He says that legend is a particular way of perceiving the world. One of his interesting observations is that gods belong to the domain of myths and demons to the domain of legends. He also maintains that ‘Genres are thus not mere literary or folkloric categories of classification but expressive forms of vernacular religion and of social life in its public and private forms’.

Similar to Kirin Narayan, Ulf Palmenfelt also focuses pragmatics of telling and its moral and social functions. He also deeply touches the narratological, communicative and existential issues connected with legends. He situates metamorphosis legend telling in the context of peasant lives and land conflicts.

Arunima Das discusses certain specimens of urban legends collected from a city of North-east India. Her research in Guwahati is probably first of this kind in India. It shows that at the global level, urban legends show similarity. Hari Saravanan, in his paper discusses about the subject of contemporary heroic legends. He also observes generic interactions. This shows that oral heroic legend as a genre can spill over to other artistic genres and create myths and graphic icons.

The study of Indian legends raises interesting points. The scholars who worked in India often identified legends based on their exaggerated/hyperbolic or miraculous historical content encased in the context of long bardic narrative. Those identifications were created by the colonial collectors. Secondly, there is no binary opposition between myths and legends as Ülo Valk has drawn in the case of the West. Finally, there are stories related to place, family, saints and local history which are identified by local words (which in many languages mean ‘what is told or narrated’, thus a neutral stand is taken about its believability) and they to a great extent conform to the western definition of the genre. Contents of epics or myths tickle down to Indian legends. On the other hand, legend as a genre also inspires resonance in other genres.

References

Legends and Family Folklore
Kirin Narayan

Kamlabai Ramji rarely spoke in plain sentences. She usually issued decrees. White sari pulled over her grey hair, eyes widened dramatically behind her black framed-glasses, hands gesturing in grand sweeps, Kamlabai commanded supreme family authority. When instructing her city-born grandchildren, she spoke a nasal mixture of Hindi and Gujarati tinged with the accent of her birth near Kathiawar forests. Since her marriage to a much older widower in 1925, she had lived in Nasik, Maharashtra. The legend that she most relished retelling, though, involved the desert region of Kutch and an ancestor from her husband’s family.

“When Khimji Bhagat was young, his father sent him to guard the fields,” Kamlabai recounted. “They grew millet—javar and bajra. He was supposed to keep cows away, but he called over the cowherds and the cows. He said, ‘Let the cows eat today,’ and the cows ate until the crop was all finished. His father was furious; but Khimji Bhagat said, ‘You will get at least twice that amount of grain.’”

I leave Kamlabai’s outstretched fingers frozen in motion and the story unfinished to step back and view such a story as a folklorist, anthropologist, and writer evaluating data. Family legends like this narrative of Khimji Bhagat are one of the key arenas in which most people first learn about their identity and roots. Family stories have been discussed and theorized by folklorists, historians, sociologists, and of course family therapists; they have also inspired uncountable memoirs and novels. Many ethnographies, oral histories and life histories contain family stories, whether through summarized allusions, unpacked portions of narrative, or just a few lines in a preface. As an unmarked category, though, such stories can sometimes seem hidden in plain sight: lodged in interstices, alluded to as background. Highlighting family stories in this special issue on legends, my hope is to bring these multi-faceted gems of personal and collective identity into closer focus.
By family story, I mean stories told by and about family members, though there is clearly a wide and culturally inflected range to whom is included in the family and the kinds of stories told. Family stories might include reminiscences of events that the speaker has personally observed; oral history and legends passed along through generations; and myths that index a family’s relationship to supernatural or divine beings. Mody Boatright, a pioneer in the study of what he terms “the family saga” points out that such stories are “an important source of living folklore—a folklore that can be collected with relative ease. Each generation produces a few collectors or raconteurs of the family lore” (1958:19). Zeitlin, Kotkin and Baker write in their groundbreaking A Celebration of American Family Folklore, “A family generally believes its stories to be true, at least in part, for they are a rendering of history in which it has a definite stake” (1982:10).

Elizabeth Stone summarizes some of the dimensions of family stories in her Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Family Stories Shape Us:

They provide the family with esteem because they often show family members in an attractive light or define the family in a flattering way. They also give messages and instructions; they offer blueprints and ideals; they issue warnings and prohibitions. And when they no longer serve, they disappear (1986:5).

**FAMILY LEGENDS AS MODELS OF IDENTITY AND CLAIMS TO STATUS**

As a folklorist-in-training, while still a graduate student, I first encountered a family legend in the field when interviewing ‘Swamiji,’ the bemused, tobacco-chewing “agaram-bagaram Baba” who instructed his visitors through folk narratives. Swamiji was recalling his childhood, telling me how, after his mother died when he was a child, he was sent to live with his mother’s relatives near Mysore. Beside this home was a samadhi shrine containing the clothes of a saintly ancestor:

There was a man; my mother’s mother’s father’s father (Swamiji counted these off on his fingers, then raised his hand.) Four generations. At the time of leaving his body he became invisible. I didn’t see this, I just heard it. What happened is that he sat to perform worship [puja]. He was wearing ochre. It was the month of Dhanu—November, December—on a full moon day. And in the middle of doing his worship, he began to ascend. He rose up into the sky as the people were sitting and watching. Then the ochre clothes he was wearing fell down, but not his body. They made a samadhi with these clothes. There, in my mother’s grandfather’s house. The samadhi still stands today (Narayan 1989:185).

Many years later, that same winter full moon marked the morning when Swamiji recognized a Goddess in her shrine containing the clothes of a saintly ancestor: this man is probably among the models Swamiji does not directly connect his ideales; they issue warnings and prohibitions. And when they no longer serve, they disappear (1986:5). Yet, as Komal Kothari has pointed out in his inspiring conversations with Rustom Bharucha, as family legends are passed along, the perspective on them may shift. His grandmother, for example, told a story about his great-grandfather, the Diwan of Ratlam state, who had assisted a younger Prince in taking over the throne: helping him plot to send the older brother away, to murder the King, and to bribe British officials as the case for succession steered through the courts. While Komal Kothari’s grandmother told this story with great appreciation for the great-grandfather’s intelligence and attention to details, the folklorist himself took the contrary view of this as a conspiracy (Bharucha 2003:27). The fixity of family models, then, might shift across generations.

Kothari also recollects that this same great-grandfather was later accused of embezzlement and jailed for 18 years; afterwards, he was compensated with Rs. 1 lakh for every year that he had been wrongfully imprisoned, “a fortune at the time” (2003:27). As Zeitlin, Kotkin and Baker have observed that families “hold on to episodes which mark the upheavals and sharp changes in their history” (1982:15). Based on interviews with students, Stanley Brandes (1975) found that spectacular missed opportunities for great fortunes is a favorite theme in many American family stories, helping explain away class status as lower than hoped for; he called these “family misfortune stories” but observed that these were less prevalent among minority groups who did not see themselves as having access to the same opportunities. It would be interesting to undertake a comparative study with Indians of different backgrounds too learn how often, and in what manner, family legends recalled turning points in class or caste status.

**FAMILY LEGENDS AS PERFORMING KINSHIP**

Genealogies and kinship charts provide maps of relationships; family stories, however, infuse such connections with personal meaning. In the course of researching women’s oral traditions in Kangra, the Northwest Himalayas, I found that while kinship is mostly reckoned patrilineally, many women told long narratives about the suffering of their female ancestors as part of their own life stories. Meena Rana, a woman in her late 30s with gapping front teeth and shouting good humor, for example, started telling of her own life with a long story about her Masi, or mother’s sister. Meena spoke with her aunt-in-law Tayi, a young daughter, and me all listening in and interjecting questions and comments, Meena described how her Masi’s difficulties began when Masi was just 16 and her husband’s mother died.

After his mother died, she used to appear everyday, pleading, “Come with me, come with me!” (Tayi: A shadow appearing in a dream). A shadow in a dream. Then one day, as though the dream was real, she actually appeared. She came and stood at the door. (Kirin: Your Masi saw her too?) Yes, my Masi too saw her Sas, her mother-in-law. She says that she had her head covered.

In the past, there was no electricity, and people used kerosene lamps. So the mother-in-law came in, and it’s said that also there was a metal pot of water
there. She came in and overturned the lamp as well as the metal pot full of water.

Then after that, in a few days, my Masadji [Masi's husband] died. (Kirin: All of a sudden?) All of a sudden. He vomited up blood and that was it. Finished. He had no illness and he just died.

Meena went on from this chilling supernatural episode to recount how, after this sudden death, the husband’s older brother would not give the young widow food to eat, a place to live, or fields to farm. He even said that the real widow had run away and this woman was an impostor. But Meena’s Masi persevered for her rights, bringing in her own father to speak on her behalf, and when that didn’t work, going to court. As an Rajput widow, notions of female chastity and family honor set remarriage for her in a 1930s village out of the question. By her late 20s, she was eking out a living and decided to adopt a child. That child was two-year old Meena, one of three small girls who Meena’s exhausted mother offered to her sister to choose from. “I called her ‘Amma’ [mother],” Meena recalled. “I didn’t even know she was my aunt until much later.”

Meena appeared to be holding up her aunt as an exemplar of integrity, endurance and ingenuity. In emphasizing this connection, she also reoriented her own self-worth from being a pesky “extra” daughter to becoming a cherished transmitter of such admirable female qualities. So, in telling her aunt’s story rather than her mother’s, Meena reformulated and imaginatively activated certain kinship ties over others. Such family legends, then, reveal more about how kinship is experienced than how it might be routinely reckoned.

FAMILY LEGENDS AS MORAL INSTRUCTION

Family legends can also be passed along outside a family to make a point that carries the authority of personal connection. For example, in 2002, I visited the same village and accompanied Meena on a condolence visit to a family whose 30-year old son had been tragically killed in a tractor accident, leaving a 24-year old widow and two small daughters. We met with the man’s parents downstairs, and then we climbed the steep steps to the upper story where the young widow sat somberly hunched by the adobe hearth, preparing tea. Meena briskly squatted beside her.

“Don’t cry, child!” she commanded in a comforting, take-charge voice. “You have children, you have a family: a mother-in-law, a father-in-law, a younger-brother-in-law.” From there, Meena launched into a summary of her Masi’s tale.

I had a Masi who was widowed when she was just 16 and she had no one. In those days, they married girls off so young. She didn’t have any support, poor thing; she didn’t have a husband or children, or a father-in-law or a mother-in-law. She had one older-brother-in-law who would not give her anything to eat. She raised a sheep and sold its wool, she farmed a bit of land and she made her living. She’s the one who brought me up! It was she who arranged my marriage.

“Look at all that you have: a whole family, and your little girls,” Meena concluded, taking the young woman’s hand. She clearly intended the story as a form of comfort through contrast, showing how things could be worse. For me, overhearing a version of this previously taped tale was a reminder of how lives are transacted in many social contexts beyond the interviews privileged by microphone-brandishing fieldworkers.

But, as Kothari again reminds us, when family stories leave the defining family unit, they may be heard as carrying an altogether different message. He recounts how a low-caste Bhambhi boy in the village of Berunda talked with pride about how his great grandfather had served the jagirdar as a postman, walking all over the district for twenty years without payment. Kothari recalls being sympathetic on hearing of such exploitation, which angered the boy: “What are you talking about? Why don’t you see that my great grandfather was capable of walking forty-two miles every day? Don’t you see what strength he possessed? Why are you talking about money?” (2003:28).

FAMILY LEGENDS AND CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

Family legends often carry the aura of particular places. I now return to Kamlabai Ramji’s legend of her husband’s ancestor, Khimji Bhagat, who had disobeyed his father’s instructions to guard the fields in Kutch, instead encouraging cows to feast on the grain.

“The next year there was a drought,” Kamlabai continued to her grandchildren. “Even then, the millet in our fields sprouted. It sprouted three times—people ate, animals ate, the birds ate and the insects ate. No one else in the village had a crop that year but because of our fields, they ate.”

The motif of the holy person causing food to miraculously multiply is well known across religious traditions. Kamlabai, though, fixed this motif to a particular place, much as her husband and his brothers had in 1899 returned to their village with funds earned in Bombay to build a temple in their grandfather’s honor: Khimji Dwarao, the Doors of Khimji, in Bhorara, Kutch.

Kamlabai concluded these surprising events with Khimji Bhagat now extracting himself from family responsibility to devote himself to singing God’s name. “Then Khimji Bhagat said to his family, ‘Take this, it’s for all of you. Now let me go free, so I can sing to God.’ He sang bhangas praising Ram. His Guru was Ramananda Swami, who lived in Kandagra, the place in Kutch where our kul-devata, our family deities live too.”

Kamlabai had never lived in Kutch; her husband had moved to Bombay as a 12-year old seeking work and had not lived in Kutch since about 1876. Yet decades later, Kamlabai reinforced the family’s association with Kutch and the family deities resident there by regularly invoking the living presence of this spiritually minded ancestor. With migration, places retain their imaginative salience for family members partly through such legends. I have found this to be true not just among families who have migrated across regions of India, but also for members of the South Asian diaspora (cf. Narayan 2003). Family legends then, are an important node in the lived experience of cultural geography.
FAMILY LEGENDS AND SCHOLARLY REFLEXIVITY

A final aspect of family legends I would like to address is: what about the stories in a scholar’s own background? If including reflexive perspectives in scholarship has been dismissed as navel-gazing, attention to one’s own family stories might well seem like a brandishing of umbilical cords. But to ignore the range of stories that we ourselves carry, as family members, is to miss a precious resource in a situation where we already have privileged insight and rapport. Further, we might gain understanding into the reasons we are drawn to particular topics rather than others.

How does it change a readers’ understanding of the previous story to know that I was among Kamlabai’s grandchildren who so often heard her tell the story of Khimji Bhagat. I draw here on words I wrote down in a notebook over 25 years ago, when I was a student. I knew Kamlabai as “Ba,” a vibrant source of stories. Khimji Bhagat was present in a painted photograph in a gold frame among the deities in Ba’s puja. A traveling photographer who came through the village in the 1880s had originally taken a photograph of Khimji Bhagat and his bhajan mandali, or group of singing companions. For the painted version, though, he was alone. He wore a white turban slanted from right to left over his forehead, a cloth over his left shoulder, a long-sleeved kurta tied in the front, a dhoti of fine white cotton wrapped around his legs. Three white Vaishnava puja marks slanted up his forehead, and a long mala of sandalwood beads hung down below the bulb of the one-stringed musical instrument or ektara which he played as he sang. He was so old that his cheeks hung slack and dented, his forehead was wrinkled, and his eyes looked out as though disoriented by the act of being photographed. Still, he carried a calm self-containment. Ba said that if you prayed to him, ‘Oh Bappa, have compassion,’ even now, he would grant boons.

Ba brought out this legend of Khimji Bhagat on many different occasions. I suspect that she drew on this legend as an assertion of privileged spiritual genealogy and a claim to status for upwardly mobile Gujarati immigrants to Maharashtra. The legend also performed kinship, demonstrating how an in-marrying wife might take on the identity of a patrilineage. Further, the legend was a form of moral instruction, reminding us that religious devotion made for a higher logic than worldly concerns. The legend also tied us to Kutch, regardless of whether we lived in Nasik, Bombay, or Madison, Wisconsin.

In retrospect, with a family model like Khimji Bhagat, was it any wonder that the central subject of my Ph.D dissertation was a delightfully eccentric holy man? For all scholars, it is worth reflecting on how the creative energy generated by the family legends we absorbed long before we learned interview methodologies might unconsciously direct our research choices and our writings.

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Folklore as Discourse

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