Detection Deception: Ancient Lie Detection Trickery

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Introduction

Every polygraph school includes a block of instruction on the history of "lie detection," and most of that instruction is a variation of histories documented by just two sources: Paul Trovillo's 1939 doctoral dissertation (published as Trovillo, 1972a and b) and the lesson plan from the first polygraph school, the Keeler Polygraph Institute.

One of the common anecdotes included in the history block is a story that takes place in ancient India, and involves a Hindu leader, a thief, lampblack, and a sacred ass. Polygraph pioneer Leonarde Keeler published an abbreviated version of the story in 1938. A fuller telling appears in the polygraph textbook by Clarence D. Lee (1953), who worked with Leonarde Keeler in the earliest days of polygraph at the Berkeley Police Depart-

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ment in the 1920s. Here is how Lee (1953) recounts the tale in the history chapter of his polygraph textbook:

> …Another test of the time, credited to a crafty Hindu prince, while based on the superstitiousness of his subjects, showed sound psychological reasoning on the part of its originator, and was successful until the ruse was discovered. Whenever a crime was committed within his jurisdiction, the prince had all the suspects rounded up and brought into his court in the palace, where they were instructed to stand against the wall with their hands behind them. He then informed them that in an adjoining darkened chamber was a sacred ass which would bray when his tail was pulled by the guilty person, and that they were to go into the room, one at a time, pull the ass' tail and then return to their original positions against the wall. When this had been done and the ass had not brayed, all suspects were ordered to extend their hands in front of them for examination, whereupon it was found that only one of the group had come out with clean hands – the guilty one. The prince had dusted the ass' tail with black powder, and those with clear conscience had pulled the tail and soiled their hands. (p. 4).

This story of the sacred ass should sound familiar to polygraph examiners trained in the past 60 years. It has been passed down by generations of polygraph instructors. The problem with this tale is that neither its origin nor its authenticity have ever been substantiated. Lee never cites the source of the Hindu prince story quoted above. The historical accounts in Trovillo's 1939 dissertation were scrupulously cited, but the story of the Hindu prince does not appear anywhere in Trovillo's paper. Nor is there any mention of it in the writings of lie detection pioneers Drs. John Larson or William Marston. An effortful search through hundreds of historical writings from India also did not uncover the story of the sacred ass reported in Lee. (See Krapohl & Shaw, 2015). When the sacred ass story is mentioned in the context of lie detection, all roads lead back to Keeler and Lee, but no further.

This does not mean the story of the sacred ass is untrue, of course. It only means no one seems to know where it originated[3]. Though it makes for an important teaching point, should it be taught in polygraph schools as a historical tale? If the absence of an authenticated source gives one pause about teaching it, as it does to the present authors, are there any other stories that could be used in its stead that convey the same message? That is, are there authentic historical accounts that demonstrate that deception was uncovered by manipulating the beliefs of suspects and watching for behaviors that set the guilty apart from other suspects? As it happens, there are several age-old narratives along that line.

In this article we have chosen a few of them to tell. Two are set in China, a third in the far north of North America, and the fourth from India. These stories have several things in common with the sacred ass tale; a clever leader is called upon to solve a crime, there are several superstitious suspects, the leader manipulates the suspects' beliefs, and the guilty man is revealed by a behavior that distinguishes him from the innocent suspects. We hope you enjoy them.

Tale 1. Smearing the Bell[4]

This story emerges from China more than a thousand years ago, and was originally written as a historical record of an actual event (Shen Gua, cited by Ting, 1985)[5]. In the story, Chen Shugu was a magistrate in Fujian province, a coastal area in southeast mainland China. A man proffers a claim to Chen Shugu that his property has been stolen, though the identity of the thief is unknown. He seeks judge Chen's

3. The first author has a standing offer of $100 to the first person who can find an authenticated source for the story prior to it appearing in Leonarde Keeler's writings.

4. We are grateful to Professor Don Grubin for bringing this story to our attention.

5. The story was also written for general readership by Amy Friedman and Meredith Johnson, and published online. It can be accessed at http://www.uexpress.com/tell-me-a-story/2009/8/16/the-judgment-bell-a-chinese-tale.

Image of bell used with permission. Original located at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wei_Bin_Temple_Bell.jpg

assistance in identifying the thief and recovering his property. Chen has all possible suspects rounded up and brought to him. Once assembled Chen tells the suspects that he has a temple bell that is endowed with magical powers. This magic bell, he tells them, will ring when touched by the thief, but will do nothing when an innocent person touches it. The bell is located behind a curtain, and he commands each suspect in turn to reach behind the curtain and lay a hand against the side of the bell. What the suspects do not know, however, is that Chen has directed his constables to paint the bell with ink such that it will stain the hands of all who touch it. Chen then examines the hands of the suspects after they placed their hands behind the curtain, and finds only one who shows no ink. The guilty man was afraid the bell will ring when he touched it, and so he did not place his hands on it as instructed. All others, having nothing to fear, show the ink stains on their hands.

Tale 2. The Thief and the Elephant

This story comes to us by way of the book *Chinese Fables and Folk Stories* (Davis & Chow, 1908). Because the copyright for the book has expired, we bring you the tale as it originally appears.

Six hundred years ago the people of Southern China trained elephants and taught them to do many useful things. They worked for farmers and woodcutters, and helped make the roads twice a year; for an elephant could do many times more work than any other animal. So wise were the elephants that the people grew superstitious about them, believing they could see even into the heart of man.

A judge named Ko-Kia-Yong had an elephant that was trained to do this wonderful thing, so it was said. Three cases which were brought before him, were decided by a wise old elephant which he owned. And this is the way one of the decisions was made:

A man came before the judge and said that some robbers had been in his house during the night and had taken his gold and jewels-all that he had; and

he asked the judge to find and punish the thieves.

In three months, five robbers had been found. When they were brought to the judge, they bowed before him and each one said, " I have never stolen anything."

The man and woman who had been robbed were called. And the woman said, "That man with the long gray hair is the one who robbed us."

The judge asked, "Are you sure it is he, and how do you know?"

She answered, "Yes, I remember. He took the bracelet from my arm and I looked into his face."

"Did the other four rob you also?" asked the judge.

The woman answered, "I do not know."

But the judge said, "The man who you say is a robber, seems not like one to me. His face is kind and gentle. I cannot decide according to your testimony. I know of but one way to find out, and we shall soon know the truth in this matter. My elephant shall be brought in to examine the men: He can read the mind and heart of man; and those who are not guilty need have no fear, for he will surely know the one who has done this deed."

Four of the men looked glad.

They were stripped and stood naked-all but the cloth-before the judge and the law of the nation, and the elephant was brought in.

Then the judge said to the elephant, "Examine these men and tell us which is the robber." The elephant touched with his trunk each of the five accused men, from his head to his feet.

And the white-haired man and the three others stood still and laughed at the elephant with happy faces; for they knew in their hearts they were not guilty and they thought the elephant knew. But the fifth man shivered with fear and his face changed to many colors. While the elephant was examining him, the judge said, "Do your duty," and rapped loudly. The elephant took the guilty man and threw him down on the floor, dead.

Then the judge said to the four guiltless men, "You may go." And to the woman he said, "Be careful whom you accuse." Then he said to the elephant, "Food and water are

waiting for you. I hope you may live a long time, and help me to judge wisely."

After this many wise men who were not superstitious went to the judge and said: "We know that your elephant can not read the heart and mind of man. What kind of food do you give him and what do you teach him? Man himself lives only from sixty to one hundred years and he knows little. How could an elephant read the heart of man, a thing which man, himself, cannot do? Did the spirit of a dead man grow wise and enter that elephant? We pray that you explain."

And Ko-Kio-Yong, the wise judge, laughed and said, "My elephant eats and drinks as other elephants do. I think he surely does not know a robber from an honest man, but this is a belief among our people. The honest man believes it and has no fear, because he has done no wrong. The thief believes it, and is filled with terror. Trial before the elephant is only confession through fear."

Tale 3. The Master of Mystery

The great American author Jack London was a prolific writer. Some of his best work was based on his experiences during the Klondike gold rush of the late 1890s, where he spent a year mining in the frozen North country in a vain search for riches. One of London's more intriguing stories is The Master of Mystery, from his book *Children of the Frost* (London, 1902). Like Tales 1 and 2, it shows how thievery is resolved through a shrewd understanding of people. Again, the copyright for *Children of the Frost* has expired, so we had the opportunity to present London's lie detection story here in his own words. The story is somewhat reminiscent of the sacred ass story, but with a couple of twists. Ting (1985), who cataloged Tale 1 earlier in this article, argues London took a real Thlinget event to create this story. Because we could find at least one of the lead characters listed in the Alaska state archives, we are inclined to agree with Ting that London borrowed the story from local Inuits he may have encountered while pursuing gold in the North country.

Before we present the tale, a little set up is necessary to introduce the characters and the backstory. It takes place in a Thlinget village in the great north woods in the area of Alaska and Northwestern Canada. Hooniah is a Thlinget woman whose prized blankets were stolen. She is upset with her son, Di Ya, because

he distracted her with some of his mischief, and as she and her husband, Bawn, were disciplining the boy the blankets disappeared from where they were hanging outside. Normally, their shaman, Scundoo, would be asked to divine who had stolen the blankets, but Scundoo had recently made a bad call about the weather, and was presently in a state of disgrace. Instead, they called upon a very powerful shaman, Klok-No-Ton, who came to the village to ferret out the thief. One of the villagers, Sime, was vocally disdainful of all magic and of all shamans. Klok-No-Ton does a magical dance, at the end of which, and with great fanfare, he implicates the villager La-lah. However, La-lah, as everyone in the village knows, had been away seal hunting during the theft. He could not be the blanket thief. Klok-No-Ton had struck out, so he left the village. This gave Sime his I-told-you-so moment. Still, having no other choice the villagers turn back to shaman Scundoo for help. Scundoo orders everyone in the village to gather at Hooniah's house that night. Our story picks up here. Pay particular attention near the end of the story to the Thlinget notion of posttest interrogation of the guilty suspect that secures the confession.

When the last silver moonlight had vanished beyond the world, Scundoo came among the people huddled about the house of Hooniah….

"Is there wood gathered for a fire, so that all may see when the work be done? " he demanded.

"Yea," Bawn answered. "There be wood in plenty."

"Then let all listen, for my words be few. With me have I brought Jelchs, the Raven, diviner of mystery and seer of things. Him, in his blackness, shall I place under the big black pot of Hooniah, in the blackest corner of her house. The slush-lamp shall cease to burn, and all remain in outer darkness. It is very simple. One by one shall ye go into the house, lay hand upon the pot for the space of one long intake of the breath, and withdraw again. Doubtless Jelchs will make outcry when the hand of the evil-doer is nigh him. Or who knows but otherwise he may manifest his wisdom. Are ye ready?"

"We be ready," came the multi-voiced response.

"Then will I call the name aloud, each in his turn and hers, till all are called."

Thereat La-lah was first chosen,

and he passed in at once. Every ear strained, and through the silence they could hear his footsteps creaking across the rickety floor. But that was all. "Jelchs made no outcry, gave no sign. Bawn was next chosen, for it well might be that a man should steal his own blankets with intent to cast shame upon his neighbors. Hooniah followed, and other women and children, but without result.

Photo of Scundoo (center) ca 1907. Courtesy of Alaska's Digital Archives, the William R. Norton Collection.

"Sime!" Scundoo called out.

"Sime!" he repeated.

But Sime did not stir.

"Art thou afraid of the dark?" La-lah, his own integrity being proved, demanded fiercely.

Sime chuckled. "I laugh at it all, for it is a great foolishness. Yet will I go in, not in belief in wonders, but in token that I am unafraid."

And he passed in boldly, and came out still mocking.

"Someday shalt thou die with great suddenness," La-lah whispered, righteously indignant.

"I doubt not," the scoffer answered airily. "Few men of us die in our beds, what of the shamans and the deep sea."

When half the villagers had safely undergone the ordeal, the excitement, because of its repression, was painfully intense. When two-thirds had gone through, a young woman, close on her first child-bed, broke down and in nervous shrieks and laughter gave form to her terror.

Finally the time came for the last of all to go in, and nothing had happened. And Di Ya was the last of all. It must surely be he. Hooniah let out a lament to the stars, while the rest drew back from the luckless lad. He was half-dead from fright, and is legs gave under him so that he staggered on the threshold and nearly fell.

Scundoo shoved him aside and closed the door. A long time went by, during which could be heard only the boy's weeping. Then, very slowly, came the creak of his steps to the far corner, a pause, and the creaking of his return. The door opened and he came forth. Nothing had happened, and he was the last.

"Let the fire be lighted," Scundoo commanded.

The bright flames rushed upward, revealing faces yet marked with vanishing fear, but also clouded with doubt.

"Surely the thing has failed," Hooniah whispered hoarsely.

"Yea," Bawn answered complacently. "Scundoo groweth old, and we stand in need of a new shaman."

"Where now is the wisdom of Jelchs ? " Sime snickered in La-lah's ear.

La-lah brushed his brow in a puzzled manner and said nothing.

Sime threw his chest out arrogantly and strutted up to the little shaman. "Hoh! Hoh! As I said, nothing has come of it! "

"So it would seem, so it would seem," Scundoo answered meekly. "And it would seem strange to those unskilled in the affairs of mystery."

"As thou?" Sime queried audaciously.

"Mayhap even as I." Scundoo spoke quite softly, his eyelids drooping, slowly drooping, down, down, till his eyes were all but hidden. "So I am minded of another test. Let every man, woman, and child, now and at once, hold their hands well up above their heads!"

So unexpected was the order, and so imperatively was it given, that it was obeyed without question. Every hand was in the air.

"Let each look on the other's hands, and let all look," Scundoo commanded, "so that -"

But a noise of laughter, which was more of wrath, drowned his voice. All eyes had come to rest upon Sime. Every hand but his was black with soot, and his was guiltless of the smirch of Hooniah's pot.

A stone hurtled through the air and struck him on the cheek.

"It is a lie!" he yelled. "A lie! I know naught of Hooniah's blankets!"

A second stone gashed his brow, a third whistled past his head, the great blood-cry went up, and everywhere were people groping on the ground for missiles. He staggered and half sank down.

"It was a joke! Only a joke!" he shrieked. "I but took them for a joke!"

"Where hast thou hidden them?" Scundoo's shrill sharp voice cut through the tumult like a knife.

"In the large skin-bale in my house, the one slung by the ridge-pole," came the answer. "But it was a joke, I say, only-"

Scundoo nodded his head, and the air went thick with flying stones. Sime's wife was crying silently, her head upon her knees; but his little boy, with shrieks and laughter, was flinging stones with the rest.

Hooniah came waddling back with the precious blankets. Scundoo stopped her.

"We be poor people and have little," she whimpered. "So be not hard upon us, O Scundoo."

The people ceased from the quivering stonepile they had builded, and looked on.

"Nay, it was never my way, good Hooniah," Scundoo made answer, reaching for the blankets.

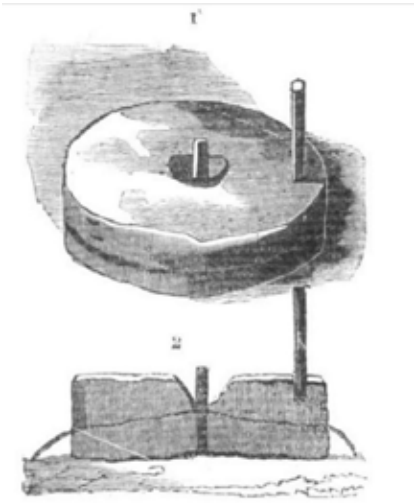
"In token that I am not hard, these only shall I take."

"Am I not wise, my children?" he demanded.

And he went away into the darkness, the blankets around him, and Jelchs nodding sleepily under his arm.

Tale 4. The Thief Catcher

Our final story hails from India. In his expansive text on Muslim customs in India in the early part of the 19th century, Shurreef (1832) describes a practice in which a holy man sets up something like the sacred ass in a tent, but with an odiferous substance between heavy grinding stones in a room filled with religious relics. Here is Shurreef's account.



When a person's property is stolen he sends for a thief-catcher; and should he suspect any particular individual, he assembles together a few of his neighbors along with that person. Then the thief-catcher having besmeared the floor of an apartment with yellow or red ochre or cow-dung, and sketched thereon a hideous figure of prodigious size, selecting any one from among those employed in the casting out of devils, giving it four frightful faces, he places a handmill in the centre of it, having previously rubbed some assafœtida[6] about the centre betwixt the two stones. The upper stone of the mill is placed obliquely, resting on the pin in the centre of the lower one, or some cloth or flax is wound round the pin, about the distance of a finger or two from the top, and on this the upper stone rests, so that it appears as if suspended in the air and not resting on anything. He places near the mill a few fruits, & burns frankincense, and places thereon a lighted lamp, made by burning oil in a human skull-cap. He then desires the men and women to go one by one into the room, touch the centre of the mill, and return to him; adding, that should none among them be the thief, they need not hesitate in so doing; observing, "Behold, by the power of my science the stone is suspended. Whoever is the thief, his hand will be caught between the stones, and it will be no easy matter for him to extricate it. Nay, the chances are, the upper stone will fall and crush his hand to atoms." While they do this, the thief-catcher sits in a place by himself ; and as each individual comes to him, he smells his hand, to ascertain whether it has the odour of assafœtida, and then sends him away to a separate apartment, that they may have no communication with each other. He who is the guilty person, through fear of being detected, will not on any account touch it; consequently his hand will not smell of assafœtida, and he must be set down for the thief. The operator then takes him aside, and tells him privately, "swear that I will not expose you, provided you deliver up the article to me, and your honour will remain wholly unimpeached." In consequence of which, should it be a reputable man, he will immediately confess it and deliver up the stolen goods... (p 390-391).

Oblique and cross-section of a stone handmill. From: *The Dublin Penny Journal* (1836, Mar 12)

6. A substance used in Indian cooking which, in its raw form, has a very strong and pungent aroma, so much so that it will contaminate other spices located near it.

Conclusion

Guilty people often behave differently from innocent people, and this is probably true across cultures and history. A clever person can use this fact to discriminate who the guilty person is, which is the core lesson of the sacred ass story. Ancient folk tales from several cultures capture the same idea, and though we tell four such tales here, there are certainly others (e.g., the story of biblical King Solomon determining who was the mother of a disputed child.) We suspect the use of manipulation of peoples' beliefs to elicit a revealing behavior and so to solve a problem is probably as old as human culture. We hope you enjoyed these stories, and that they may be incorporated into the profession's body of history.

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