



Roald Larsen

UiT The Arctic University of Norway

BETWEEN THE REALISTIC AND THE MYTHICAL. ANALYSIS OF A LOCAL, NORTHCIC LEGEND

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to analyse a northern Norwegian legend. Working with legends will provide a cultural insight and can thus be a gateway to establish knowledge structures. The main purpose of this paper is to reveal some of the diversity that a legend contains, and show that an analysis of this type of text can be a tool for dissemination and discovery learning. The analysis in this article is made from a multi-perspective approach: a literary perspective, religion, historical, mythical and folkloric perspective.

The word legend is characterized in Norway as religious texts. The proper Norwegian term for the text being analysed here is actually “*sagn*”. However, I choose here in the English language to use the word legend instead.

Key words:

legend, *sagn*, Norway, folk poetry, cultural history, knowledge development

1. Introduction

This article will analyze a northern Norwegian legend¹. Legends, like the adventure genre, belongs to folk poetry, and these two genres are considered initially as oral

¹ The word “legend” in Norway pertains to religious texts. The text that will be analyzed is in

narratives. It is important to take care of the oral narrative tradition to preserve our heritage. Poetry in oral form becomes weaved into culture, ie passed on to new subjects and forms in this way to preserve folk narrative traditions. Ronald Grambo² use the term tradition about the actual product being retold.

Since 1998 have I led a research and development-project at the UiT, The Arctic University of Norway, Department of Education, where it has been collecting several hundred legends mainly from northern Norway. In addition to my own collections, students and external contributors have participated.

The reason why the student teachers are involved in this work is that legends can be used as a method for knowledge development. This will become useful the day when students are trained teachers and are facing their pupils in elementary schools. Working with legends will provide a cultural insight and can thus be a gateway to establish knowledge structures. Legends can be used in the teaching of different subjects in primary school because the text contains many useful elements: the literary expression, good entertainment, local historiography, the popular conception of strange events, morals and values, location, etc.

The main purpose of this paper is to reveal some of the diversity that a legend contains, and show that an analysis of this type of text can be a tool for dissemination and discovery learning. The legend that is the subject of analysis in this article is written by a student who previously had interviewed an informant. The analysis in this article is made from a multi-perspective approach: a literary perspective, religion, historical, mythical, and folkloric perspective.

2. The legend's identity-creating meaning

Harald Rosen³, former professor of mother tongue education, points to the importance of creating your own stories and says that telling them is a mental process. Rosen says that by creating stories about what we have heard, read and seen, we draw out meaningful sequences from our own experience and place them within limits. Stories are, he says, senseful-making activities, storytelling organizes the world. When students hear stories from their home community and their region, they in a sense get to localize their identity and belonging.

Norwegian referred to as a "sagn". However, in translation to the English language, I chose to use the word "legend" in its place.

² R. Grambo, *Folkloric Handbook. The Term - Terms*, Oslo 1984.

³ H. Rosen, *Mother Tongue Didactic Essay*, Oslo 1981.

3. The legend of Høttakallen

The following legend, which I will analyze, is a recurring (ghostly) legend from Grytøya, outside of Harstad in northern Norway:

The legend of Høttakallen

This story last took place on Grytøya in the 1890s. The island is located 10 to 12 kilometers north of Harstad, with Bjarkøy as neighboring island, which today is linked to the city by ferry. Today, it only takes 20 minutes to travel into the city center. However, at that time there was no access to either cars or car ferry. Back then, if you were to travel along the highway, it was either by foot or possibly on horseback, if a guy had access to that kind of luxury.

Grytøya got its name from the old Norwegian Grotjir which means rock – Steinøya (Stone Island). The island is about 20 km at its longest, and has high, rugged mountains of more than a thousand feet going up. In Viking times, the island was part of Tore Hund's kingdom, he who had his seat at Bjarkøya, who took the life of saint Olav on the Battle of Stiklestad. Today Grytøya is incorporated into Bjarkøya municipality and there are many burial mounds from the Iron Age – so it was long ago since people learned that the island was a nice place to settle down. Maybe people settled here because the south side is a place with a lot of land that provides wealthy farm stock, and it is a climatically favored location. The great mountains protect against the often sour wind.

By the end of the 1800s, about 200 humans lived on the south side of the island, spread over the strip of land located along the ocean. People lived from combined use of the soil and fishing. They usually had 1–3 cows and maybe some sheep. Besides onnetida (the time when farmers cut the grass) the men did home fishing, and in January they went on cod fishing in Lofoten. The women were then responsible for the farming.

Mette, who this legend is about, lived on the countryside where she and her husband, Magnus, ran a small combination usage. As the farm name conveys, they lived beneath the mountain top. Between Øverlandet (the overland) and the rest of the village, lies the cemetery, as it does today. Mette was born in Olsvika in Fenes, but was married to Magnus at Øverlandet, Fuhr, first in the 1890s. Mette and Magnus had three kids, and everyone grew up.

So was it a year, in early September, that Mette had an errand with her family in Olsvika. Magnus was at home with the kids. It was a long-winded trip from Øverlandet to Olsvika, about 11 kilometers, so it was intended for Mette to sleep over to the next day there. At that time the men were so lucky that it was the wife who was

in charge of cooking for the whole family, so Mette had her work laid out for her before she could leave.

About three kilometers before she came to Olsvika there was a wilderness area called Høtta. There was so little infrastructure there that the unfortunates who traveled there had to walk through a tiny path that found its way to the upper part of the shorelines near the sea. And even here it was sometimes difficult to find their way. Twilight had settled when Mette came to Høtta, and it didn't help that she stumbled into something close by Mekko river, and fell as long she was.

It was not a stone but a bundle of cloth she had stumbled upon. And in the bundle Mette found the body of a dead child. Mette wrapped the body back in cloth and hid it in a small nearby cave before she took her leave to her family in Olsvika. She told them about the incident and they agreed to return to Høtta the next day to bury the child's body, which they did as soon as daybreak. Unfortunately, the first autumn storm was approaching. And that's why they could not get a hold of either the sheriff or the priest before the burial, because those two had to be notified and sent after from Bjarkøya. And thus, it happened that the child's body was buried in unconsecrated ground, which proved to have punishmental effects: The legend tells that Høttakallen (the Høtta man) appeared regularly in Høtta after this. This was fatal to whoever was unfortunate enough to see him. Anyone who saw Høttakallen experienced later on that one in the the family would die. If someone had to go over Høtta, that person better not look to the side, but just stare straight ahead on the road.

Edvard from Bjørnå was unlucky enough to see Høttakallen and three weeks later died the youngest of his kids. Similarly, there was one man from Sandsøya who skied across Høtta before Christmas and he saw Høttakallen. On the first Christmas Day his wife died while giving birth. So the legend goes, they say.

Not do I dare go alone over Høtta during a cold and chilly winter night. Do you dare?

I shall now make an analysis of "The Legend of the Høttakallen". The story that I will analyze, is written by Frank Eriksen who has been a pre-school teacher student at the UiT, The Arctic University of Norway. The informant has been Ivar Olsrud. When students are interviewing informants, there is always a risk that significant details can slip away. This has happened in this case, including that he has lost the relationship between the burial of the child and the creature Høttakallen. At the same time, it has led to that we now have a more open text that allows for multiple interpretations. A genre feature of oral tales is that there will be a myriad of stories that deal with an original event, a kind of mythical core of truth. Around

this core there is layer upon layer of new versions that have attached themselves. Based on a literary point of view, some of these variations are good, others not so good, almost close to having fragments raining.

In a good number of legends where the narration is about unexplained events, the supernatural is used to answer what logically cannot be justified. We see this evidenced in this legend as it uttered the following phrase: “Edvard from Bjørnå was unlucky enough to see Høttakallen and three weeks later died the youngest of his kids.” We see here that the legend wants to appear as a reliable story, something that people in the community should take note of.

4. The legend in a literary perspective

The legend is chronologically built, structured in time. The legend’s action takes place over a few autumn days in September, but the consequence of the event remains unchanged to this day. The first three paragraphs must be seen as preliminary to the main story. Here we get a time stamp and a mentioned location: “This story last took place on Grytøya in the 1890s.” The events of this legend can thus be placed in the 1890s. To convey the legend how it was all the time: “However, at that time there was no access to either cars or car ferry. Back then, if you were to travel along the highway, it was either by foot or possibly on horseback.” The introduction thus provides a good picture of what the conditions were on Grytøya in this time period. This view is quite detailed and is probably not part of the primeval legend, because it would be hard to remember. Furthermore contains the legend, part modern expressions (car, car ferry, etc.), one can say with certainty that these words could not be heard in the original version.

The opening statement can also be considered as a frame narrative. As mentioned above, he tells about a time a little before 1900. The contrast and development comes in to expression in part through the presentation of communicational means of today versus then. The fourth paragraph can be considered a bridge between the frame narrative and the actual narrative. Here we place names and personal descriptions.

The purpose behind using this type of substantial introduction is discussable. For those not familiar with the place and its’ history, this part of the legend becomes useful information. For people with local knowledge however, this section seem tiresome because it all becomes so obvious and therefore boring.

The real legend, the main story begins in the fourth paragraph. The way this part of the legend is told, suggests the witness must have lived within colloquially

reach of the origin. The legend has a clear verbal touch. The story has a relatively simple structure that makes it easy to remember the content and narrate it to others. The story is intriguingly told, yet it conveys something to the recipient. The legend says little to nothing about the person's character and strength, but there is plenty of talk about hard working people since they live isolated under the mountain. This section is also where the main character, Mette, is introduced. The following text is a detailed representation of the place where it all happened, why the protagonist is residing there at this time, and we get a warning that something is going to happen. The climax of the main part is when she trips over something she thinks is a rock, but which turns out to be a bundle of cloth that contains a small dead child within it. When it was autumn, and they did not get hold of a priest, and so it was then decided that the body would be buried in unconserrated ground. The legend does not say anything about how this decision affects the protagonist, but tells how it has affected other people in retrospect. The end of the narrative is thus a direct consequence of the action in the main part. Høttakallen begins to show himself and the eerie events follow in his wake.

Right at the end of the story the author directly addresses the readers: "Not do I dare go alone over Høtta during a cold and chilly winter night. Do you dare?" "The Legend of Høttakallen" clearly says that it will convey a true story. The narrator treads forth in the last sentence and reveals himself and his relationship to the story's content, he dares not tempt fate by walking past Høtta, or perhaps this is an instrument he uses to strengthen the horror effect. Whatever reason the narrator has, when the last sentence is presented to the reader, the narrator challenges the reader in case he or she should doubt the reliability of his story. The last inquisitive sentence should give the reader something to think about. Should we believe the legend, or is it just pure fiction? The author gives us a choice. Other than though, the author or narrator stays outside of the story and conveys to us a folktale that he heard from another person. There is a distance between the narrator's position and the events that are being presented.

The text is mainly written in Bokmål (one of two written forms in Norway), but with touches of some dialect to it, intended for a local audience. By using the dialect, you create a closer sense of belonging and a sense of place and thus create an indication of where the legend originated. In addition, the added accent puts an edge on the text and creates intrigue. Writing down the used dialect words such as nonsmaten (eating at a particular time) and onnetida (when the farmers cut the grass). These words may be foreign to outsiders and make the text more difficult to understand. The accent pervades syntax: "Besides onnetida, the men did..." The language has also many places in the text of an oral and commonplace character –

presented here with two examples: “ran a small combine usage” and “if a guy had access to that kind of luxury”. There is also the use of irony in one case, “At that time men were so lucky that it was the wife who was in charge of cooking...”.

5. Legends and folklore

“The legend of Høttakallen” retrieves its traditional substance from the traditional farming and fishing community from around 1900. This is according to Olav Solberg⁴ characteristic of older legends, they are entrenched in this type of primary societies, in stark contrast to the legends that arrive today in the present and takes place in the modern society.

My material contains many kinds of legends and stories, examples are copyrighted legends, walking legends, mythical nature tales, etc. Solberg⁵ operates with four legend groups, and I think from this division it is quite natural to call “The Legend of Høttakallen” a mythical nature folk legend with elements of historical material. As a main type, this legend is a mythical nature legend, but there are several scenes taken from several different beliefs and different legend types, all of which belong to the mythical nature legends. We can kind of say that this legend is made out of fragments from several design circuits, such as outdrilling and the recurring (ghosts).

A mythical nature legend is a legend that uses the interaction between man and the various supernatural powers or spirits as the main theme. Outdrilled really means “the one who is carried out”. “In folk belief throughout the country, between both Norwegian and Sami, the term outdrilled/æppar refers to the recurring (or ghosts) of children who died during childbirth and being buried in a field without receiving Christian baptism. The child was perhaps killed after birth. When the outdrilled were given names, they received peace”⁶. Strict sexual morality within the society was often the reason children were murdered. If you heard children cries from the dead body of a killed child who is thrown away, then one can give it a name. This response to children cry will bless the baby. This is what the northern Norwegian storyteller Regine Normann depicts in a poetic way in the beginning of his novel *Bortsat* 1906⁷.

⁴ O. Solberg, *Norwegian Folk Poetry. Literaturic Historical Lines and Thematical Perspective*, Oslo 1999.

⁵ O. Solberg, *op.cit.*, p. 41.

⁶ T. Storjord, *Lule-Sami Adventure and Legend*, “Bodø Teacher College Script Serie” 1991, No. 2.

⁷ R. Normann, *Set Away. Memoire*, Kristiania 1906.

The legend of Grytøya is about a possible consequence should you bury a child in unconsecrated ground. Mette, the protagonist of the story, finds the body of a killed child, who apparently was not wanted, or could not be provided for. I have received many legends that deal with this topic. Some folklore has it that the people who are buried in the unconsecrated ground will not find peace and will come back as the recurring (ghosts who walk again). Yet this is not a story with a typical recurring motif, for in this narrative one neither sees or hear anything about the child after the burial, however a supernatural creature begins to show itself to people. He is named Høttakallen (the Høtta man). The legend does not clarify what connection this figure has for the child. There will be room for different interpretations when speculating who the character Høttakallen really is, or what function he has. Høttakallen occurred possibly as an explanation as to why the plague came upon the village.

6. The legend in the history of religions' perspective

The legend conveys that the child who was buried in unconsecrated ground, triggered rage within Høttakallen. This figure thus turns into a warning of death. In several other northern Norwegian folklore one will often find one or several unknown men arriving with warnings, including from Knut Strompdal⁸ for instance. Perhaps this might explain why the dead child is made into a figure that comes with a warning. Ørnulf Hodne⁹ says nothing about what kind of precaution one could take after receiving the death notice, but the legend of Høttakallen advises us thusly: "If someone had to go over Høtta, that person better not look to the side, but just stare straight ahead on the road." This legend speaks of punishment that may follow after committing an unchristian act.

In the pre-Christian religion the belief in underground supernatural creatures was widespread. These beings belonged to the so-called "other people". They lived underground, in rock and pile. Most often, they lived in peace with the humans, but could punish if someone defied them. According to Ann Helene Bolstad Skjelbred¹⁰ the belief in "the other people" has been the strongest in Northern Europe. In Norway and Iceland, they called them the people of fairies and spirits. Alv (elf)

⁸ K. Strompdal, *Old from Helgeland III*, Oslo 1939, pp. 77–79.

⁹ Ø. Hodne, *Norwegian Folk Belief*, Oslo 1999.

¹⁰ A.H.B. Skjelbred, *Tales about Huldra – Tales About Us*, Oslo 1998.

etymologically stems from the word "elf" that exists in both Old English and Old German. In Denmark, they were called "Elle folket" (the Elle folk).

The legend presents us a clear connection between Høttakallen and supernatural beings. When people would drive over Høtta, they were *vettaskremte* (A North Norwegian dialect for the word "terrified") of seeing Høttakallen. And the adjective *vettaskremt* goes back to the noun *vette* (troll figure). Høttakallen was probably and originally a local underground creature that goes back to pre-Christian beliefs.

Could one imagine then a pagan character who wants to ensure that the child is buried in consecrated ground, that is to say, he punishes people who do not adhere to Christian ethics? How can this be? Høttakallen probably represents a religious being of pre-Christian art, possibly a *vette*. The legend represents, therefore, a syncretism, i.e. a confusion. In the Legend of Høttakallen and the Christian maxim of baptism and burial in consecrated ground as they are referenced in the Christian right block in *Gulatingslovi*¹¹. These two elements are mixed together in such a way that Høttakallen appears to be in service to the Church and punish those who do not adhere to Church rules.

7. The legend of a mythical perspective

From another point of view, or according to a different interpretation, Høttakallen is a mythical natural creature that is related to the outlying area Høtta, a specific place on Grytøya. Etymologically, Høtta is a name of a landscape or a formation that can mean "rising" (to rise) or something similar. Høtta is less than one square mile in extent. In the river corner, down towards the shoreline, the child was buried. Further up the area there is a rocky outcrop which is called Høtta-hill. Before 1910, there were walkways around Høtta-hill, but since that time there is now built a road going over Høtta. According to the son of the informant, it was close to the top of the knoll where Høttakallen began to appear. The fact that Høttakallen lives on a knoll, a small mountain, makes us associate him with a troll-like creature. I have collected several legends about these trolls living in the mountains, including "The Legend of Vågakallen (The Våga Man)".

The legend says nothing in detail why Høttakallen begins to show himself to the people and punish them. One interpretation could be that the figure we hear about in the narrative, Høttakallen, did not like it that the kid was buried in his land and that is why he takes revenge for it. In folk belief, the troll was seen as

¹¹ *Gulatingslovi*, Translated from Old Norwegian by Knut Robberstad, Oslo 1937.

a hostile human being, and within this tradition it can explain why Høttakallen reacts as he does. The child was buried in an area lying within Høttakallen's domain, or seen from another perspective, outside the Church's domain.

8. The legend of a folkloric perspective

Finally, we will go outside the text and see what people in the surrounding area think, what kind of tradition Høttakallen falls within. The reason that Høttakallen was associated with fear, was that he was associated with the afterlife. The fear was being caught by Høttakallen who came from the hereafter and represented death or a spirit that was no more.

The belief in colloquially was thus that the child who was driven ashore and was found on the beach, was Høttakallen. Because the child was buried in unconsecrated ground, his soul found no peace in his grave, thus he rose again as Høttakallen. The legend suggests that Høttakallen began to appear recurrently after the baby was buried, but according to the son of the informant, a really long period of time passed before it took care to show up in adult size. Thus, one can at the abstract level of thinking assume that the child had "grown" even though it was dead. There is no similar example of this in my material. This theory is also strengthened by what an eyewitness observed. About 10 years after the child was buried, a man came driving late at night with a horse in the Høtta area. He saw a young alien boy walking around. This gave rise to the idea that the child grew and eventually became Høttakallen. This is also a legend with a recurring motif: Høttakallen is the child who was buried in unconsecrated ground and came back as an adult. This is an interpretation whereby Høttakallen protests that he was not buried in consecrated ground. And this interpretation is clearly rooted within the Christian faith.

The legend motif about outdrills who can become recurring (ghosts) are known from other northern Norwegian folklore collections, such Hveding¹², Strompdal¹³ and Strompdal¹⁴.

¹² J. Hveding, *Folk Belief and Folk Life in Hologaland*, Oslo 1944, pp. 46–47.

¹³ K. Strompdal, *Old from Helgeland*, Oslo 1929, pp. 126–128.

¹⁴ K. Strompdal, *Old from Helgeland III*, op.cit., pp. 50–53.

REFERENCES:

- Grambo R., *Folkloric Handbook. The Term – Terms*, Oslo 1984.
- Gulatingslovi*, Translated from Old Norwegian by Knut Robberstad, Oslo 1937.
- Hodne Ø., *Norwegian Folk Belief*, Oslo 1999.
- Hveding J., *Folk Belief and Folk Life in Hologaland*, Oslo 1944.
- Normann R., *Set Away. Memoire*, Kristiania 1906.
- Rosen H., *Mother Tongue Didactic Essay*, Oslo 1981.
- Skjelbred A.H.B., *Tales about Huldra – Tales About Us*, Oslo 1998.
- Solberg O., *Norwegian Folk Poetry. Literaturic Historical Lines and Thematical Perspective*, Oslo 1999.
- Storjord T., *Lule-Sami Adventure and Legend*, “Bodø Teacher College Script Serie” 1991, No. 2.
- Strompdal K., *Old from Helgeland*, Oslo 1929.
- Strompdal K., *Old from Helgeland III*, Oslo 1939.