

Nordic Legends and the Question of Identity

Introduction

John Lindow
Timothy R. Tangherlini

AS SIMPLE BELIEVABLE STORIES OF PAST EVENTS, with characters, locations, and situations recognizable to the people who tell and hear them, legends are easily exchanged in ordinary conversational contexts. Like all folklore, however, they contain symbolic representations of folk belief and reflect the experiences and values of those who share them.¹ Since identity might be defined as the sum of experience and values,² it is self-evident that folklore can be understood as the bearer of identity, and formulations of this point go back at least to Herder. Stripped of its national romantic overlay (if that is possible), his postulation of folk songs as the florescence of timeless national identity is not so terribly distant from the arguments folklorists now construct about folklore and identity: virtually any group and the individuals within it use folklore to negotiate their identities (Dundes 1983).

In recent years, the identity of the storytellers has become prominent in studies of folklore (Penitkainen 1978; Holbek 1987; Tangherlini

¹ For a summary of legend scholarship on which we base these two defining sentences, see Tangherlini 1990 and 1994: 3-22.

² Although this is hardly the place to enter into a discussion of the concept of identity (on which in this context see Dundes 1983), we would like to draw attention to the etymology from *idem* 'same' and the requirement of differences for the observation of sameness. Even the Grimm brothers needed folktales to define legends: "Each of them has its own realm. The fairy tale [*Märchen*, folktale] is more poetic; the legend is more historical; the former exists securely almost in and of itself in its innate blossoming and consummation. The legend, by contrast, is characterized by a lesser variety of colors, yet it represents something special in that it adheres always to that which we are conscious of and know well . . ." (translation in Ward 1981: vol. 1, p. 1). A number of the essays below explore precisely this means of marking boundaries, samenesses and differences, and hence identities.

1994). The identity of the narrators is, of course, paramount in a study of "folklore and identity" such as this one, since we are concerned not only with the story texts, but also with who tells the stories and possible reasons for the telling. The Swedish folklorist Carl Wilhelm von Sydow (1932) introduced the concept of "tradition bearers," thereby becoming one of the first folklorists to consider seriously the role of the individual in the folkloric process. According to his distinction, members of a tradition group were either "active" bearers of tradition or "passive" bearers. Active tradition bearers were people who knew and told or otherwise passed on a particular folklore item, while passive tradition bearers were people who could recognize the folklore item but were unable to reproduce it themselves. In a later modification of this theory, Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi (1973) pointed out that a person could be an active bearer of certain types of lore and a passive bearer of other types of lore. Even though these observations help explain why some people are able to tell stories and others are not, von Sydow's view of folklore implies that folklore is something tangible, something that can be carried about from place to place until the opportunity arises to pass it on to another person. Furthermore, it suggests that folklore has a life of its own and is able to exist independently of the people who "bear" it. As a result, it downplays the importance of individuals in shaping and transmitting traditional expressions and thereby raises a question as to the importance of folklore in the expression of identity. Tradition does not have a life of its own; rather, it is completely bound by the people who perpetuate it. Fortunately, contemporary folklorists have begun to shy away from the romantic notion of folklore as an amorphous entity, passing from the mouth of one active bearer to the mouth of another active bearer. Instead, they have begun to view folklore as emerging during performance events. The event centers around participants, and it is these participants who create the folklore. Thus, it is more accurate to speak of "tradition participants" than of "tradition bearers." In any performance, there are some people who take an active role—telling stories or making comments on the performance as it unfolds; they can be referred to as "active tradition participants." Other people often take a less active role, simply watching or listening to the performance(s), and can be referred to as "passive tradition participants." This refinement of von Sydow's important distinction highlights the role of individuals in the (re-) creation of tradition through performance and thereby

strengthens the link between individual performance of folklore and the use of such expressions as part of the invention of identity. Because of the close connection between the individual as a participant in a tradition and the concept of identity, we use the term "tradition participant" throughout.

In the opening article, John Lindow examines the supernatural "others" in the earliest Old Norse-Icelandic literature, particularly the *Ynglingatal*, and shows that a connection between notions of ethnicity and the supernatural has existed for many hundreds of years. Specifically, Lindow considers the phenomenon of the *blá menn* and the *skeltingar*, noting the strong link between ethnically or racially differentiated groups and supernatural abilities. Using evidence from the *forvaldarrögur*, he reveals the close and at times ambiguous relationship between ethnic outsiders and supernatural beings and suggests that often the two groups were conflated in folk expression. Lindow is able to trace the relative constancy of these attitudes from the earliest Old Norse-Icelandic materials down through folk legends collected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In so doing, he implies a certain stability in the Scandinavian expression of ethnic identity and world view as reflected through folkloric texts. A catalogue of the differences between humans and the supernatural outsiders helps reveal which attributes tradition participants believed were critical in making group membership. Lindow posits that the attributes of the outsiders are constructed by the tradition participants as a means for expressing what they deemed to be the important markers of group membership. As such, the attributes of the supernatural outsiders contrast with those of the human insiders and thereby help in the process of affirming group identity.

The Finns, or as Lindow and others have rightly pointed out, the Saami, often appear in the legends of other Scandinavian lands as the "magical outsiders." Not surprisingly, the Saami do not present themselves as "other" in their own legends. Rather, they move to the position of "insider" and posit other groups, even Scandinavians, as the "other." In his examination of Saami legends, Thomas A. Dubois presents an interesting view of the close relationship between Anar Saami identity and land use. Basing his study on the late nineteenth-century collections of A. V. Koskimies, Dubois shows that outside groups often are placed in conflict with members of the Anar community in situations where the Anar identity is primarily linked to geographic

location and land use practices. His discussions of legends concerning the *éadeb* and the *staalo* present new evidence linking these traditional figures with ethnic outsiders in the legend vocabulary of the Anar Saami. Most of the legends Dubois deals with cast the outside groups in a decidedly negative light, while portraying the Anar in a positive light. As becomes apparent, Anar identity is tightly linked both to Lutheranism and the Anar Saami's intense and close relation to their land. Dubois's concluding remarks concerning the roles of land and land use as central and "meaning making" entities help us in our attempts at understanding the indigenous Saami populations and their struggles to maintain and preserve their identities in a technologically advanced and changing European political environment which does not always respect the rights of indigenous peoples.

Religion, specifically Lutheranism, plays a key role in the expression of identity in the folklore of all the Scandinavian lands. In her article, Kathleen Stokker considers a cycle of legends catalogued by Reidar Christiansen (1958) as ML 3015, "The Cardplayers and the Devil." Stokker reveals how a popular interpretation of Lutheran theology, one that actually conflicts with the "official" version, informs legends about the abilities of the "Black Book Minister" to exorcise the Devil from the card players' room. Lutheranism is a key component of Scandinavian identity, and Stokker reveals how the tradition participants rely on both their perceptions of the minister, often a marginal and liminal—but extremely powerful—figure in the community, to counter a religiously charged Satanic threat to the community. Through the successful exorcism of the Devil, the community's integrity is restored and the community identity reaffirmed. Nevertheless, the parishioners remain in a position of relative impotence with respect to the Devil, entirely dependent on the talents of the minister to deliver them from his presence. Arguably one of the most important concepts that Stokker addresses is that of salvation and how these legends present a view of salvation counter to that propounded by the Lutheran Church, in which the individual could gain salvation by faith alone. Instead, in these legends, salvation appears as an elusive goal. The Black Book Minister, his successes and near failures, and the threat to the community posed by the Devil all become key elements in these legends which reveal important aspects of late nineteenth-century Norwegian cultural identity.

Moving on to more contemporary legends, Timothy R. Tangherlini presents an engaging view of both the changes and continuities between contemporary Danish legend tradition and the legends collected nearly a century earlier by Evald Tang Kristensen. Perhaps one of Tangherlini's most interesting findings is the substitution of ethnic outsiders into the motifemic slots once reserved for supernatural or preternatural outsiders, a substitution confirmed by Lindow's opening article. A result of these substitutions is the change of the expressions from inclusive to exclusive—and thus ethnocentric—expressions of ethnic identity. Tangherlini's remarks are particularly relevant to the contemporary political situation in Denmark and Europe with the current rise of ethnic violence. The stormy debate over the Maastricht treaty and the hesitant ratification of the treaty by the Danish population in April of 1993 reflect the reluctance with which Danes are willing to embrace far reaching union with the other European states. This reluctance became even more prominent with the Norwegian rejection of membership in the European Union in November of 1994. The contemporary legends Tangherlini considers often reflect attitudes suspicious of foreigners, particularly immigrants and refugees from southern European or west Asian countries. Tangherlini's conclusions concerning both the process of historicization of legend accounts, with the substitution of culturally credible characters—refugees and foreign merchants—for supernatural beings, as well as the dehumanizing goal of ethnocentric expressions, reveal the process by which inclusive, positive expressions of ethnic identity can quickly change into exclusive, negative expressions of ethnocentrism. Understanding these processes may help in the struggle to minimize the ethnic strife which is sweeping across contemporary Europe.

Niels Ingwersen, in the concluding article, addresses the individual use of folk expression as a negotiation of experience. Ingwersen considers both how individuals respond to stories and how they appropriate particular narratives into their repertoires. Leading off with an example from the classroom, Ingwersen provides a view of how the contextualization of narrative performance opens the narrative to multivariant, yet individuated, processes of meaning. One of the goals of folkloric analysis is to develop an understanding of who tells what to whom and why. Without an appreciation of the historical context of performance, the analysis tends toward generalities. However, when an understanding of the individual teller or, more important, the individual listener is

brought into the analysis, the search for meaning(s) becomes particularized. Individuals use narratives as part of the creation of identity. Often, stories are told as a means for negotiating the potential implications of an event. Here, the event itself is not necessarily one of historical fact, but rather one of historical potential. The tellers and the audience, a distinction which is often hard to make in the folkloric process, then use the story—its performance and the subsequent responses—as a means for engaging issues fundamental to their community. As such, the performance of narrative can be seen as part of the process of the negotiation of identity. Meaning, however, is not solely limited to the active participants of the tradition group. Rather, particular stories can suddenly take on new meaning for both active and passive participants, even those external to the original tradition group. This point is aptly illustrated in Ingwersen's example of a Norwegian *bergtagsning* story collected from the nineteenth century, edited, translated, and eventually retold at a recent Christmas party in Wisconsin. Ingwersen concludes with observations on how stories which have seemingly lost relevance to the tradition group and therefore no longer constitute a part of tradition participants' active repertoires can assume new importance because of a change in the social and historical situation. With the re-emergence of the tale into the tradition participants' active repertoires, the individual tellers and audience members are able once again to negotiate the often difficult implications of the event and incorporate the event into their creation of identity.

This small collection of essays addresses numerous issues of interest not only to folklorists and Scandinavianists, but to students of culture in general. How do people express their identity? What role does storytelling, particularly the telling of legends, play in the negotiation of identity? Certainly with the emergence of a strong and ostensibly unified "western" Europe concomitant with the breakdown of "eastern" Europe, marked by economic crisis and ethnocentric strife, the question of identity—its creation and its expression—is of central importance. All of these articles consider how stories are used to create identity and how consistency through time has often acted as a conservative force in the folkloric expression of identity. From the earliest expressions of the Old Norse-Icelandic materials, through the Lutheran informed (or misinformed) legends of the nineteenth century, up to contemporary ethnocentric legends, storytelling has played an important role in the creation of identity. The stories and the act of storytelling

itself are charged with political power, and both can function as forms of protest. While at times the political expression can be somewhat negative, as in the ethnocentric contemporary legends, at other times the expression can be one which helps a community oppose oppression, as in the case of the Anar Saami. The goal of this issue, then, is to reveal how storytelling, and particularly legend, is intimately bound up with the processes of the invention of identity.

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