Endnotes

1 I refer to the people who participate in these performances as “tradition participants,” a modification of von Sydow’s well known concept of active and passive tradition bearers. Von Sydow’s concept of tradition bearer proposes a static view of tradition, as something that can be carried. My refinement acknowledges the performative nature of tradition—tradition only exists because people tell, listen and retell the things they hear. As with von Sydow, I readily acknowledge that some people are more active than others in their participation in a particular aspect of traditional expressive culture. For a further discussion of this, see Tangherlini 1994, 30-33.
As Christopher Fuller has shown, exorcism of malevolent spirits often happens through a confrontation between a deity and the demon (1992: 232). The tutelary deity can possess the exorcist but sometimes victims of possession are “taken to temples in hope that a vision of the powerful deities, present in their images will drive out the frightened spirits” (Fuller, ibid.). It is obvious that the demon, which represents the sphere of legend, is in conflict with the deity, who belongs to the textual realm of myths. So the confrontation of the exorcist and the possessed person can be understood as an expression of inter-generic tensions. In order to comprehend the nature of this conflict, let us delineate the main traits of the two genres. Myths tend to be polymorphic narratives that appear in public sphere: in writing and in print, in pictures and other forms of art; while myths are performed in rituals, theatre, songs and dances. These performances are elaborate, attract large crowds and can be broadcasted via mass media. Myths also set pilgrims and tourists to motion to visit sacred destinations far away. Mythical locations are famous, differently from the micro-geography of legends, whose plots are linked with the close neighborhood of the traditional community. Legends about demonic encounters are not performed on stage for the enjoyment of the audience but are normally told in a private sphere, if they are narrated at all. Many beliefs circulate in cultures as hints, symbols, customs and taboos. Legends can also be experiences in every-day life, when people find themselves in similar situations that they know from oral tradition.

The state of demonic possession can be interpreted as a case when the genre of legend takes an overwhelming control over the human consciousness. A narrative is transformed into psychological and social reality, witnessed by others. In short, demonic possession is a legend that is acted out if a supernatural character from belief narratives is incarnated in human body. If the malevolent spirit is exercised in front of the village gathering, this increases the public pressure on the demon, because legend represents the private and hidden sphere. Deities establish their authority through the magic of mantras, used by the exorcist, and through the public knowledge about their power that is confirmed by myths and shared as a collective tradition. Demon is thus forced to disclose its identity and is expelled from the human body back to the textual body of legends and the mental body of beliefs.

Genres are thus not mere literary or folkloric categories of classification but expressive forms of vernacular religion and of social life in its public and private forms. Also, genres are cognitive tools for interpreting different kind of religious phenomena and life situations. Legend is one of the main genres of belief but it can also be used to express skepticism and doubt. Let us, again, return to the interview that I made with the spectral narrator Mainul Barbhuiya. Here is one of his stories that shows how legends are oriented on real-life events and how dramatic experiences tend to be interpreted according to traditional narratives:

“At that time we used to stay in Silcher town, in the headquarters of Kachar district of Assam. In winter we used to get some school holidays - ten or fifteen days. It is the time of harvesting, when all the fields are clean and we used to go to the village. We had lots of fun. All the boys of my age used to say: “Don’t go this way.” Elders made all kind of stories: “If you go there, you find a saint like man with a long beard. He will just stand on your way like this.” So all sorts of stories... One day my elderly uncle reached home, fell down and fainted. Then slowly-slowly, he came back to his sense and started telling: “When I was coming from the market, I saw a person who was just blocking the road and doing like this. He was such a tall man, I couldn’t see. Sometimes his hand was like this...” All right, I listened to this story. After some time, maybe next year, I was walking with my father, who is a very religious person. Suddenly he stopped in that point. “Remember, last year your uncle witnessed this. He faced this problem, this person. See, he is there...” I was already quite big, a student of class nine. I had already joined student politics. “I don’t know, what, papa?” I had a torch, but we were not using it in full moonlight. “No-no, don’t put on this torchlight, otherwise he will follow us.” Then I put it on. Before that, I had also seen a tall person. It was a banana tree in moonlight. The light and shades create a lot of illusion. Dry leaves, bunch of trees... and the young one just moved like this... So it creates illusion and you find a human figure like this. That I witnessed, that's why I am telling this.”

We can see that legend as a traditional genre provides the narrator with a certain supernatural interpretation of his experience. The tall saint-like man could have been like burudangarīd of Brahmaputra valley whom Benudhar Rajkhowa identifies as a tree-spirit who is religiously disposed (1973: 129). However, the narrator here rejects the interpretation, offered by the tradition, and gives another explanation that undermines the traditions of belief.

The oldest textual sources confirm that narratives about supernatural encounters were spread in India thousands of years ago. “Athravaveda” is a compendium of rich and elaborate demonology. For example, it includes a charm (IV, 37), that has been used to ward off the demonic apsaras and gandharwas, who are described as seductive females and handsome young men, who live in rivers and trees. The need for such charm must certainly been derived from stories about personal encounters with these malevolent demons. The spread of vernacular demonological terminology in any language is a proof about the existence of legends that form the primary textual realm for these bodiless creatures. Beliefs have a great potential to be verbalized in conversation as religious discourse or as narratives – sometimes fluid, local and unique, but occasionally crystallized into recognizable types of migratory legends.

In January 2003, Professor Kishore Bhattacharjee organized a workshop at the University of Gauhati, “Syncretism, Belief, Genre: A Comparative Study of Estonian and Indian Legends”. The papers, given at this workshop, drew attention to the need to interpret Indian legends from the perspective of ethnic genre systems of folklore. Legend as a generic category derives from the 19th century Europe and is shaped by the written and printed word of Western countries. It would be misleading to suggest that legend is a homogeneous genre
of global folklore. According to Linda Dégh, legend is rather “an overarching term”, to denote different narratives that discuss belief in the supernatural (2001: 97). What kind of narratives, beliefs and modalities this term should cover in Indian folklore, past and present, is a vast topic of research and discussion. The category of “legend” has a remarkable potential to get filled with multiple meanings and be developed into a rich body of research. Just as beliefs are transformed into verbal genres in folklore, concepts and categories have the potential to become the multiform textual body of international folkloristics. Eyes of legend provide religious communities with a special outlook of the world and orientation in reality (Bakhtin, Medvedev 1991: 135). Legend also offers to folklorists certain insights into a vast realm of tradition, inhabited by demons and other agents of the dark textuality of the genres of belief.

My research on Indian folklore has been supported by the Estonian Science Foundation (grant no. 6518).

References


Some Thoughts about Form in Metamorphosis Legends

ULF PALMENFELT

Since the Grimm brothers, folklorists have developed sophisticated methods for analyzing the forms of oral narrative and narrative performances. Paradoxically enough, however, this deep concern with form does not always seem to be a central part of the self-image of folklore scholars. Perhaps this apparent inconsistency can be explained simply by looking at the concepts preferred by folklorists. Many of us are educated to think in terms of morphology and motifs, not of form and content (see e.g. Propp 1958, Dundes 1980, Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1978). Even Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, one of the great pioneers of scientific taxonomies based on formal aspects, in his definition pointed out that it is the ethnographer, not the folklorist, that “must have a sense for form and color” (von Sydow 1919: 18). In spite of that, von Sydow (1934), Axel Olrik (1908), Gunnar Granberg (1935), Carl-Herman Tillhagen (1964), Bengt af Klintberg (1987), and Timothy R. Tangherlini (1994) along with others continued to refine the methods of folkloristic form analysis.

In this paper it is my purpose to focus upon some aspects of form when discussing the 106 metamorphosis legends in Per Arvid Säve’s 19th century collection of Gotlandic legends (Gustavson/Nyman 1959-1961). I have chosen to name my material metamorphosis legends, because they all deal with some kind of magical transformation. I emphasize ‘magical’, since the dynamic core of all narrative is transformation, the pendulum change between different stages of equilibrium. A substantial part of Säve’s entire legend collection (106 out of 812 numbers) responds to this selection criterion, which, of course, refers to the contents of the stories. My intention here, however, is to relate the concept of form to other factors than contents.

This is an example of how these legends might sound:

Once a farm-maid went to fetch water from the well. As she pulled up the bucket it was full of ash leaves. She carefully took her hand and threw out all the leaves from the bucket, but a couple of them came to be left floating on the water. But when the farm-maid came into the cottage and put down the bucket by the fireplace, the leaves sank into the water and something was heard to resound from the bottom of the bucket. This surprised her and when she took a closer look, there were two silver spoons glistening there. (Gustavson/Nyman 1960, 328).

From the Swedish national encyclopedia I learn that the Swedish word “form” can have several meanings (and most of this applies to the English word “form” as well). The basic meaning is the concrete noun “form”, “mold”, implicating a container into which something is poured to congeal into the same shape as the container. As a verb, “form” both in English and Swedish means “to give shape or form to”. The result of such a forming process, in a more figurative sense, can be referred to in terms of the outer shape of an object: cruciform, vermiform and liquid form. Even more abstractly, we speak of a form of punishment, a sonata form, and forms of living. Here we are approaching the meaning ethnologists and folklorists imply by concepts as “cultural forms”, i. e., ideas or sets of values that have congealed into certain configurations (NE:s internettjänst 2003:11-18).

The encyclopedia also points out that, in material objects, form is identical to spatial shape or configuration. In non-material phenomena, form can only be considered to be a shape or configuration in an abstract or figurative sense and only concerning the logical or syntactical structure of the phenomenon in question.

My starting point here is to regard both form and content as analytical aspects of a coherent unit. Hence, form and