

The Trickster's Transformation – from Africa to America

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Abstract

One of the most favorite characters in many African myths and folk tales is definitely a trickster. As a part of the African cultural heritage, the trickster has an important place in the cultures of many African nations. He is an entertainer, teacher, judge and a sage. Many comic aspects of life are brought together through the trickster, as well as serious social processes. He rewards and punishes. He is a deity and an ordinary man, if not an animal. During the Middle Passage Era he goes along with his suffering people to the New World. New circumstances require him to change and assume new forms. He has to be a rebel and a protector of his people due to slavery and violation of human rights. So, from comical spider and monkey back in Africa, we now have new characters such as Railroad Bill, Brother John, Br'er Rabbit and many hoodoo doctors. African oral tradition is transformed and becomes the basis for African-American literature.

Keywords: African-American literature, African myths, the trickster

Introduction

African trickster is an important figure in the myths of the African oral tradition. Among the Akan, the trickster god Anansi is so popular that there is even a special genre of stories - *anansesem* (spider stories). Although his habits and desires are those of men, the trickster is usually in animal form. It is usually in the form of a spider, like Anansi among the Akan, Ture among the Zande and Gizo among Hausa. In some cultures, it is in the form of a rabbit, like in the mythology and stories of Central and East Africa. While in West Africa, and among some peoples of Central Africa, the most common is turtle, as Ijapa in the Yoruba culture. In some South Africa stories he takes the form of gazelles and jackals (Peek, 2004: 961).

Thanks to its universality, and often existing beyond the religious context, the similar trickster stories can be found in the oral traditions of different peoples of Africa. Although the main characters are animals, their characteristics are distinctly human, and sometimes they appear in human form, or even as a deity. In many African cultures it is considered that the trickster was a man or a god once, but because of his escapade he was punished and sent to live as a weak animal at the bottom of the food chain. He was forced to use his cunning to survive. In many stories, he is presented as ungrateful, dishonest, unreliable person, but his unreliability does not lie in the immaturity but in the calculated selfishness and controlling the situation. Susan Feldman (1963: 15) gives an example of his victims: "Though in a given cycle trickster will victimize any of his fellow creatures, he usually concentrates on a particular prey. Trickster's favorite foils and dupes are Lion, Elephant and Hyena. The victim is always larger and therefore stronger; inevitably slow and dull – witted, often hard working and honest." A reward in the form of food is what usually motivates the trickster in the stories. Taking into account that Africa has experienced difficult periods of food shortage and hunger throughout the history, the main character's greed is only an act of self-preservation and shows the real situations and real social problems. John Roberts (1989: 27) explains "When faced with social and natural conditions in which individuals find themselves literally in a struggle for their physical survival, harmony, friendship, and trust are ideals difficult to sustain, while deception, greed, and cleverness can easily emerge as valuable adaptive behavioral traits if pursued in ways that do not threaten the well – being of the group". Therefore, the acceptance of African trickster as a sacred being, mainly as a deity, who appears in many myths, influenced on the attitude that the trickster's behavior is acceptable in certain situations. "As gods or god – like figures, the actions of sacred tricksters conveyed the idea that material shortage was an aspect of the natural order of things, and that behavior which involved trickery to compensate for it was appropriate under certain conditions" (Roberts, 1989).

Accepting his behavior as a natural state, the people of Africa does not question the trickster's morality, but expect new adventures with pleasure. Feldman also noticed that unlike the heroes of fairy tales that always have some supernatural powers, the trickster always relies on his cunning. "Trickster operates in a real world where the hero can not count on supernatural helpers and clever cheating replaces magic" (Feldman, 1963: 17). Therefore, the trickster is much closer to mortals. A man can identify with him, and even copy him in certain situations requiring cunning. Feldman also explains (1963: 15-16) the relationship between the trickster and the hierarchical social order: "The trickster's actions offered Africans a model of behavioral patterns that facilitated both individual and communal well-being without violating or threatening communal identity and values. While those at top of the hierarchy could rely on their inherent power-defined in both religious and social terms – those at the bottom demonstrated worth and ability to survive through native intelligence. This natural state of affairs was constantly reinforced through the trickster's interactions with antagonists in the natural world as well as in the supernatural".

Many well-known anthropologists and psychologists have dealt with the issue of the trickster's role in myths around the world. Karl Kerenyi (1969: 185) gives an explanation that may also relate to the African mythic trickster: "Nothing demonstrates the meaning of the all – controlling social order more impressively than the religious recognition of that which evades this order, in a figure who is the exponent and personification of the life of the body: never wholly subdued, ruled by lust and hunger, forever running into pain and injury, cunning and stupid in action. Disorder belongs to the totality of life, and the spirit of this disorder is the trickster. His function in an archaic society is to add disorder to order and so make a whole, to render possible, within the fixed bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted."

In searching for the trickster's origins, many start their quest from Stern's saying "Each man is his own primitive ancestor." (Kerenyi, 1969: 207) Released of social norms, the trickster relies on instincts and laws of nature, as the first people did. Among the Dogon people, the trickster Sofa-Yurugu mythologically represents the life cycle of man, from birth to death, but also the cycle of humanity, from the first primitive people to the present day. In his character survived a lot of untamed wilderness and instinctive behaviors that are equal to animal. Therefore, it is no wonder that all the tricksters are in the form of animals or with certain animal characteristics.

Even the famous psychologist Carl Jung dealt with the question of the origin of the trickster's character and his animalistic side. "In picaresque tales, in carnivals and revels, in sacred and magical rites, in man's religious fears and exaltations, this phantom of the trickster haunts the mythology of all ages... He is obviously a "psychologem", an archetypal psychic structure of extreme antiquity. In his clearest manifestations he is faithful copy of an undifferentiated human consciousness, corresponding to a psyche that has already left the animal level." (as cited in Radin, 1969: 202) Jung's archetypal psychic structure as a type of personality that existed at the dawn of mankind, according to Jung, exists even today, but it is hidden and suppressed in the subconsciousness. It is revealed during the irrational and senseless behavior, when it seems as if the man has two minds: the mind of modern man and the animal mind. The emergence of ambiguities or two-mind games is well known among the tricksters of African mythology. All tricksters, such as Anansi, Esu, Legba, and Ogo-Yurugu, possess the power of two-mindedness. However, this two-mindedness is not the trickster's unconscious state because of his evolutionary roots, but it is his planned goal when he wants to achieve or prove something. The appearance of duplicity is not only reflected in trickster's doings, but also in the language which becomes extremely complex.

The African people are aware that there are certain limits required in order for them to survive, but these limits are both fragile and too strict. The mere duplicity appears in human life with the need to self inflict some restrictions, but also to strive for complete freedom. This ambiguity makes the life complete, and tricksters like to play with it. "They transform the meaningless into the meaningful, not by becoming saviors, but by remaining ambiguous, facing both ways on every boundary." (Pelton, 1989: 234)

Trickster's conflict with the gods, usually with a supreme deity, shows human revolt towards the laws of nature. In the stories of Anansi, conflict is inevitable; sometimes due to his own interests, and sometimes because he wants to help humanity. Legba, the trickster in Fon mythology, most often comes into conflict with Mavu, master of the universe, life and death. Esu, as a mediator between gods and men, comes into conflict with everyone, depending on which side injustice is made. He connects heaven and earth, society, nature, social classes, consciousness and unconsciousness, past and future, the divine and beastly in man. He is a hero and a coward, noble and cunning, always present in an attempt to establish "worldly religion in which the gods exist not to be served, but to be conquered." (Ricketts, 1964: 350) and where "the only experience of sacredness is of the self-transcending mind of man and its accomplishments." (Ricketts, 1964: 345)

The New Trickster

The popular trickster from many African stories found his place and in the stories of a new world. As a part of the African heritage and an important element of the African oral tradition, the trickster adapted to the new climate and new situations. His supernatural functions were suppressed under the pressure of slavery and the prohibition of the practice of African traditional religions. He now becomes the protector of the oppressed, fulfilling their dreams of freedom and escaping cruel masters. The slaves compared with him, imagining themselves as bold impostors. However, the big difference between the old and the new trickster is that the new trickster acts instinctively, individually, carried by instincts and basic needs of the common man, sometimes acting even ruthlessly. Unlike the old tricksters who knew almost all the secrets of the universe (such as Esu or Anansi), who always kept the situation under control, a new trickster is limited to what is in the range of knowledge of ordinary people, carried unknowingly through the situations and getting away only with the help of his intelligence or luck. The desire to obtain food or money, the need to sleep or get away from work, the dream of freedom and vengeance to slaveholders represent the civilizational decline of the African man in relation to the former complexity that is easily recognized in the trickster stories. The former magnificence and mystery of a divine trickster is gone. Seeing how they are wronged, and how white people are getting rich at the expense of their work, the slaves no longer include moral messages in their trickster stories, but the hope, the dream of liberation or wealth. One such trickster is often in the stories the slave himself. The most famous among them is John, known for his adventures and outwitting with his master.

1. Brother John

There is a whole cycle of stories about the John the trickster, originated from many situations that really happened to slaves or they secretly dreamed to happen. The adventures with their masters and deceit that are performed on them from the collective is personified into one person - John. John is an unsophisticated slave carried by ambitions of ordinary man who wants his freedom. His ruse is within the limits of eavesdropping on the estate, flattering to the masters and pretending that he is of utmost importance. The story of an old master, and John (or Jack), also known as the old master and the slave, besides the South - can be found in Haiti, Jamaica, Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands. The stories are often performed accompanied by banjo. (Hamilton, 1985: 160)

2. Railroad Bill

The desire for freedom and revenge goes to the extent that even notorious African-American bandits of the nineteenth century became tricksters. Among the famous national heroes of that era were John Hardy, Morris Slater known as Railroad Bill, Aaron Harris and Stagolee. Bandits' conflicts with the law, which is mostly conducted by whites, and their skillfully avoiding of penalties, thrilled African Americans. Although most of them were hardened criminals and murderers, their revolt and causing damage to the white authorities seemed like a great satisfaction of the disempowered blacks. Lawrence Levine in his book *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* claims that African-American heroes bandits have no resemblance to the romanticized outlaws like Robin Hood. (2007: 415) The romanticized outlaws live the life of bandits in the last resort, their crimes are selective, targeted at those who have the economic or political power. They're robbing from the rich to give to the poor. They become friends of the oppressed. African-American outlaws of nineteenth century have neither one thing in common with the noble bandits. Their entry into the African-American folklore in the role of the new tricksters (although they cheated the authorities, but also to the detriment of their own people) is the result of popularity of antagonists who are in opposition to whites and rich slavers. The former actuality of slaves to celebrate their rebels grew into a glorification of all who are in conflict with whites. One of these bandits was Railroad Bill who gained his fame in 1893, killing a police officer in Alabama. The next three years he was hiding along the railway line, traveling by freight trains and stealing cans of food that, under the threat of death, he was selling to the poor blacks. In 1896 he was killed by two bounty hunters who got a reward of 1250 dollars. (Levine, 2007: 410-413) In many African-American stories Railroad Bill was presented as a con man who had magical powers and thanks to them managed to avoid his capture for three years. He could turn into a sheep, brown dog or red fox. This magical addition to converting into the animal form is the legacy of the old African trickster myth.

3. Br'er Rabbit

In fear of being punished for open accusations and ridiculing of their masters, slaves mask the reality and the characters in new animal adventures. The main character and favorite trickster is a rabbit, known among African Americans as Br'er Rabbit. Octave Thanet in his article "Folk-Lore in Arkansas" wrote "All over the South the stories of Br'er Rabbit are told.

Everywhere not only ideas and plots are repeated, but the very words often are the same; one gets a new vision of the power of oral tradition". (1892: 122) African oral tradition was preserved in the African-American community. Although deprived of their rights, the power of storytelling could not be taken away from the slaves. Under the influence of the old tricksters' stories where they changed shapes, the slaves also converted their new tricksters and freedom fighters into the animals. These are not gods, like Anansi, but metaphorically ordinary people with their mortal characteristics. Anansi, a favorite character of oral tradition of West Africa, eventually disappears in the United States. New generations of descendants of slaves and free African Americans are turning to new idols and heroes that are much closer to their life needs. Anansi survives in just a few stories as Aunt Nancy in South Carolina and Georgia. (Levine, 2007: 105)

The freedom of African Americans to express themselves through the stories about cunning animals, primarily through the stories about Br'er Rabbit, is significantly higher than in the stories of Brother John. Br'er Rabbit is a free animal that constantly tricks stronger than itself, sometimes even causing an oppressor's death. The same situations are repeated in all stories - the strong want to catch the weak, but they are just fooled by these weak. The strong ones are usually a lion, fox, wolf or a bear. When asked why the rabbit appears in the role of a cunning animal Abigail Christensen responds "It must be remembered that the Rabbit represents the colored man. He is not as large nor as strong, as Swift, as wise, nor as handsome as the elephant, the alligator, the bear, the deer, the serpent, the fox, but he is 'de mos' cunning' man dat go on fo' leg' and by this cunning he gains success. So the negro, without education or wealth, could only hope to succeed by stratagem." (1892: 11-12)

Br'er rabbit's cunning is all about the survival, where he, as a weak animal on the bottom of the food chain, has to cope with larger ones than himself. There are many stories in which the wolf or the fox keep trying to catch and eat him, but he successfully escapes each time. Probably the most famous story is "The Tar Baby". Virginia Hamilton, in her collection of African-American stories *The People Could Fly*, states (1985: 19) that there are nearly three hundred versions of the story of the rabbit and the tar doll. In the Bahamas in the role of the fox is an elephant who makes the doll, in Brazil the old woman catches monkeys with the help of sticky wax dolls, and even in Africa, among the Yoruba and Ewe people, there are roots of similar stories. The rabbit, in African-American tales, really applies its cunning in different situations, from the fight for its own life, over the petty thievery, to the courtship. Octave Thanet connects the rabbit's cunning with hopes of African Americans when he says "Br'er Rabbit, indeed, personifies the obscure ideals of the negro race. Ever since the world began, the weak have been trying to outwit the strong; Br'er Rabbit typifies the revolt of his race. His successes are just the kind of successes that his race have craved." (1892: 122)

4. The hoodoo doctors

In African tradition, except the gods, only the priests had the right to use magic without prejudice. All others were classified as evil witches and it was considered that their magic is negative because they used it for their own purposes. In the new trickster stories, hoodoo doctors lose the function of the priests. Magic is available to everyone and everyone can be a wizard. Of course, there are certain rules about who is really a wizard, destined by birth. However, losing a sacred function, wizards (hoodoo doctors) are much closer to ordinary people. They become their heroes, their favorite tricksters that they can look up to or enjoy their adventures. Hoodoo doctors use magic to help people, not just in trouble, but in order to achieve their desires. Magic serves as the strongest weapon for disenfranchised slaves, and a scam done by magic is the greatest satisfaction that slaves can get – even if it is just a fictional one. The liberation with the help of magic seems to be much closer, if we know that in every African-American community, there is at least one semi-skilled hoodoo doctor. They are no longer untouchable deities, but mortals, people in the same position as the other slaves, ready to take pity on the suffering of their people.

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