

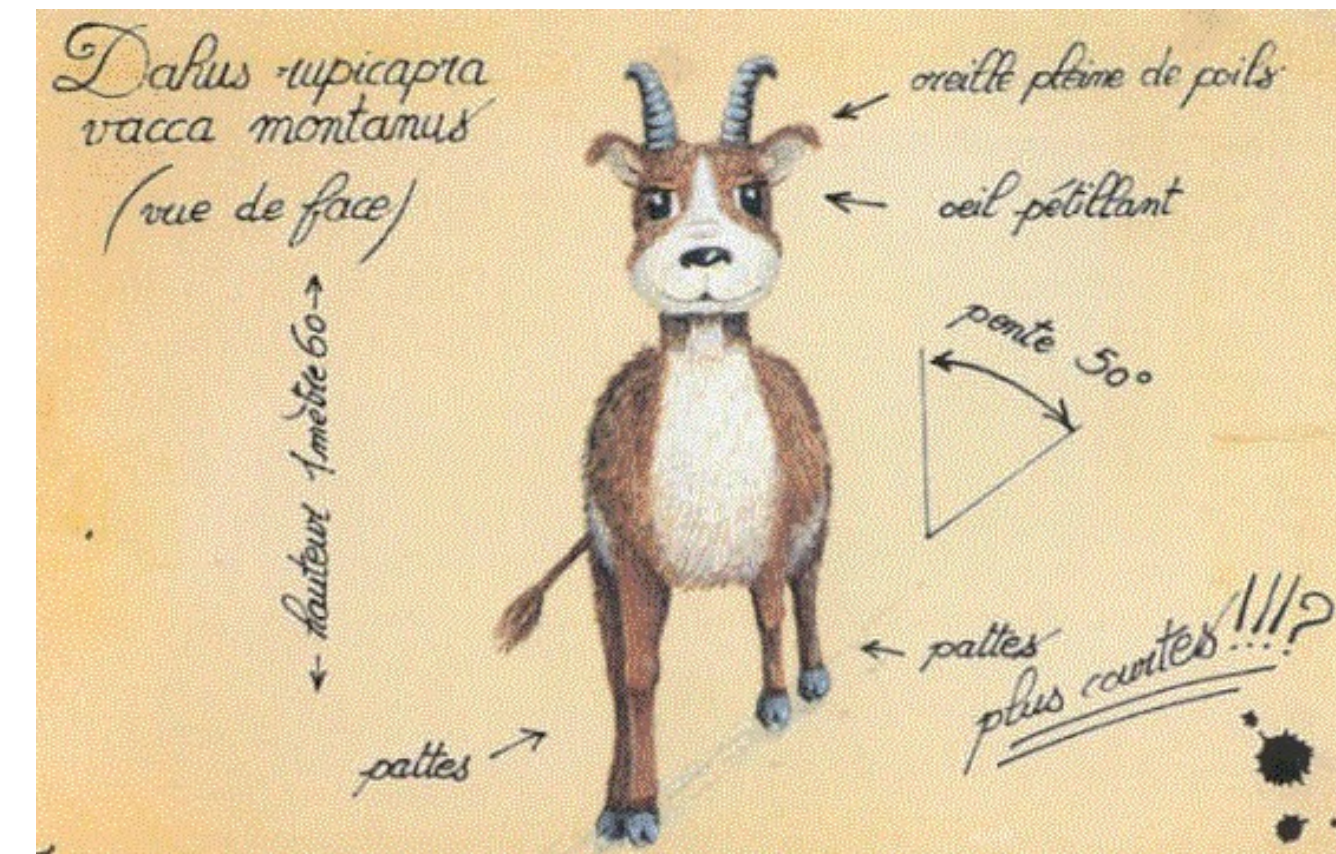
The fool's errand: one prank, three cultural evolutionary paths

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The fool's errand is a prank with a similar structure across cultures: a naive individual is tricked into performing an absurd task. Examples are searching for a left-handed hammer, borrowing the autoclave, sending mail from ships using the "mail buoy", hunting for a "dahu" (see image on the right), or borrowing Fallopian tubes. Often, pranksters coordinate in "sending the fool further" using pre-arranged or spontaneous scenarios.

In Umbres (2013), I proposed a social-cognitive explanation for the success of the prank and its similar structure: the pranksters exploit a vulnerability of the **epistemic vigilance** (Sperber et al 2010) of victims under conditions of **social asymmetry of knowledge**. Without fully understanding the linguistic content of communication, victims trust the competence of sources and carry on the task with partly opaque representation of the request.

In this poster, I investigate the joke's cultural transmission by identifying three main patterns of cultural transmission with distinct social dynamics, joke content, and cultural stability. The explanatory factors are social authority and the recruitment of pranksters and victims.



Type 1: The rite of initiation

It appears in **industries and institutions** (factories, construction sites, hospitals, restaurants, schools, army, etc.) The victim is a new member targeted for its liminal status (neither fully integrated, nor an outsider), being a form of hazing-cum-initiation.

The **complexity** of content is **low**, usually an opaque term inserted in an everyday request. **Cultural stability** is **high**, with the same content being used across settings (e.g. striped paint appears in army and factories) and across time (e.g. mail buoy is recorded for more than 200 years). "Elbow grease" may have been a prank transformed into idiom for hard work. **Victims** are subsequently **recruited as pranksters**, tricking the ones who replace them as apprentices.

Type 2: The naive visitor

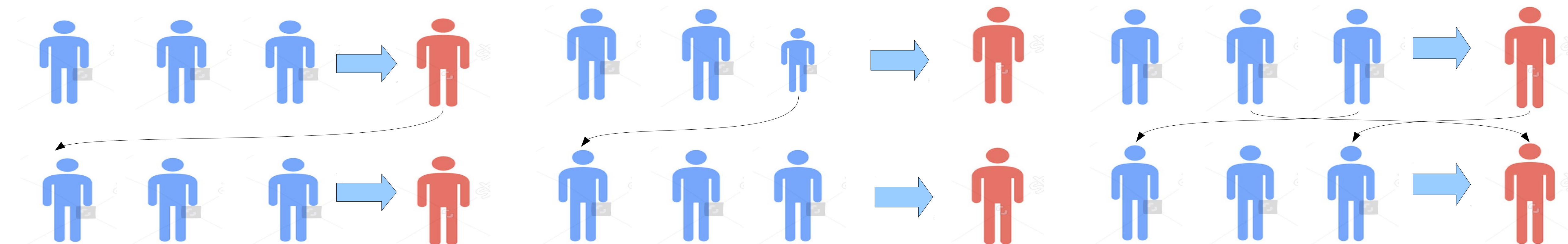
Found especially in **touristic areas**, where locals trick urban visitors into hunting for fantastic animals and leaving them stranded in the wilderness. The tourists are urban dwellers, unfamiliar with local fauna but eager for "going native" experiences. Even the experience of being tricked is, post hoc, experienced as entertaining. The **complexity** of content is **average**, with a short narrative describing the fantastic beast and its absurd features and mode of hunting. Cultural **stability** is average, the same basic story being used over again but adapted for each instance of the prank and the current victim(s). **Victims** do not become **pranksters**, and **young locals learn from elders** how to trick strangers as part of local folklore and tradition.

Type 3: Competitive tricking

Discovered during my fieldwork in a **Romanian village** where men compete into tricking fellow villagers. The prank blends into a wider array of practices defining the hierarchy of smart and dumb persons. The **complexity** of content is **high**, with a long narrative mixing truth with fiction aimed at persuading victims and allaying their suspicions. Cultural **stability** is **low**, as a story is only used once and quickly known across men who become immune to a second attempt. Each new prank uses an improvised version of the fool's errand motif. There is **no clear path to becoming a prankster or a victim**, since anyone can end on either side of the joke depending on context and personal ability.

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The role of authority, persuasion, and recruitment for cultural stability

There is an inverse relationship between the authority of pranksters and the amount of persuasion involved in the joke. Senior workers have strong legitimate authority of hierarchy and competence over neophytes to send them on errands with curt commands (T1), locals have expertise but no authority over tourists (T2), while Romanian villagers are fiercely egalitarian and would not just take orders from others (T3). Where authority decreases, the level of persuasion raises and increases the complexity of the prank content by adaptation to specific context. The prank content is more stable where **authority is high** and **persuasion is low**.

In institutions with **constant recruitment** of personnel (T1), there is a constant flow of victims-turned-pranksters insuring a **faithful replication of the joke**. In settings such as T3, the **haphazard recruitment of victims and pranksters renders impossible the exact replication of the same joke content**. In T2, **recruitment is one-sided** (pranksters are always locals, victims are always visitors), insuring the relative stability of a prank motif with contextual adaptation.