

“I det Hus kunde jeg ikke godt være tjent med at spise...”
Evald Tang Kristensen’s Attitudes Toward Poor Informants

In the general representation of Evald Tang Kristensen’s informants propagated by Tang Kristensen and by subsequent scholars, one finds an emphasis not only on the poverty of these informants but also on Tang Kristensen’s willingness to visit with these “poorest of the poor.” Indeed, in Else Marie Kofod’s *Evald Tang Kristensens syn på folkeminderne*, she proposes that “Det var som sagt blandt de dårligste stillede og blandt de ældre Tang Kristensen især færdedes” (Kofod 1984, 11). Similarly, Bengt Holbek in his classic *Interpretation of Fairy Tales* mentions “nearly all of his informants belonged to the class of *husmænd*, lodgers, etc.” (Holbek 1987, 80). Both of these later scholars simply echo Tang Kristensen’s own assertions, such as “Jeg har samlet næsten alle mine Viser hos de fattige Folk” (Jyske Folkeminder 1, vii) and “Præstere og Lærere har jeg liden eller ingen Nytte af, bortset fra, at de kan give mig Nattely” (MO II 113). The actual situation of whom Tang Kristensen collected from, and how he reacted to poverty and poor people, is somewhat more convoluted.

Romantic notions of the connections between folklore expression and the poorest and oldest citizens as guardians of the survivals of a quickly disappearing Danish national culture doubtlessly informed Tang Kristensen’s own projections of the status of his informants as the poorest of the poor, and the alleged joy he derived from visiting with these people. Erving Goffman, in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, proposes that people are constantly engaged in a political projection of self—and it is likely this type of political project that motivates Tang Kristensen’s public and published representations of his informants (Goffman 1956). Indeed, given the orientation of the academic elite in Copenhagen (particularly Sven Grundtvig), it seems likely that Tang Kristensen was consciously representing his “samlervirksomhed” in terms that were most likely to lead to continued (economic) support of his obsessive collecting habits—so obsessive that he continues collecting as his children are stricken with measles (MO III 161) and later as his daughter and then his wife waste away from tuberculosis—and an appreciation of him as a person closely connected to these poor and old cultural guardians.

A close reading of *Minder og Oplevelser*, Tang Kristensen’s “memoirs” reveals a far more complex relationship to his informants than the one presented in the forewords and afterwords to his numerous printed collections. Reading *Minder og Oplevelser*, of course, is one of the more bizarre exercises one can engage in, as it is written with no narrative complexity whatsoever, has no index, and proceeds in linear form from Tang Kristensen’s early childhood up through his dotage, ebbing out into 1915 or so. It concludes somewhat abruptly with an afterword written shortly before his death, ending with a challenge for someone to publish an index of the work. The majority of *Minder og Oplevelser* is a redaction of the letters he sent home during his travels coupled to other diaries and journal entries. Most telling are his observations made in the field of the different people he visited, how they received him, how he perceived them, and who was able to tell him stories.

Through such a reading of *Minder og Oplevelser*, it becomes quite clear that Tang Kristensen relied heavily on the extensive network of school teachers that spread across Jutland not only for contacts in the villages, but as hosts and in contradiction to his own assertions, as informants. So, for example, at the start of a

fieldtrip in February of 1888, Tang Kristensen starts off “Fra stationen gik jeg op til Bjedstrup for at besøge Lærer A. J. Meldgaard og han var meget venlig og fortalte mig noget” (MO III 158). Later on that same trip, he mentions “Jeg gik saa op til Taaning og besøgte baade R. P. Randlev og Lærer Hovgaard” (MO III 158), noting that “Hos Lærer Hovgaard have jeg det ret godt og var der i fire nætter” (MO III 158-159). The next trip that starts in late March or early April of 1888, follows the same pattern—“Jeg kom saa til Ry. Her fik jeg god Hjælp af Lærer Jensen...” who then proceeds to help him find contacts in the village, both poorer and wealthier people alike (MO III 162-163).

The pattern is the same throughout *Minder og Oplevelser* and throughout Tang Kristensen’s collecting: he comes to a town, finds the teacher and collects from him first. He then asks for other contacts in the town and, if he is fortunate, the teacher follows him to the various people. Ideally, Tang Kristensen manages to secure lodging at the teacher’s residence—allowing him the opportunity to collect more from the teacher later on that evening. In some cases, Tang Kristensen is able to find comfortable lodgings or a delicious meal with a well placed official or farmer in the town, who also become informants. His visit to Godsejer Scavenius in October 1893 is perhaps the most extraordinary of such visits. After a long discussion of local geography, he writes: “Derefter skulde vi op og spise Frokost, og jeg skal love for, den var flot. Jeg var helt benovet ved at se, at jeg havde en Tjener staaende bag ved min Stol for at tage sig af mig og skifte Tallerkener, for der var vistnok en 3,4 Stykker oven paa hverandre. Der var Dyresteg og mange andre gode Sager, som jeg ikke her kan opregne. Dertil skulde jo bruges mere en ét Hold Tallerkener, og der var ogsaa flere Hold Gafler og Knive, og da vi saa havde afspist, og det var til Side, takkede jeg for god Behandling og sagde Farvel. Men det Besøg staaer endnu levende for min Hukommelse” (MO III 489-490; see also the description of the farm at Taarup where Tang Kristensen and Olrik stay on their trip in May 1888, MO III 182). Indeed, his descriptions of his numerous visits to Ane Nielsen, the daughter of Landstingmand Niels Rasmussen, are all extraordinarily positive (MO III 14, 34-35, 67, 282, 314, MO IV 10, 50-51, 53, 55, 85, 90). Like many, Tang Kristensen is attracted to luxury.

In contrast to his suggestion that he has little use for teachers, Tang Kristensen’s characterizations of them are generally quite positive. So, on a field collecting trip in October of 1889, he mentions, “[Jeg] gik saa videre helt til Mejlby... Der søgte jeg ind til Lærer Jacobsen, som viste sig at være en helt fin Mand i et fint Hjem. Han var dog meget flink og viste mig hen til den gamle Margrete Jensdatter” (MO III 281). Likewise, on the first of November 1889, he notes, “Her besøgte jeg Lærer Lindeloff, der var en meget fornøjelig Mand at komme til. Han var god til at fortælle Skjæmtesagn, og jeg tilbragte saa Aftenen hos ham” (MO III 285) and in late May of 1890, “Endelig hen ved Aftenstid naaede jeg saa til Nødager og blev vel modtaget af [Lærer] Sahl og hans Kone i deres rare Hejm” (MO III 317). The only negative characterizations of other teachers arise when he visits old friends from his Seminarium days who either do not remember him, such as S. Sørensen in Hadsund, “Jeg gik ind for at hilse paa ham, men han hverken lod til at kjende mig eller mindes mig” (MO III 85), do not share his interest in folklore such as Thomas Kr. Sørensen in Børglum “mine sager havde han ikke Spor af Interesse for, saa vi havde egentlig ikke noget at tale om” (MO IV 498) or own vicious dogs, such as N.C. Kragh in Brandstrup: “da jeg kom I Nærhed af Skolen, blev jeg overfalden af en stor glubsk Hund, der tilhørte Læreren. Den bed mig meget slemt I Benet og flængede mine Bugser. Da jeg saa kom ind, beklagede jeg mig meget over den, og Kragh var

naturligvis ked af det... Han fortalte mig ogsaa lidt, men ikke nær saa meget, som jeg havde haabet" (MO III 315).

Tang Kristensen is often most at ease with teachers, ministers and deans who share his interest and give him both food and a warm place to stay. He also seems to reserve a special place for relatively well situated folk who take him in and feed him, particularly farmers: "Om Aftenen fulgte Johannes med mig hen til en Gaardmand, der boede i den østre Ende af Byen, og her sad vi om Aftenen og havde det helt hyggeligt..." (MO III 161). Of course, when things do not work out at farms, he is willing to make blanket characterizations about the worth of farmers as informants, that contradict not only his desire to stay with them, but also the role they have played as informants: "det bekræftede sig da atter, at det som Regel ikke nyttede at søge til Gaardene" (MO III 495).

But Tang Kristensen reserves a special critical place in his memoirs for an indignant critique of poor people who live amid clutter, dirt and dust. In a visit to Anders Udesen, he describes the aftægt apartment as follows: "Først kom jeg ind i en Slags Forgang med en aaben Skorsten fuld af Aske, og saa til ventre ind i den gamles Stue, der var aldeles opfyldt af gammel Skrammel, og der var saa snavset og saa støvet overalt, at det ligefrem var gruelig. Jeg undrede mig over, at et menneskeligt Væsen kunde i Længden holde ud at leve saadan (MO III 289). In an equally disturbing scene, he details his visit to Jakob Jørgensen, who emerges in the description more as a specimen than an informant, given the use of the word "undersøge" to describe the interaction: "Derefter stak jeg af til Firgaarde for at faa Jakob Jørgensen undersøgt. Han var en gammel mand der laa til Sengs, og det var meget uhyggeligt hos ham. Der var saa frygtelig en Træk i Huset, at jeg næsten ikke kunde være mig der, og saa laa han stadig og hostede og harkedede, og ophostede flød omkring baade paa Sengen og ham selv" (MO III 158).

Such an expression of disgust toward the poor and elderly is not uncommon for Tang Kristensen, and indeed if the dirt and filth of poverty is too overwhelming, he simply leaves, such as his visit to a small house in Godthaab: "Om Formiddagen var jeg inde i et Hus, der laa lige nord for Skolen paa den anden Side af Vejen, for Læreren sagde, at der kunde jeg nok faa noget at vide. Men Mage til Svinehus har jeg snart aldrig set. Det var ligefrem ikke til at være der for Svineri, og jeg kom snart derfra uden at have faaet det mindste" (MO III 483-484). Tang Kristensen's disgust with his poor informants extends to descriptions of their unappetizing food, such as his visit to Anders Sams in Rostved, "Han levede yderst tarveligt og levede paa egen Kost, som man siger. Sine Fødevarer havde han gjemt i en gammel Standkiste, der stod i hans Stue, og det var ikke appetitligt at se ned i den... Jeg spiste jo ikke hos ham" (MO IV 7). Perhaps the best known of such descriptions comes during Tang Kristensen's visit in Madum Sø with Peter Andersen Stærk: "Jeg var forleden inde i et Hus, hvor Røgen gik omkring alle Vegne, da der ingen Skorsten var... Hundehuset dannede en Kabork ind i Stuen snart som en lille Ovn, og ovenpaa laa en flad Sten, som man kunde sidde paa..." (MO IV 59). After a description of hen droppings in the bread, he notes, "I det Hus kunde jeg ikke godt være tjent med at spise, men man bød mig heller ikke noget" (MO IV 59). All in all, Tang Kristensen seems to have little interest in spending more time than necessary with the poorest of the poor, and often notes that he hurried away as soon as he had recorded all that he could.

It is not surprising that Tang Kristensen was not enamored of rural poverty and that he felt far more comfortable in clean homes where the food was reasonably plentiful and appetizing. Poverty, illness, dirt and poor hygiene are noisome even for a romantic. Nor is it surprising that Tang Kristensen's public representations of his

collecting contradicted these more private feelings of disgust. If he had had the benefit of a theoretical grounding in “self-reflexive” approaches to ethnography, he might well have engaged in a more public display of this disgust (and probably collected far less folklore, perhaps none at all, since he could have made an entire career out of studying his own navel). On the other hand, *Minder og Oplevelser* can be seen as just such a self-reflexive endeavor in which he confronts his own disgust with the very people whom he proposes were his best informants. A slightly revised view of Tang Kristensen’s collecting efforts—related to an indexing of *Minder og Oplevelser* and his field diaries and coupled to a mapping of all his field trips—will doubtlessly reveal that the majority of his informants were not as poor nor as old as has been presented, that many of them were in fact teachers, ministers, deans, farm owners, craftsmen and other relatively well-to-do people, and that the majority of them lived in northern and eastern Jutland (rather than the much fabled, yet barely visited, heaths of western Jutland).

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