

“You’re a trickster”: Mockery, egalitarianism, and uncertainty in northeastern Namibia

Abstract: The trickster has held a prominent place in the study of folklore, as much as it has been central to anthropological understandings of egalitarianism. In both, the trickster embodies an insoluble tension between the repressed, amoral desires of the individual and the moral demands of social life. This tension, so it goes, is visible in the ambiguity of the figure—a protean indeterminate being, neither good nor bad. Among the Jú|’hoànsi of northeastern Namibia, the trickster is similarly ambiguous. The figure conveys not a clash of values, but rather the doubt and uncertainty people feel toward those with whom they share resources, or about different ways of sharing and how they might relate to one another. This article approaches such uncertainty through a focus on the mocking phrase “you’re a trickster” and the moral discourses that accompany it.

Introduction

The statement “We, here, are people who share” is uttered frequently by the Jú|’hoànsi (meaning ‘real people’) of northern Namibia. The statement is comparative—a slight on jú dórésín (other people) who refuse the demands of those who are not close relatives or those they trust, and who see the act of demanding from others as deeply shameful. Conversely, to be jù jàn (a ‘good’ person) among the Jú|’hoànsi is to sìn | |àn (just demand) and sìn |’àn jú (just give to people). These are “prototypical” forms of sharing (Widlök 2013: 21). The values enshrined in these forms of sharing are those that see equality as an intrinsic good. If everyone is granted the same rights and opportunities to demand from others who have more than they do, whoever they may be, equality should follow. Within contexts of uncertainty, however—where life is characterized by undulating flows of abundance and lack and where people are dependent on those who cannot be trusted—these forms of sharing take on new resonances. They are circumscribed by paradox and give rise to experiences of ambivalence.

At the heart of this paradox is the doubt people experience over who the ‘we, here’ are (see also Bird-David 2017), over who, in other words, share the values inscribed in different forms of sharing to the extent that they are concerned not simply with their performance, but with the consequences that follow. The ‘we, here’ are those who care about whether these acts of sharing really bring about the effects that are intended by them. With respect to demand sharing (see Peterson 1993; Widlök 2013, 2017)—the act of demanding from others who have more or of agreeing to demands that are made—the doubt people experience concerns whether those who are making demands will, in turn, make themselves present to be demanded from when the division of wealth shifts. Although these concerns have proliferated within the contemporary context, they are not entirely new. There have, in fact, long been other forms of sharing within the region that have sought to address these issues of trust or the possibility that such problems might arise. Most notably, there are long-standing gift-giving relationships, called xaro (commonly spelled hxaro), which have allowed goods that are not easily divided up to be circulated, and have compelled people who do not regularly share one another’s company to make themselves present to one another to ensure that redistribution happens (see Wiessner 1977, 1986, 2002). These measures are far from foolproof, and within the contemporary context, where people readily get into debt, these measures are just as likely to be sources of ambivalence. With respect to gift-giving relationships, showing need or expressing desire sits uneasily between customs of gift-giving, which enforce reciprocity but not its timing or its nature, and ever-expanding commercial debts, which compel both the timing and nature of repayments. The self-same paradox emerges, where taking the values inscribed in gift-giving too seriously in the present undermines the potential they have for bringing about equality over time (also see Kapferer 2015).

When framed in this way, the paradox and the moral ambivalence it generates are not so much unique to contexts within which demand sharing or generalized gift-giving is the norm. Rather, they are a more general outcome of problems of temporality, spatiality, and intentionality in the course of everyday commitments to certain values. They form part of broader experiences of doubt over the values or intentions of others, yet also reveal how different values that people hold might ultimately relate to one another. Among the Jú|’hoànsi, specifically, this means not only dealing with the difficulty of distinguishing people who value demand sharing from those who do not, but also working out how different forms of sharing contribute to the broader aim of achieving equality. Within the contemporary context (see Biesele and Hitchcock 2013), different forms of sharing—from those considered !aòh (traditional), such as demand sharing or generalized forms of gift-giving, to those considered zé (new), such as monetary debts, wage labor, or acts of begging—relate to one another in complex ways. As people have become dependent upon those who have to make themselves present to be demanded from, demand sharing has become increasingly indistinguishable from efforts to take from those who have more without the intention of caring for them in return when they need it. Similarly, as money has become an item of reciprocal gift-giving and monetary debts have proliferated, the lines between generalized and balanced reciprocity have blurred. Those who loan money to one another struggle to enforce the timing of repayments and the form that these repayments take, and those who engage in gift-giving struggle to shake the feeling that what they reciprocate is never enough.

This article traces the way people attempt to negotiate or resolve ambivalence as it emerges in the course of competing redistributive efforts. In particular, it looks at the role of mockery in these processes of negotiation. The form this mockery takes draws upon a well-documented tradition of joking with insults, but also upon the well-known figure of the ‘trickster’—a deeply ambiguous figure that is at once revered for its ingenuity and heroism and chastised for its gluttony and egotism. Within treatises on the trickster in its mythic guise, this ambiguity expresses a tension between the repressed amoral desires of the individual and the moral demands of social life—in other words, between two competing and incommensurable value projects. Within writings on ‘egalitarian societies’, rather than value projects of distinct provenance, these value projects are seen as two sides of the same moral coin. One side is concerned with freedom of movement—with relations of property between people—and the other side with redistribution—with relations of property between people and the things they produce. These two sides are framed as an indivisible binary, with “individualism ... running as a strong countercurrent to the ethos of communalism” (Guenther 1999: 42). This is not the binary famously described by Dumont (1980), which sees individualism as a form of personhood that supports private property relations and communalism as a form of personhood that describes the way people are relationally defined. Instead, it is a binary between individualism as the freedom to choose where one moves and communalism as a form of redistribution that aims to foster equality in people’s ability to do so. Where in Dumont’s reading, these are two incommensurable systems, within egalitarian societies they are interdependent. In their interdependence, they make ambivalence a hallmark of ‘Bushman society’—one feature in the total social system that defines egalitarian societies.

Drawing upon recent debates within the anthropology of value (Graeber 2013), which challenges the tendency to think of ethical life as a ‘system’ of values, and within the anthropology of ethics, which, accordingly, regards “contradictory thoughts, feelings, and attitudes” as a fundamental and enduring feature of human life (Berliner et al. 2016: 1; see also Robbins 2007; Zigon 2007), this article casts this ambivalence under a different light. Pushing beyond the, at times, quite formalistic portrayals of egalitarian societies that have typified the literature, the focus here is not on ambivalence as a function solely of clashing values, but rather on ambivalence as recognition of the issues of temporality and spatiality that shape their effects (Gulbrandsen 1991). What is at stake, here, is not simply an appreciation

of the complexity and contradiction of ethical life, but an understanding of the specific ambivalence entailed in pursuing egalitarianism in the face of uncertainty.

Buffoons and Heroes

The ethnographic context in northeastern Namibia is one in which there are clear divisions between those called *g|'áákhòè* (marginalized) and those called *|'áíhàsi* (privileged)—between those with a regular source of income and those without. As these divides have become more entrenched, issues of uncertainty have grown in their intensity. Those without employment tend to roam incessantly in search for patronage, mostly from the wealthy, or at least the readily employed few located at the region's urban center. The relative stability of these divisions has contributed to the expectation not only that certain people should demand and that certain people should be demanded from (irrespective of the relative wealth they may possess over time or the extent to which they help others), but that certain 'debts' or 'gifts' should not be repaid or reciprocated since those with more should always give to those who have less without expecting repayment. Where, in the past, the shifting distribution of bush foods and game animals may have meant that the division of resources readily shifted between people, today certain divisions appear more enduring. Similarly, where, in the past, the tendency for people to depend largely on those they lived with may have meant that problems of transparency arose less frequently, today these problems appear endemic. People, especially but not exclusively the marginalized, are heavily dependent upon those they neither live with nor know particularly well. The ability to move through space—to 'roam'—has, in turn, become contentious. On the one hand, it stands as the primary means through which people are able to make use of their rights to demand from others. On the other hand, it stands as a means through which people are able to evade scrutiny and avoid showing care for others. There are those, in other words, who use deception and trickery for good and those who use it for selfish gain, and it is often difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between them.

The comparison brings to mind the common trope of the trickster as either a 'selfish buffoon' or 'culture hero' (Carroll 1984). The culture hero, or clever hero, is a trickster that uses deception and wit to overcome its subordination to more powerful others by bringing about redistribution or freeing itself from bondage. One example of a culture hero within *Jú|'hoànsi* folklore is Willem Poster, a jackal who appears in a well-known trickster tale recounted among *Jú|'hoànsi* of the Omaheke region (see Suzman 2017: 241–242) and across Namibia. It tells the story of a vagabond who manages to trick two Herero pastoralists into paying a large sum of money for a pot that cooks meat without the need for fire. Willem Poster emerges as a hero, inverting the common experience of *Jú|'hoànsi* in the region who are duped into working without pay for Herero farmers. The selfish buffoon is a trickster who uses deception and wit to exploit others—those more privileged but also those more marginalized. This trickster, unlike its heroic counterpart, is a "perverse" person whose "horrifying project is to build a world in which its desires matter only to itself" (Gow 1989: 581). One example of a selfish buffoon within *Jú|'hoànsi* folklore is, once again, a jackal who, alongside a hyena, works for a cruel Afrikaner baas (supervisor) as a farm laborer. Feigning the role of the overseer, trickster manages to dupe hyena into doing the hard labor while he collects their payments of meat and fat and eats them out of sight. Having gorged himself, jackal falls into a deep sleep only to awake to his baas branding him with an iron rod, exposing his ways to hyena. While the acts of the selfish buffoon backfire, the culture hero comes out victorious and leaves more powerful others foolishly duped. Both employ deception as a means to exploit others: on the one hand, these acts are considered fair (since they are against a more powerful, resourceful, and untrustworthy other); on the other, they are considered unfair (since they are against a less powerful or resourceful and generally more trustworthy other). One is for equality, the other for profit and exploitation.

Early accounts of the trickster in folklore tended to conflate these two tropes, focusing on the trickster as an archetype that embodies the necessary conflict between the repressed amoral desires of the individual and the moral demands of social life. Most contributions to these accounts pay tribute to Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural study of myth, with influences from Sigmund Freud, and Paul Radin's seminal study of the Winnebago trickster in Native American mythology (cited by Carroll 1981, 1984). They were therefore heavily influenced by structuralism and interested in the trickster only to the extent that it stood for pairs of binary oppositions. Lévi-Strauss (cited in Carroll 1981: 302–305) starts with the question, why is it that throughout North America the Trickster role is almost everywhere assigned to either coyote or raven? He bases his answer on the observation that trickster tales everywhere are concerned with polarizing the abstract concepts of life and death. Coyotes and ravens are said to collapse these concepts upon one another. They bring their contrast into sharp relief by being 'carrion-eaters' who do not kill animals but do eat animal flesh. These findings then serve as the basis for a structuralist argument about irreconcilable binaries between categories such as life and death, production and consumption, society and the individual. Similarly, Freud, following Carl Jung (cited in Carroll 1984: 105), argues that the trickster is an archetype that is "buried in the mind of all human beings" and symptomatic of the incongruity between the id and the super-ego—between repressed desires and social morals or values. Focusing on the pedagogic potential of the trickster (also see Clastres 1987: 150), Paul Radin ([1956] 1972: 168) argues that the trickster myth is the 'original plot' that "no generation can do without." The trickster is myth's prototypical character marking the generation of sacred and profane, deity and man, hero and fool.

Following broader critiques of structuralism (e.g., Diamond 1974), these structural studies of myth and of the trickster figure fell increasingly out of favor. Replacing them initially were the contributions of several theorists (notably, Babcock-Abrahams 1975; Guenther 1999; Hynes and Doty 1997; Pelton 1989) who nevertheless focused on the trickster as a protean indeterminate social being—neither good nor bad, neither deserving nor undeserving, a challenge to what appear as even the most basic truth claims (see Santo 2016: 39–40). Within these arguments, the trickster remains fundamentally cross-cultural, a 'grotesque' and 'carnavalesque' figure (Bakhtin [1941] 1993) whose archetypal qualities include inhabiting liminal spaces, often as both predator and prey, while pursuing an insatiable desire for sexual or other forms of consumption that invariably lead to the violation of social norms. Framed in terms of Victor Turner's notion of 'liminality' (cited in Carroll 1984: 107), the trickster is a malicious or predatory creature occupying liminal time and space. Lacking the desire for sociality that would end this liminal phase, the trickster extends it into eternity. It embodies a paradox that is thought to pervade the human condition—that the pursuit of personal, physical pleasure necessarily leads to the destruction of the sociality that makes these pursuits possible.

Running through both of these generations of writers, Carroll (1984) notes, is the tendency to conflate the figure of the trickster as a culture hero and a selfish buffoon. As a consequence, the trickster appears simply as a protagonist in recurring lessons against selfishness, rather than as a figure who brings this truth—that selfishness is destructively short-sighted, both socially and personally—into question. By distinguishing between these trickster figures, a different sort of paradox emerges that speaks not to the problem of competing desires for gluttony and sociality, but to the problem of discerning gluttony from sociality in the course of everyday life so that equality might actually be possible. Anthropologists have long observed leveling mechanisms within egalitarian societies that have served to thwart accumulation, necessitating that displays of wealth, power, or prestige (see Woodburn 1982) are only ever a short-term affair. Most notably, demand sharing has served to ensure, as Strathern (1988: 138) puts it, that "ties between persons are not constructed through the control of assets and of persons as though they were assets." In other words, demand sharing has ensured that people are regularly confronted with the difficulty of quantifying what we owe to others. People are, and should be, free to refuse the demands of

others. At the same time, they must know that doing so, if not a rejection of sociality, amounts to a claim about the true distribution of wealth between themselves and those who demand, or a claim about the trustworthiness of others (in short, that those who demand will make themselves present to demand from in the future when the balance of wealth shifts).

Viewed from this perspective, the figure of the trickster appears to confront a different sort of uncertainty—that is, uncertainty over conditions of transparency and perceptions of trustworthiness. While demand sharing is well suited to bringing about equality within contexts of transparency, it is a source of ambivalence in contexts where both the division of wealth and the intentions of others are opaque. Contributing to these experiences of moral ambivalence is the shame associated with doubting and confronting others (see Briggs 1970; Howell 1984). As much as people are committed to principles of sharing that reject either the ability to choose with whom one shares or attempts to define what is reciprocated and when, they are also committed to giving the benefit of the doubt. People are not only presumed to be acting in accordance with their own doubts, or to have acted unknowingly, but those who doubt them figure that they, themselves, may be guided by untruths. These are not only important signs of respect, but measures that protect people from the harm of ancestors who are relentless in their search for excuses to strike their living relatives with sickness, so they may take them away from the acrimony of the living. This makes challenging and confronting others a deeply sensitive process. The “personal stories and previous emotional encounters” (Beatty 2013: 420) that may, elsewhere, justify doubt and suspicion are, here, set aside. The reality of the “opacity of other minds” (Robbins and Rumsey 2008: 408)—the difficulty, in other words, of knowing what other people think, feel, or value—is set aside in favor of the reinforcing argument that all ‘real people’ are committed to egalitarian values.

Mockery strikes a balance, here, between the difficulty of knowing and the shame of doubting and suspecting others. It brings to the fore the possibility that, in the face of uncertainty, ‘good’ ways of sharing may not be so well suited to bringing about equality over time. The following ethnography presents four encounters with tricksters—in their social personas rather than as mythical figures—among the Jú|’hoànsi of northeastern Namibia. These encounters inspire similar performances of mockery, but they should not be conflated. Where one performance of mockery is celebratory, the other is defamatory. Together, they represent moments of reflection and efforts to engage in dialogue on the difficulty of pursuing egalitarianism in the face of uncertainty. The article then concludes by considering the relevance of this discussion to the recent turn to ambivalence in the anthropology of ethics, and to the role of political humor in contexts of uncertainty.

“You’re a Trickster!”

It was mid-day in Tsumkwe, and a rush of residents with permanent employment had descended on the general store in the center of town. I was loitering awkwardly in the shop, alongside a number of regulars who hung around the area looking for money or food. People were buying cold drinks, and the local baker was piling fresh loaves of bread onto the counter. A man entered through the large wooden doors, which were held open by bins and leaned on by children sucking on drink-o-pop sachets. Dressed in a smart shirt, beige shorts, and fake Adidas slides, he walked confidently into the shop, swinging his car keys in his hand. Another man at the counter shouted at him in a tone that was both suspicious and angry: “Jaoooo! A ó |xúríkxàò!” (Yooooo!! You’re a trickster!!).¹ Standing in line to pay at the shop counter, with two cold bottles of Fanta and a warm loaf of bread, he was similarly on a break from the hours he spent waiting to entertain tourists at the nearby lodge where he worked. The accused looked up and, with a grin surfacing on his face, exclaimed: “Ayee! Mí |óá ó |xúríkxàò!” (No way!! I’m not a trickster!). They battled it out for about a minute with statements like “You deceive me!” “No!” “You’re

playing tricks!” “No! Leave me with this!” They then erupted into laughter before performing several polite greetings and parting ways.

Recounting the exchange here brings to mind the astute observations of Carty and Musharbash (2008: 21) that “writing about laughter and humour is rarely funny” and that “translating the joke and preserving its funniness is a precious skill possessed by few.” This is especially relevant when considering the case at hand, where it was not immediately evident that it was laughter that people hoped to bring about through these sorts of verbal tussles. They were so commonplace throughout my fieldwork that they often fell flat, nor did they carry much obvious meaning. In some ways, they resembled the familiar custom of “insulting the meat” (Lee 1984: 48), a form of mockery that involves using sarcasm to downplay a hunter’s skill in killing large prey. Rather than give a hunter praise when he arrived home with a large animal, it was customary to mock him for killing something so “thin” or “small.” Despite the name, this was a common way of downplaying any number of skills or attributes, not only those related to hunting. It was less obvious, however, that calling others a trickster was a means through which to deride them for their relative wealth, power, or prestige. This is partly because this appellation was not obviously ironic and, as such, teetered precariously on the border between humor and insult, and partly because calling someone a trickster in this way had, over the years, become a caricature of itself. Making these sarcastic remarks was not for everyone, and even those who did make them—people either called |òrèkxàòsi (jokers), or known as those who were in joking relationships with one another (Radcliffe-Brown 1940, 1949; Silberbauer 1981)—were careful not to do so too frequently or too indiscriminately.

Their performance was a hedging of bets. There was typically no mention of a debt or obligation that had been dodged, and so it was often difficult to ascertain why this kind of sarcastic mockery was used at any particular moment. My informants invariably revealed, however, some genuine act of trickery that had motivated the mockery. At times, particular individuals had shown themselves to have such a proclivity for deceitful acts that the mockery was directed toward them regardless of whether they had performed a deceitful act at that time. They deserved this mockery because they were “probably doing bad things.” Those directing these forms of mockery toward others had typically given them some sort of assistance in the past by acquiescing to demands, loaning money, or giving gifts. Their actions rarely had any obvious reparative effect, such as the redistribution of wealth or the repayment of debts. They did, however, contribute to the formation of narratives concerned with how trustworthy a person was. These are narratives that have risen in prominence within a contemporary context marred by issues of transparency—issues that are associated with the expansion of the cash economy and the increasing precarity of both the marginalized and the privileged.

There are two primary scenarios that sparked these forms of mockery. The first concerns relationships between the marginalized and the privileged— those whose status as receivers and givers, or (rather) demanders and responders, has come to be regarded as fixed. On account of their unequal access to employment and resources, in other words, there is an expectation that the latter will always be in a position to respond favorably to demands of the former. As it has become harder for people to know whether another person is in a position to share or whether to rightfully demand from others, accepting these as ‘good’ ways of sharing has become more challenging. The second scenario concerns relationships among the privileged, those who are largely equal in terms of their access to a regular income and who similarly owe large amounts of debt to furniture and clothing chains or to local store owners. On account of their relatively equal access to employment and resources, in other words, there is an expectation that they can request larger sums of cash that would otherwise be reserved for customary gift-giving relationships. While these are unequivocally debts, formed through requests rather than gifts, the logic of xaro nevertheless makes it difficult to request when and how repayments are to be made. The fact that it is relatively easy to conceal access to cash makes it difficult, at times, to adopt the logic of demand

sharing.

Both of these scenarios underline the role of transparency in distinguishing ‘good’ and ‘bad’ ways of sharing. They point to a paradox, even, that pursuing ‘good’ ways of sharing within opaque contexts threatens the very pursuit of egalitarianism upon which they are based. Examining the way people navigate these challenges points to a further paradox that deception and trickery can themselves be key means through which people are able to overcome the exploitation that problems of transparency make possible. To limit trickery is therefore to seek to control one of the primary means through which people (both the marginalized and the privileged) engage in efforts of redistributive justice—especially within a context increasingly characterized by the entrenchment of unequal distributions of wealth, power, and prestige.

With the exception of writers such as Henry Louis Gates and James C. Scott (see Shipley 2015), this relationship—between the trickster figure and patterns of resistance—has been largely overlooked. Shifting the focus away from the ‘human condition’ and toward the particular ways and contexts within which the trickster figure is discussed and deployed and to what effect, writers within this tradition have pushed the discussion toward moral ambivalence. The ambiguity of the trickster, as a figure both venerated and loathed, throws this ambivalence into sharp relief, exposing the ways that trust and transparency shape the ethical in people’s encounters with one another. Among the Jú |’hoànsi of the Nyae Nyae region, trickster tales involving jackals, hyenas, and oppressive masters—which abound in nineteenth- and twentieth-century studies of Khoisan communities—are rarely if ever recounted. The |xúríkxàò (trickster), nevertheless, remains a frequent topic of discussion and is a figure that is repeatedly deployed in people’s efforts to navigate the difficulties of not knowing whether others can be trusted. By looking at the way that this figure is discussed and deployed, it becomes clear that there are both selfish buffoons and culture heroes within the Nyae Nyae region. While they are both described as |xúríkxàòsi (tricksters), they are discussed in distinct ways. Where selfish buffoons are the subject of mockery and hushed speculation, culture heroes are a source of joy and laughter as people narrate ingenious ways of overcoming exploitation.

In other words, the proposition that tricksters embody a tension between ‘individualism’ and ‘communalism’, between the desires of the individual and the very moral demands of social life, appears to be true with respect to those tricksters that are selfish buffoons. Where the trickster is a culture hero, the opposite is the case. Acts that appear individualistic (demanding from others, not making repayments) are precisely those that entail communalism, or at least the forms of it that value egalitarianism. Saying that, without transparency, it is not always easy to tell a ‘fool’ from a ‘hero’. It is the problem of transparency, then, that makes the figure ambiguous—the problem of not knowing whether someone has resources to share, and of not knowing whether someone’s intentions are ‘good’.

The experiences of moral ambivalence that accompany this ambiguity are felt as much by those who suspect others of being tricksters as they are by those who are tricksters themselves. This, as mentioned above, is because trickery does not always entail serving individual desires over communal ones. People may perform trickery when they suspect that others are being exploitative, and not only when they seek to exploit others. Without the ability to know, either way, people fall back on reputation and stereotype—on distinguishing those who are ‘good’ from those who are not, or those who are privileged from those who are marginalized. The following section traces the forms that these suspicions take through an examination of several cases of tricksters and the ways in which people went about approaching them. In closing, it returns to the discussion of mockery that opens this section, and to the ways that people turn to mockery as a powerful mechanism for voicing suspicion but also for working through the impasses that mutual suspicion can bring.

Taking Egalitarianism Seriously

Addressing the tendency to pit individualism against communalism, and developing an alternative theory of communism, Marcel Mauss writes that it is possible to have a social system in which the individual and the community do not exist in perpetual tension and that a “fundamental error consists in opposing communism and individualism” (cited in Graeber 2001: 159). As Graeber states, Mauss’s theory means that “it is perfectly possible to have a system of individualistic communism,” defining it as the mutual commitment to the principle that “someone has the right to take what she feels she needs without any direct payment or reciprocation” (ibid.). The emphasis placed on ‘need’ is vague, but the principle is nevertheless similar to the practice of demand sharing and, to some extent, the forms of gift-giving discussed thus far. Where demand sharing entails supporting those who have less in their efforts to secure assistance from those who have more, gift-giving entails rejecting any attempt to enforce when or how repayments should be made between those who go beyond reacting to each other’s demands and vow to ǀ’áng |’àn (think for) one another.

These are two different ways of sharing—one promises redistribution between those who occupy the same space, the other promises redistribution either between those who live apart from one another or of the type of things that cannot easily be divided up. Within both cases, however, the problem of not knowing what people have or what their intentions are poses significant challenges. Where people do not know what others have, making demands and agreeing to the demands of others, or rejecting balanced or timed reciprocity, can support or perpetuate inequality. Since the privileged generally have more than the marginalized, these issues are rarely a focal point in their relationships with one another. Accordingly, when it comes to light that people have tricked those who have more than they do or who are thought to exploit them, the response is not necessarily one of anger or resentment. In fact, it is often one of praise and humorous admiration—just as the discourse of the culture hero suggests. Two cases of trickery from northern Namibia are presented here as illustrative.

A Goat Disguised

Teme knows a trickster, a ǀxúríkxàò (owner of cunning deeds). Teme prunes aloe plants in the garden of a man from Windhoek who runs the general store. During a lunch break, Teme sat with Tshae, my host, and me inside the quiet craft center that stands on the corner of the crossroads at the center of Tsumkwe. He tells us animatedly, interrupted by continuous laughter from Tshae, about a trickster he knows who once invited him into the bush for a toilet break. Teme wondered about going so deep into the bush when they had passed so many shrubs that would have sufficed for coverage. Suddenly, they arrived at the fresh carcass of a goat, the property of an Oshiwambo herder from Oshikati who relocated to Tsumkwe and set up a drinking house selling home-distilled alcohol after the end of the Namibian War of Independence. It is the same herder whom Teme sells water and firewood to for a nominal price and for whom he occasionally works for a nominal wage. The goat needed to be skinned, cut up into portions, carried into the Oshiwambo location where most goat and cattle herders reside, and sold before its owner noticed the goat was missing. That would ideally occur once the money was spent and the evidence was minimal. The goat, once skinned, was not a goat, but a duiker (a goat-sized antelope), the trickster explained to Teme. It was a duiker that the trickster had hit with a poison arrow, tracked deep into the bush, and carried to Tsumkwe in pieces for sale.

A Stolen Donation

The government of the Republic of Namibia supports the community of Tsumkwe by providing free

health care, which is administered at the local health clinic. Additionally, a non-governmental organization supports the operation of a mobile health clinic that provides care to Jú|’hoànsi living in rural territories across the Nyae Nyae region. The funds go toward transport, the salaries of mobile health workers, and food that gets dispensed to patients. At an annual general meeting that I attended during my research, the organization was required to report on its finances. The project manager, a man who moved from Windhoek to Tsumkwe to take up the post, reported humorously on the proceedings from the year. He explained that he had borrowed a large sum of money from the project, but that he had called his boss shortly after to confess and make plans to repay. People began laughing and mumbling to each other: “Ja, |xúríkxàò hìn to’ǎ” (Yes, this one here is a trickster). As he continued, revealing that the project had struggled throughout the year due to a lack of funds, the crowd became more vocal but seemed unsurprised by the news. As a climax to his speech, he then revealed that the board of health workers, a group of ten Jú|’hoàn men and women whose mandate was to oversee the project, had borrowed and used up among themselves the funds reserved for buying food for patients and paying for fuel. At this point, the heckling directed at the project manager erupted into uncontrollable laughter among the crowd, including among those who had ’m tòàn màrì (eaten up the money) and who had not made efforts to repay their debts. The meeting then moved on to address the next issue. I turned and asked a friend: “Why is everyone laughing? Isn’t this serious?” “Yes, it’s serious, but these people who run it are always misusing the funds that are meant for Jú|’hoànsi.”

While these stories were amusing when told, they rarely inspired public forms of mockery in which these tricksters—the man who slaughtered the goat and the team of health workers who ate up the money—might be ridiculed. These were tricksters who were certain not to steal from the powerful and wealthy others with whom they are on good terms, or from those who are their equals. These tricksters, although acknowledged to have done something wrong (if not illegal), seemed to be appreciated for their actions. Fitting the role of the culture hero, they appear to have acted on behalf of the ‘marginal man’ who fails to “fit into the present-day social order of ... state government” (Guenther 1999: 124). The Jú|’hoàn person who is perpetually a ‘marginal person’ surely cannot be expected to repay debts to someone who has more than they do, or who otherwise exploits them. Stripped of the capacity to demand from those with more, either due to the opacity of their wealth or the consistency with which they refuse, these acts of trickery become laudable pursuits to achieve what is fair.

Within the first case of trickery in this section, the trickster’s actions are forms of defiance against the herders who Jú|’hoànsi hold responsible for patterns of environmental degradation within the region. Within the second case of trickery, the tricksters’ actions are forms of defiance against the many brokers whom Jú|’hoànsi hold responsible for their ongoing experiences of marginality and poverty. In both cases, trickery serves to bring equality to relationships that are putatively unequal in situations where making demands and compelling people to ‘think for’ others is not possible. Trickery, however, does not always have such positive valences. For the similarly marginalized and privileged—who depend on making reciprocal counter-gestures of either demanding or giving—the possibility of trickery is of ongoing concern. The trickster as a selfish buffoon appears repeatedly as the subject of mockery, allowing people to voice their suspicions. These are individuals who are not always wittingly selfish, but who, on the basis of their own suspicion, behave in ways that exploit those who are in reality their equals. Voicing suspicion thus serves not only to shame those who are knowingly exploitative, but also those whose own suspicions lead them astray. Two further examples are presented here as illustrative.

The Unreliable ATM

Kuma was a known trickster. He enjoyed permanent employment in a government ministry and lived in the sequestered location of ||Xàràsi. The opening vignette of the previous section was an exchange between Kuma and Gaga, a Jú|’hoàn man who similarly held permanent employment as a tour guide and driver. Some days before, at an encounter in the general store, Kuma had requested from Gaga that he borrow some cash since the ATM at the store had run out of money and he was unable to make a withdrawal. Kuma knew that Gaga had managed to withdraw cash that morning and promised that he would return the following morning to withdraw the cash and repay him. The following morning came and went, and Kuma did not withdraw the cash to repay Gaga. Whenever they crossed paths, Kuma would apologize for having forgotten to withdraw the cash and promise to repay him next time. He only ever saw him in the afternoon, however, when the ATM had invariably run out of cash and it was too late in the day to make a withdrawal. “I can’t force him to repay me. I just have to leave it. It is like he is pushing me to just give him the money,” Gaga complained. “All I can do is say ‘Yeah! You’re a trickster!’ and keep waiting. It is up to him to decide that what he has done is not good.”

The Zula Expert

Etsu was also a well-known trickster, but unlike Kuma he was not permanently employed. Instead, he got by as a skilled research guide, working intermittently with governmental and NGO officials, tourists, and researchers on different projects and at different rates. It was rarely enough, however, forcing him to zula (roam) in order to live. Among the many zula experts in the region, he was famed for his ingenious strategies for securing an income—from reselling electrical goods for higher prices to getting tourists or researchers to collect firewood that would then be resold to local shop owners. If it were not for his reputation as something of a spendthrift, he would be revered for his ability to secure a steady income despite his odds as a marginalized person. “He can spend NAD800 [16 times the minimum daily wage] in a day on the fruit machine,” a friend of his remarked in astonishment. “He is wasting his money every day like that.” By his own admission, Etsu was an addict, but he also felt that he was an “expert” or “owner” of the fruit machine—someone who could make it “spill” money, and this compelled him to keep going. “He’s not marginalized,” one of his neighbors exclaimed. “He’s a trickster! He goes around making demands from people, and then he just gambles what he gets, leaving his children to feed themselves.”

In both cases, what are otherwise ‘good’ ways of behaving toward others—demanding (or even taking) from those who have more than they can consume, and giving people the freedom to choose when and how they reciprocate—become the primary means through which people such as Kuma and Etsu are said to take advantage of others. At the heart of these freedoms is the shared recognition that people should not be forced to act in a manner that is not of their own choosing. It is a value that makes ethical action less about retribution than it is about getting people to contemplate the morality of their own actions. Individuals cannot take their own perspectives as truth and use them as a means to force others to act in a manner that is not of their own choosing. As much as they were known to be tricksters, then, Kuma and Etsu were rarely chastised beyond being the subjects of mockery.

This mockery, however, has destabilizing effects, forcing those who perform it to expose their suspicions, and forcing those who are the subject of mockery to either reconsider their own suspicions or to give themselves up. These efforts can also serve precisely the opposite purpose. Exploring the use of mockery and trickery among Yukaghir hunters in North Siberia, Willerslev (2012, 2013) notes that mockery and trickery provide hunters with a way out of their obligations to the spirit-masters who bring balance to the landscape. Spirit-masters do this by striking hunters with sickness or death when the balance of vitality shifts after too much hunting. By mocking the rituals that ordinarily appease the spirit-masters, and tricking their prey into giving themselves up, hunters take these obligations seriously, but not

too seriously. In the Nyae Nyae context, mockery can give tricksters a way out of their obligations to accede to demands or to make themselves present to others. Either way, it stands as a powerful mechanism to generate what Steinmüller (2011: 24), based on his ethnography of the ways people confront contradictory representations of the state in China, calls a “community of complicity”—a group of speakers who share not only an understanding of “conventions and platitudes” but also the issues of temporality and spatiality that shape their effects. Where in China, irony allows people to confront competing visions of history and state, in northeastern Namibia, irony—or, rather, mockery that is ironic—allows people to confront and appreciate the risks of taking egalitarianism too seriously in the face of uncertainty.

Conclusion

Responding to the call to pay greater attention to contradictions in anthropology (Berliner et al. 2016), Jovanovic (2016) proposes that rather than speak of contradictions, anthropologists should turn their attention to ambivalence. The turn is to mark a move away from the recent focus on ‘moral breakdown’ (Zigon 2007) in the anthropology of ethics, which has been concerned largely with the commensurability of different ethical positions, to a focus on the contextual and social factors that shape their consequences and how we might navigate and tolerate them. These debates (see Mattingly and Throop 2018) challenge strongly collectivist theories of morality that have also typified writing on egalitarian societies, paving the way for new sorts of analyses concerned with reflective moments within the everyday. As Graeber (2013: 226) argues, humans are capable of taking a number of values seriously, but “the ultimate stakes of political life tend to lie precisely in negotiating how these values and arenas will ultimately relate to one another.” Adding to these debates, the ethnography presented here shows how these moments arise not only when people are confronted with two or more sets of ‘rules’ or ‘norms’ that they are compelled to take seriously, but also when they are faced with the possibility that following one set over another may not always have the intended effects.

Where a focus on contradiction supports a close examination of “the social, political, and economic conditions on which people are reliant, and which more than often ‘work against’ them” (Jovanovic 2016: 4), a focus on ambivalence brings us closer to the way people actually approach contradiction in their everyday lives. This article has analyzed the ambivalence that Jú|’hoànsi feel toward the dictum that they are “people who share,” bound up as it is in the principles of demand sharing, on the one hand, and of generalized reciprocity, on the other. Drawing upon the literature on tricksters, it has drawn attention to this ambivalence not simply as a tension between individualism and communalism—between the desire for accumulation and the desire for redistribution—as it has been understood, but as a paradox that is brought about by the opacity not only of the wealth of others but of their intentions. This is, in part, a function of freedom of movement and the reticence with which people act on their suspicions, and, in that sense, this ambivalence is at the heart of so-called individualistic communism. As Mauss, among others, has argued, if individualism is understood as the equal capacity of those with less to demand from those with more, and communalism is understood as the mutual commitment to this means of ensuring equality, then it is not necessary that these values contradict one another. This only works to ensure equality, however, if people are regularly forced into one another’s company, and if their wealth is readily on show. With this in mind, ambivalence is not simply a consequence of selfishness meeting communalism but more a consequence of the reality that, in the absence of transparency, to take egalitarianism too seriously is to risk exploitation.

The problems of transparency explored here appear to have two primary origins. First, dependence on the cash economy has increasingly brought about the concealment of relative wealth—not

only between the marginalized and the privileged, but among the privileged themselves. Second, as people have increasingly come to depend upon those who do not necessarily share one another's company, and cannot be forced to, the forms of surveillance that normally accompany egalitarianism become harder to realize. Encounters between people have thus become increasingly framed by the discourse of trust and transparency, forcing them to rely on what philosopher Ian Hacking (1986) refers to as a process of 'making up people'—on classifying people, in this case, as either marginalized or privileged, tricksters or trustworthy. This is not to say that doubt is something altogether new, but rather to point to the specific forms that doubt takes. As this article has shown, issues of trust and transparency apply not only to demand sharing, but to other ways of sharing—some of which have previously sought to confront the doubt that accompanies the acts of making and giving in to demands.

To say "you're a trickster!"—a form of mockery that is both ironic and cynical—amounts to what Peterson (1993: 860) calls "substantiating behavior." It is at once a means through which people acknowledge certain values (the right to demand, or to choose when and how to reciprocate) and a means through which people "establish the state of a relationship in social systems where relationships have to be constantly produced and maintained" (ibid.: 870), where people cannot be certain whether the commitment to equality is mutual. Uncertainty, according to de Vienne (2012: 184), is "built as constitutive of the joking frame," since people are all too aware of the damaging social consequences both of not voicing their suspicions and of voicing their suspicions too assuredly. To demand repayment or to refuse to share would amount to a rejection of the principles of egalitarianism that they value. Mockery strikes a balance between these conflicting threats and helps to foster an environment in which tricksters might give themselves up. It is a warning to the trickster that to be a selfish buffoon is to inevitably bring about one's own demise—if not by taking on the reputation of a trickster, then by exhausting the support networks upon which tricksters depend.

There is a side to these experiences of ambivalence, however, that is not captured by the focus above on how people come to terms with doubt and suspicion in the pursuit of equality. Explored in less depth here but equally salient is the aspect of ambivalence where people are less concerned with equality than with the desire to limit the sharing they do and when they do it. If we take seriously the claim that "it is often particularly the egalitarian societies which are torn by terrible inner tensions, or at least, extreme forms of symbolic violence" (Graeber 2004: 25), then ambivalence may also be a product of a contradiction between these values and the desire to get away from it all (and to sympathize, to a degree, with those who desire the same). To bring back the early binary, there is a tension between communalism, the compulsion to give in to the demands of others in the pursuit of equality, and individualism, the freedom to choose whether to do this or not. Mockery, from this perspective, can go two ways. It can form part of broader efforts, as this article has shown, to compel people to be honest about their wealth and to confront the uncertainty that curtails pursuits for equality. It can also provide a more cynical commentary—either on the freedom there may be in uncertainty or on the reality that, even with greater certainty, not everyone is at the mercy of the scrutiny it makes possible.

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Notes

1. The word for trickster is composed of the verb |xúri, meaning to be ‘cunning’, ‘sly’, or ‘tricky’, and the suffix -kxàò, meaning to be renowned for or an ‘owner’ or ‘expert’ of the verb that precedes it.

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