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The Bushman Trickster: Protagonist, Divinity, and Agent of Creativity

In a classic article and book on the subject, Carl Gustav Jung noted that “the so-called civilized man has forgotten the trickster” (Jung 206). In this paper I would like to recall this virtually universal mythological and folkloric figure back to our civilized memory. I will draw most of my information from a tribal culture, the Bushmen of southern Africa, within which the trickster is still very much alive (and on which I have done ethnographic research).

Trickster was once a prominent feature of our own Western myth and lore, for instance, the trickster-god Loki of Nordic mythology who, as the enfant terrible of the Scandinavian pantheon, received more mention in the Icelandic *Edda* than any of the other divinities—including Odin, the supreme god of the Teutonic pantheon, a bit of a trickster himself (Tonnelat 268–72; Oosten). The trickster remained a popular and prominent figure in general folklore throughout the Middle Ages. Examples are Reynard the Fox; Chanticleer the Cock; and Till Eulenspiegel (or Howleglass, as he is known in English), the peasant yokel who delighted in duping urban burghers; as well as a number of trickster figures from medieval folk Christianity—“natural louts in cassocks” (Welsford 202)—of whom all but Friar Tuck have been forgotten. Another trickster of folk Christianity was, and in some parts of the world still is, Saint Peter; yet another is none other than the devil himself.¹ The trickster, or trickster-like figures, also make the occasional appearance in literature. The best known is

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Puck of *Midsummer Night's Dream*, or Robin Goodfellow of medieval Mummers' plays, the mischievous fairy being of ancient English folklore, a trickster par excellence. As a shape-shifter—"sometimes a horse [. . .] sometimes a hound, a hog, a headless bear, sometimes a fire"—who played a seductive pipe, Shakespeare's Puck, a "shrewd and knavish sprite," lured forest travelers into swamps, "laughing at their harm." He delighted in watching the follies of humans and—as is the trickster's wont—in "frightening the maidens of the villager."

It is probably true to say, however, that the trickster figure—of the classic mold, as ambiguous, multifaceted protagonist, creator, inverter, and culture hero²—has been pretty well obliterated from the folkloric and literary imagination of the Western adult. It has been transferred over to that of the Western child, every Saturday morning, on the television screen. Here we find a rogue's gallery of trickster figures: Bugs Bunny, Wile E. Coyote, Woody Woodpecker, and, that most enigmatic and complex of trickster figures, Daffy Duck—the only one, as far as I am aware, without precedents or antecedents in the world's trickster lore (which reveals a dearth of ducks). Daffy, the duck-trickster, may thus be a genuine creation of Hollywood fakelore, as against his colleagues Bugs and Wile E., Tooney Land's premier tricksters, who do have deep roots in world mythology. As suggested by the folklorist Alan Dundes, Bugs, *qua* Hare, may have had his origin within African oral literature (Dundes; Georges and Jones 148–49), from where the figure was wrested and taken to North America through the slave trade, there, perhaps entering the folklore of Native and Anglo Americans. Coyote may have had a like source, or, alternatively, his folkloric precedent may have been the twelfth-century European Renart (or Reynard or Reineke) the fox, who may have become conflated with the New World Coyote, much the same way as he did in southern Africa, with the Bushman trickster jackal, whom we will meet again below (Bleek, *Reynard*). The New World incarnations of hare and coyote/fox were such figures as Bre'r Rabbit and Bre'r Fox,³ Nanabush (or Nanbohzo), and Old Man Coyote, of the northeastern and southwestern American Indians, respectively, who along with Raven of the northwestern and Arctic regions, make up the trickster-trilogy of Native American and Canadian myth and lore.

We have banished the trickster figure from the mental, expressive, and religious domains of our own culture because it grates with the spirit of earnest thought and sober rationality that prevail within it as the operative principles of our collective Western mind. Notwithstanding recent developments in theoretical physics—quantum physics, Einstein's relativity theory, chaos theory, string theory, and, most recent and most murky of all, M-theory—which are beyond the grasp of most ordinary intellects—most of us Westerners still see the world as a system of Newtonian order, as a grand clockwork created by a Grand Architect or Watchmaker. He has divided that world—in six orderly,

work-scheduled days—into light and dark and day and night, above and below, heaven and earth, land and sea, plant and animal, animal and human, man and woman. All are neat categories, all planned order—all of it replacing an earth which before was “without form and void.”

The Bushman Trickster: Spirit of Disorder, Enemy of Boundaries⁴

The home of the Bushman trickster—and the trickster figure of so many other non-Western cultures whose universe is less dualistically structured—is just that formless earth or void, where order, structure, categories, boundaries are as yet absent, or, if they exist, are fluid. This early pre-Genesis world of chaos and ambiguity, which God’s divine creation has displaced from the Judeo-Christian cosmic purview, is the world of the trickster. He is its premier inhabitant, along with the early animals, humans, and animal-humans. It is also the world of Bushman mythology—as that of so many other tribal peoples, especially hunter-gatherers—and the setting for most of the myths and tales of their culture. Moreover, it is the setting for Bushman cosmology, as the First World’s inhabitants prefigure the animals and humans of today, who remain linked to their shadowy ancestors to this day. A parallel here are the Australian Aborigines, whose notion of Dreamtime is an especially elaborate and profound version of the inchoate, pre-creation world and whose inhabitants, whom the Aborigines call Ancestors (and some of whom were also tricksters), remain linked to the living through reincarnation, such that every birth will bring into this world yet another Dreamtime being. The landscape is crisscrossed with song lines and Dreaming sites placed on the landscape by the Ancestors during their wanderings through their Dreamtime World. It lies superimposed on the world today and forms a mythological atlas, through which Aborigines to this day demarcate the land.

Let’s continent-hop back again to Africa and the Bushmen and their Dreamtime—which they, somewhat more prosaically, call “First Time”—and to their trickster being. He is First Time’s preeminent citizen, holding that elevated status because, as the embodiment of ambiguity—“the spirit of disorder, the enemy of boundaries” (Kerényi 185)—his nature is consonant with the qualities of chaos that inform the First Time world. “Absolutely undifferentiated” in consciousness (Jung 200; see also Georges and Jones 240–43), he is a bundle of contradictions as every conceivable quality or condition comingle in his being.

One way in which this ambiguity is manifested is through the many names and guises by which the trickster is known, which vary from one Bushman tribe to another and, within the same tribe, from region to region and even individual to individual. The latter may each have his or her own vision or encounter, either through dreams or daydreams or a trance experience, which readies the person for a spirit encounter. I have time to mention only a few of

these oftentimes bizarre figures. There is the Nharo (Naro) Bushmen's Pate, a smallish one-legged manikin whose body is covered with spider webs and has a dozen or so big toes sticking out from it. The trickster of the /Xam of the Cape was a mantis-man named /Kaggen with a green body and stiff wings which, along with suddenly sprouted feathers, he used to fly away from a scrape he had gotten himself into (followed by his "thing-children," his various possessions, hartebeest sandals, shoes, bow and quiver, skin cap and cloak, walking stick, all hurtling after him through the sky). The Nharo, Hei//om and Khoe Khoe told many tales of /Iri—or Jakkals, his Afrikaans name which some of the farm Bushman storytellers have adopted as his name—whose possible historical connections to the European Renart the Fox and the American Old Man Coyote I mentioned above. Another colorful trickster character, among the Nharo, is N=ari tsam ='gei /am who had his eyes on his feet—the meaning of his name—rather than his face, which was an eyeless, hairless blank. As one might imagine, this anatomical peculiarity its bearer mined for no end of trickstering. Among the /Xam of the Cape the same figure was Will-o'-the-Wisp (which, given his slippery nature, is a most appropriate embodiment for the trickster figure).

The most variable figure, and, as we will see below, the one most salient in Nharo folklore and religion, is //Gāuwa, of whom I have received over a dozen descriptions, some of them haunting and numinous. One was from an old woman—who led her blind shaman-husband through veld and farms by his walking stick—who told me of how one day the sky darkened and a dozen black horsemen came from the sky and circled her menacingly and then disappeared again, into a lightening sky. Another person described his vision of //Gāuwa as being a black man, as tall a windmill, riding on a huge black dog. A third said the //Gāuwa he saw was a white man, about six feet tall with a dark beard, who might look extremely handsome one moment you looked at him, or he at you, and repulsive at another. Qwaa, a trance dancer and one of the artists of the group whose work I am currently studying, at times depicted //Gāuwa in his pictures. All of them were based on visions he has had. The most striking depicts the trickster-spirit in a modern setting, standing beside, or in front of, a row of colorful Western-style trousers and wristwatches with shiny metallic wrist bands. He points to the latter with a spindly insect-clawed hand, his baleful eyes huge circles that recapitulate the watches' dials. His head is round and swollen, like a Cobra's, because, as explained to me by Qwaa, he was agitated and angry.

The ambiguity of this multifaced figure is manifested within three dimensions of his make-up: ontologically, temporally, and morally. The first, the ontological dimension, pertains to the trickster's nature and being, which is made up of multiple contradictory traits and requires the appositional rhetorical device of both/and or on the one hand/on the other hand which is basic to all accounts

about the trickster. He is both spirit and flesh-and-blood; both human and animal or plant—life forms into which he may transform himself or, as in the case of Jackal or Mantis, he may assume permanently. However, compounding the state of ambiguity on this score, *qua* animal he nevertheless also retains human traits—“he is a man,” the storyteller said when I queried him on this point, even though he may have an antelope’s head or cloven feet, “he is a man, an antelope-man, which is a man.” Similarly, with regard to the prominent and well-contoured /Kaggen-Mantis, narrators will state that “he is a man” while, in the same narrative, also saying that “he is a mantis, a thing that is green and has wings.”⁵ Trickster is both organic and mineral (when he transforms himself into a stone), solid and fluid (when he becomes a body of water) and, a polarity he delights especially in confounding, he is both male and female. Life and death are also both qualities of the trickster as tales and myths tell of his being killed or dismembered and then resurrecting and reassembling, all of it with shrieks of pain.

As “a sort of dream Bushman,” the mantis-trickster /Kaggen moves in and out of his dreams, such that, in stories about him, the listener never quite knows whether what occurs is part of what the protagonist dreams or actually experiences. This state of disassociation—reminiscent of the Bushman trance dancer-shaman’s state of altered consciousness—is also evident in the way in which his possessions, his “thing-children,” may take their leave of him, running or flying off in all directions, sometimes taking back the shape of the animal from which they were made (such as his walking stick becoming a shrub sprouting leaves or his springbok cloak growing legs and ears and bounding off). Equally at odds with their possessor may be the trickster’s own limbs, which in some of his misadventures may become severed from each other, for instance, when he feigns death as an antelope into which he has transformed himself, and has himself cut up by a bevy of girls out a-gathering, who find him (see below). In rearticulating himself, body part after body part, “he became a man while he was putting himself together again” (Bleek and Lloyd 11), all the while running after the girls lustily and scattering them before him. While running each of Mantis’s body parts—head, neck, spine, thigh, ribs, shoulder blade—will run ahead of the other and jump on top of each other, rearticulating the trickster’s body:

The flesh of the Mantis sprang together, it quickly joined itself to the lower part of the Mantis’s back. The head of the Mantis quickly joined itself upon the top of the neck of Mantis. The neck of the Mantis quickly joined itself upon the upper part of the Mantis’s spine. The upper part of Mantis’s spine joined itself to Mantis’s back. The thigh of the Mantis sprang forward—like a frog—it joined itself to the Mantis’s

back. The other thigh ran forward, racing it joined itself to the other side of Mantis's back. The chest of the Mantis ran forward, it joined itself to the front side of the upper part of Mantis's spine. The shoulder blade of the Mantis ran forward, it joined itself on to the ribs of the Mantis. The other shoulder blade of the Mantis ran forward, while it felt that the ribs of the Mantis had joined themselves on, when they raced. (Bleek and Lloyd 9–11)

However, things may not go all that smoothly; for instance, until all the parts have found their proper place and rhythm, the shoulder blade may jog alongside the legs or shoes for a while⁶ (“he was stepping along with his shoes, while he jogged with his shoulder blade” [Bleek and Lloyd 11]).

The temporal dimensions he confounds are past and present, as Trickster is at home equally in the mythological past of First Time, as in recent historical times, when, as Jakkals, he gave the pioneer trek-boer—his *baas* and favorite dupe—a hard time, and the present, when he appears to trance dancers (in conjunction, perhaps, with Western consumer goods, such as watches and trousers, as in Qwaa's painting). The same way he shuttles back and forth through time he moves through space, as a restless wanderer, through veld and bush and farms and villages. He may also be present at boys' initiation rites, where he is likely to appear in his female guise, and at girls' initiations, where he can be expected to lurk in the bushes near the menstrual hut, jealously guarding the girl from other males. As I was told by a Nharo storyteller, “//Gäuwa likes the women”—from maidens to matrons (including his own mother whom, in one tale, he raped when he was but a lusty—and lusting—babe).

This brings us to the moral dimension of Trickster's ambiguous nature. He is a lecher and a glutton, who refuses to share food—the basic expression of sharing and fundamental rule of decorum in Bushman society—and may be so greedy in his appetite for meat, the Bushmen's favored food, that, in a fit of meat greed, he will even devour his own flesh, cutting fillet-sized slices from his thigh (howling in agony, as is his wont whenever things go badly wrong, as they certainly do here). This displays another moral failing: stupidity, which, as in the scene just mentioned, may be terminal. For this the /Xam Mantis-trickster /Kaggen is forever scolded and lectured by his grandson Young Ichneumon, who has more moral sense than his none-too-venerable grandfather (Bleek, *Mantis* v, 9, 21, 33). He is also a vulgarian, who exercises little control over his lower body functions; these include flashing, usually at nubile girls, as well as every other variety of crudity and lechery. He may be cruel and murderous, bringing harm, illness, and death to his duped victims. Yet, for all of these moral failings—cruelty, lechery, gluttony, stupidity, vulgarity—he may also exemplify the opposite traits. As such he may appear as a protector of people (including

maidens, whom he saves from ogres), he may be archly upright about norms and mores and hector or punish their violators; he may display resourcefulness and wisdom and he may heal the sick and bring rain to a drought-stricken land.

Protagonist, Hero, God

These various dimensions of ambiguity that render the trickster so outrageous and beguiling are the stuff of the tales, which, in Bushman and Khoisan folklore, make up well over half of all of the body of the culture's oral literature (Guenther, *Bushman* 115–51; Schmidt, *Catalogue 2*: 71–221). They play out the themes of ambiguity, incongruity, disjuncture, and, especially, of moral inversion (and perversion), the theme most embellished in the tales. Here we see Trickster flouting the norms of proper society—society “with customs,” as the Nharo Bushmen put it. Special prominence is given to tales that display his lechery and gluttony. These two failings may be combined, so that meat, for which his craving is insatiable, and sex, craved with equal avidity, may appear in the same narrative as variations on the same theme. In a number of lascivious and scatological tales of a tit-for-tat kind in which the trickster matches wits with his wives (Schmidt, *Catalogue 2*: 133–34), we see the former eating the severed labia of the latter after they have mixed their genital flesh into the trickster's food. Turning the tables, he tricks the women into eating his own severed testicles (or his excised anus or the content of his intestines), gloating with triumph and *schadenfreude*.

In one widely-told variation on the latter theme (Schmidt, *Catalogue 2*: 115–16), the trickster transforms himself into an antelope and, feigning death, places himself into the path of some lusted-after women or nubile girls who are out in the veld gathering wild food plants. They find him and, delighted with this windfall of meat, they carry the antelope carcass to camp, or skin and butcher it on the spot, or prepare portions of the meat to cook. The butchered parts—a winking eye on the severed head carried by one girl, or the antelope-trickster's errant penis roasted and beaten to softness by another—then proceed to have their fun and their way with the girls, causing them confusion and fright.

Here is a !Kung (or Ju/hoan) version of the story, featuring the !Kung trickster Kauha (Kaoxa), as told to the folklorist Megan Biesele by the Ju/hoan woman !Kun/obe n!a in the early 1970s:*

Kauha wanted to get married. He asked one girl after another, but they all refused him. So he said to himself, “All right. Just let them

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wait and see what I'm going to do to them." Then he went off and turned himself into a springbok. Next he died, and lay down out in the bush somewhere.

The women came that way gathering. They found the dead springbok lying in their path. "Ooh, ooh, ooh; I've found a springbok!" cried the girl that Kauha had especially wanted to marry. "Hey, everybody, I've found a springbok. Come here and let's pack it up to take home."

All the girls ran up to see. "But since we have no string, how will we carry it? How can we possibly carry such a big thing over our shoulders?"

"Don't worry," replied the first girl, "We'll just carry it in a kaross [leather cloak]. We'll carry it to the camp and then borrow a knife from someone and skin it."

Now in the group of girls there was one that Kauha did not desire. This girl volunteered to carry the springbok first. She stowed it firmly in her kaross. The heavy meat rode high on her back, and she walked well. But as they walked, Kauha made himself very heavy. The kaross sagged, and in a short while the weight had completely defeated the girl. So she lay the bundle on the ground and called to the first girl, "Come on, you found this meat—now you carry it."

The first girl said, "Who says I'm refusing? Give it to me and help me get it on my back." The girls continued walking. As they walked, Kauha slipped downward in the kaross until he lay directly behind her buttocks. Then he began to do it to her—he was "marrying" her. He slid down right into her crotch, and she cried, "Ai! Why have you people placed this meat so that it can slide down like it's doing? What am I doing wrong? Maybe I'm too short to carry this springbok. Maybe its doing me this way because I'm too short."

The other girls said wearily, "Just push it back up and let's go, hey? We know it's heavy, but why should we be the only ones to carry it?" Nonetheless, they helped her out: another girl came to her and carried it for a while. With her nothing happened, and they continued a long way along their path. When it was the first girl's turn again, she put the springbok back in her kaross. But as soon as she started to walk, Kauha slid down again and was "marrying" her. She would push him back up again, and he would slide back down again, and she would have to push him up again. "Hey!" she wondered. "What kind of meat is this?"

But she struggled on, and at last they arrived at the camp. The people were puzzled. "What meat is this that dies but is still alive like this seems to be?"

“It’s meat we found lying in the bush. We’ve carried it home. But we don’t know what this meat is up to: when some of us carry it, it’s just fine. But when this girl tries to carry it, the meat does something awful to her. It’s a terrible piece of meat.”

“Can this be just a piece of regular old meat?” the people wondered. “Is it just a piece of regular old meat?” The people all sat around and talked it over. But at last they decided to skin it, it turned out to have no blood and no guts. It was just a solid piece of meat, and it tasted bad. So they didn’t eat it. “No,” they said, “some terrible fever may have killed this animal. Something awful may have killed it, so that it tastes so foul. We just don’t know about this meat.”

So they threw it away. That’s what they did with the meat those girls had found. (Biesele 317–19)

Other tales are about the trickster-protagonist’s magical and supernatural powers, especially of transformation, flight, and life restoration. These he may use destructively, usually in the form of a prank played on some unsuspecting fall guy, or as a joke, either a practical one or one with malicious intent. It may backfire on him leaving him hurt and harmed, yet, in the process, an act of creation may come about. Alternatively, he may use his powers constructively and more or less deliberately, perhaps to make or create something or other, at one occasion alongside God (who is an obscure figure in Bushman belief), vying with him in a pique of envy over God’s superior powers of creation (Guenther, *Bushman* 60). As creator, Trickster may be fine tuning God’s creation, engaging in creative acts of the spots-on-the-leopard and stripes-on-the-zebra kind, by which an animal is given its distinctive traits or a bird its song.

Or he may create the features of a rather featureless early landscape, such as water holes and river beds, as in the following story, which I collected at a remote Ghanzi farm from a Nharo storyteller:

Trickster finds Puffadder lying in her sand-nest, brooding over her eggs. Bursting with mischief he takes a flying leap, jumping over her nest and voids his bowels—shits [Bushman narrators like earthy language]—all over her. She is mad, but also not too bright. So he does his foul deed again, and again, until she wises up and, when he does it the next (and last) time, she bites him. Between his spread legs. With her poison fangs. In the balls. [Earthy language is called for again.] He shrieks with agony, his poisoned testicles swell and grow, to the size of a water melon, a boulder, a grass hut. Howling with pain he drags his monstrous appendage through the desert plain and, in trying to cool the burning pain, gouges out of the sand the river beds and

waterholes of the Kalahari, as well as all of its pans, depressions and caves. (Guenther, *Bushman* 121; for a //Gana variant see Tanaka 25)

The tale illustrates most aptly the modus operandi of this trickster-creator, as well as his nature and moral make-up. It also illustrates the contrast I drew at the outset, between the Judeo-Christian story of creation of the world and of the creator, in terms of a divine plan of order and reason, as against a random action of a vulgar protagonist, one of whose gross pranks has backfired on him, resulting in the creation of something portentous and vital for humankind's existence.

Another creator role of the Bushman trickster—and of tricksters elsewhere, for instance, Raven or Nanabohzo (see Messer)—is that of culture hero. Here his major accomplishment was to bring fire to humankind, along with the art of cooking. To mankind he brought the art of love—*ars arandi*—which, coming from the trickster, is not so much an artful performance than it is the satisfaction of carnal lust. This fateful event the Bushmen relate in an extravagantly salacious tale (Guenther, *Bushman* 60–64). Another one of Trickster's boon services to humans is that he brought them medicines, which trance dancers seek to procure from him when out in their trance-induced spirit journeys.

We are brought now to one of the most intriguing ambiguities of the Bushman trickster, which he shares with tricksters from only a few other mythological traditions: he can step out of the tales and his role as droll protagonist, inverter of norms, culture hero, and antihero, and into the domain of religion, wherein he assumes the stature of divinity. As such, the figure's creative, beneficent, serene, and providential qualities are accentuated and the destructive and outrageous ones are downplayed. (He thus differs from the trickster-god mentioned earlier, Loki, who, for all his puckish playfulness, was a dark and destructive being and the chief force to bring about the *Ragnarök*, the twilight of the gods and the end of their world.) He, the Bushman trickster-god, is the god of healing, whom trance-curers contact, and the spirit protector of animals, against abusive hunters, and of maidens inside their menarcheal huts. He is a numinous spirit presence at trance dances and initiation rites, or even out on a distant hunt when, as an eland or hartebeest—the trickster-god's favorite antelope species—he may be encountered by hunters.

In sum, we see the Bushman trickster to be a highly complex and enigmatic figure, who is as central to the culture's domain of folklore as it is to religion. He is ambiguity writ large, who confounds within his being every conceivable category and all conceptual boundaries, shuttling the borders between the mythological past and the here-and-now.

He is a figure that fits eminently well into Bushman cosmology and social organization and because of this correspondence—between belief and

experience—the trickster has kept his center-stage position within the belief system and oral traditions of the Bushmen, even those acculturated and no longer part of the hunting-gathering lifeways and culture of the past. As I have shown elsewhere (Guenther, *Tricksters* 58–94), the Bushman cosmological view of the world is one in which amorphousness and flux are the basic principles of (dis)order and (anti)structure. Instead of bounded structures and categories—human-spirit, animal-man, good-evil, prankster-god—we find overlap or, as the French anthropologist and philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl put it, “*participation mystique*” (of each being or state in the one that is its opposite). The trickster-god, and the ambiguity that he exudes, also fits into Bushman social organization, which is one of small, loosely formed bands, fluid in composition, small-scale, nomadic, open, egalitarian, with flexible social institutions—such as marriage, kinship, and leadership—and negotiable, contestable values, which individuals may bend and get around so that they might fit personal agendas (Guenther, *Tricksters* 12–94). The trickster figure is also relevant to the life experiences of contemporary acculturated Bushmen, who work on farms owned by white or black cattle ranchers or herders. The figure provides a suitable narrative device for lampooning and subverting the power of the white Boer *baas* or the black patron on whom Bushmen have become economically or politically dependent (Guenther, *Bushman* 128–39).⁷

//Gāuwa Meets Jesus Christ

Because of the correspondence between the trickster with Bushman cosmology, social organization, and acculturative situation, the Bushmen are not cast into mental or spiritual confusion over the multiplex contradictions inherent in their trickster-god (Guenther, *Tricksters* 226–47). With one exception: those Bushmen who, over the past thirty-odd years, have had contact with, and have to varying degrees embraced, Christianity. For them //Gāuwa has become problematical and a source of confusion and doubt. As I have shown elsewhere (Guenther, “Jesus Christ” and *Tricksters* 116–20), some of them have, in various ways, conflated //Gāuwa with the new religion’s central figure, Jessu Kriste,⁸ rendering that figure “a person of great difficulty.” Indeed, from the perspective of the missionary, such a conflation is tantamount to grand heresy. To him and his converted Bushman charges, a trickster-god in whom the profane—and profanity—combines with the sacred, evil with good, and destructiveness with providence, is an abomination; his equivalent in the missionary’s dualistic belief system is, in fact, none other than Satan. That, in fact, from early contact times has been the official missionary line on the figure (and may have contributed to the benighted and racist Western notion that the Bushmen are devil-worshippers). So established was this notion that even nineteenth-century Cape farm Bushmen, with only tenuous and indirect connections to missionaries,

would sometimes refer to /Kaggen as “devil” (Bleek, *Brief Account* 9; Lewis-Williams 157). This erroneous conflation recently gained confirmation through an entry—of //Gāuwa as “devil” and “Satan”—into a dictionary of the Nharo language that is currently being compiled by a missionary-linguist. When I discussed the matter with him he informed me that he had obtained this translation for //Gāuwa from his informants (many of whom attended the local mission church, thus creating a hermeneutic circle).

Yet, to some of the Bushmen I talked with the matter is not that straightforward: “he is not so bad”; indeed, to others “//Gāuwa is our Jesus of old times”! (Guenther, “Jesus Christ” 206–7 and *Tricksters* 116–17; Schmidt, *Märchen* 241). A corollary of that view, which I obtained in the form of an elaborate myth which the teller related as an “old, old Bushman story” (Guenther, *Bushman* 45–46), is that Jesso Kriste is one of several //Gāuwa figures (whose special role it is to dispense the trance dance curers’ healing arrows). As I gathered from numerous religious conversations I have had with mission Bushmen, the trickster-god is thus both a stumbling block to cross-religious understanding and a spiritual, mystical *bon à penser*, with which to explore some of mysteries and ambiguities that surround the key figure of their new faith.⁹

Conclusion: “/hibi dua?” or “What’s up, Doc?”—The Trickster and “The Paradox of Order”

The Bushmen—and hunter-gatherers generally—are a remarkably open society, egalitarian, accommodating of individuals and neighbors, especially the Bantu-speaking pastoralists with whom they have had associations for close to two thousand years. Because of that association their culture—especially its field of religion and mythology—is a shreds-and-patches amalgamation of ideas they have foraged from neighboring cultures in a spirit of cross-cultural openness and curiosity (Guenther, *Tricksters* 86–93).

I think the trickster—this culture’s chief protagonist and divinity—can be credited for some of that openness and tolerance. As the embodiment of ambiguity he is also a being of all possibilities. He reminds humans that their ways of going about the world and its affairs—which humans, especially those in the West, tend to do with such earnest deliberation—are only *one* set of ways, one of many. That there *are* other ways—or even other worlds—is the message of the trickster. When Puck exclaims “Lord, what fools these mortals be!” he drives home that message—in a spirit of bemusement, coupled with amusement and even a touch of amazement at the antic ways of mankind and their world, the boundedness of their understanding and vision, their boundless folly.

“What’s up Doc?” is very much the trickster’s question, when he comes across a human (say one Elmer Fudd) engaged in a task (say washing his car

or painting his backyard fence) that to him is so eminently ordinary, so much a given. To Bugs the trickster, who's just popped up from his hole in the ground and come from his other world, that task, any human task, appears more than a little contestable. So he goes about his trickster's business of upsetting the rules and routines that govern the mortal's task (say by splashing the water or paint over Elmer, targeting especially his bald pate, that invites this sort of attention).

As a being from the world of all possibilities and a traveler across the boundaries of each of these worlds, the trickster becomes the outsider looking in, the shit-disturber in the affairs of humans. He alerts us to the "infinite possibilities of the outside" (Zucker 315; also see Turner, "Betwixt," and "Passages" 255), and engenders the unsettling awareness that the monocultural order we impose on our world and lives is relative, as well as finite, specious, and fragile. (He reminds me in this regard of the anthropologist *qua* ethnographer and the premise of cultural relativism.) As the ultimate liminal figure the trickster becomes an agent of creativity, who "reminds us that every construct is constructed [. . . His] constant chatterings and antics remind us that life is endlessly narrative, prolific and open-ended" (Hynes 212–13). This makes out of the "spirit of disorder," an "enabler" "whose actions, good or bad, bring certain ideas and actions into the field of possibility" (Toelken 221; Basso 365). Moreover, as shape-shifter and mingler of categories, deceiver and violator of norms, Trickster reveals the "hidden truths" of instability and disorder underneath order (Koepping 213).

In combination, what the trickster teaches us about order through these lessons—that it is inherently fragile and disorderly as well as arbitrary—amount to what Zucker calls the "paradox of order" (315). That order may not be what structures our world, or that the order there is may be one of a number of orders, is a liberating force for the human imagination. It is one that resonates with the intellectual currents of the new millennium, in which postmodernism and poststructuralism in the humanities, and the aforementioned quantum physics, indeterminacy, chaos-, string-, and M-theories in the sciences, upset our structured universe.

Notes

1. On Saint Peter, see Hynes and Steele. On the devil as trickster, see Zucker 313–14; Russell 62–91; and Guenther, "Jesus Christ" 220.
2. If the trickster category were to be expanded to include all manner of fools and clowns, conmen, stand-up comics, political satirists and cartoonists and the like, tricksters would then still be very much part of our collective Western imagination. (See Hynes and Doty 9; Schnepel.)
3. The fox and coyote are likely variants of one another as they have closely similar traits in their tricksters personas (as well as their personalities as wild and wily animals). A striking case is the Khoisan jackal trickster of southern Africa whom one early folklorist referred to as "Reynard the Fox of Africa" (Bleek, *Reynard*). The

- reason is the close correspondence of certain tales about the jackal to those of the twelfth-century central European Renart (alias Reynard, or Reineke).
4. In profiling the Bushman trickster I have taken much of my information from chapter 4 of my book *Tricksters and Trancers: Bushman Religion and Society*. Other works on this figure are Bleek, *Reynard and Mantis*; Bleek and Lloyd 2–36; Hewitt; Schmidt, “Heiseb” and *Catalogue 2*: 7–222; and Guenther, *Bushman* 115–50.
 5. Apart from revealing a high degree of tolerance for ambiguity within Bushman symbolic and expressive culture (Guenther, *Tricksters* 226–29), such statements attest to the sense of kindredness Bushmen, like hunter-gatherers generally, feel toward animals (Guenther, “Animals”).
 6. One might note that tricksters in other parts of the world have the same problems with their body parts; for instance, the Winnebago’s Wakdjungkaga, who carries his excessively long penis in a box. His member has a mind of its own—which, like its master’s, is dirty—and his lascivious antics gets its owner in trouble. Wakdjungkaga’s anus, too, can get severed and engage in antic tricks. Another set of unintegrated body parts are the Winnebago trickster’s left and right hands, which fight and work across purposes (Radin 17–20, 38–40; see also Koepping 207; and Apte 215).
 7. This is reminiscent of the function of the trickster in the folktales of American slaves, who pitted Br’er Rabbit or John, *qua* folk hero, against the white slave owner and master (see Roberts). To this day we see the trickster as a prominent motif in Canadian First Nations literature and art; a recent study (see Ryan) depicts him as a cultural force through which Native Canadians engage and critique the world of the Euro-Canadians or break down oppressive ethnic and racial stereotypes. I am grateful to Martin Ware for making me aware of some of these dimensions of the contemporary Native Canadian trickster figure.
 8. A similar trickster-Jesus Christ conflation can be found in the oral literature of Native Americans. For instance, among the Winnebago, the trickster Hare can become so merged with Jesus Christ in the minds of some Indians that they will state that they have no need for Jesus Christ, “as they already [have] Hare” (Henderson 104–05). Similarly, the conflation of Jesus with the Algonkian hare-trickster Nanabush—the former’s “living equal”—is the theme of a recent play entitled “If Jesus Met Nanabush” (1993) by the First Nation Canadian playwright Alanis King-Odjig.
 9. Elsewhere (Guenther, “Jesus Christ”) I have explored the ways in which Bushman converts have attempted to reconcile the trickster elements of their traditional religion with their new Christian beliefs (as well as traced tricksteresque elements within Christian religion itself, especially during medieval times when the “spirit of the trickster” [Jung 67] was especially wanton within the walls of the ecclesia).

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