Cause: a category of the human mind?*

Some social consequences of Chewong (Malaysian rainforest hunter-gatherers) ontological understanding

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ABSTRACT

In the absence of concepts that correspond to those of chance, luck, or fortune, how do people account for why seemingly random desirable or undesirable events occur? Based on long-term fieldwork with the Chewong, a small hunting-gathering and shifting-cultivating group of people who live in the Malaysian rain-forest, I study their theory of causality. It is argued that cause is a universal category of the human mind, but that an understanding of cause cannot be separated from an examination of the ontology and epistemology in each case.

KEYWORDS

Causality, Ontology, Epistemology, Misfortune, Chewong

Shortly before my arrival in 1977 to the Chewong – a small group of hunter-gatherers and shifting cultivators who live in the rain forest of Peninsular Malaysia – a terrible event took place\(^1\). The incident – a disastrous thunder-storm – was still at the forefront of people's mind and I was repeatedly told about it. Several families were spending the night in temporary shelters in the forest when a heavy storm blew up, accompanied by rain, thunder and lightning. A very large tree was uprooted and fell on top of the shelters. Three people were killed outright and two severely injured. Others received minor injuries. It was a frightful calamity, especially in such a small and fragile society where everyone has some kind of kinship relationship with everyone else. When I was first told about it, my reaction was that it was shockingly bad luck for the tree to fall precisely on the sleeping. However, people dismissed the notion of luck or chance. They had an explanation for why it had happened and, as I learnt their ontological and metaphysical principles, I became able to account for the happening in their terms. The identified cause fits into Chewong notions of causality more generally, and I came to understand that there is no conceptual space for what I would recognize as luck or fortune. To explicate Chewong notions of causality will be the topic of this paper. From a methodological point of view, I shall be using the incident as a springboard for general methodological, theoretical and analytical speculations.

Everyone I asked about the fallen tree gave me the same explanation for why it had happened there and then. It was directly linked to an event earlier the same evening. A few people had teased and laughed at some millipedes that had entered the lean-to. To laugh at or near all kinds of insects, worms, moths and butterflies is a heavily sanctioned act called *talaiden*. *Talaiden* is one of a number of named prescriptions and proscriptions that I call cosmo-rules and that constitute Chewong semantic and moral universe. Cosmo-rules provide the parameters for meaningful action. There is a direct and specified causal relationship between the infringement of one such rule and the occurrence of an undesirable event. To perform *talaiden* automatically arouses the anger of the thunder spirit, Tanko, who lives above in the sky, as well as the Original Snake, who lives in the primordial sea below the earth. Whenever humans break the *talaiden* rule, these two beings make thunder storms, heavy rain and land slides. On this occasion, the *talaiden* offence of teasing millipedes was the direct cause of the storm and the fallen tree.

Far from expressing the disaster as a misfortune – bad luck for those killed and injured to be just where the tree fell – the Chewong asserted that the transgression had caused the event to happen. Although some of those killed or injured had not participated in the breach of *talaiden*, this was irrelevant

for the two spirit beings, a fact that implies that the rule has wide moral implications. To laugh at animals places the whole community, not just the transgressors, at risk.

1. SOME POINTS OF METHODOLOGY

The main source for Chewong ontological knowledge is the large body of myths that every individual knows and which, apart from providing entertainment, provides by example insight into the principles of the world in which they live, and their theory of epistemology (Howell 1984). The myths are endless confirmations about cause and effect of the various cosmo-rules. The myths are also constitutive of practical knowledge, demonstrating how all people – including sentient animals, plants, and ‘things’ – emerge as conscious and knowledgeable actors. The rules are not only good to think, they are also good to act (viz. Mosko 2009). As such, myths are an important source for understating Chewong ontological schema. Other sources are shamanistic songs performed as the shaman sends his *ruwai* into space and meets non-human conscious beings (see Howell 1986 for a discussion of the various Chewong formal speech acts).

Concepts that are comparable with Western understanding of ‘fortune’, ‘luck’, ‘fate’ or ‘chance’ are not found in Chewong vocabulary and are no part of their understanding of how the world works. Rather than trying to explain why they do not have such notions, I shall show how they conceptualize the occurrence of desirable or undesirable events, as these affect both individuals and the collectivity. My focus is on the metaphysical construction of interaction between humans and non-humans (animated natural world, deities) and I will argue that this is integral to ensuring the ‘good life’ for oneself and others. When certain things go wrong – occurrences that the outsider may think of as bad fortune, they are not characterized by the Chewong in such terms. Rather, Chewong ontology and epistemology emphasize how the application of ‘correct knowledge’ enables humans to control their environment and influence the course of events. Correct knowledge in this case consists in adhering to the cosmo-rules; a direct causal relationship exists between behavior and event. Unanticipated happenings can always be diagnosed afterwards by reference to preceding behaviour which is characterized as transgressive according to the cosmological schema. This does not necessarily mean that a perpetrator knows about his or her transgression. After an accident or the onset of an illness the cause emerges only through diagnostic sequences per-

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2  *Ruwai* is a complex concept that covers several aspects of the spiritual side of humans and other conscious beings, as well as being the term for a shaman’s spirit guide (Howell 1984)
formed by someone with shamanistic ability. I learnt about the significance of cosmo-rules by hanging around. No-one told me about them, they are embodied knowledge and become operative on the relevant occasion.

2. ALTERNATIVE CAUSAL SEQUENCES

Cause is one of the Aristotelian categories of human understanding, but one that has received relatively little anthropological investigation. Durkheim was critical of Aristotle’s and Kant’s a priorism and argued that explanation was to be grounded in sociological terms. I salute Durkheim’s project to submit the categories of mind to comparative sociological analysis, but I agree with Steven Lukes who refutes Durkheim’s claim that the categories were derived from the social, asserting rather that they are manifestations of “what thinking is” (Lukes 1973: 447, original emphasis).

To explicate indigenous understandings of causality – that is how an event (a cause) leads to another (an effect) is, I suggest, a highly pertinent pursuit. But in doing this one should not, as has been a tendency in anthropology, concentrate upon ‘strange’ connections of magical thinking in specific religious ‘world view’ contexts (cf. Boyer 1992). Boyer has argued that theories of causality must be viewed in their totality – in both religious and mundane contexts (ibid.: 188). I agree with this. Indeed, in my investigation of Chewong causality, I argue against a separation between ‘magical’ and ‘mundane’ causation, a separation that has been – at least until recently – an anthropological tradition. As will become clear, there is no meaningful separation in Chewong understanding between what one may term nature and culture – or, indeed, between society and cosmos, (Howell 1984, 1996). This became clear to me during my first fieldwork when I began to grasp the constitutive significance of cosmo-rules.

From a comparative ethnographic point of view, my argument is that theories of cause are best interpreted when grounded within local ontology and epistemology. In an examination of headhunting in Borneo – one of the few studies that addresses cause as a category of the human mind – Needham (1976) asserts that there need not be any mystical force – “spirit” – to serve as an intermediary between an object and the effect that it produces. He ar-

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3 Causality has been central to medical anthropology, but as an instrumental, not a cognitive, category.

4 Other sociological terms include ideas of time, space, number, self, and class. For a detailed discussion of Durkheim’s sociology of knowledge, see Lukes (1973: chap. 22). Citing a translation of Durkheim’s 1912 *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Lukes (1973: 436) further notes that “the categories could be considered as ‘essentially collective représentations’, which ‘depend upon the way in which [the group] is founded and organized, upon its morphology, upon its religious, moral and economic intuitions, etc.’.”
gues that this interpretation is the result of Western predilection for mystical thinking. In Borneo, he claims, the possession of skulls in itself causes well-being. This is contrary to much anthropological writing that seeks to identify an intermediary agent that produces well-being from the possession of skulls. His is a cautionary tale, one that echoes the famous statement by Hocart when he asks, ‘[h]ow can we make any progress in the understanding of cultures, ancient or modern, if we persist in dividing what the people join and in joining what they keep apart?’ (1970: 23). In line with that, I would claim that unlike the causal sequence case of Borneo headhunters, Chewong understanding of cause and effect does posit an intermediary mystical link between rule and event, namely the non-human beings whose agency is activated in the wake of a human transgression.

In a relentlessly rational system, such as that of the Azande – and, I would argue, the Chewong – there is no room for chance as an explanatory concept; and this, of course, was Evans-Pritchard’s great problem in his study of Azande witchcraft beliefs (1937), or rather, the problem for him was that Azande did not operate with a concept of bad luck. Instead, when something adverse occurred that, under normal circumstances, ought not to have happened, they insisted on witchcraft as the cause. Chewong explanation for undesirable events hinges on the possession and application of relevant knowledge, i.e. knowledge that is integral to their metaphysics: what is the nature of reality; and to their ontology: what types of things exist in the world and how they relate to each other. Such knowledge is constitutive of daily behaviour, and is predicated upon elaborations on the concept of personhood (human nature) and upon the personhoods of the many non-human conscious beings that inhabit their cosmos. To live with the cosmo-rules as guides for daily action is a kind of ritual act. It brings the humans and non-human conscious beings into a continuous, but prescribed, relationship of mutuality, rendering the rules ‘techniques for life-saving’ (cf. Hocart 1970 [1936]: 33, 34) – not in a utilitarian sense, but as providing security about how the world works and their own place in it. For these claims to make much sense I need to elaborate upon the principles and values that constitute the Chewong social world – a social world that is co-existent with their cosmos.

3. CHEWONG; SOME SOCIO-COSMOLOGICAL FEATURES

Chewong live in an inclusive, but bounded, animated environment in which humans, and many sentient animals, plants and spirits constitute a single moral universe. Existentially, humans are not set apart from the other sentient beings. They all interact according to principles that form the basis for correct behaviour and maintenance of order and which are expressed as named cosmo-rules. Knowledge of these codes for conduct is essential for individual
and social survival in the forest. Every Chewong – man and woman – has free access to this knowledge and everyone knows enough to perform their daily tasks with confidence. Those who seek to know more and who wish to establish relationships with conscious beings of other species, may do so and, as a result, they are more effective in their dealings with the animate environment in which they live; primarily as diviners of cause on particular inexplicable occasions and as shamanistic healers.

Chewong symbolic classification is constructed upon a principle of enumeration rather than on hierarchical ordering (Howell 1995). This is also the organizing principle of their social organization which is thoroughly egalitarian and peaceful. Ontological principles and socio-cultural practice thus co-constitute each other.

4. WHO AND WHAT IS A ‘PERSON’?

Existentially speaking, all Chewong persons – including the many species of non-human beings mentioned above characterized as ‘people’ (beri) – are equal, with identical person attributes and qualities. The acid-test for people status is the possession of consciousness (ruwai). I have argued that Chewong understanding of the animated world in which they live may be thought of as anthropomorphic, or more precisely, Chewongmorphic. While each species of sentient being not only has a distinctive body (see below), they also live according to the specificity of their own cultural/nature specific interpretation of the world. Chewong adhere to a psychic and cognitive unity of all species of ‘people’, at the same time as they are species relativists. They know that the ‘natives’ points of view’ differ somewhat from each other; that this is due to the special quality of the eye-ruwai-body assemblage in each case. Arguably, the animated world around them consists of many natures, but only one culture (Descola 1996). This composite world of many natures, may further be described as one in which the common reference point is not humanity as a species, but the human (the Chewong) as a condition. This form of cultural (species) relativism bears many similarities to what others more recently have called perspectivism (cf. Århem 1996, Descola 1996, Viveiro de Castro e.g.1998).

Chewong conceptions of being and consciousness are thus central to an interpretation of their social world and events within it. As stated, in theory everything in the forest may reveal itself to be sentient beings with person qualities, needs and aspirations identical to those of the Chewong. This is why I characterize Chewong animistic world as Chewongmorphic. It is on the basis of this premise that interaction between all sentient species is non-hierarchical, demonstrating the profoundly egalitarian basis for all relationships. Such sentient, conscious, beings must possess ruwai – consciousness,
rationality. Empirically (in nature) they are distinguished as species through their bodies – the ‘cloak’ as Chewong terms the body. Each species has its own special body by which it may be recognized. Cloaks may be put on and off, and those individuals in each species who have shamanic abilities may in certain circumstances take off their cloaks and put on that of another species. This deception is not apparent and they are accepted as a bona fide by those whose cloak they have donned. The myths contain many examples of this. Further, the eyes are profoundly important in distinguishing one species from another. Indeed, perception is relativistic and species-bound. In one sense all species see the same world, and have the same needs; only what makes up the material objects in each world differs. For example, human eyes see the body of a wild pig as potential meat; as pork. A gibbon sees certain leaves as pork. A bas (group of potentially harmful spirits that are activated to perform a harmful act upon humans following a breach of a cosmo-rule) sees human ruwai as pork. In the forest there are a number of invisible villages and houses that belong to the different species of conscious beings. To ordinary (‘hot’, see below) human eyes they are just clusters of trees or leaves; to the species themselves they are houses and fields just like human houses and fields. While they are in ‘their own land’, their wellbeing is dependent upon the observation of the same prescriptions and proscriptions as those of the Chewong; the causal chain is identical, but again, what actually constitutes the offence – and the effect – is species dependent.

Importantly, those with shamanic abilities who have established a permanent relationship with a spirit guide (also called ruwai) have cool eyes – as opposed to the ordinary hot eyes. Cool eyes can see through all deceptions of borrowed cloaks and apparent trees and boulders which actually are houses and villages of specific species. They can also send their own ruwai into space during a healing seance. On such journeys they meet the various immortal spirits as well as the shamans of other species. This experience provides both a continuous source of new ontological knowledge and a confirmation of the old. Their animated universe is thus static only in principle, not in actuality. The law of causality, however, is the same for every species. Retribution for acts of omission or commission is not exercised by fellow humans, but by whichever spirit or non-human personage that is activated through a particular disregard of a rule. This was the case when the thunder deity and Original Snake caused the deadly thunderstorm mentioned at the outset of this chapter.

5. OTHER MISHAPS

Apart from ‘natural’ catastrophes, another type of undesirable event that requires explanation in the Chewong world is illness. The fear of illness is
constantly present, and there are numerous cosmo-rules that help individuals from succumbing to it. Illness does not happen by chance, but is always the result of some infraction which may have been committed by self or by others. For cure to be effected, the cause must be identified. For example, to the question of why x became ill, several answers are possible, and the shamanistic interpretations of the sick persons activities previous to the illness leads to the identification of the cause. One possible explanation is the breach of the numerous rules for food preparations and eating. For example, x may have eaten fruit shortly after eating monkey meat (the *chicka* proscription). This enabled a certain spirit to enter her body and eat at her innards. This is a well-known causal sequence that people are at pains to avoid. In this case, breach affects the transgressor only; and spells and invocations are usually sufficient to remedy the complaint.

Or, x may have become ill because y failed to observe the *punén* rule that prescribes that all food brought to the settlement from the forest must be shared with everyone who is present at any time. If someone knows that food has been brought back and he or she is not given a share, this will give rise to an emotional state of unfulfilled desire. Such an emotion places the person in a state of danger, vulnerable to attack by the tiger spirit (*ruwai*). The *punén* rule is one of the most important ones among the Chewong. Arguably, society itself is predicated upon it. It has clear moral connotations (Howell 2011b). *Punén* transgressions are potentially fatal. A shamanistic séance may enable a person with much knowledge, first to diagnose the cause and then to retrieve the soul (*ruwai*). This requires extensive negotiations and exchanges. In some cases the shaman’s knowledge is not sufficient and the person dies.

Their is a fragile community, so these cosmo-rules which carry heavy moral injunctions are a major factor in the constitution and maintenance of social order. Practice is never neutral but embedded in, and constituted, upon cosmological knowledge.

6. RISK AND FORTUNE

Risk perception, that is how people conceptualize, experience and respond to risk in daily life, and to potential future risk, varies considerably between societies and are closely linked to a theory of causality. The degree to which people have tools – practical or magical – at their disposal to control risk will, of course, also vary. Sociologically speaking, risk factors are not natural facts, but social ones, part of the ontology in each case; and, according to Mary Douglas (1992:50), ‘[w]e need a way of putting the isolated risk issue into the context of the larger system’. Broadly speaking, risk factors are concerned with how undesired evens are categorized and handled. In the Chewong case, risk factors are many and affect the pursuit of livelihood. I have tried to place
them in the context of the larger cosmological system in which their theory of knowledge and causality is embedded.

Just as Chewong are affected detrimentally when they infringe some prescribed mode of behaviour, so also will failure to observe an analogous rule within the world of non-Chewong sentient beings. For examples transgressions by wild pigs activate humans who then may hunt and kill them. There is a kind of double-loop that folds in and out of itself between humans and the many species of conscious personages. Chewong risk is thus very different from that of the Azande whose epistemology and concept of personhood are such that any individual may be a witch, even without knowing it themselves. Azande witches operate in secret – even unconsciously – against anyone they feel a grudge against. Azande do not have at their disposal tools to prevent witchcraft attack – only tools to identify a witch after the event.

7. IN CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly human beings everywhere try to protect themselves against undesirable occurrences. The Chewong are no different in this respect. But there are major socio-cultural differences in how the explanations of why and how undesirable events occur. I have argued that Chewong understanding of causality in human existence has no conceptual room for luck or fortune. Metaphysically constituted knowledge is applied in daily and ritual practice, ensuring a life that, ideally, is prosperous and devoid of unwanted or dangerous events. In egalitarian Chewong society every person is responsible for the correct application of this knowledge for the benefit of self and others. The premises for well-being are dependent upon the relationship between every individual Chewong man and woman and the numerous anthropomorphized beings that populate their environment. Sociality can only be understood from this perspective.

Cause is a universal category of human understanding in the Aristotelian sense. How causality is conceptualized varies from one society to another and it should be the task of anthropologists to unravel its ontological conceptualization in each case. It is widely assumed that such a conceptualization will include the notion of luck, fortune and chance. Like the Azande, but with important sociological and epistemological differences, the Chewong offer an interesting empirical counter-example.
REFERENCES


