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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.



Eyes of Legend: Thoughts about Genres of Belief

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Folklore genres are verbal channels and modes of communication that can be conceptualized from two perspectives: from the point of view of the community to whose traditions they belong and from that of the researchers whose analytical schemes provide us with different insights into oral performances and their recordings. Whereas it is easy to identify some genres, such as fairy tales and epic songs, as their performances are clearly marked, it is much more difficult to trace the spread and circulation of beliefs that tend to remain latent as ideas, images and attitudes. Beliefs form a collective mental resource that can take a variety of forms, if expressed - as rituals, customs, norms of behavior, visual symbols, works of art and verbal statements or narratives. Many people tell short stories about supernatural encounters and share their own experiences with others. Although they often lack a special vernacular term to denote such narratives, folklorists have identified them as legends. It seems that recognizing legends as a part of folklore needs a certain distance from the tradition group whose world perception and mode of thinking are shaped by the genre

that mediates and confirms belief. Mikhail Bakhtin and Pavel Medvedev have written about the "eyes of genre" as a certain kind of world outlook and a way of conceptualizing social and physical reality (1991: 133). Seeing the world and representing it take place both in literary and oral genres.

Legends provide people with interpretation models of situations of uncertainty and danger. This genre is often activated by sudden disruptions of everyday life by unexpected events, such as accident, sickness, death or being lost in wilderness. Black magic, evil eye, witchcraft, and confrontation with demons or possession by them offer a variety of explanations of these traumas and tragedies. One of the topics, discussed in legends, is the existence of spiritual agents or demons, such as ghosts, spirits, fairies, *bhuts*, *prets* and thousands of others, known under different names in the religious traditions of the world. As beings of "low" mythology, demons are opposed to deities who take the powerful positions in religious hierarchies. Demons are also opposed to humans who tend to forget or ignore their needs and whose religious practices are instead focused on deities. Although bodiless creatures, demons still depend on the offerings and attention of humans, whose bodies can become targets of demonic attacks. Demonic possession is a complex phenomenon that has been explained by introducing psychological or medical discourse or through social paradigms - as a case, when a person who is generally suppressed, acquires a public voice and reveals truths that have been hidden. However, possession can also be explained with the help of generic paradigms by applying the folkloristic categories. Gods usually appear as characters of myths - sacred narratives about the origin of the world and of its present order. Demons, on the other hand, are supernatural agents, whose usual textual environment is the genre of legend. However, both gods and demons can leave their regular textual bodies (*corpus scriptorum*) and manifest themselves through physical reality - if such occasions are prepared by cultural traditions. In India, gods take multiple visual forms as they become publicly manifested in temple sculptures and religious art. Demons, generally, remain hidden in legends but sometimes they leave their ordinary environment and possess human beings, whose worldview is dominated by this genre. There are descriptions of such cases from many parts of India.

In the year 2000, I met the artist Mainul Barbhuiya and his family in Shillong. One night we were sitting at a bonfire in the backyard of his home and I asked him to tell about some beliefs and religious practices in North Eastern India. A short passage from the field recording follows: "In our area I witnessed some cases of possession by evil spirits. In most of the cases, these are patients of hysteria - people with psychic disorders. In villages, there are *oja*-priests, the village witch doctors. He usually calms the patient and starts beating her, he tortures the sick person. Then, after some time she comes to sense in front of the huge village gathering. The *oja*-priest repeatedly says: "Yes, you tell, whose spirit you are? Who are you?" After sometime she starts speaking, because she is scared. So, she makes up stories and then people think, may-be really there is some spirit. This practice is spread among the Muslims and Hindus."

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 legends 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 exorcised 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 skeptical 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 *burāṅgariā* 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. “Atharvaveda” 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 *gandharvas*, 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.

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Some Thoughts about Form in Metamorphosis Legends

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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 Sävö'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 Sävö'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 internetjänst 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