

The Monks with Red Eyes

History and provenance

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The muddy-children family

The red-eyed-monks story is a version of the *muddy children* or *wise men* puzzle family. Joseph Halpern discusses this family as an example of common knowledge and reasoning about other people's knowledge [1]. Gierasimczuk and Szymanik study a generalization in a 2011 research paper [2].

The details vary: visible marks, muddy foreheads, hats, or eye colors; a public announcement; and repeated opportunities to act or remain silent. The underlying inference depends on a publicly shared starting fact and on observing that others have not acted.

Attribution limits

These sources document the mathematical and logical tradition, not an original author of the exact red-eyed-monks wording. I did not establish who first used that story.

This page uses departure from the island rather than self-harm. That leaves the reasoning unchanged: each monk departs at the first scheduled midnight after deducing that their eyes are red, and everyone observes departures. The other reasoning and observation assumptions are now explicit.

Sources

- [1] Joseph Y. Halpern, Epistemology: Five Questions (author manuscript), discussion of muddy children and common knowledge.

<https://www.cs.cornell.edu/home/halpern/papers/vincent.pdf>

- [2] Nina Gierasimczuk and Jakub Szymanik, A Note on a Generalization of the Muddy Children Puzzle, TARK XIII (2011).

https://jakubszymanik.com/papers/GS_Tark2011_proc.pdf

Sources checked September 7, 2026. A documented appearance is not necessarily the earliest appearance.