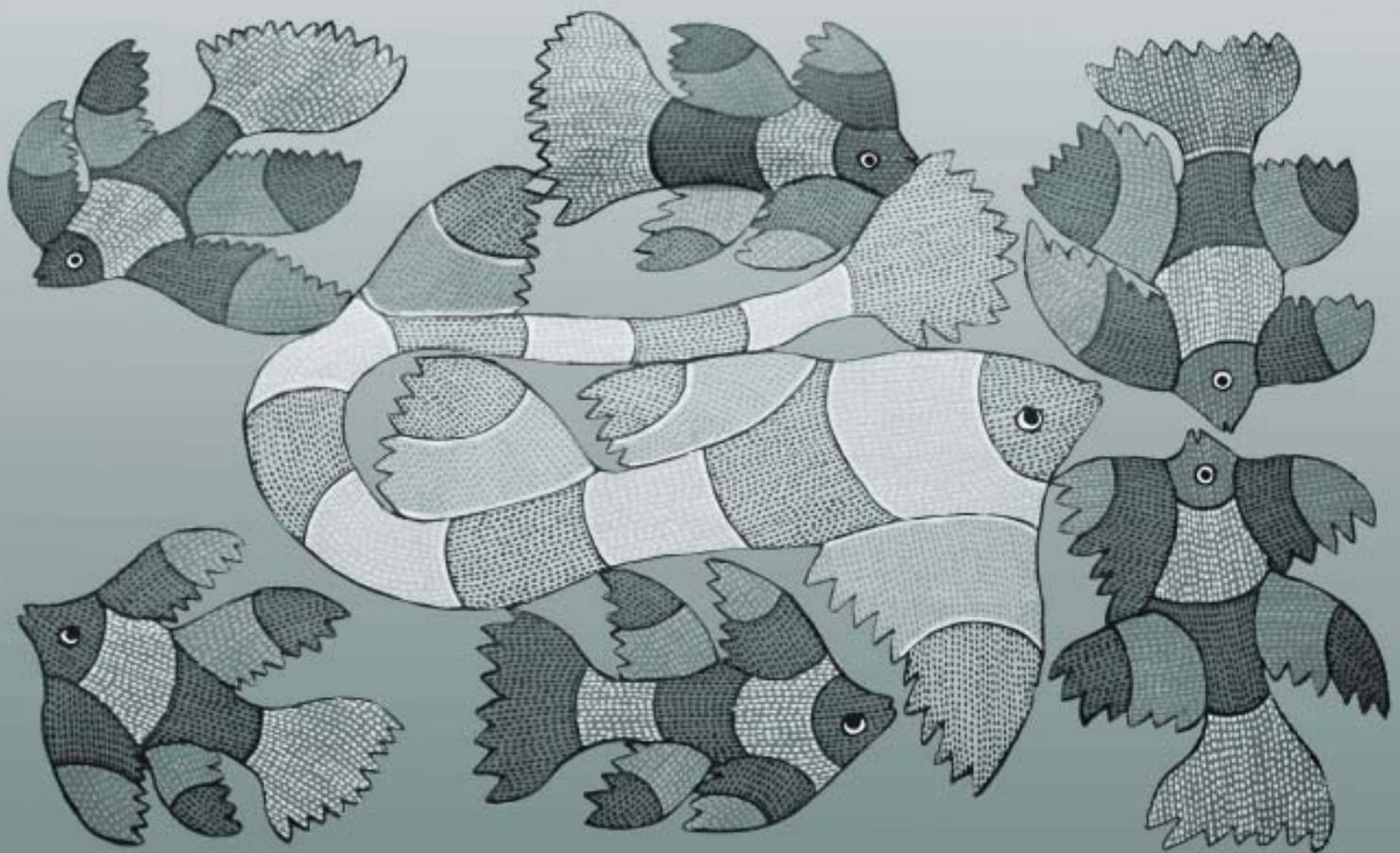


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The Legend: Conceptual
Issues and Pragmatics of Telling

Guest Editor: Kishore Bhattacharjee



NATIONAL FOLKLORE SUPPORT CENTRE

National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC) is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation, registered in Chennai dedicated to the promotion of Indian folklore research, education, training, networking and publications. The aim of the centre is to integrate scholarship with activism, aesthetic appreciation with community development, comparative folklore studies with cultural diversities and identities, dissemination of information with multi-disciplinary dialogues, folklore fieldwork with developmental issues and folklore advocacy with public programming events. Folklore is a tradition based on any expressive behaviour that brings a group together, creates a convention and commits it to cultural memory. NFSC aims to achieve its goals through cooperative and experimental activities at various levels. NFSC is supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

CONTENTS

The Legend: Conceptual Issues and Pragmatics of Telling	3
Legends and Family Folklore	4
Rhetoric, Truth and Performance: Politics and the Interpretation of Legend	8
Eyes of Legend: Thoughts about Genres of Belief	12
Some Thoughts about Form in Metamorphosis Legends	14
Urban Legends: A Study in Guwahati	19
Legend of a photograph—Ernesto 'Che' Guevara from Revolutionary to Pop Icon	23

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Rhetoric, Truth and Performance: Politics and the Interpretation of Legend

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No single interpretive approach—performative, historical, textual—can be successful in elucidating the range of meanings produced for tradition participants by the performance of a legend.¹ Rather, an approach that fuses the advances made in the study of oral narrative over the past several decades, one that is based not only on a detailed consideration of the historical, ethnographic and performative contexts of a specific legend, but also on a rigorous examination of the text itself is most likely to lead us to a better understanding of the meanings created by the legend teller for himself and his original intended audiences and other, often later, unintentional audiences. I label such an approach to the interpretation of legend the “synthetic approach” (Tangherlini 1994).

Legends, whether in current circulation or conscribed to the dusty confines of the archive, reveal a great deal about the tradition participants and their relationship to each other and the world around them. In earlier work, I have proposed that legend be characterized as “a traditional, (mono) episodic, highly ecotypified, localized and historicized narrative of past events told as believable in a conversational mode” (Tangherlini 1994, 22; see also Dégh 2001, 23-97). In that work, I further suggested that legend reflects the collective values of the group to whose tradition it belongs, a suggestion which points directly at the deeply political nature of these folk narratives (Tangherlini 1994, 22).

For many years, scholars of legend were stuck on trying to define quite precisely the boundaries of the genre and its alleged subgenres (Dégh 2001). Significant scholarly ink has been spilled on delineating various subgenres of the legend and developing typologies for the genre (see, for example, Christiansen 1958 and Dahll 1972). This futile division of legend into ever smaller subcategories led to a theoretical overdetermination of the genre and obscured the more important considerations of why tradition participants tell, remember and retell these monoepisodic believable narratives (Dégh 2001, 97). To get around this endless hair-splitting, Linda Dégh proposes that “the legend is a legend once it entertains debate about belief” (2001, 97). The idea that legend is based on a dialectic tension, centering on what is believed in a community,

is of paramount importance. Belief is intimately related to cultural ideology—the norms, values and expectations of a particular cultural group. But belief is hardly static; the requirement for legend is that it be believable; it does not need to be believed.

In any community, belief exists on a sliding scale—while narrators tend to perform legend as “true,” they themselves might not be fully invested in the truth of the account. The “truth” of the account may reside more in its relationship to

the ongoing negotiation of cultural ideology that informs the give and take of the performative context of the legend. The “believability” of the legend, on the other hand, offers the story a degree of rhetorical weight and sets it apart from many other folk narrative genres, most notably the overtly and deliberately fictional folktale, and imparts to it a considerable amount of cultural and, by extension, political importance in a tradition group (Dégh 20001; Dégh and Vázsonyi 1971; Holbek 1987; Grimm and Grimm 1816). Because of the rhetorical weight of legend, as an expression of something that “might well have happened,” the stories can become a significant component of an individual’s political behavior, informing his or her actions as they negotiate daily life in communities and organizations. Tradition participants also deploy legends to sway others’ actions, often to align with the narrator’s own goals. Often these goals have a strong economic or political component to them (Tangherlini 1998b). Neither the economic implications nor the political impact of legend should be underestimated. These stories are deployed incessantly in economically charged encounters, in local politics, in international politics and in everything in between; they can have a profound effect on the way in which people behave.

The performance of legend—be it in a face-to-face interaction or, in more recent times, in an electronically mediated performance forum such as email—offers an opportunity for a teller to probe and perhaps redefine the boundaries of the cultural ideology of the tradition group. The groups’ ideology—however abstract and amorphous it may be—is presumably shared by the performer and his or her interlocutors, and legends are often told to confirm this shared ideology. In fact, it is the indeterminate and fluid nature of such ideology that requires group members to tell stories (and engage in other types of expressive behavior) to each other to confirm, define and shape it. This reshaping of ideology does not happen all at once—rather the repeated tellings of stories within the group, and the variation of strategies and the outcomes of those strategies across repeated tellings have a cumulative effect—cultural change is often slow and takes place over considerable time. At its best, this negotiation of the parameters of cultural ideology can bind members of a community together and affirm the group identity of the tradition participants. Such a negotiation of ideology can also serve to delimit clearly in-group and out-group membership. At its worst, then, this negotiation of ideology can lead to exclusiveness,

xenophobia and even genocide. As such, the telling of legend should be considered a deeply political act.

Legend telling is never solely a positive or negative force in a community. Although the telling and retelling of legends can provide a sense of shared identity, solidarity and a confidence that other group members would act the same way as the teller in a particular situation, these repeated tellings can also lead to serious divisions within and between groups. In the worst instances, they can lead to ruptures of profound historical proportions (to wit the role of storytelling in the recent genocide in Rwanda, where stories about Tutsi and Hutu tended to dehumanize the other group, and allowed for the wholesale slaughter of hundreds of thousands of people (Gourevitch 1999; see also Tangherlini 1995)). Not surprisingly, in-group membership and out-group threat are topics explored frequently in legend. One should not forget that individuals are always members of multiple communities, be those communities defined nationally, ethnically, locally, vocationally or avocationally, and each of these groups has their own ideologies—sometimes these align, and at other times these do not; as such an individual might also use their storytelling to reconcile some of the contradictions implicit in multiple group membership.

Not all tradition participants “hear” a legend the same way. And people from other tradition groups may “hear” the story a completely different way. Stanley Fish (1980), in his now classic essay, “Is there a text in this class,” explores how different “interpretive communities” can understand an ambiguous utterance in myriad ways, yet still communicate successfully. The same types of ambiguities of meaning exist in our understanding of legend—different communities, different historical contexts, and different performative settings can all influence the manner in which a legend will be understood. Because of these complexities, the best we as folklorists can hope for, through our analysis of legend performances, is to delineate how and why tradition participants—both active and passive—decide to tell, remember and retell the stories that they do.

More often than not, studies of legend focus on a legend type (for example, stories of changelings ML5085) or a group of closely related legend types (for example, stories of ghosts ML4000-4050), usually limited to the stories from a single national or language group. In other cases, the stories are limited to those collected in a specific locality, or collected from a single individual (see for example Pentikäinen’s study on Marina Takalo’s repertoire (1978)). Only on occasion is the main organizational principle stories collected by a single collector during a well-defined period in a well-defined area (see Palmenfelt 1993 and Tangherlini 1994). In almost all cases, legends are not treated as discrete performances, but rather in an agglomerative fashion reminiscent of Levi-Strauss’s paradigmatic structuralism. The best case would examine legends as discrete performances but also as part of the broader folklore repertoires of multiple narrators from a diverse, yet linguistically and culturally related area, set against a thick understanding of the historical, political, social and economic forces that influence day to day life, and coupled to a clear understanding of the backgrounds and motivations of

the collector or collectors. Of course, there are numerous significant barriers to the development of this ideal type of study.

Toward a synthetic approach to the interpretation of legend

The great diversity in the quality of the collections that are available for study poses one of the greatest challenges to the consistent interpretation of legend. Archival recordings made during the nineteenth century in Europe, despite being voluminous, were seen in the 1970s by many students of more recent folklore theory as highly suspect, given the often nationalistic motivations of the collectors, and the lack of any information about the storytellers or the performance contexts. By contrast, many more recent collections of legend, despite being wedded to significant micro-contextual information and despite being meticulously recorded and transcribed using audio and video tape recorders, suffer from their idiosyncratic nature. Even in the best cases, contemporary collections rarely include the performances of more than a few dozen storytellers.

This diversity in the quality of legend collections does not preclude interpretation—it simply means that one often has to supplement the initial collection with appropriate archival, historical, ethnographic or comparative material, and that one must also be careful to properly qualify conclusions. In the case of early archives, it is possible to situate the tellings in a appropriately rich historical and ethnographic context—while we may not be able to figure out how the story was performed, we might well be able to understand why the story had currency when it did. Similarly, in the case of more recent recordings, we may well be able to use certain performative clues to understand more fully the relationship of the story to the broader contours of its contemporaneous tradition. In either case, wedding an understanding of historical context, developing a rich ethnographic context, and reanimating the performative context all provide fertile intellectual ground for understanding how we should interpret the text itself.

The Importance of Historical contexts

The role of history in the study of legend has, since the inception of the scientific study of folklore, been a significant one. One need only consider the Grimms’ differentiation of the legend and folktale, and their well known statement that the “legend is more historical” (Grimm and Grimm 1816). This early emphasis on the connection between legend and history led many scholars on a wild goose chase, with endless quests for the historical kernel that hypothetically animated each legend narrative. As it turns out, legend does not map onto historical fact. Nevertheless, situating legend historically is a crucial component of interpretation. Not only do legends refer to believable (albeit not necessarily factually true) past events and but they are also performed in historical time. As such, there are two dimensions to the historical context of legend. On the one hand, there is the historical context of the purported events (internal historical context). On the other hand, there is the historical context of the performance (external historical context). Interestingly, most studies of legend tend to privilege one of these contexts over the other. So, for

instance, many studies of contemporary legend explore aspects of recent historical phenomena and their relationship to the story. By contrast, studies of legends collected in the nineteenth century, for example, tend to focus more on the internal historical context, rather than the external performative context of the legends, even in cases where the internal historical context is significantly earlier than the external historical context. While part of this emphasis is attributable to the lack of significant performative information about the stories, there is in all cases adequate documentation of this external historical context. Accordingly, there is little reason for this external context to be ignored.

The internal historical context of legends can be somewhat more complex to pin down than the external historical context. In some cases, the historicization of the events in a legend is an expression of narrative choice. At times, this choice is quite deliberate, and often imbued with local political implications. Understanding those local political implications requires an understanding of the external historical context. This choice of historical setting can influence significantly audience reception of and understanding not only of the story itself, but the narrator's implicit commentary on aspects of the chosen historical period. So, for instance, a narrator can choose to situate a story about a threatening band of marauders from another ethnic group in the immediate past, thus stirring up among her audience an immediate fear of that group (and perhaps spurring them on to action), while another narrator may choose to situate a similar story about the same threatening group in the distant past, thus allowing the audience to perhaps muse on the much better relations that exist between the groups currently. Or, by contrast, such a choice can also serve to legitimate the "historical nature" of the conflict. One need only look at the recent conflicts in the Balkan states for examples of such a deployment of legend.

In certain cases, the narrator has no such latitude concerning the internal historical context. For instance, legends that tell of seventeenth century Danish witchcraft trials are wedded to that historical period, just as legends about the falsification of the Apollo moon landing are wedded to the late 1960s and early 1970s. These legends have a fixed historical referent—it would make little sense to propose that certain events happened at significantly different time, unless the one wanted to suggest a revision of otherwise well-known chronologies. Yet, there is a certain fluidity that creeps into these accounts, in which stories from one period are historicized to fit the parameters of another period. In any event, understanding the internal historical context and the implications of that context in light of the external historical context is an essential component of interpreting legend. Why, for example, would people in the 1890s tell stories about events that transpired in the 1660s? Or, why would people in 2004 tell stories about events that transpired (or didn't transpire, according to the stories) forty years earlier? We are remiss as folklorists if we ignore one historical context in favor of the other.

Ethnographic and Performance contexts

Clifford Geertz in a now classic essay explores the concept of thick description (Geertz 1973). Surprisingly, few studies of legend have attempted to situate the stories in

an ethnographically thick description of the cultural environment in which the stories are told and heard. Legends have frequently been mined as a resource for ethnographic information, and are often used somewhat uncritically to describe not only folk belief but also folk practice. The interrelationship between legend and any number of other expressive forms in a particular culture is an equally important, although frequently overlooked, consideration.

The thick description of a cultural group can be a fairly daunting undertaking. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the role that legend plays in the day-to-day lives of the tradition participants. Is the telling of a legend an unusual occurrence, or is part of the constant banter between people? What other types of expressive forms exist within the group? What are the interrelationships not only between the different forms, but also the active and passive tradition participants for each of those forms?

Ethnographic context is also closely linked to performative contexts and it may be misleading to separate the two. I do it here in the more in the sense of macro context (ethnographic) and micro context (performative), rather than as a suggestion that the performance of legend is not an ethnographically significant event.

During the 1970s and 1980s, in large part due to the pioneering work of Dell Hymes (1975) and Richard Bauman (1977), among others, a great deal of attention was placed on the performance of folkloric expression. Inexplicably, this attention to performance led to a bifurcation in many American folklore programs between textual scholars and performance scholars. Such an overemphasis on one or another aspect of folkloric expression is counterproductive. Indeed, there would be no performance without the text, and without the performance there would be no text. That said, early collections of legend often erased nearly all vestiges of the performance and in so doing, made the task of understanding who told these stories to whom and when seemingly impossible. Despite this significant hurdle, it is in many cases possible to reanimate the archive and to develop a sense of the performance of the stories recorded there. By the same token, contemporary recordings are not necessarily any better than these earlier recordings—to wit the numerous student collections that have formed the basis of relatively recent studies of legend often had little or no information about the actual performance of the story (Brunvand 1981).

Aspects of performance context such as location and time of the event, the number, age and gender of the people present along with linguistic features of the telling such as intonation, volume and pacing are of considerable significance in our understanding of a legend. In addition, paralinguistic and kinesthetic features of the telling itself should also play a significant role in how we understand a particular legend text in context.

Text and Structure

The legend text itself is still the most important component of any legend performance. I have already established that the study of the text without a consideration of external and internal historical contexts, an appreciation of micro and macro ethnographic contexts, and a consideration of the performative event

is unlikely to help us understand why someone told a legend at a particular time to a particular person or group of people. At the same time, it is important to develop an approach to the study of the texts that allows for consistency across multiple variant texts and multiple legend types. There have been significant developments toward the study of legend text that offer the promise of reproducibility (in other words, others can approach the text with the same methodology and derive the same results), based primarily on the study of linguistic structure of the accounts. William Labov and Joshua Waletzky's approach to personal experience stories has been adapted successfully by numerous legend scholars, most notably William Nicolaisen (1987) and Lisa and Robert Christensen (Christensen and Christensen 2001; see also Tangherlini 2003). The six part scheme of abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda is not only applicable to legend, but also helps delineate areas of significant meaning-bearing import in the particular narrative. In the orientation, the narrator chooses the in-group for the story—usually people whose background is very similar to that of the tradition participants. The complicating action propose an out-group and a specific form of threat to the in-group. How the in-group member reacts to the threat can be seen as a representation of a strategy for dealing with this type of encounter. In legend, the encounters tend to be extreme, but can be extrapolated to less extreme examples that are common in everyday life. The resolution—positive, negative or neutral—reflects the narrator's attitude toward the chosen strategy. So, to cite an almost ridiculous example, if a person angrily confronts an alien in a legend, only to have his head torn off, the suggestion is rather clear that the narrator does not endorse that particular strategy for dealing with out-group members.

Textual ideology—storytelling strategies and the politics of legend

Michel de Certeau, in his work, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1985), suggests that storytelling represents repertoires of schemes of action. Through storytelling, individual tradition participants can explore how they would react—and try out different reactions—to various, hypothetical, often extreme, situations (Tangherlini 2000). The telling of stories among friends, colleagues, relatives, or other community members, allows for the negotiation of strategies to deal with the potential threats that any group perceives in their surroundings (Tangherlini 1998a and 2000). Understanding the historical basis for these threats and reactions, and situating the storytelling in a thick ethnographic context, allows folklorists to approach the interpretation of the actual text in a manner that is most likely to yield the best understanding of the range of possible meanings of the particular performance.

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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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✪

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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."