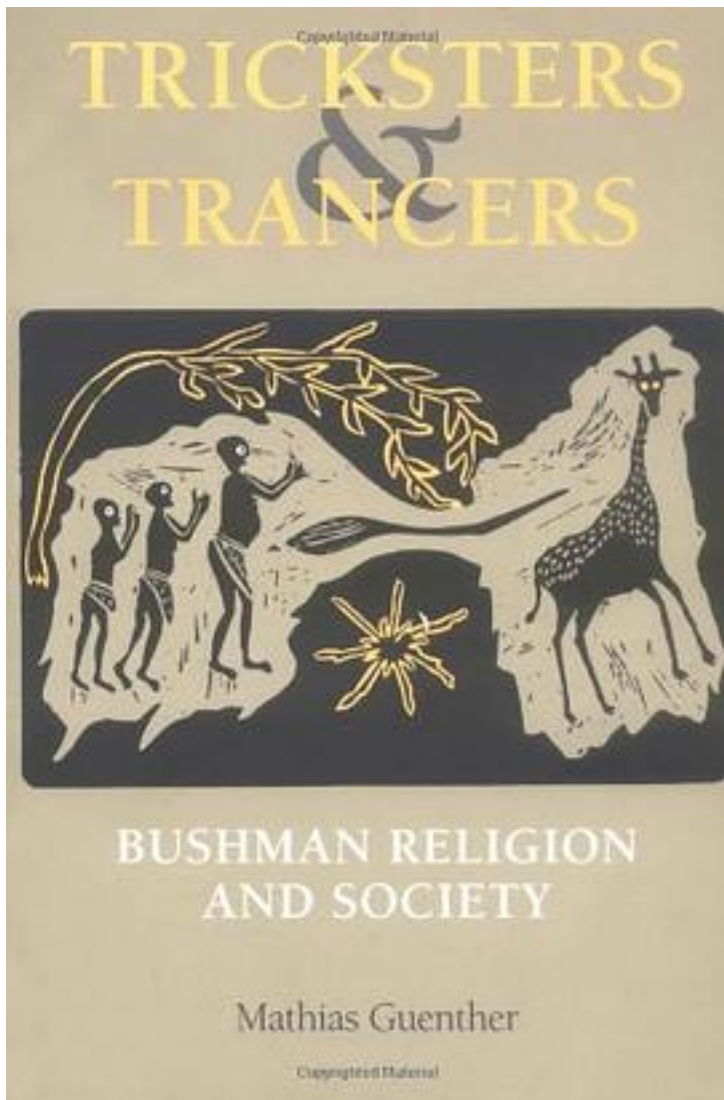


Tricksters and Trancers



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The trickster and trance dancer are the guides through Bushman (or San) religion, a world of ambiguity and contradiction, and of enchantment. The two figures, who in Bushman belief are symbolically equivalent and mystically linked, embody these antistructural traits. Confounding natural-supernatural, humanity divinity, human-animal, both figures are ambiguous. The trickster, who in Bushman belief is both ludicrous protagonist and numinous divinity, elicits feelings of profound ambivalence, exacerbating the figure's ambiguous state. Both the trickster and trancer are ontologically fluid, ever ready to transfer who, what, and where they are, and, in the trancer's case, transcendence by altered state of consciousness. The hallmark features of Bushman religion - fluidity, flexibility, and adaptability, are also the (anti)structural components of Bushman society and ethos. In hunting and gathering societies such as the Bushmen, these characteristics pervade all of the other cultural domains. The similarity between society and religion provides the key for understanding the persistence of a system of belief based on ambiguity. An experience-rooted analysis of Bushman society and religion is contrasted with other anthropological approaches to ambiguity which are biased towards a rational structure and, as a result, fail to grasp a culture's antistructural tendencies. In order to convey both the diversity and the dynamism of Bushman religion and society, this study presents information on Bushman groups from all over southern Africa, derived both from recent ethnographic studies and early missionary writings.

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目录:

[Tricksters and Trancers_ 下载链接1](#)

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