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Tricksters: Change Through Chaos

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Tricksters: Change Through Chaos

Irenae Aigbedion

Many cultures, if not all, contain trickster gods or trickster types. In mythology, folklore, religion, and even children's stories such as Little Red Riding Hood, we find glimpses of the trickster flouting social conventions and brewing disorder alongside discord. From many tales of tricksters, for example the account of Ragnarok wherein the trickster Loki ushers in the end of the world, we can see that death and destruction often accompany their "mischief." In spite of this fact, cultures throughout the ages have been fixated by the character of the trickster. What do tricksters represent that makes them so very intriguing? In *Transformations of the Trickster*, literary scholar Helen Lock argues, "Trickster's trickery calls into question fundamental assumptions about the way the world is organized, and reveals the possibility of transforming them [the assumptions] (even if often for ignoble ends)" (qtd. in Windling, 1). While tricksters do embody unpredictability and the inversion of natural order, they also represent the paradoxes of human existence and the potential for change.

When we hear the word "trickster," we tend to think of mischievous itinerant gods and spirits who play pranks on humans and other gods alike. Oftentimes, tricksters, such as Hermes in Greek mythology and Legba in the Dahomean culture, are also intermediaries for deities in the heavens and mortals on earth. As messenger for the gods, the trickster becomes a literal "boundary-crosser" (Hyde, 7) while s/he moves between physical planes of existence. However, this role takes on a figurative sense when we consider the fact that tricksters quite often cross social boundaries, behaving with complete disregard for propriety. For example, in many stories, tricksters regularly engage in taboo sexual acts such as adultery and necrophilia. In story ten of Melville and Frances Herskovits' *Dahomean Narrative*, we see that not only does the trickster Legba assist his siblings in killing three women, but he also immediately fulfills his necrophilic impulse (Herskovits, 142-144). (We are further shocked when we remember that the gods have killed these passersby simply for failing to equally divide a group of cowries.) With their sometimes horrifying and repulsive actions, "tricksters cross lines, breaking or blurring connections and distinctions between 'right and wrong, sacred and profane, clean and dirty, male and female, young and old, living and dead' (Hyde 7)" (qtd. in "Tricksters," 1).

While analyzing these tricksters, or "trouble lovers," as symbols, we begin to recognize recurring personality traits, physical characteristics, and modes of behavior among tricksters of different cultures. In fact, almost all tricksters have the same basic characteristics. According to Peter Klaus Koepping, author of "Absurdity and Hidden Truth: Cunning Intelligence and Grotesque Body Images as Manifestations of the Trickster," two of the most important (and easily observed) traits are the trickster's "cunning form of intelligence" and "grotesqueness of the body imagery used to indicate the inversion of order" (Koepping, 194). In Barbara Babcock-Abrahams' "'A Tolerated Margin of Mess': The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered," the author asserts that tricksters also typically:

- "tend to inhabit crossroads, open public places, doorways, and thresholds. [They hardly ever have their own homes and] are usually situated between the social cosmos and the other world or chaos;
- have an ability to disperse and to disguise themselves...;
- are generally amoral and asocial - aggressive, vindictive, vain, defiant of authority, etc.;

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- exhibit a human/animal dualism and may appear as a human with animal characteristics or vice versa..." (Babcock-Abrahams, 160).

The defining feature of a trickster, however, is that everything about his being contains dualism. He is never completely evil, nor is he ever completely good. His very nature is an "expression of ambiguity and paradox, of a confusion of all customary categories" (Babcock-Abrahams, 160). Not clearly defined by the black and white groups into which humans sort the world, a trickster inhabits a grey limbo, existing as both a solitary individual and a part of society. We see this type of dual existence when considering Legba in the tales of *Dahomean Narrative*. Although Legba frequently interacts with humans and their society (he even marries the daughter of a king), he is not truly part of their world. In fact, "because Legba always created scandals, he was not to live in houses...his place would always be in front of houses" (Herskovits, 146). Similarly, Legba has no real home in the heavens, as he was left behind on earth after tricking the creator god, Mawu.

It is this dualism that enables the trickster in both character and in action to typify the dichotomies and paradoxes in human existence. For example, when the titan Prometheus steals fire from the gods, he lays the earliest foundation for civilization but at the cost of introducing human mortality. Additionally, after humanity's "fall from grace," any boons from the gods take on a dual nature. Koepping writes, "they [the gifts] are pleasant and necessary for life, but they are also unpleasant and difficult to obtain" (205). Using agricultural references, Koepping points out that to have grain (or any nutrition necessary for life) that once grew profusely, people now had to labor and struggle. Babcock-Abrahams asserts that a trickster "embodies the fundamental contradiction of our existence: the contradiction between individual and society, between freedom and constraint" (Babcock Abrahams, 161). As much as humans desire self-sufficiency, we are gregarious beings, always seeking some sense of community and society.

As instigators, whether for good or ill, tricksters represent an impetus for change. Tricksters' actions almost always lead to an alteration in nature and in human life. In *Dahomean Narrative*, because Legba humiliates Mawu with one of his tricks, Mawu decides to ascend to the skies, marking the separation of humanity from divinity. However, Legba continues to irritate Mawu by having a woman throw water at her in the sky; angered by this action, Mawu raises herself and the sky further away from the earth (Herskovits, 150). Not only do Legba's pranks change the close relationship between humans and gods into a distant one, but Legba is also indirectly responsible for altering nature. Again analyzing the story of Prometheus, we see that this trickster's deeds signal a great change. The introduction of fire leads not only to cooked food (a move away from eating raw meat like animals), but also to religious rituals (Koepping, 206), and the discovery of practical applications for fire (i.e. heating and light). However, not all change is good; trickster also "represent sudden, massive, sometimes violent and destructive change" (Anonymous, "Playing" 2009). After Prometheus' deception comes the gods' revenge in the form of Pandora's Box, which when opened, unleashes all evils into the world. In Norse mythology, the trickster god Loki is meant to reappear at the battle of Ragnarok to herald the end of the universe (Windling, 4).

Taking Wakdjunkaga, the trickster of the Winnebago Indians, as an example, we see that tricksters also represent life free from the trappings of civilization. In the early stories of Wakdjunkaga, the trickster comes across as a naïve being, almost unaware of all the parts of his body. He travels at will, has a close connection to nature, and is mostly concerned with feeding himself. However, for the Winnebago tribe, Wakdjunkaga also stands for a satirical commentary

on tribal customs. For example, Babcock-Abrahams analyzes episode 10 of the trickster stories. In this installment, Wakdjunkaga cuts the head off of a young raccoon and places it on a pike inside the raccoons' home (Babcock-Abrahams, 179). Babcock-Abrahams states that this story is meant to criticize a Winnebago war practice that many tribesmen denied or attributed to their enemies (Babcock-Abrahams, 179). In this situation, we see the trickster as a vehicle for social observations and indirect criticism. He brings to light certain hypocrisies accepted in a culture. It is also interesting to note that Wakdjunkaga is recognized as a "bringer of culture," who pioneered domesticated food plants (Koepping, 208) and the "Medicine Rituals" (Koepping, 208). However, in this capacity, Wakdjunkaga represents an inversion of natural order; he does not plant seeds to grow crops, but rather scatters parts of his genitalia into a lake. From these pieces come plants. On a larger scale, it could be argued that by their very violation of societal standards, tricksters create values, morals, and a sense of propriety to which cultures adhere.

Tricksters speak to our natural interest in being independent of normal social conventions. Because they live "interstitially," –in the gaps of one world and the next—tricksters are able to more easily "confuse and escape the structures of society and the order of cultural things" (Babcock-Abrahams, 148). Tricksters are bound neither by the knowledge of what is right or wrong nor of what is expected based on cultural or social values. Tricksters come and go as they please, especially as they hardly ever have homes for themselves. According to Babcock-Abrahams, tricksters typically "tend to inhabit crossroads, open public places, doorways, and thresholds. [They] are usually situated between the social cosmos and the other world or chaos." (Babcock-Abrahams, 159). In addition, tricksters are usually able to shape-shift (from animal appearances to human forms and vice versa), enabling them to freely move between the animal world and the human world. In a metaphorical sense, their shape-shifting represents an ability to switch between a more civilized, moral state of mind and a more primal, even amoral existence. Understanding that tricksters symbolize some of our doubts and aspirations concerning our existence, we are drawn to them. Additionally, we can see parts of ourselves in tricksters, our more uninhibited and powerful characteristics.

As we analyze tricksters throughout different cultures and times, we observe that they have become symbols of questioning human nature and of change. Ultimately, "Trickster represents a certain flexibility of mind and spirit, a willingness to defy authority and invent clever solutions." ("Tricksters," 6); these solutions may even reshape the world. The trickster's readiness to bend the rules is especially appealing as we realize, "we [too] shall probably always try to violate boundaries" (Koepping, 197). Further investigation into the nature of tricksters also raises more questions on what more they could possibly represent. For example, many anthropologists and psychologists assert that the trickster represents an inversion of "natural" order, a contravention of social norms. However, what if the trickster is actually a return to our true natural states, a more primal consciousness? According to Paul Radin, author of *The Trickster*, the trickster seems to be "a reflection of an earlier rudimentary stage of consciousness" (qtd. from Babcock-Abrahams, 163). Nonetheless, tricksters will constantly remind us that life is always changing.

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