. Neck riddles are typically embedded in a **narrative frame** consisting of two parts: one tells about a condemned person who is able to save his or her neck by propounding a riddle the judge is unable to answer; the other part contains the solution.

There are many neck riddles, recorded from oral tradition in in Europe, and in other places of the world as well. Generally four basic forms are distinguished, I'll give you in brief one example of each of them. Most neck riddles have a strophical form.

A ILO

Love I sit, Love I stand;
Love I hold, fast in hand.
I see Love, Love sees not me.
Riddle me that, or hanged I'll be.

from: Norton (1941); recorded in Devon, ± 1890.

The narrative frame tells about a lady, condemned to death.
She pleaded her case, the judges promised to save her neck if she could propose a riddle they couldn't answer in three days. When they came in her cell, she propounded the riddle. The judges couldn't guess it, and so she was acquitted. -
The explanation in the frame story: She had killed her dog, called 'Love'. With its skin she had made socks for her shoes - on these she stood; gloves for her hand - and these she held; a seat for her chair - fast in hand [?]; she looked at her gloves and she saw Love; but the dog saw her no more.

B Living in the dead

As I walked out, as I walked in
From the dead I saw the living spring
Blessed may Christ Jesus be
For the six have set the seventh free

from: Meyer (1967); recorded in Herefordshire ± 1910

I'll go straight to the solution:

- 1 As I walked out, as I walked in: i.e. the prison
- 3 From the dead (horse-skull) I saw the living (young birds) spring
- 4 The six (young birds) have set the seventh (the prisoner) free

C Morning Spring

Good morning, good morning, your ceremony, king,
I drunk a drink out of your morning spring;
Through the gold the streams did run,
In your garden that was done;
If you can unriddle that I'll be hung.

from: Abrahams (1980)

The solution: the king's wife nursed the prisoner on the breast through a gold ring, in

the garden.

D Unborn

Under the earth I go
Upon oak-leaves I stand
I ride on a filly that never was foaled
And carry the mare's skin in my hand

from: Norton (1941); recorded in Northern England ± 1860

The explanation: the prisoner had put earth in his cap, oakleaves in his shoes, cut open a pregnant mare to obtain the foal, and made a whip of the mare's skin.

3 Current explanations

All solutions of these riddles refer to private and curious experiences of the riddler. They are insolvable for outsiders and cannot be found by wit. The riddle of Simson is a prototype of a riddle with this feature (Judges 14, "Out of the eater comes something to eat, out of the strong came something sweet"). I would like to name this feature 'autoreferentiality'.

The subject-matter in neck riddles has been derived from ancient stories, by several researchers mentioned as bizarre, grotesque, *grausig* (Petsch 1898: 16). You 'll have noted the resemblance of the bees in Simson's lion's carcass with the birds in the living-in-the dead riddle. The ILO-riddle recalls the motif of the murdered lover: A queen's lover, usually a slave, is killed by her husband or her son. She takes possession of the body and makes various objects of it. The queen challenges the murderer of her lover with a riddle; if he guesses correctly she is to die, if he fails he forfeits his kingdom or dies. The Morning Spring remodels the story (in late antiquity) of the faithful daughter, saving the life of her father in prison by nursing him. And the riddle of the Unborn refers to unnatural birth, also occurring outside the judicial frame: in Macbeth for instance the oracle of the witches turns out to have excluded Macduff from having been born out of a woman; he is the unborn hero, who defeats Macbeth.

Modern research focuses on the interpenetration of multiple voices and asserts that neck riddles contain clear echoes of carnival practice. They are constructed of a system of imagery with murderous birth and parturient death, confusions of family relations, of youth and age, of wholesome food and poison, dismemberments, incest and reversals (Dorst 1983).

4 Riddles in mimetic theory

If we try to understand neck riddles from the viewpoint of mimetic theory, a few intriguing questions arise.

(1) First. The speech event riddling as such can be characterised as a process in which

rivalry eminently occurs. From ancient times we find the riddle contest: in the Rgveda we're told the head of a Brahman falls from his trunk when he fails to answer a riddle - the mythic version of a murder.

The Dutch historian Huizinga writes in his *Homo Ludens* (1940) that every riddle shows its dangerous character by the fact that in mythological or ritual texts it is almost always a neck riddle. In fairy tales and folk tales we find comparable contest before and around wedding ceremonies.

(2) Riddles can be connected with rituals around a scapegoat. In ancient Greece the one who failed to give the right answer to a riddle, was punished: he had to drink salt wine (Wünsche 1883: 14), which is a mitigation of the heavier punishment of beheading. Physical signs show the tension that accompanies riddle sessions: people need to be tuned up, warmed up (Rickford 1986: 92).

The metaphor loose one's face for failing to give a good answer or propounding a threadbare riddle, is an expression which belongs to the vocabulary of expulsion. Riddle-researchers have reported being humiliated when, at their entrance in the speech community, they had to solve sexual riddles, giving opportunity to laughter.

(3) Taboos in riddle customs occur in traditional societies. Riddles can be forbidden: during certain seasons, during funerals. In other societies those events require it. Concerning this paradox, we should realise that social events regulate rivalry, and that the position of the dead can vary according to the representation of the scapegoat mechanism.

Riddles test our competence to interpret the world around us by selectively confusing the very domains which we usually use as means of asserting order, in the sense Mary Douglas uses this term. What confuses order most, is the transgression of the incest-taboo. Therefore, on a symbolic level, riddles are incest-like.

(4) The carnival-practice is to be analysed more profitably if conceived in terms of the mimetic crisis, found in the code of the neck-riddle. 'Living from the dead' is a riddle about the murdered scapegoat who comes to life.

5 Concluding remarks

I would like to consider neck riddles as part of our cultural memory. The confrontation between judge and condemned reveals two types of the scapegoat: the god/king/judge on the one side and the devil/criminal on the other side. The grotesque experiences of the riddler have to do with the crimes des dieux in Girard (1982).

In our modern eyes a remarkable change has taken place: it is not the judge who examines the condemned, but the reverse. Chapter 4 in the Gospel of Matthew shows that the story of the temptation of Jesus by the devil in the wilderness has the same pattern.

The presupposition in the neck riddle is: the judge ceases to be a judge if he fails to answer. His condemned counterpart makes him aware of the arbitrary references the

riddle contains and so of the in principio arbitrariness of any accusation: aren't we all criminals?

I'm going to end with an etymological curiosity I discovered only a few weeks ago: *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Girard 1979) is the French translation of the Greek of Matthew 13: 35, κεκρυμμένα ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου 'kekrummena apo kataboles kosmou'. These words refer to Psalm 78, where we find, in the Septuagint, προβλήματα ἀπ' ἀρχῆς problemata ap'arches 'dark sayings from the beginning'. When we look at the original Hebrew we find מִן־קֶדֶם חִידוֹת: for *des choses* the word חִידוֹת chidot, the plural of חִידָה chidah, which means **riddle**...

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Biographical notice

Michael Elias was born in 1948, in the city of The Hague, The Netherlands. He read linguistics at Leiden University where he obtained his B.Litt., and at the University of Amsterdam, where he was awarded his Master's degree in linguistics with distinction. He is now preparing for his Ph.D at the University of Utrecht.

Mr. Elias has taught at the Delft Teacher Training College and the Faculty of Letters of the Free University in Amsterdam. Since 1984 he directs his own consultancy agency in Amsterdam. He has published on a variety of language-related topics including the use of dialect, literacy, applied linguistics, taboos in contemporary speech and Girard's theory of mimesis. He is now writing a monograph on the so-called neck riddles and their relation to the scapegoat mechanism.

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