CHAPTER ONE

Interpreting the Trickster

I will devise matter enough out of this Shallow to keep Prince Harry in continual laughter.

Falstaff (Henry IV, 2: V,i)

Yes, by God, you need technique to make a good job out of life. All you can get. You need to take necessity and make her do what you want; get your feet on her old bones and build your mansions out of her rock.

Joyce Cary, The Horse’s Mouth

Loutish, lustful, puffed up with boasts and lies, ravenous for foolery and food, yet managing always to draw order from ordure, the trickster appears in the myths and folktales of nearly every traditional society, sometimes as a god, more often as an animal. Seemingly trivial and altogether lawless, he arouses affection and even esteem wherever his stories are told, as he defies mythic seriousness and social logic. Just as skillfully, he has slipped out of our contemporary interpretive nets to thumb his nose at both scholarly and popular understanding of so-called primitive peoples. Yet these peoples too know their tricksters as the very embodiment of elusiveness.

One of the Ashanti trickster tales strikingly illustrates the way in which Ananse, the spider-trickster, seizes the Ashanti mind by fooling with its ordinary categories. Ananse has promised to cure the mother of Nyame, the High God, and has pledged his life as a forfeit if he fails. When the old woman dies, Nyame insists that Ananse too must die. Then, as the executioners are preparing to carry out the sentence, Ananse plays his hidden trump. He has sent his son to burrow under
the place of judgment, and at the last moment the son cries out as Ananse has bidden him:

When you kill Ananse, the tribe will come to ruin!
When you pardon Ananse, the tribe will shake with voices!

Nyame's chief minister turns to the High God and says, "This people belongs to you and to Asase Yaa. Today you are about to kill Ananse, but Yaa, Old-mother-earth, says that if you let him go, it will be well." Nyame complies, and thus it is, the Ashanti say, that the expression, "You are as wonderful as Ananse," has gained currency among them.¹

Tricksterlike, Ananse speaks the truth by dissembling. The Ashanti cherish him for his gall and he delights them with his tricks, but the echoes of the complex relationships between Nyame and Asase Yaa, Queen Mother and King, that float through the story hint that Ananse has become synonymous with everything amazing for deeper reasons. Somehow, his slipperiness fulfills the nation's need for healthy commerce between what is above and what is below, between male and female, between apparent and hidden order. Without him the demands of the earth will be stifled, wholeness will vanish, and the people themselves will lose their coherence.

This simple tale suggests that tricksters' tricks may not be all play and no work. Unfortunately, trickster tales have seemed either interesting but not funny, or very clever but not interesting. The second view especially has worked against understanding the trickster. It has often prevented scholars from taking him seriously, and moreover, by confusing folk humor with the sort of inconsequence we know as cuteness, it has tended to lead students of the trickster to treat his seriousness so ponderously that they have turned this most gleeful of mythic figures into a solemn philosophical statement. The difficulties that historians of religion, as well as anthropologists, have had in dealing with folklore show

that the problem reaches beyond the trickster into the area of cross-cultural hermeneutics. Still, E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s collection of Zande trickster tales, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s attempt to fit the trickster into the categories and processes of the “savage” mind, and Georges Dumézil’s study of Loki’s place in the Scandinavian branch of Indo-European mythology suggest that these giants of twentieth-century scholarship came to believe that the odd, nearly omnipresent, supposedly peripheral figure of the trickster bears more weight than either anthropology or the history of religions has thus far been able to grant him.²

But that is just the question: how can one discover the meaning of the trickster? Or rather, how does one uncover the meaning the trickster has come to have for peoples with a rich, complex religious life, who know the trickster as a figure of the margins yet somehow of the center? The problem, I am convinced, is finally one of language. The trickster speaks—and embodies—a vivid and subtle religious language, through which he links animality and ritual transformation, shapes culture by means of sex and laughter, ties cosmic process to personal history, empowers divination to change boundaries into horizons, and reveals the passages to the sacred embedded in daily life.

By looking at the Ashanti, Fon, Yoruba, and Dogon trickster-figures in their social and mythical contexts and in the light of several contemporary ways of thinking about “primitive” religion, this book seeks to interpret the trickster’s language with enough suppleness to remain faithful to it and with enough imagination to challenge our own cultural canons. This examination shows that the trickster is not an archetypal Idea, but a symbolic pattern that, like the High God or the Divine Mother, includes a wide range of individual figures. His movement between worlds, I believe, forms a human

world sacred both as given and as process, both as social enterprise and as divine gift. The trickster depicts man as a sort of inspired handyman, tacking together the bits and pieces of experience until they become what they are—a web of many-layered being. In symbolizing the transforming power of the imagination as it pokes at, plays with, delights in, and shatters what seems to be until it becomes what is, he discloses how the human mind and heart are themselves epiphanies of a calmly transcendent sacredness so boldly engaged with this world that it encompasses both nobility and messiness—feces, lies, and even death.

But why did I choose to study just these four West African societies and their trickster-figures? First, Africa provides a good vantage point for a new look at the trickster, because most studies have focused hitherto on North American Indian cultures. Yet Africans in general and West Africans in particular have also delighted in telling his stories and in recognizing his ties to solemn ritual, great divinities, the market, psychic structure, and other central themes of African religious thought. Furthermore, the hard necessity of making an arbitrary choice to study only certain figures (after rejecting as physically impractical and theoretically bewildering any effort to deal in depth with all African tricksters at once) is softened by the advantage of working within the geographical and cultural boundaries of West Africa. These boundaries are clear enough to make comparison possible, yet they allow sufficient room for different ethnographic methods as well as for useful variations in the trickster pattern itself.

Moreover, within West Africa the choice of which trickster-figures to study becomes much less arbitrary. Clearly, a study that chooses to make use of others' fieldwork and interpretations must look at societies which trustworthy ethnographers have dealt with reliably and imaginatively and whose tricksters are prominent enough to have been treated at length. Within this framework, then, I made the decision to examine
Ananse of the Ashanti, Legba of the Fon, Eshu of the Yoruba, and Ogo-Yurugu of the Dogon. Each of these trickster-figures is complex and intellectually provocative. The societies to which each belongs are all in some way major West African societies. And, most important of all, these societies and their tricksters have been the subject of massive and intellectually valuable research. The research often needs to be questioned; I have tried to question it and to make it question itself, but there is no doubt that the sheer volume of material available makes questioning simpler. Additionally, the Ashanti and the Yoruba have been studied almost wholly by English anthropologists, and the Fon and the Dogon chiefly by French, so that the diversity among the tricksters is demonstrated by the differences in outlook, style, and aim of Bascom and Maupoil, Rattray and Griaule, or Mercier and Herskovits.

**A REVIEW OF PREVIOUS THEORIES**

Before moving on to Ananse, Legba, Eshu, and Ogo-Yurugu, we need to consider briefly some of the ways others have dealt with the tricksters and some of the problems they have encountered. Trickster-figures appear in all parts of the world in hunting and fishing, pastoral, and agricultural societies at every stage of religious development. Furthermore, the trickster shows himself in a baffling array of mythical masks. S. G. F. Brandon has suggested that these many "guises"—in which the trickster may be "deceiver, thief, parricide, cannibal, inventor, creator, benefactor, magician, perpetrator of

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3. The work of Melville and Frances Herskovits among the Fon is a major exception. The difficulties of interpreting the fragmentary religious documents of other times and places raise many methodological issues. Pertinent treatments of these issues include Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa, eds., *The History of Religion: Essays in Methodology; Eliade, The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion and Patterns in Comparative Religion; Jonathan Z. Smith, "I Am a Parrot (Red)" and "When the Bough Breaks"; Hans Penner, "The Poverty of Functionalism" and "Is Phenomenology a Method for the Study of Religion?"; and Max Gluckman, Closed Systems and Open Minds: The Limits of Naivety in Social Anthropology.*
obscene acts”—reflect a “mythological portrayal of a kind of surd-factor, of diverse manifestation and common occurrence in human experience.” This is a tantalizing suggestion, but most attempts to strip away the trickster’s masks fail to bring his many faces into a clear focus. These failures fall into two broad categories: those which split him into contradictory and conflicting beings and those which accept his ambiguity but seek to explain it away. Laura Makarius rejects these two interpretive tendencies for the following reasons:

If one limits oneself to examining this complex myth-structure in itself, without reference to realities lying outside it, one can only choose between two paths: to strive to explain the coexistence of contradictory traits in a single figure or to consider it as the result of the overlapping of two different figures. Those who have taken the first path have worn themselves out in psychological analyses without reaching acceptable results. The second path begins with an arbitrary assumption and ends by dissolving the mythic figure, all without explaining the figures resulting from this dismemberment or their supposed overlapping.5

Makarius proposes her own interpretation of the trickster, based on the assumption that his ambiguity lies in the social experience of those who speak of him in their myths and tales. A similar assumption of the importance of the trickster’s social context has guided this book, and certainly Makarius’s analysis of the trickster’s meaning calls for a most careful examination. Here, however, her remarks simply serve to give some order to the welter of previous interpretations of the trickster, which we must look at, however briefly, before examining the four figures who are the chief subjects of this book.

Daniel Brinton seems to have been the first to give the name “trickster” to the baffling figure of North American Indian


5. Laura Makarius, “Le Mythe du ‘Trickster,’” pp. 18–19 (my translation). Cf. Angelo Brelich’s observation that “to create, conserve, and reshape a figure such as the trickster, a society must have had its own reasons, needs, and aims” (my translation); “Il Trickster,” p. 134.
mythology and folklore who was a gross deceiver, a crude prankster, a creator of the earth, a shaper of culture, and a fool caught in his own lies. 6 In any event, by the end of the nineteenth century, the term had become standard, and the great anthropologist Franz Boas was struggling to grasp how the trickster "combines in one personage no less than two and sometimes three or more seemingly different and contrary roles." 7 The chief problem, as Mac Linscott Ricketts saw very clearly in his important survey of the attempts to understand the North American Indian trickster, was to penetrate the "kind of logic [that] combines all these disparate elements into one mythical personality." He is

the maker of the earth and/or . . . the one who changes the chaotic myth-world into the ordered creation of today; he is the slayer of monsters, the thief of daylight, fire, water, and the like for the benefit of man; he is the teacher of cultural skills and customs; but he is also a prankster who is grossly erotic, insatiably hungry, inordinately vain, deceitful, and cunning toward friends as well as foes; a restless wanderer upon the face of the earth; and a blunderer who is often the victim of his own tricks and follies. 8

The logic shaping the trickster has been a rock upon which many good scholars have foundered. Most attempts to interpret tricksters and their myths leave the figure himself curiously untouched; the many angles of approach which interpreters have used have not come to grips with his ambiguity. Some have seen him as the degenerated remnant of a far more noble figure. Brinton sought the cause of this degeneration in a confusion and a trivialization of language. 9 Raffaele Pettazoni, in his valiant effort to trace the historical development

9. Ibid., p. 328. See Brinton, Myths of the New World, p. 194.
of religious phenomena, has seen the trickster as a degraded, folklorized Master of the Animals, but both these hypotheses dissolve the trickster's multiformality without grasping its meaning. Others, committed not so much to a historical hermeneutic as to a certain theory of social and personal evolution, have similarly failed to grapple with the trickster as he is, but have seen him as a kind of myth on the make, a primitive construct moving toward a higher mode of sacredness. Franz Boas, Paul Radin, and Carl Jung, for instance, are convinced that the original nature of the trickster was that of the fooler-fool, and that his gathering of power and importance shows the impact of social progress, shamanic interference, or the growth of primitive man from an undifferentiated psychic state to a mature capacity for differentiation. As a result, they believe, a younger, more simply heroic mythic personage has emerged from the cocoon of the older, grosser figure. Ugo Bianchi, too, despite the erudition of his analysis, looks on the trickster as an early form of gnostic dualism and thus has his eye more on Egyptian and other religious systems than on the trickster himself.

Ricketts's own view, supported by extensive research, insists quite rightly that the lewd, gluttonous fool so aptly called "trickster" nonetheless establishes the world as it is, no matter how unthinkingly or selfishly, against the plans of the gods and the threats of monsters. He is simultaneously trickster, transformer, and culture hero, and "all these elements are integrated into one character, who, in reality, is none other


than Man.” 13 Mircea Eliade recognizes what Ricketts means to imply by this identification:

Ricketts sees in the Trickster the image of man in his efforts to become what he must become—the master of the world. Such a definition can be accepted with the condition that the image of man be situated in an imaginary universe impregnated by sacredness. It is not a question of an image of man in a humanistic, rationalistic, or voluntaristic sense. In fact, the Trickster reflects what can be called a mythology of the human condition. He opposes God’s decision to make man immortal and to assure him an existence somehow paradisiacal, in a pure and rich world free of all contraries. 14

It is true that Ricketts understands the trickster to be a “myth-being,” a figure belonging to the mythic time of human origins, who is not “atheistic” since he knows and recognizes the power of the High God, of spirits, and of shamans. Yet Ricketts believes that the trickster’s opposition to that power is absolute. He shows man’s true being: “at once noble and foolish, heroic and cowardly, daring and deceitful, often beaten but never defeated,” 15 seeking to establish a “worldly religion,” in which the gods exist “not to be served, but to be conquered,” 16 and in which “the only experience of sacredness is of the self-transcending mind of man and its accomplishments.” 17

Thus Ricketts sees the trickster as the symbolic agent of the human struggle to make the world human, the precursor of Prometheus, Milton’s Satan, Nietzsche’s Superman, and the Marxist “new man.” Because “the goal of man’s strivings is power,” 18 the trickster, who embodies this striving, opposes the gods and mocks the shamans. In seeking this mas-

17. Ibid., p. 345.
tery of the world and the creation of a secular sacredness, the trickster often fails. In his failures he becomes a joke, yet in laughing at him men are set free, for "they are laughing at themselves. He endures their ridicule like a suffering savior, and in the end he saves them, through their laughter." 19

These conclusions and the reasoning on which they are based weaken Ricketts's sense of the celebratory purpose of the trickster and undercut his argument that in the trickster's very open-endedness lies his true coherence. 20 By defining religion too narrowly as the will to power, Ricketts has enlisted the trickster too quickly in the post-Renaissance war between heaven and earth. But if such an oversolemnized trickster makes a laughable general and an even more undependable private in that war or any other, his irreducible ambiguity presents one clear problem for all his interpreters, namely, how to juggle the whirling mass of relationships which traditional societies view as their world and for which the trickster is somehow a symbol.

**SOME METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

In part, the modern intelligence tends to undermine at the outset the task of understanding how those who tell trickster

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20. For example, those tricksters which do not show Prometheus features Ricketts assumes to have been tampered with by shamans or exhausted by "semantic depletion" (see Adolf E. Jensen, *Myth and Cult Among Primitive Peoples*, trans. Marianna Tax Choldin and Wolfgang Weissleder [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963], pp. 4–5. Eliade's discussion of the "degradation and the infantilization" of symbols is a more useful way to deal with the exhaustion of symbolic meaning; see *Patterns*, pp. 440–46). However, such historical evidence as does exist, e.g., the cave paintings at Lascaux and the presence of shamanism among the Eskimos and the indigenous peoples of Siberia, suggests that hunting cultures have found in both the shaman and the trickster an apt expression of their inner lives at least since paleolithic times.
tales understand them. First, it often assumes that the tensions between the High God and the trickster, between shamanism and folklore, between "earlier" and "later" versions of the tales reflect our own recent Western experience of two unyielding visions warring in the bosom of a single culture. One need not be bedazzled by a romantic image of the total harmony of premodern societies to believe that such societies did indeed both enjoy and strive after a unity of experience. This unity—realized or hoped for—suggests that one can best approach the many aspects of premodern religious life by searching for the logic that knits diversity together, a logic through which Ricketts in particular seeks to understand the trickster. To assume that such a wholeness is not worth looking for is to posit an almost universal premodern schizophrenia and to breathe new life into outworn theories of foxy priests and sheeplike people.

An even greater difficulty lies in the essentially comic nature of the trickster. Recent studies of the role of comedy in the Christian tradition of the West have shown how greatly estranged the comic and the holy have become since the Renaissance and the Reformation. Furthermore, this estrangement has reinforced the leveling tendencies of what I would call, with William Lynch, "the univocal mind," that great enemy of the muddiness of actual human life.

I call univocal that kind of mind which, having won through to all the legitimate unities and orderings of the logical and rational intelligence, insists, thereafter, on descending through the diversities, densities and maelstroms of reality in such a way as to give absolute shape to it. . . . This mentality wishes to reduce and flatten everything to the terms of its own sameness, since it cannot abide the intractable differences, zigzags and surprises of the actual.22

Thus interpreters of the trickster are tempted to reduce his many meanings to only one—be it archaic Prometheanism, protognosticism, psychic growth, or symbolic exhaustion. Certainly one must ask whether hunting-culture tricksters differ from those of agricultural societies, and how religious symbols are linked to social and psychological change, but as Eliade sees, a “mythology of the human condition” remains a mythology. The language used to describe the trickster’s shaping of our inner and outer worlds has, on the whole, lacked the imaginative depth needed to grasp the sacredness of ordinary landscape, the ritual of daily time, the mysterious passages in normal social order, and the multiformity of the power to which the trickster gives man access. For example, Ricketts believes that the trickster has “gone away” and has even less “presence” than the High God, except in the order of the world which he has helped to shape and in his tales. That is simply not the case with Legba, Eshu, and Ogo-Yurugu, as we shall see; they are very much present to their societies, and in several ways. Yet even Ananse, who is not worshiped, can hardly be said to be absent since he is remembered whenever his stories are told. Thus we need to find a way to speak about “remembering” so that we can understand how the trickster links the mythical past to the present, how that linkage discloses the meaning of his offhanded acceptance of death, and the real reason why he gives such delight.

The language of interpretation

Ricketts himself has raised this issue by insisting that the trickster symbolizes not only the mythology of human life, but the myth-making processes of the human mind itself. There are three theories of the trickster that base themselves, for widely differing reasons, on this insight; they are the psychological interpretation of Jung, the structural analysis of Lévi-Strauss, and the neo-Durkheimian hypothesis of Makarius. I

will discuss these theories later, but I mention them here because each wrestles with the problem of interpretive language and yields insights into the "logic" of the trickster's many guises. Each represents a way of handling religious discoveries and creations, and all—depth psychology, philosophical anthropology, and social anthropology—will help to probe the inner shape and order of the West African materials we will look at here. The questions they raise are useful, even where their answers are partial and even mistaken, but more importantly, each of these visions of religious behavior and symbolism places the trickster within the larger framework of religious hermeneutics.

However, I believe that these interpretive modes cannot alone provide the language needed to uncover the trickster's meaning. In a real sense, the history of religions is based on the intuition, or conviction, that the many modes of speech—historical, psychological, philosophical, anthropological, sociological, and even theological—our culture has devised to talk about religion are not fully suited to the task, no matter how much each may contribute to it. Of course, simply to point to the subjectivist bent of Jung, which is subtly related to the denser rationalist determinism of Freud, to the Cartesian and Kantian presuppositions of Lévi-Strauss, and to the Durkheimian limitations of Makarius, neither refutes their arguments nor produces a more suitable way of speaking about the subject. Indeed, historians of religion have had as much trouble finding words able to bear the weight of religious experience as have others. Certainly Eliade's lifelong work, to take only one well-known instance, attests to the struggle that historians of religion share with all those who seek, in the intellectually secularized and fragmented world of the West, to know what it means to speak about the sacred. It is enough to sug-

gest here that language which the history of religions finds reductionistic and thin can still have its uses, and to undertake to meet the issue of finding less univocal speech squarely, if modestly, within the boundaries of this book.

The meaning of pattern

There are other methodological issues that need to be dealt with openly. The first of these involves a logical difficulty. Just what does it mean to study the trickster in a particular culture? Do we already know what he is so that every study is merely a search for a new embodiment of him? Or is it just the other way around, so that we understand the word "trickster" to be merely a nomen, purely a work of the mind that we apply to a vast array of more or less similar phenomena which remain nevertheless irreducibly particular? A failure to ask such questions makes it easier, for example, to assume, as Radin does, an unrelenting warfare between shamanic and "popular" religion. Such an assumption can lead to a foregone conclusion that the differences among tricksters spring from their victory or defeat in the battle with the High God for the religious allegiance of their respective societies.

We touch here one of the knottiest of philosophical problems, and my aim is not to resolve the quarrel between the followers of Plato and those of Occam or even the more contemporary dispute between Lévi-Strauss and Sartre. However, to find a way to proceed between the devil of idealism and the deep blue sea of nominalism (even if others must draw the metaphysical charts), it seems necessary to avoid, on the one hand, the trimming of the material at hand to fit a ready-made form and, on the other, the dilettantism of the encyclopedist, who buzzes from culture to culture collecting, arranging, and displaying the exotica he has gathered. 26 Whether Platonist or

26. J. Z. Smith’s term referring to a method of comparison based on private or superficial categories so that materials are simply brought together for display, not ordered according to any inner logic. See his essay, “Adde Parvum Parvo Magnus Acervus Erit.”
structuralist, the idealist will ignore the trickster in favor of the Pure Idea, while the nominalist will treat him as an intellectually impenetrable surface.

The Platonic temptation is probably the greater of the two, since man is everywhere confronted with particularity, yet his mind always moves to establish unity and essence. In this, man goes beyond both the tendency to explain the less by the better known and the contrary tendency to elucidate the familiar by the strange, for awareness itself seems to insist that the experience of continuity be accounted for by the linkage of moments and the discernment of patterns. The danger is that, once drawn out from experience by the mind, abstract forms will be used not as tools for further exploration and enlightenment, but as molds into which all reality must be poured.

Thus no one ever saw, or even heard tell of, a Trickster with a capital "T," but the process of abstraction that tends to capitalize the "T" is not a perverse function of the academic brain. Everywhere one looks among premodern peoples, there are tricky mythical beings alike enough to entice any human mind to create a category for them once it had met two or three. They are beings of the beginning, working in some complex relationship with the High God; transformers, helping to bring the present human world into being; performers of heroic acts on behalf of men, yet in their original form, or in some later form, foolish, obscene, laughable, yet indomitable. They tend to be animal figures, but are not always. Ogo is there in the beginning with Amma, the High God, yet Ananse is not. Ricketts gives several instances where the trickster defeats, and even replaces, the High God, yet Ogo's defeat by Amma creates the world of men. Is the trickster part of a protodualistic structure, as Bianchi says? Perhaps, yet Eshu does not in any way stand alone against the High God, but is in complicated relation to him and to other divine figures. All tricksters are foolers and fools, but their foolishness varies; sometimes it is destructive, sometimes creative, sometimes scatological, sometimes satiric, sometimes playful. In other words, the pat-