of global folklore. According to Linda Dégh, legend is rather “an overarching term”, to denote different narratives that discuss belief in the supernatural (2001: 97). What kind of narratives, beliefs and modalities this term should cover in Indian folklore, past and present, is a vast topic of research and discussion. The category of “legend” has a remarkable potential to get filled with multiple meanings and be developed into a rich body of research. Just as beliefs are transformed into verbal genres in folklore, concepts and categories have the potential to become the multiform textual body of international folkloristics. Eyes of legend provide religious communities with a special outlook of the world and orientation in reality (Bakhtin, Medvedev 1991: 135). Legend also offers to folklorists certain insights into a vast realm of tradition, inhabited by demons and other agents of the dark textuality of the genres of belief.

My research on Indian folklore has been supported by the Estonian Science Foundation (grant no. 6518).

References


Some Thoughts about Form in Metamorphosis Legends

ULF PALMENFELT

ULF PALMENFELT, Gotland University, Visby, Sweden.

S

ince the Grimm brothers, folklorists have developed sophisticated methods for analyzing the forms of oral narrative and narrative performances. Paradoxically enough, however, this deep concern with form does not always seem to be a central part of the self-image of folklore scholars. Perhaps this apparent inconsistency can be explained simply by looking at the concepts preferred by folklorists. Many of us are educated to think in terms of morphology and motifs, not of form and content (see e.g. Propp 1958, Dundes 1980, Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1978). Even Carl Wilhelm von Sydow, one of the great pioneers of scientific taxonomies based on formal aspects, in his definition pointed out that it is the ethnographer, not the folklorist, that “must have a sense for form and color” (von Sydow 1919: 18). In spite of that, von Sydow (1934), Axel Olrik (1908), Gunnar Granberg (1935), Carl-Herman Tillhagen (1964), Bengt af Klintberg (1987), and Timothy R. Tangherlini (1994) along with others continued to refine the methods of folkloristic form analysis.

In this paper it is my purpose to focus upon some aspects of form when discussing the 106 metamorphosis legends in Per Arvid Säve’s 19th century collection of Gotlandic legends (Gustavson/Nyman 1959-1961). I have chosen to name my material metamorphosis legends, because they all deal with some kind of magical transformation. I emphasize ‘magical’, since the dynamic core of all narrative is transformation, the pendulum change between different stages of equilibrium. A substantial part of Säve’s entire legend collection (106 out of 812 numbers) responds to this selection criterion, which, of course, refers to the contents of the stories. My intention here, however, is to relate the concept of form to other factors than contents.

This is an example of how these legends might sound:

Once a farm-maid went to fetch water from the well. As she pulled up the bucket it was full of ash leaves. She carefully took her hand and threw out all the leaves from the bucket, but a couple of them came to be left floating on the water. But when the farm-maid came into the cottage and put down the bucket by the fireplace, the leaves sank into the water and something was heard to resound from the bottom of the bucket. This surprised her and when she took a closer look, there were two silver spoons glistening there. (Gustavson/Nyman 1960, 328).

From the Swedish national encyclopedia I learn that the Swedish word “form” can have several meanings (and most of this applies to the English word “form” as well). The basic meaning is the concrete noun “form”, “mold”, implicating a container into which something is poured to congeal into the same shape as the container. As a verb, “form” both in English and Swedish means “to give shape or form to”. The result of such a forming process, in a more figurative sense, can be referred to in terms of the outer shape of an object: cruciform, vermiform and liquid form. Even more abstractly, we speak of a form of punishment, a sonata form, and forms of living. Here we are approaching the meaning ethnologists and folklorists imply by concepts as “cultural forms”, i.e., ideas or sets of values that have congealed into certain configurations (N.E:s internettjänst 2003:11-18).

The encyclopedia also points out that, in material objects, form is identical to spatial shape or configuration. In non-material phenomena, form can only be considered to be a shape or configuration in an abstract or figurative sense and only concerning the logical or syntactical structure of the phenomenon in question.

My starting point here is to regard both form and content as analytical aspects of a coherent unit. Hence, form and
content as well as other aspects of the material (like function, mood, and aesthetics) are dependent on the purpose of the analysis, not on the quality of the object. On the analogy of Ferdinand de Saussure (1970,93—98), I am prepared to regard formal elements of legends as components of content, and motifs as constituents of form, but many other aspects of the narratives also have to be fit into the model.

In the metamorphosis legends, I have isolated two clearly distinct story patterns:

I. Simple or double reverse transformations

1. A human or supernatural being acquires or observes a
   a) worthless or disgusting object
   b) valuable object
   c) something familiar
2. The being performs an action – including neglect – directed towards the object
3. The object is (has been) transformed into
   a) something valuable
   b) something worthless or disgusting
   c) something foreign or hostile
   d) or disappears
4. The object is (has been) transformed once more into something of reverse value

II. Transformation as (religious) penalty

a. Past tense
   1a. a human being performs a sinful or deceitful action
   (2a. a holy time or place is involved)
   3a. a magic transformation takes place
b. Present tense
   1b. a human being under a spell appears
   2b. the spell is explained by an earlier sinful or deceitful action
   (3b. the ghost causes an optical or acoustic illusion)
   (4b. the sinful/deceitful action is corrected)
   5b. the spell is broken

Each pattern consists of a number of coherent motif chains, where the motifs are described at a generalized level. Another way of presenting the same information could be the one used by Stith Thompson (1955, 8) with the motif elements hierarchically ordered at (for instance) five different levels. For me it is satisfactory to be able to ascertain that these structures are recurrent in all the legends I have analyzed, and that we, without doubt can speak about stable formal configurations at several motif levels. As indicated in the tables above, however, alternative story lines are possible, and several of the motifs are interchangeable. Even so, reality as always rarely accepts to be caged in models constructed at the theoretician’s desk. We find several exceptions from this model; there are lots of combinations and fragments.

Reproductive Forms

The word ‘transform’, of course, is of Latin origin, from ‘trans-’, meaning across, through, behind, and ‘forma’, meaning form. The transitive verb ‘transform’ thus implies giving something a radically different shape, belonging to a world across our normal mental landscapes or behind what we usually see. The idea of transformation itself is stimulating to the imagination. It suggests a playful attitude to the world around us: what if things are not what they appear to be? Consider this example:

As Mikkel Rasmussen Båta on Fårö once was riding up to the vicarage with fish for the tithes, he found twelve herrings with bloody heads lying on a flat rock. He didn’t pick them up at that time, since he didn’t want to stop and get off the horse’s back, but when he returned, they had disappeared! Then he understood that it had been dragon’s goods and that he easily could have got hold of twelve silver spoons with golden bowls if only he had thrown something over them or made the sign of the cross. (Gustavson/Nyman 1960, 199)

In this short story (and in seven other similar examples) no transformation actually takes place. The remaining ninety eight stories where transformations do occur have created a form for the type of situations where a magical transformation could be expected: When you come across a familiar or worthless object in an odd place, you could suspect that it in fact is something valuable in disguise. To support this idea the quoted story emphasizes the similarity between the silvery herrings with their blood red heads and a set of silver spoons with golden bowls. And we notice that there are twelve herrings, a common number for a set of spoons. Maybe the visit to the vicarage also could be of importance to our understanding of the incident. Before his meeting with the priest, Mikkel Rasmussen Båta was predisposed to have a supernatural experience, but after his visit to the sacred place everything was back to normal again.

To me this is an indication that existing metamorphosis forms are well known as culturally accepted ideas. The storyteller has certainly been aware of this and can even express his surprise (with an exclamation mark in the transcript) that the expected transformation does not take place. If we understand the story as a memorate, the main character, Mikkel Rasmussen Båta, too, was aware of and behaved in accordance with the template. Thus the metamorphosis form is reproductive as a narrative element and it is prescriptive in real everyday life as a pattern of behavior that you possibly might have to take into consideration.

The Legends’ Relation to Belief Systems

To take a closer look at the forms of the magical transformations, there seems to be four dominant patterns. The most common one is where something valuable is transformed into something worthless or the other way around. In the other types, something beautiful is transformed into something ugly or disgusting, something familiar becomes something strange or foreign, and something that is visible or tangible simply disappears. Here is an example of a double transformation:

A farm-maid, on her way to milk the cows, saw the water hole in the meadow filled with beautiful yellow skeins of yarn, and the fences as well were
full of them. When she walked back home, she picked up one skein just for fun and put into the pocket hanging under her apron. After a while, when she took it out to look closer at her catch, it was all changed into – horseshit! The girl was ashamed and threw it all away. But when she arrived home and was about to clean the pocket, she found its inside all gold-plated and even some small gold nuggets lying in the corners. (Gustavson/Nyman 1960, 330).

Here the beautiful yellow skeins of yarn are transformed into disgusting and worthless horse manure, which in its turn is transformed into valuable gold. But, even before the story begins, another magic transformation has already taken place: the water hole and the fence around the meadow have been decorated with skeins of yarn. The farm-maid finds something familiar situated in an odd place, which is usually a sign that you are entering a realm where magic transformations do occur. As a matter of fact, in the metamorphosis legends, horse dung (but never manure from other animals!) is one of the most common examples of worthless objects that can be changed into something valuable. Other frequent examples are oak or ash leaves and wood shavings. A single example with an elaborate imagery is a story where a poor boy finds a pair of blue gloves hanging from a juniper. When he comes back later the same evening, the gloves have been transformed into a pair of silver goblets. Many transformations include intestines and blood clots as examples of disgusting objects that can change into something beautiful or valuable.

Here is an example of how something familiar is transformed into something strange or foreign:

An old woman was plowing a field with some other people at Fardume in Rute. She thought she heard some children weeping in the Husby pasture close by. As she went there, she could not see any children, but instead she now saw a terrible frog.

These visions were all made up by an evil forest-Byse, the Husby man, who during his lifetime had got hold of his neighbors’ land through perjury. As a punishment he had to walk in the pasture as a ghost till doomsday, always with some earth inside his clog heel. (Gustavson/Nyman 1959, 132).

The familiar things that become foreign sometimes actually belong to the nuclear family, although the children in this example appear to be unknown to the old woman. The first part of the incident, where some invisible weeping children are replaced with a lying horse and a heap of twigs could be a normal ingredient in a memorate. The supernatural quality of such an experience lies in the mind of the observer. The next transformation, where the horse is transformed into a terrible frog, is more remarkable.

To this category of metamorphosis legends belong all the stories of how children are exchanged with the offspring of supernatural beings, whereby they literally become changelings. The last part of this story introduces the etiological motif that some kind of deceitful, criminal or sinful action lies behind and is the cause of the transformations. I will return to this a bit later.

Once when some men were walking on the transparent ice of lake Aikaträsk, they saw some unusually fine-looking, big perch swim under the ice. After a while the fish disappeared among some big stones on the bottom of the lake. One of the men looked down there and saw what appeared to be a big vault and a door with big gilt letters above it. He took off his skates and put them on the ice to mark the place, but when he came back with his companions everything had disappeared. (Gustavson/Nyman 1959: 169)

In all metamorphosis legends, the experienced person’s own senses can be said to be questioned or at least represented as unreliable. Maybe this idea is most evident in the group of stories where visible or tangible objects simply disappear. Other disappearing objects are human beings, icicles, an eagle, revenants and yellow skeins of yarn, as we have already seen.

The vague boundaries between the valuable and the worthless, between the beautiful and the disgusting are easy to relate to the widespread attitude of a self-sufficient farming society where practically nothing is worthless or unusable.

The metamorphoses of the legends certainly stand out as colorful and stimulating to the imagination. The transformations can be humorous and entertaining, but also worrying and frightening. They represent the world as evanescent, elusive and treacherous. Nothing can be trusted to be what it appears to be – for good or for worse.

However, these are not accounts of clever magicians’ performances. The transformations never take place before the eyes of the observer. Instead, they follow this scheme: the persons in the legends focus their attention on a suspicious looking object. Then something interfering happens that takes the attention away from the object. Often some time passes and when the object comes back into focus, somebody or something has turned the coin to show the other side of it.

Only material objects are transformed, never values, social relations, or economy. The protagonists of the legends may obtain one or two valuable objects, just to realize that they could have acquired a fortune, if they had only behaved in the right way (cf. Lindow 1982). Even if the magical transformations per se might seem extraordinary, they seldom bring about deep and radical changes in the lives of the persons who experience them. Everything remains as usual, except for some coins, a pair of silver spoons, or a gold nugget, and the thrilling memory of the evanescent possibility of becoming very rich. Paradoxically enough, you could say that the knowledge that these legends about transformations truly convey is that, in spite of what it might look like, nothing at all really changes. This conclusion is strengthened by the observation that not everything in the material world can be affected by the changes. For instance, they never involve the church, the priest, the county counselor or
Consequently, the legends situate the transformations such a strong crime as to deserve such cruel punishment. The punishment was that the offender was transformed into, for instance, Christmas Day or Easter Sunday. The holy days by working, hunting or even quarreling on, some cases they even occurred at the time when the mountains were soft, or when a certain lake still was a fir forest.

The element of punishment is central in these stories, making it natural to understand them as either warnings against unrightful behavior or as etiological stories, explaining the origin of some stone formation.

One Christmas morning a greedy farmer at Nårs in Weskindе necessarily wanted to drive down to the mill in Lummelunda to grind; but on the road between the mill and Nårs both of his oxen were transformed into two large stone blocks. Even today people call them Nårs stone oxen and they stand to the east of the main road. (Gustavson/Nyman 1960: 343)

The offenses mentioned are directed either against other people or against religious norms. Most of the crimes against other people concern land ownership. In the Gotlandic farming society, family ties to the inherited land seem to have been strong. In the medieval code of laws, Gutalagen, the longest section is the one regulating land transactions. One of the laws stipulates that family land can never be sold, only inherited (Holmbäck/Wessén 1979:221). When Säve collected these legends in the 19th century, the land parceling process was running in many Gotlandic parishes. Farmers had to witness how the fields they had inherited from fathers and grandfathers, for maybe a thousand years, were handed over to neighbors, possibly enemies, by the land surveyor’s pencil mark. Before the land parceling there were only few visible boundary-marks in the Gotlandic landscape (Lindquist 1991:183). Especially in forests and pastures, knowledge of the boundary-lines was maintained through oral tradition. The importance of family land and the uncertainty about the boundaries must have offered fertile conditions for all kinds of suspicions between neighbors. In the legends, greedy farmers committed all kinds of perjury and deceitful acts to get hold of each other’s land. The normal punishment, still in the legends, was that the offender after death was transformed into a revenant, especially in the Gotlandic form, a byse.

The religious offenses usually consisted of desecrating holy days by working, hunting or even quarreling on, for instance, Christmas Day or Easter Sunday. The punishment was that the offender was transformed into stone. It is hard to believe that failure to remember the Sabbath-day, in the 19th century, could be considered such a strong crime as to deserve such cruel punishment. Consequently, the legends situate the transformations in some distant Old Testament or even pre-Christian past where such religious harshness would be more likely. Perhaps we should understand these stories not as examples of existing popular beliefs, but as games of imagination, inspired by the human-like shapes of certain limestone formations.

Distinctions of mood and mode

From a genre analytical point of view there can be little doubt that all the 106 texts I have chosen for this study fall within the boundaries of the legend genre. Stylistically, however, the stories show rather different attitudes to the fantastic content they report. In some of them the magical transformations are described in an uncomplicated, matter-of-fact style, reminding of how supernatural experiences typically are reported in memorates. Only one sense of the observer is activated: if you see something, there is no sound; if you hear something, nothing shows. Seldom the supernatural quality becomes evident only through the teller’s interpretation of the experience. Here is an example:

Once, when a farmer together with his folks was in a hurry to take his rye home, and he came with his horses and wagon on a road close to home, he, to his surprise, found all bushes in the pasture close by full of icicles, glistening in the warm sunshine.

– Well, they were in a hurry and drove directly down into the rye field where they were to load. Meanwhile somebody said: - Aren’t the kids crazy to hang the bushes full of icicles?

- Yes, what a folly, said another, icicles in the rye season! But let’s have a closer look when we return.

But when they returned, all the icicles were gone from the bushes, because it was probably Bysen that had made up the whole scene! (Gustavson/Nyman 1959, 143).

What separates this story from a typical memorate is that the experience is collective. Aside from that, the event might very well fit into the memorate genre: it is seen from a distance and when the observers are in a hurry, it is never checked out calmly in a controlled situation, it affects only one of the senses, and we can think of several possible, “natural” explanations. Perhaps the most plausible one is what is also suggested in the text: that it is a practical joke, staged by some children. Compare that story with this almost fairytale-like example:

A fisherman had his boat in Kappelshamn bay. Then he saw a fair maiden with three servants come sailing through the air and sink down upon the third reef towards Svarvudden. Two of her servants led her by each hand and the third followed after them with a chair. Then the maiden sat down on the chair, and the servants washed her and combed her hair, dressed her as a bride and put a crown on her head, thereafter the two who had led her finally kissed her. But at the same time a cloud appeared from a distance. The maiden sat down on the chair and the servants washed her and combed her hair, dressed her as a bride and put a crown on her head, thereafter the two who had led her finally kissed her. The chair away under her! And instantly the maiden turned into a stone. It is hard to believe that failure to remember the Sabbath-day, in the 19th century, could be considered such a strong crime as to deserve such cruel punishment. Consequently, the legends situate the transformations in some distant Old Testament or even pre-Christian past where such religious harshness would be more likely. Perhaps we should understand these stories not as examples of existing popular beliefs, but as games of imagination, inspired by the human-like shapes of certain limestone formations.
Here the human observer plays a peripheral and passive role. The only function of the fisherman in the story is to provide the teller with an explanation to why he is able to recount these strange happenings. In spite of the detailed geographical positioning it is obvious that the events of the story do not take place in the Kappelshamn bay of the ordinary world, but in some invented tale world.

My first example – the icicles hanging from the bushes – is characterized by simple, uncomplicated everyday language and simple, uncomplicated realistic narrative elements, while the second one – the maiden transformed into an eagle and hit by a thunderbolt – shows a more elevated language (which is more obvious in the Swedish original), and also has a composite series of unrealistic events performed by evidently fictitious actors. This seems to indicate that within the genre of legend, we are able to find different degrees of fictitiousness, perhaps best described as differences in distance between the ordinary world and the tale worlds of the stories. From the teller's point of view, the language can be simple, casual with individual traits and wordings – or stylized and formulaic. The tale itself can be an undramatic report of a trivial episode – or a refined composition of artfully interwoven narrative elements. The contents or events reported can appear as plausible and easy to accept as part of an everyday reality – or have the character of belonging to a fabricated otherworld. Borrowing a word from linguistics, I would suggest we call the differences modal, since they express a distinction of mood in the grammatical sense, such as that between actuality and possibility. Furthermore, I suggest that the term ‘mood’ be used to refer to the “grammar” of the narrative, the linguistic form and the narrative structure. The attitude or stance of the narrator as well as the atmosphere of the story and the emotions provoked in the listener could be indicated by the word “mode”.

Conclusion

Experiencing natural transformations like humans’, plants’ and animals’ ageing, seasonal changes, and technical alterations builds up a memory bank of accumulated experience in the individual and in society. The metamorphosis legends help people to organize these experiences in understandable categories. They direct people’s minds towards the phenomenon of change in itself, and inspire their fantasy to speculate around what changes are possible. By emphasizing the natural quality of the transformations in everyday life, they contribute to uphold and make visible the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural. Furthermore, the legends confirm the understanding that everything can be, has been, and will be changed. Nothing can be trusted to be what it appears to be. Perhaps even our human senses of perception should be questioned. Why would the world otherwise appear so elusive and impossible to control? Or perhaps reality is uncontrollable only to the ordinary man? The legends seem to verify the suspicion that even the transformations are illusory, at least when a poor person seems to have the chance to become rich.

As the accounts of such experiences are poured into narrative forms, they congeal into stable, recurrent shapes that can be used both as building stones for new stories and as patterns of action. The legends are descriptive and prescriptive at the same time.

At another level of analysis, these recurrent shapes should of course also be regarded as cultural building stones. As such they could be ordered on a scale from a practical, concrete frame of mind to abstract, philosophical or religious attitudes, from the down to earth advice “Never throw anything away; everything can be used for something” to the ethereal “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose”.

Looking at metamorphosis legends from both a narratological and a communicative point of view, this span between the concrete and the abstract, the realistic and the fictitious, also comes out as influential. From a narratological point of view, the narrative building elements show distinct form criteria at several different levels, from single motifs or parts of motifs, to composite chains of motifs built up to complete episodes, all the way over to long, multi-episodic narratives. At all these levels forms can be influenced by more realistic or more fictitious modes that are expressed by different formal moods.

From a communicative point of view, we can observe how a teller transforms an event into a tale in front of an audience. This interplay, which activates cultural as well as narrative forms, also takes place in the power field between more concrete, realistic worldview and more abstract and fictitious belief systems. The teller’s or the listener's attitudes of belief, doubt, or disbelief, familiarity or distance, argument or entertainment generate formal differences at all levels.

One conclusion of this discussion is that form certainly can be related to content, but that to an equal extent it is mutually interrelated to, among other things, function, mood and aesthetics. Furthermore, behind these concepts it is possible to define several layers of specifications. At the level of contents, for instance, we could make a difference between on one hand ideological elements in the sense of values or mental hierarchies and on the other belief systems, meaning both religious and profane convictions. Here I have briefly discussed two aspects of function in the metamorphosis legends, both of which deal with upholding norms for people’s relations to each other and to the church. Other functions are etiological, didactic, and entertaining. When talking about mood, I have noticed how different attitudes of closeness and distance are expressed. I could also have talked about how a narrator communicates his stance to hopes, dreams, fears, own and others’ memories. Concerning aesthetics, I have given some examples of the colorful imagery of the metamorphosis legends.

Common to all narratives is their double quality of being at the same time descriptive and prescriptive. All cultural forms are both results of people’s mental images and templates molding our minds.

References


Urban Legends: A Study in Guwahati

ARUNIMA DAS

Urban legends connote some sensational occurrences in the cities and concerning people. Linda Dégh remarks that as, “Urban Legends—stories about sensational occurrences in cities and concerning people, places and structures known to the urban folk-have been noted and published since the mid-nineteenth century.... From Prague to Berlin, from Paris to Ljubljana, Basel and Vienna, European authors have celebrated old and new legends about revenants, curses and miracles as well as modern incidents of Witchcraft and UFOs in their cities” (Dégh, 2001:86-87).

Guwahati, the gateway of Northeast India, is a city inhabited by different communities with a population of about eight thousand and eight hundred. According to 2001 census, the geographical, social, economic characteristics of the city show that it has been experiencing both physical and population growth along with the expansion of trade, and commerce industries. Growth of urbanization is one of the main factors for this change.

Urban legend expresses fears of new kinds of life, threatening dangers, representing human struggles and hopes for survival. Urban legends appear as immediate response to the day today questions to the laymen and the elites of the present urban areas. Guwahati has continuously been facing the impact of rapid urbanization that has made the people talk on predicaments of the city. In this case, birth and growth of reasonable numbers of urban legend is certainly a possibility. This study is confined to thirty two informants from all over the city and covers almost all the age groups. Legend tellers, generally, are from different backgrounds with different ages: some are students, some are housewives, few include unemployed youths and whereas some are state officials. Some Assamese vernacular newspapers and periodicals which are at least 25 years old have been searched, for example: Asom Bani, Daunik Asom and Bisnoi. Urban legends collected from Guwahati can be thematically classified into the following categories: 1) Student Life, 2) Sexual Desires and Wishes, 3) Family Stories, 4) Hospital Legends, 5) Miraculous Incidents, 6) Faith in Religion, 7) Inter-ethnic Relations, 8) Desire for Fortune and 9) Terrorism.

It is seen that the range of the themes shown above related to the problems of social life, individuation, aspirations, belief, sensitivity, fear, concern, and anxiety. Some examples from each of the categories except one are given below:

Nationalencyklopediens internettjänst: http://www.ne.se
Stockholm: Bo Cavefors Bokförlag.