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Belief Elements in Life Histories

Since Jacob Grimm in his 1816 foreword to “Deutsche Sagen” proposed that “Das Märchen ist poetischer, die Sage historischer” (Grimm 1816, v), folklorists have spent much time in trying to pinpoint folklore genres on a scale between fact and fiction. On the whole, few scholars seem to have any problem in agreeing that fairy tales belong to the fiction end of the scale. As we all know, the classification of folk legends has been more problematic. An extensive overview of the classification debate was given by Timothy R. Tangherlini in an article in Western Folklore (Tangherlini 1990).

A shorter, updated version, focused on the belief element in legend definitions was offered by Elliot Oring in his 2008 Journal of American Folklore article (Oring 2008). Oring exemplifies the two meanings of the word “belief” by contrasting belief in supernatural phenomena with belief that the supermarket will provide the items I want to buy (Oring 2008, 128). Another common metaphor is to compare the two sentences “I believe that God exists” and “I believe in God”.

To loosen up the somewhat rigid positions following the legend definition debate, Oring suggests that we should employ the vaguer term “legendry”, which would include non-narrative elements and “a range of expressions that gravitate around” (Oring 2008, 128) the legends proper. Furthermore, instead of stating anything definitive about the truth status, Oring prefers to say that “legend is concerned with matters of truth” (Oring 2008, 128). In the bulk of the article, Oring then applies elements of classical rhetoric to penetrate what he calls legend’s “belief language”, “belief vocabulary”, and “rhetoric of truth” (Oring 2008, 128).

Following Gillian Bennett and W.F.H. Nicolaisen, Ülo Valk states that “personal experience narratives and belief legends share the basic narrative pattern” (Valk 2009, 1) and that both “are told as true stories” (Valk 2009, 1). From a narrative point of view “there is no difference between ‘ordinary’ and supernatural events”. (Valk 2009, 1).

Another similarity between legends and personal experience narratives is that to us as culture scholars, both genres provide us with source material concerning “commonly held values and beliefs” in a society (Tangherlini 1990, 379). “Legend and folk belief […] reinforce each other”, Timothy R. Tangherlini stated in 1990 (Tangherlini 1990, 379).

If we understand belief in Oring’s supermarket sense of the word, I would like to add that personal experience narratives and folk belief reinforce each other, too. When several people continuously repeat similar accounts about an event, a correlation, or a condition these phenomena achieve a status of collective acceptance. They come to be regarded as facts; you do not have to prove that they are true every time they are mentioned. They become icons that can be referred to in everyday conversation without retelling the full story. They come to claim recognition within their domains of influence; when a personal experience narrative unfolds in the vicinity of such narrated “facts”, the narrator has to relate to them. They are not easily avoided. By being retold often, the narrated facts become truths that people believe in.

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In this paper, I want to take a closer look at some such often repeated phenomena in a corpus of orally narrated life histories.

Material
The material I have used consists of some 40 tape-recorded life history narratives. The narrators were all retired citizens of my home town Visby, Sweden. The recordings were made during a concentrated collection period in the summer and fall of 1995, and the narrators were all living in Visby at the time of the interviews. Thus all these life histories were recounted from the same temporal and geographical point of view. The material has a clearly defined “here” and “now”. Furthermore, the narrators were all born between 1910 and 1930, representing more or less one and the same generation.

Circular Stories
The orally narrated life history is a cultural form with its own specific genre conventions. Its themes are typically the narrators’ chosen memories of their own lived experiences, but the form is seldom a merely chronological enumeration of facts. Structurally the life narrative often moves between descriptive, evaluative, argumentative blocks and epical, dynamic chains of development – always with the same protagonist at the center. The British folklorist Gillian Bennett has notified the existence of “circular stories” that can be described as “clusters of events organized round some central idea” (Bennett 1984, 83) or, in other words, “stories structured in non-final, non-linear forms” (Bennett 1984, 83). These stories are different from “‘action narratives’ – that is, stories meant to impress, thrill, or entertain an audience” (Bennett 1984, 87). The circular stories, according to Bennett, “focus on detail and description rather than on the unfolding of a plot and they leave the end deliberately open for comment, interpretation and follow-up by the audience” (Bennett 1984, 86).

In verbally painting a panorama of her childhood neighborhood, one of my narrators gives an example of such a circular story. Notice how the account starts by mentioning the neighboring woman Liss Östlund and her beautiful daughter Rosa. The gaze of the narrator then sweeps over houses and blocks, fixing persons and street addresses to them, mentioning professions and small enterprises. After a full round has been completed, the circular movement is dramatically broken by the beautiful Rosa returning, this time running naked through the streets. The narrative sequence ends by the aged Rosa borrowing a telephone to call the ambulance when her husband has just died.

Our neighbors were Liss Östlund and her daughter Rosa in the Klinten. She was so beautiful when she was a girl. Madam Pettersson had hired farm-hands and workmen. She had cows and horses. We bought milk from her. We bought milk in a bowl. She had horses and cows and chickens. The chickens ran about in the square crying. Later they were not allowed to have chickens inside the city. Outside the city wall she kept pigs. She carried food to them with a yoke. In the front side of the house Klintorget number 4 was the entrance to the backyard belonging to Östra Tullgränd. There was a gate leading to the back of the house. The next house belonged to the same yard. That’s were the painter Wigström lived. The house was owned by building contractor Hjalmar [last name not audible]. The name of the alley was Östra Tullgränd. Maria Wretberg lived on the first floor at Klintorget number 1. She worked at horse-dealer Fridgren’s office outside the Eastern Gate. There was a horse stable there. Miss
Wretberg had a dog that we children were scared of. The Ekengrens lived in the three-storey house across the alley. They had several children. Liss Östlund got married to a man from Dalecarlia and they had a daughter who was called Rosa in the Klinten. They said that once when it was cold outside, she came running and yelling along one of the streets downtown. A man had emptied a bucket of water over her and she came running naked as an ice statue. People had to take care of her. I think she is dead now. She had a son and a daughter. When Rosa’s husband died, he was suffocated, I remember she came in to us to borrow our telephone (Elsa Pettersson, b. 1915 in Visby).

**Narrated Memories**

A limiting factor for what is possible to recount can be represented by the chain: experience – memory – retold memory. We do not remember everything that we have experienced and we are unable to verbalize some of that which we do remember. Only some memories are suitable to convey in narrative form.

Classifying a personal experience narrative as a memory is a keying (Goffman 1986, 43 ff) that allows the narrator to make use of certain possibilities and informs the audience of how to interpret it. Well known keying formulae are: “I can remember…”, “I have a strong memory of…”, “As far as I remember…” This keying bestows that which is remembered first with a distinct quality of being something that is selected and thus important, simply by not belonging to the sad category of forgotten experiences. And as we all know there is a constant process of exchange between the two groups: we forget what we once remembered and we come to remember what had been forgotten and we remember vaguely or we forget in part (cf Ricoeur 2005, 109, 190). Memories presuppose the existence of forgotten experiences.

Second, memories are very personal. We are often astonished of how differently our minds operate, when comparing what we remember of a certain event with other persons’ remembrances of the same situation. This shared experience allows every memory narrator to be extremely personal and subjective when deciding what to tell and how to present it.

**The Self-Biographical Paradox**

The persons in a life history can be either subjects or objects in relation to the narrated events, answering directly to the grammatical active and passive voice. As active subjects, they will play the role of being agents who initiate changes and push the action forward. As passive objects, on the other hand, they will get the role of being carried away by other agents’ actions, as victims in the hands of ruthless villains or an inescapable fate. Handling such moments can sometimes be awkward for a narrator, since the narrating “I” is acting out a social role as the speaking subject in the narrative situation, while the experiencing narrated “I” fulfils a dramaturgical role as an object to exterior influences in the story. Narrators, who want to be true to their own experiences, cannot easily exclude those episodes of their lives where they for one reason or another were out of control. In such instances, a tension might build up between the narrating “I” who is in control (at least theoretically) of the situation and the narrated “I” who is not (at least not all the time). We can call this the self-biographical paradox.
Tradition Dominants in Local History

There are also instances where the narrated “I” seems to be in perfect control, acting as a subject, but all the same the story line sometimes is hit by an external factor from local history that has to be taken into consideration.

In narrated individual life histories it is not surprising to encounter elements of local or regional – or even national and international – history. After all, most narrated events making up individuals’ life histories have actually taken place in physical locations where many other people’s lives have also been enacted, as well as different kinds of public events. Some such events, more or less external to the individual life history narrator, seem to possess an extraordinary significance which makes it likely that they are referred to in one way or another when a life history touches upon a certain place at a certain time (cf. Tangherlini 1990, 377f; Palmenfelt 2009).

The Swedish folklorist Albert Eskeröd proposed the term tradition dominant to indicate prevailing phenomena (primarily supernatural beings) in local traditions, or in his own words:

As the concept motif appears to be more appropriate within folk narrative research, it seems proper to identify those various phenomena that dominate a local tradition by the word tradition dominants. By tradition dominants thus will be understood such elements that in the common folk tradition dominate different groups within it (Eskeröd 1947, 81. My translation).

As a qualifying criterion later generations of folklorists have added that tradition dominants, for instance supernatural beings, can be identified through their power to attract features that in other traditions typically belong to other beings. This process is usually called motif attraction.

Obviously we can find elements in life histories that possess a similar capacity to dominate local traditions, but these are seldom supernatural beings. Instead the dominant units can be points of time, places, events, values, ideas or accepted emotional attitudes that all have become so firmly established in people’s minds that they possess an agency to demand dominant positions in all historical narratives.

These dominant units can be regarded as verbal expressions of an ongoing interplay between collective ideas and individually expressed narrative forms. They represent different phases in the process of acquiring solid form. By positioning themselves in relationship to these dominant units, narrators inscribe themselves in the collective body or emphasize that they are declining such membership. Dominant units that are repeated often increase in collectivity, gain in volume and importance, which, in turn, makes it ever more difficult for future narrators not to relate to them, which, consequently, strengthens their attractive potential even more.

Narrated history

In the following I will share with you an artificial reconstruction of some physical and mental life conditions in Visby during the 20th century as I hear the narrators describe it. This is the collectively acknowledged cognitive universe into which the individual narrators’ taleworlds are located, making up a frame of reference for their thought, and an arena into which they have to fit their narrated taleworlds.
Each narrator has to relate to this template, which per se does not have to be anything else than a mental construct, never formulated verbally and never outspoken. Being an insider you will have developed a sense for what choice of episodes is appropriate, what categories are fitting, which persons, which shops and which streets are proper building stones of the narrative construction, in which modes these elements can be narrated, and equally important – who and what is never mentioned. When many individuals apply these templates they are successively reinforced and a collectively acknowledged picture is gradually established. This narrated reality will be regarded as the “true” version, but only the static, non-dynamic backdrop.

Narrators shift between using third person perspectives to describe commonly accepted facts, and first person accounts to mark that the narrated “I” deviates in one way or another from the given template.

I will take a closer look at seven examples that I have chosen because they show some of the stereotypical traits that are common to many of the narratives. Naturally, I cannot say that these stereotypes are false and that the narrators are consciously manipulating reality. The narrators made their experiences in the “real” world. The narrating decontextualizes the (memories of) the experiences by re-presenting them in a taleworld (a narrative enclave. Young 1997, 33).

To a certain degree this is actually what life was like in 20th century Visby. But, on the other hand the narratives cover a time span of roughly 75 years during which substantial social changes took place, and, even if the narrators represent different social population strata, they are only 40 voices among several tens of thousands of Visby citizens who are not heard in my material.

What I can say is that certain facts, formulations and values are repeated so often that they can be considered to be traditional, in the sense that they have become part of a collective mind.

**Childhood**

Unlike most families we had a father who did not drink. He was orderly, so we really had a good childhood, I guess. There were parents who drank and the children had a hard time.

We had a free life and ran and played in the streets and alleys. We used to pick berries in fall, on Sundays that is, for on Saturdays you had to work. Even if times were scarce, we had a good life. I don’t think that we had to go to bed hungry even once.

We had a household pig, as they called it, that was slaughtered in December. My mother didn’t have a job, for the wives were always at home, so she sewed clothes and patched and mended. We used to have macaroni with the pork and sometimes a fisherman came and sold herring. We ate a lot of salted herring. In the garden we grew spinach that was stewed. There was a lot of baking at home, round loaves of rye that were dried on a pole. My dentist usually says that I was born in those days when children used to munch hard bread and that was good for the teeth (Henning Nilsson, born 1922 in Eskilstuna).
This short account contains several stereotypical features. Unmarried men were supposed to drink alcohol, play cards and fight (although fighting in those days was honest). When they married, some vague fate seems to have determined whether they would stop drinking or not.

As a matter of fact several women were actually working professionally, but the stereotypical picture is that married women were housewives. As such, they are often said to make some extra money to the family by selling eggs, preserved berries or mushrooms, or home-made socks or mittens.

There was no communal child care, so when children were not at school, they were normally outdoors playing. Many homes were small and there simply was not space enough for large groups of children to play indoors.

Family economies were generally strained and it was normal that you picked mushrooms and wild berries in the falls. If you had a garden, you would sooner grow vegetables and berries in it, than entertaining a lawn and decorative bushes. Cages with chickens were common. Especially during the war years, many kept rabbits in their gardens, and there are many stories about people collecting grass for their rabbits in the fields outside the city wall. Normally you did not keep pigs within the city wall, but outside it there were plenty of economy buildings where people kept horses, cows and pigs.

Ambulating fishermen were a common sight, but you could also buy fish in the harbor or at the market in the main square.

When you were a new father, you would work all day long and chop firewood in the evenings. We kept rabbits that we killed and sold. At Hällarna there was a shoemaker living in a cellar. He used to walk down to the harbor in the early mornings to collect shoes for mending. He took bread for salary and we fed our rabbits with his bread. We had a big rabbit that was black and white and he even ate pork. It was a strange rabbit. When I was about to kill it and put it on the chopping-block it screamed so loudly so I couldn’t kill it. I took it back to the cage, he was so fine. Later, I gave it away. Bengt, my son, even took it with him to school. (Nisse Stenström, b. 1916 in Slite).

This is another example of how families kept rabbits in their gardens as additional food supply. This account makes the point even stronger by telling about an exceptional rabbit that escaped being killed and eaten.

Typical is also the categorization of days as consisting of two parts, one when you work as a salaried employee and another when you work with your house, garden or otherwise for the family’s direct support or benefit.

Just like the fisherman in the former example, there were ambulating artisans like shoemakers and tailors walking about looking for customers.

To me, it is not clear from the narrative why the shoemaker’s bread automatically could be used to feed the narrator’s rabbits. I take the statement as illustrative of the many existent informal systems of support mentioned in the narratives.
Solidarity
The following story gives a more outspoken example of friends and workmates helping each other. Even the harsh ship’s captain is shown to have a big heart:

During my years at the Gotlandsbolaget (the local shipping company) I built a house in Järnvägsgatan. They were called “large family homes” and the production was administrated by the municipality. You were supposed to put in 10% of the loan in the form of own work, but that was not so easy when you were sailing at sea. I dug the entire foundations by hand; it took me one whole vacation. When the boat lay in harbor, my workmates came and helped me to dig. Once the boat was supposed to leave at 4 pm and I arrived at the harbor a few minutes before 4, but they were already leaving. I yelled and shouted, but they pretended not to hear me. So I was free for another day and a half. The next time I met the captain, he told me to buy an alarm clock. Then I told him to learn how to leave on time. He didn’t answer, he just chuckled a little.

Afterwards the other guys told me that they had notified the captain that I was not on board, but the captain only said: “We are leaving, he needs the time for his house building”. That captain was a bit harsh, but kind (Gösta Österdahl, b. in Bunge).

The Sinking of the Hansa
Although Sweden had proclaimed itself neutral during the Second World War, the war events taking place all over the Baltic Sea naturally had a profound impact on everyday life on Gotland. On November 24, 1944 the Swedish passenger ship the Hansa, plying the trade between Visby and the Swedish mainland, sank outside Gotland and 84 people died. Hundreds of Gotlanders lost close relatives, but the majority of the inhabitants on Gotland suffered no personal losses. In spite of that, the incident had an overwhelming impact on the Gotland society as a whole. It is not difficult to image how the tragedy could be taken to be a violent and anonymous assault (not until much later was it proven that the ship had been hit by a Soviet torpedo) against all Gotlanders collectively. After six years of tension with belligerent actions constantly taking place in the very vicinity of the island, the sinking of the Hansa became a harsh reminder that war time brutalities were for real and could hit even civil citizens of a neutral country.

In three fourths of the life narratives I have studied here, the Hansa event is mentioned in one way or another. No other single item is close to appear that often. Here is one example of how the news of the disappearing of the ship entered everyday life.

I had been to school in the morning and I was on my way to work in the afternoon. I and my friend used to go to a café for a cup of hot chocolate and a bun before going to work. After that we made a walk through the streets and outside the newspaper’s office we saw the news bill announcing that the ship Hansa was missing. My friend, well, she had an uncle or whatever who worked on the boat. Then it started. When I arrived at my work, well, one of my workmates, her husband was on the boat. And wherever you went and whoever you met they had somebody onboard, you know. And we found that spooky. Later in the evening we went down to the harbor to have a look. And there was a raft, a wrecked raft I believe it was that they had found. Somebody had written
with a pencil: ‘A final greet…’ and then it was only a line. Probably several more had been on it. Well, that was unpleasant.

This young woman was emotionally troubled for a couple of hours, but she did not lose any relatives or friends in the calamity, and the sinking of the Hansa has no dramaturgical role to play in her life history. Still the potency of the event as a tradition dominant in narrated local history is strong enough to force itself into her life history.

**WW2 – a family trouble**

My next example shows another quality in narratives about war time events. In the life of this Visby family the war interfered rather brutally. One family member actually died and another one was suffering a nervous breakdown. The narrator labeled this as “some trouble in the family”. I do not believe that the somewhat euphemistic choice of expression should be interpreted as unfeeling or lacking empathy. Rather it could be seen as an example of how it is possible to represent a universal tragedy like a war in your individual life history. In this short narration, World War II does not have the function of a tradition dominant. The family in question was in fact struck by the war and in the narrative this is recounted in a low, matter-of-fact voice.

In 1939, we had some trouble in the family, when the war broke out. My grandfather was enrolled and his nerves couldn’t take it, so he committed suicide. It’s one of those things you do remember. My mother got weak nerves after that. Those things stick. So, from that point of view, war was difficult for us and for many other families. Several of his colleagues did the same thing. Probably they as officers were assigned some hard commitments. But they did not have the resources (Siv Jolby, b. 1920 in Visby).

**Values**

Many of the narratives contain an obvious element of evaluation. It is probably unrealistic to expect anybody to stick to the role of neutral observer when recounting her or his own life history. The evaluations normally take the form of generalized statements in first person plural: “we had a good time when we were children”; “we made no great demands on life”. The grammatical form is similar in many of them: my life has been (hard, poor and full of misfortunes), but still (good, rich, calm, free, harmonious). A typical example is this:

Life has been rich, I think. And now you are an old woman. And that is all right, too. They come and pick me up for lunch and dinner. On Tuesdays we do gymnastics. The food is good and the personnel are nice. I am grateful for that. And I am grateful that my head is still clear. My oldest son is in America. I am rich to have children, grandchildren and great grandchildren (Fanny Lindström, b. 1911 in Visby).

The prevalent conclusions resonate of gratitude and satisfaction. Several declare that they would have chosen a similar life, if they were given a chance to start anew. My overall impression is that these people have reached a state of reconciliation, where they have ceased worrying about their own mistakes and pardoned others’ wrong-doings.
All jobs (including the compulsory military service) seem to have been interesting and enjoyable. All workmates were helpful and supported each other. In their free time, they organized barbecues in summer and crayfish parties in fall. Everybody was an active member and supporter of the trade unions.

To a certain extent the narrators’ accounts are definitely representations of original experiences. But it is also near at hand to consider them as examples of what in 1995 it was possible to narrate about facts and events earlier in 20th century Visby. These life histories can be regarded as the evaluations in hindsight made by one generation of Visby inhabitants of their own professional, social, cultural contributions to local history.

Many narrators were eager to emphasize the contrasts between values that they regarded as common to their generation and the morals and ethics that they saw as typical for the younger generations. Within the field of values, the complementary phrases of the imaginary dialogue often appeared in outspoken form. Here are some examples:

- I feel sorry for the young people today who cannot find any jobs.
- They have no belief in the future and they have nothing to do.
- Young people today never assume any responsibility.
- The respect for other people is gone, especially for older people.
- Today young people are drunk and fight.
- One entire generation will be lost.
- Today’s society is no society to grow old in.
- Society today cannot handle the young.

**Conclusion**

This is (part of) one possible grand narrative about 20th Visby. Several others could have been constructed from the materials that I have used, and the one recounted here could have been made both broader and deeper. However, there is no doubt that this mental image of 20th century Visby owns some kind of existence. Many people – both among the interviewees and in other situations – refer to fragments of it and in many interactions it is obvious that you are expected to be familiar with it and relate to it.

From my point of view it is not important to decide whether the facts presented in this narrative are historical or not, nor whether the events described have actually happened nor whether the narrators really “believe” in what they are relating. To me as a folklorist it is enough to be able to show that the fragmentary or embryonic grand narrative does exist and that its mere existence demands that people relate to it. And to me, this is also the case with other so called belief narratives, for instance folk legends. We know that they do exist (or did exist) and we know that people in one way or another had to relate to them. What and how much people actually did believe is more or less impossible for us to decide.

Each individual life history creates its own unique narrated world. In my material the major part of the narrators’ lives has been enacted on the same arena during approximately the same period of time: 20th century Visby. Taken as a whole, the individually recounted narrative worlds (together with several thousands of similar narratives not mentioned here) create a fairly consistent image of a universe with static as well as dynamic elements. The static parts, expressed in circular, non-final, non linear forms, consist of the physical environment with streets, buildings and institutions, but also including a population with specific groups and
individuals, recurrent traditions and accepted values. Among the fixed elements are furthermore points of time, dates and years, but also historical events in a reified form, devoid of their dynamic aspects. Into this common narrative construction, it is the assignment of each individual to fit her or his personal narrated world.

These operations bring about complicated dialogues between the individual life histories possible to insert into the collectively narrated universe and its prerequisites resulting precisely from these negotiating dialogues.

While folk legends typically deal with the extraordinary, the deviant and the unexpected, both individual life histories and collective grand narratives are dedicated to normal, everyday, predictable matters. Maybe we could regard grand narratives as the smallest common denominator of local history, formulating the agreements that everybody subscribes to – while folk legends explore the boundaries of normality, the almost unknown borderlands facing the backyards of the unbelievable.

Grand narratives lack the legends’ focal concentration on one single, dramatically charged chain of events. That may be one reason that they seldom show the elaborate form of the verbally formulated narrative. They have no obvious temporal extension, no clear line of development following a hero’s handling of a complication from its introduction to a satisfactory resolution. From the perspective of a single individual it is next to impossible to follow the long and slow developing processes of a society. That is why we perceive of the grand narratives as fragments of an indiscernible whole or as embryos that may once unite into a coherent entity. On the other hand the causal elements appear to be strong. The grand narratives obviously have a function to support cause and effect-explanations or as a common cultural standard with which you can compare your own experiences and values (cf Hyvärinen et al 2010). Largely, they consist of non-narrative, descriptive elements and we cannot even say for sure that they have a consistent verbal form. Probably they are never narrated. Instead they are ever-present as collective frames of reference for what is considered to be normal and how it is accepted to talk about local history.

Taken as a whole, these 40 life histories create an image of a place and a time, Visby during the 20th century. The common traits form recurrent thematic fields around certain tradition dominants of local history. Thus it is possible to understand a small peripheral Swedish city within the context of the creation, flowering and deconstruction of the welfare society.

**Literature**


