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Storytelling Games and
the Game of Storytelling: Social Norms and
Legend in Nineteenth Century Denmark

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Questions often arise concerning the function of storytelling within a tradition group. Why do people tell the stories they tell? Do particular situations precipitate specific stories, and do certain tale tellers choose to tell their tales in particular ways? Folklorists generally accept that storytelling helps express and simultaneously reinforce the social norms and values of a tradition community (Honko 1984ab; Abrahams 1984; Röhrich 1984; Simonsen 1985: 30; Holbek 1987). Stories that are frequently repeated within the tradition group are considered to produce meaning for the tradition participants. Often these meanings are closely linked to the group's values. Once a story ceases to produce meaning for the tradition participants, it ceases to be told in that particular manner. A main focus of folklore is the study of variation within tales. As values change, stories change and, similarly, as stories change, values also tend to change. The story market, as it were, guarantees that the stories with the most currency, those that produce the most meaning for the tradition participants, are those that will be most frequently told and remembered. Storytellers change their stories to fit the particular performative setting and, as the expectations of the tradition participants change, so too must the story (Brown 1984: 91). Although tradition tends to be conservative, variation is an integral part of the life of tradition. If storytellers do not change their stories to reflect the values of their community, people will no longer listen to their stories.¹

When non-folklorists think of storytelling, they often focus on the fairy tale. Bengt Holbek, in his important *Interpretation of fairy tales*, posits that the fairy tale presents both a model for behavior and an exploration of the sexual tensions between children and their parents (Holbek 1987). Based on the late nineteenth century collections of the Danish folklorist Evald Tang Kristensen, Holbek's work explores how the fairy tale allows for an examination of the politics of the domestic space, with a particular emphasis on the struggle between both the sexes and the generations. Holbek also discovered, however, that fairy tale telling was the domain of a relatively small percentage of the tradition community (Holbek 1987: 181). Thus, while fairy tale tellers told tales which explore issues salient to the lives of most

tradition participants, most tradition participants did not actively use fairy tales to explore these issues.² As such, fairy tales were not a common locus for the negotiation of social values.

Conversely, another genre of folk narrative, the legend, provides tradition participants a more active arena for developing, reinforcing and renegotiating cultural norms and values. Legends are short, mono-episodic believable narratives, often told in a conversational mode for rhetorical purposes (Tangherlini 1990). While fairy tale tellers were few and far between in rural nineteenth century Denmark, nearly everyone in the same area could tell at least one legend (Tangherlini 1994: 62). Legends, with their frequent focus on startling events during common day-to-day interactions provide more information on daily life and rules governing interaction than the more fabulous fairy tales. Because of this focus, legends offer tradition participants the opportunity to explore with impunity the potential ramifications of various actions in given interactive settings.

One also finds a greater latitude for variation in legend. While fairy tales by definition all end with the marriage of the hero and heroine, the legend teller is not constrained by such set expectations (Holbek 1987; Propp 1968(1928)). Thus two similar stories can progress in markedly different manners:

The farmer from a farm in Bjærø was out in his field, plowing with four horses. *Byy* mound lay there, now it's been leveled since people have taken gravel from it for so long, so it has completely disappeared. As he was plowing by it, there was a peelboard lying there and it was broken. So the man repaired it and when he came back, there was a warm muffin lying there for him and his farmhand. They ate it and found themselves well off because of it (Kristensen 1928: 83).

One time, a farmhand plowed near Birdmound on *Visborg* farm field. Then a woman came out of the mound with a peelboard, which was broken. She asked the farmhand to repair it and then place it back on the mound. Then she disappeared. The farmhand searched his pockets and found a few nails and, with the help of a stone, he hammered the board back together. Then he laid it down on the mound. He plowed along and, after a little while, he went to see if the board was still there, but it had disappeared. In its place there was a freshly baked loaf of bread. The farmhand thought that the bread was probably for him, but didn't dare take it. A little later, it had also disappeared (Kristensen 1928: 81)

These differences may reflect competing strategies in given situations. As such, one may consider that legend telling acts as an exploration of strategies given a particular social interaction. In the above social interaction, an example of a barter transaction between an in-group, here members of a small Danish

farming community, and an out-group, here a supernatural community of mound dwellers, the two tellers offer competing strategies for dealing with the interaction: (a) acknowledge the transaction and accept the payment or (b) not acknowledge the transaction and refuse the payment. Presumably, the strategy endorsed by the majority of the tradition participants would appear in the largest number of stories. In this instance, the vast majority of stories in Denmark laud the acceptance of the bread and the acknowledgment of the barter arrangement with an outside group. This dominant strategy would therefore also reflect the social norm of conduct in the given situation, here that barter arrangements with groups outside of the circumscribed community (where the strategy of "tit for tat" cannot be used to guarantee cooperation as it can in frequent intergroup transactions), is the preferred strategy. Interestingly, stories which include both strategies--eating the bread and not eating the bread--are common, and generally endorse the action which acknowledges the transaction:

One day, the parson's farmhand at *Strynø* along with a farmboy were out plowing at *Joste*. After one pass, they found an oven rake in the furrow. The boy asked where it had come from, since it wasn't there before. The farmhand answered that they were probably baking down there today, and he could see that the rake was broken. Then he took out a nail and put it back together and placed it back where it was. On their next pass, it was gone. Round about noon, there were two muffins in the same place, which the farmhand took and said: "Here you can see the payment for my work, but you can certainly have one of them." The boy didn't want to eat that kind of cake, and crossed himself, because the farmhand dared to each such a thing. The one cake was left behind, and they drove home. But along the way, the boy started to get sick, and before night he was dead. That was because he didn't eat the muffin (Kristensen 1928: 86).

A structural map of the legend, first proposed by William Labov and later refined by W.F.H. Nicolaisen may help in delimiting the areas of choice for the legend teller (Labov 1972; Nicolaisen 1984). Legends, according to this structural scheme, include an orientation, in which the legend actors are introduced and the initial conflict is presented, a complicating action, in which the conflict is brought to a head, and a resolution, in which the conflict is resolved. The resolution can be either positive, in which the social or economic status of the central legend actor(s) has been enhanced, negative, in which the social or economic status of the central actor(s) has been diminished, or neutral, in which the status quo obtains. Accordingly, legend tellers can choose who will act in the legends, the type of conflict, and how that conflict will be resolved. Since the inner reality of the legend closely mirrors the outer reality of

the legend teller, one expects the narrator to choose conflicts which are close to those of his everyday life. The resolution of the conflict thus stands as a narrative negotiation of the contingencies of particular actions given the presented conflict.

Game theory may offer useful insights into the motivations for storytelling among tradition participants, and may also help reveal some of the cultural values which receive expression in legends. As Walter Goldschmidt observes, "the general conceptual apparatus of game theory is useful...as a mode of determining what the values actually are in a given society. By examining the strategies that the ethnographer finds to be regularly employed, he can determine where the payoff is, and what the values are" (Goldschmidt 1969: 73). In many of the Danish legends, it appears that the primary pay-off is the maintenance of social integrity. While individuals may act to increase their own personal wealth, by alliances with the Devil for example, such strategies most frequently end in horrible and bloody death:

There was also a manor lord at *Søby Søgård* who had made an agreement with the Evil One that he would indulge him for a while and therefore he could later have possession of him with skin and hair. Now when the time approached when the Devil was supposed to come get him, he didn't have the slightest idea how to get free. Finally he came up with the idea of covering his entire room with comforters. Now when his time had run out, the Devil came sure enough and it only helped a little bit that the soft comforters could cushion the sinner, because now he danced around the room with him so that soon that there wasn't a whole stump left of neither the comforters nor the manor lord. The blood, which splattered about on the walls, can never be cleaned off and can even be seen now (Kristensen 1980(1892-1901), vol. 6: #144).

Here, the orientation posits the wealthy manor lord in an alliance with the Devil, an alliance geared towards increasing his wealth. The conflicting action, namely the lord's attempts at avoiding the Devil, ends with a negative resolution, namely the man's grisly death. While the concept of limited good may motivate the proscription against actions which lead to personal gain presumably at the expense of the rest of the community (Foster 1965; Lindow 1982), the legend may also express several other values, including the devaluation of individuals who seek to leave the community (by rising above it economically), as well as the devaluation of individuals willing to make alliances with entities outside of the close homogeneous community. Here the outsider is particularly frightening, as he is the sworn enemy of the church which, in nineteenth century rural Denmark was the focus of much social interaction

and active in the prescription of norms. Surprisingly, the legends of the repaired peelboard seem to directly contradict the evaluation of such alliances. Whereas in this legend the alliance is considered bad, in those legends, such out-group alliances were considered to be good. The distinction must lie in the intentions of the individual. In the first case of the repaired peelboard, the farmhand is simply engaging in a low level barter transaction, without an expectation of significantly increasing his financial situation. In the alliance with the Devil, however, the individual desires to substantially increase his economic standing to the detriment of the rest of the community, in this case by inviting Satan into the community. In other legends, legend actors make alliances with the Devil to increase their power, a power used for the good of the community. These individuals are often able to defer indefinitely the Devil's claim:

Those who go to the Black School run out of it when they are done; because the one who comes out last belongs to the Devil. There was once a minister who came out last but he was wise enough to tell the Devil that he could take his shadow first and had to be happy with that. The minister didn't have a shadow after that, and the Devil often put it on and went around with it, so people thought that they saw the minister out in the field and other places, even though he was at home in his house at the same time (Kristensen 1980(1892-1901) vol. 6: #75).

Generally, people who trick the Devil in this manner use their learning to help the community; both priests and folk healers are often credited with having tricked the Devil in this or similar manners.³

Just as legends offer the tradition participants an opportunity to explore strategies for interaction, the storytelling situation itself must also be seen as a game. Here, the storyteller has particular motivations for telling the stories that they tell. Although much of the pay-off from storytelling is linked to such non quantifiable factors such as prestige, certain storytelling situations, such as those concerning folk healers, may also be linked to the economic situation of the storyteller and other tradition participants. Goldschmidt adds that, "If game theory analysis really fits a pure economic model and does not have to concern itself with other motives such as prestige, the implications are that prestige goals are not themselves relevant to the generality of behavior within a cultural situation, though they still may relate to the question as to what type of person will choose one strategy over another" (Goldschmidt 1969: 64). While it may be difficult to calculate the absolute pay-off derived from choosing one particular story over another, strategies linked to significant increase in prestige with only marginal

increase in economic situation may dominate in the legend telling arena. Legends concerning cures and the abilities of certain folk healers to provide cures in situations where others have failed may help illustrate this point.

In rural nineteenth century Denmark, folk healers were often reviled as charlatans, and their cures were often labeled superstition and the work of the Devil. But they were also valued as important members of the community who had the ability to cure ills that others could not cure:

The folk healers were both feared and respected. They could measure, bless and show again, cure illnesses and, by reading, stop injuries or catastrophes. They could also stop bleeding, stop run-away horses and a lot more. Some parsons were also thought to have similar abilities. These folk healers could do both good and bad (Kristensen 1936: 141).

Kristen Simonsen said that Jørgen Hansen Birkebæk could do both good things and bad things...(Kristensen 1936: 117)

Not everybody accepted the abilities of these folk healers, and thus legend telling was a locus for the conflicting tensions surrounding these figures. Deciding to tell legends about folk healers and deciding on the resolution of these encounters allowed tradition participants the opportunity to engage in the social valuation of their services. Those who did not value the abilities of folk healers might tell legends in which their cures failed:

I had an uncle who was nearly blind. He went to the Vindblæs woman [a folk healer], and she gave him some herbs, which he was to boil and then he was supposed to drink it. Then he was to go to a mill and get some grease and make a poultice and put it on his neck. In the herbs there was a piece of paper with nine little segments and he was to take one segment each morning for nine days, starting at the small end. It didn't help (Kristensen 1980(1892-1901) vol. 4 : #1839).

Or they might tell tales which deal with the arrest of folk healer for quackery:

Præst-Jens had the habit of walking back and forth across the floor and saying, "Seven times ten is the dust's year and seldom seldom more." He was forbidden to practice and when they came and got him, he was tied up in a hay bag and placed in the back of a wagon so that nobody could see him (Kristensen 1936: 111).

Other tradition participants negatively inclined towards folk healers might focus on their potential alliances with the Devil or label them witches:

A witch supposedly lived down by Hunseby. Once, two men came to visit her, because they heard that she was wise [a folk healer]. They were going to Hunseby, but they planned to come back. Then she said that they should hurry, because the weather was going to get bad. She was so wise that she could feel it. Once they had left, they said to each other, "It wasn't pretty there with that hag, it looked really bad there." There was also a terrible thunderstorm, but they came back. She had made pancakes for them, and she asks them if they want to eat some pancakes. Well, they weren't too sure, because it was so dirty there, but they ate them anyway. Then she says, "Yeah, you could eat them even though you said it was dirty here." Then they could hear, that she knew what they had talked about (Kristensen 1936: 148).

The ability to predict the weather and hear conversations from afar are abilities often attributed folk healers. However, in stories such as this, which are quite frequent, the status of the person has been changed from folk healer, an individual concerned with protecting the community, to witch, an individual concerned with personal gain at the expense of the community.

In Danish legends, folk healers often are called on to counteract the negative actions of a witch. One could imagine a situation where a folk healer's supporters describe his ability to counter the evil intentions of a rival folk healer who has, in the legend, been labeled a witch:

At my uncle's farm a little child had become very ill, and they were unsure if it would live or die. So they went off to a folk healer in Græstedbro to get some advice. But the day they were there, the witch who had hexed the child came to the farm countless times and asked where the people were, she was used to finding it out. The servants were careful enough not to tell her because, if they'd done that, then they wouldn't have benefited from their trip, and the folk healer's advice wouldn't have helped. When they got home, they found a small bird's egg in the bed and they burned it. The child got better (Kristensen 1936: 277).

Legends such as this might signal a competition among folk healers for business, with legends acting as a means of supporting or undermining their enterprises. One legend mentions an apparent succession of folk healers, the master healer being supplanted by a less favored folk healer after the master's death: "As long as Wise Anders was alive, you fetched him [in case of need], but after he died, you went off to find [Wise] Jokum..." (Kristensen 1936: 113).

Given the large numbers of positively resolved legends concerning folk healers, many members of the community apparently valued their services. These people would also be inclined to tell stories which described the folk healers to be more adept at curing than learned authorities such as doctors:

There was an old folk healer who lived on Balle Højbjærg a little northwest of Balle, they called him old Hans Kristian, and he was a kind of doctor in everything, but

especially for broken legs. People also went to him for toothaches...There was a farmhand down in Kjeldkjær who was unlucky enough to break his leg. So the Doctor Ørbech in Vejle was sent for, he was their doctor. He came and bound the leg and then the farmhand was to stay in bed for six weeks. But he nearly died from the pain, because the leg was not set properly of course. So he asked for someone to fetch Hans Kristian, but they wouldn't, they couldn't allow a quack like that into their farm. But the farmhand gets another farm hand to get him that night, and when Hans Kristian comes down there and examines him, he rips all the stuff off, which the Doctor had bound around the leg, and fixed it again, and now the sick farmhand didn't have any pain. Then he told him that, if he kept still for five days, he could get up again. He did that and he got better. Now the Doctor comes by the area again, and decides to pay a sick call. Then the farmhand is standing there loading fertilizer. The Doctor becomes crazed with anger when he sees that and he jumps into his wagon again and drives off to Vejle. But he had an errand in Bræsten Inn and when he comes inside, the inn is filled with people, and Hans Kristian was also there. He was a little man, and he sat quietly in a corner, and the Doctor didn't notice him. He begins to shout about Hans Kristian from Balle and how he was going to take care of him. Then Hans Kristian gets up quietly and says, "If you want to do something to the man, here he is. But I want to say, that you're a complete clod when it comes to broken legs." The Doctor flew out the door and left (Kristensen 1936: 140).

Finally, a folk healer or a close family member may also tell stories of his own prowess:⁴

Peder Sillesthoved was my uncle. One time when I was down at his house, an eighteen year old boy came riding up and gave him a five crown note, because he had cured him, and he said, "We could have sent it, but my mother thought that you should see me." Now he was completely healthy, but when he had come the first time, he had pox all over his face, and his mother had spent 200 crowns at the doctor's. Peder Sillesthoved said to him when he came, "If the advice I give you doesn't help within eight days, it won't help for you to come to me again" (Kristensen 1936: 119).

Although one could imagine that a folk healer would have some marginal motivation for telling stories of the failure of particular cures as a means to maintain a monopoly over that cure, it seems that folk healers and those supportive of folk healers generally told stories which stressed the process of the cure-- particular knowledge that only the folk healer possessed, such as the words or actions accompanying a curative salve. Thus, the stories do not stress specific curatives for particular ailments. Rather, they stress the ability of the folk healer to effect a cure using, among other things, curative agents:

A man in Givskud, Ole Skjærhoved, had a pair of oxen which often stampeded. He went to see Sillesthoved [a folk healer] and asked him for a curative substance for it-- Søren [the folk healer] gave him for things to rub into the harnesses. It had to be done after an extremely exacting schedule, and if it wasn't followed exactly, the attempt would be in vain. Ole went home, but when he was nearly finished with the cure and the rubbing, he forgot to follow the directions, and the oxen stampeded again. But it wasn't the curative substance which didn't work, but rather him, because he didn't use it correctly (Kristensen 1936: 120).

Since the vast majority of legends concerning folk healers discuss their abilities to cure people, the strategy of telling positively resolved stories concerning a folk healer apparently outweighed the potential benefit from telling negatively resolved stories, either as a strategy to undermine the abilities of a rival folk healer or as a strategy to maintain monopolies on a particular cure.

There is a tendency to view social norms as a constant factor in the day-to-day functioning of a given community. How these norms develop and how they change are questions which are not addressed. With this brief survey of the legend tradition of late nineteenth century rural Denmark, the role of folklore, particularly legend, in the expression, reinforcement and negotiation of social norms has become apparent. Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi suggest that various "communication conduits" exist in any tradition group--different folk genres are appropriate and efficient at producing meanings for the tradition community in different interactive settings (Dégh and Vázsonyi 1973). While the fairy tale is an efficient vehicle for exploring the sexual tensions between generations and the sexes, legend is more efficient at exploring day-to-day interactions. Storytelling functions as a game on many levels. The first game is deciding which genre, or communication conduit, to use in an interactive setting. If one chooses the wrong conduit, the audience leaves. Thus, the experienced storyteller--one who knows which conduit to use for which setting--will be the most successful. A second game concerns the story itself. In the case of a legend, the storyteller chooses the story actors, an orientation, a conflicting action and a resolution. Each of these steps can also be considered a game. Finally, internal to the legend, the actors often choose a strategy to deal with the conflicting action. Since the internal reality of the legend closely mirrors the external reality of the tradition participants, one can view this choice as an examination of possible actions given the situation in day-to-day life. The storyteller's resolution of this action often signals an evaluation of this strategy. However, the storyteller is also somewhat constrained--endorsing an action that the tradition community does not collectively endorse could result in audience abandonment (the storyteller is not considered a good teller and nobody in the community listens to his stories) or the disappearance of the variant from active circulation (the next time someone tells the same story, either the legend actor's action or the resolution are changed to align with the tradition).⁵ By examining which stories, and which story strategies, both on the performative level and on the content level, persist, one can begin to discover the

social norms governing social interaction in the tradition community. In rural nineteenth century Denmark, for example, actions geared towards the maintenance of social integrity are generally lauded, whereas actions geared towards individual gain are condemned. Not all legends are alike, suggesting that the storytelling arena is an active area for the negotiation of social values in a tradition community.

¹This process of variation and the close link between the tale and the tradition community account in part for the development of both synchronic and diachronic ecotypes (von Sydow 1948(1932); Tangherlini 1990 and 1994). Eskeröd's concept of "tradition dominants" also helps in understanding variation (Eskeröd 1947: 81). In Eskeröd's analysis, when a story is adapted into the repertoire of tradition participants in a new tradition community, the dominant actors (eg supernatural beings) are substituted for features in the story which would not be accepted by the tradition participants.

²Von Sydow first made the distinction between active bearers and passive bearers of a tradition to distinguish between those members of a tradition community who actively engaged the genre under study (active bearers) and those members who recognized the utterance as part of their tradition, but did not engage in active transmission (passive bearers) (von Sydow 1948(1932)). This distinction has been modified here as to be active tradition participants and passive tradition participants, to eliminate the somewhat misleading view that folklore is something that is carried around and handed off much like a piece of baggage. The word participant reflects the role that people play in the ever evolving game of tradition.

³For example, in one legend concerning the folk healer Jørgen Hansen Birkebæk, one finds the following: "It was said and believed that he had allied himself with the Devil, and that he had made the promise to never button his top vest...and sure enough, Jørgen never had his top button buttoned" (Kristensen 1936: 117). Undoubtedly, Jørgen had told the Devil that he'd belong to him as soon as he had finished buttoning his vest, and then stopped buttoning it. This is a common ruse to hold the Devil at bay.

⁴Close relatives, such as a son, may also have a vested economic stake in telling such legends, as in the case of Peder Johansen (Tangherlini 1994: 225). Erving Goffman (1959: 242) suggests that "when an individual appears before others, he knowingly and unwittingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a conception of himself is an important part." Such a presentation of self may be part of a storytelling strategy designed to increase the prestige and importance of the self in the community. Concerning strategic representations of the self in face-to-face interactions, see also, Goffman 1969.

⁵This alignment roughly correlates with Robert Cooter's alignment theorem, in which "a social norm will evolve in a community when private incentives for signaling align with a public good" (Cooter 1994a: 9-10 and 1994b). Here, the private incentive is directed towards the storyteller and her attempt to "win" the storytelling game, while the community endorses strategies of action which protect social integrity, a public good.

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