

NARRATING CULTURAL HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT

In this article,* I investigate some of the elements and mechanisms involved in the process in which cultural heritage, in the form of narrated local history, emerges. My argumentation is that certain collectively known phenomena achieve such a strong agency of their own that they have the power to force themselves into individuals' life histories. In analogy with Albert Eskeröd's concept *dominant of tradition*, I suggest that these elements from local and national history be called *dominant units*. The interplay between several individual narratives in a local community and the collective elements takes the form of a joint negotiating process, generating agreements and discrepancies, shared 'truths' and contested disagreements, the acceptance of shared local symbols and the forgetting of less captivating material. The emerging products of such processes are grand narratives in different degrees of development circulating at different levels and in different cultural arenas in a community.

KEYWORDS: narrated life history • dominant units • grand narratives • degree of collectivity • level of participation

INTRODUCTION

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 impossible to mention a certain place at a certain time without relating to these dominant units in one way or another. Some such dominant units have a tendency to reappear in the life histories of several individuals of roughly the same age and belonging to the same local community thus achieving the role of building stones in the construction of locally narrated cultural heritage.

* This article is based on the lecture I held on July 30, 2009 at the summer university course "Local Knowledge and Open Borders: Creativity and Heritage" at the University of Tartu.

MATERIAL

The material I have used consists of 40 tape-recorded life history narratives. The narrators are all – except one – retired citizens of my home town Visby, Sweden. The recordings were made in 1995, and the narrators were born between 1910 and 1930, so the narrated events took place roughly between 1920 and 1995.

Examples

Let me start by giving four examples of how history enters the lives of ordinary people, leaving traces in their narrated life histories.

Walking against the Majority

Kjell had started to study at Uppsala University and was going home to Gotland for summer vacation. On May 7, 1945, he had visited a friend in Stockholm and was walking on Kungsgatan on his way to the Central Station. At that very moment, news was spread that the German forces had capitulated and peace had been proclaimed. Kungsgatan, at that time one of the leading office streets of Stockholm, immediately filled with happy people, walking arm in arm singing and shouting – all in the opposite direction as Kjell striving with his suitcases to catch his train. (Svensson 2002: 10)

The Sinking of the *Hansa*

In the middle of a description of eccentric persons in Visby in the 1940s, Britt (at that time 14 years old) started recounting her own experiences during one particular day: “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 harbour to 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.” After this detailed and specific account, Britt returned to general observations about feeding birds on the ice, getting hold of fire-wood and flushing the toilet late at night without waking her parents up.

The Arson in the Tannery

In 1933, Gustav as an 18-year-old worked in a tannery. One morning, when he arrived there, the tannery was burnt down. The police investigation showed that it was arson and three persons were convicted. In a subordinate clause, Gustav pointed out that it was probably a case of insurance fraud, then he made a short pause and added: “It was a terrible depression and huge unemployment, you know, and a dreadful poverty.”

The Bicycle Workshop

Edvin retold his father's success story about how he had started to work in somebody else's bicycle workshop, then opening his own business, then, after some successful years moving his workshop closer to the village centre, and finally, he was able to buy a workshop in the leading business street. At the very climax of the story, Edvin interrupted himself, made a pause, cleared his throat, and changed the subject. He had suddenly realised that the father of the interviewer, Lars, had had his business in the same street, but, being less successful, committed suicide.

Naturally, Kjell was as happy as everybody else that the war was over, but his personal situation at that specific moment did not allow him to take part in the celebrations. He had to, literally, force his way against the flood of history. His narrative provides illustrative evidence of how, at a private level, individuals are sometimes involuntarily thrown into situations they have not chosen themselves where strong external factors constrain their span of action.

Britt's narrative gives a vivid impression of how deeply the news of the *Hansa* tragedy influenced everyday life in Visby on November 24, 1944. If you were in Visby on that particular day, it was probably impossible not to be affected by the tragic event. In a similar way, it seems to be impossible for life history narrators, speaking about the 1940s and Gotland more than 50 years later, to avoid mentioning the sinking of the *Hansa*.

In his life history, Gustav needed the arson in the tannery only technically or dramatically to explain why he moved to another town and started another professional career. But, the mentioning of criminal activities in 1933 demanded a reference to the international recession.

Edvin was in his mid-thirties when Lars's father committed suicide. Although he had no personal relationship with him, of course the tragic event became known to everybody in the small community. In this case, it was impossible to mention business in this particular street without being reminded of the tragedy of Lars's father.

TWO KINDS OF ACTION

The essential element of all epic forms is action, in the meaning 'change'. An existing situation is disturbed by some external factor, so that balance is lost, a change takes place, and as a result of this change a new situation, a new balance is established. Typically, narratives are built up of sequences of such pendulum movements between equilibrium and disequilibrium. Epics consist of changes, continuous movements forward from the initial state of affairs towards the inevitable end.

From the viewpoint of the protagonists in the narrative, action can be of two kinds. The persons in the story 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 be forced into 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 and I have heard narrators getting disturbed by them and trying to avoid them. How, then, is it possi-

ble that such situations occur at all when narrators recount their own life histories, for which they themselves have selected the episodes, ordered them logically and chronologically, and finally verbalised them according to their own minds?

Part of the explanation can be found in the fact that 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 exclude those episodes of their lives in which they for one reason or another were out of control (Kjell walking against the masses; Gustav finding his work place burnt down). 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).

But this explanation is not enough. 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.

DEGREES OF COLLECTIVITY

From the individual's point of view the source of the external action does not seem to influence the narratives very much. External is external, passive is passive; if I did not start the action, somebody else did, who, when, and where does not seem to affect the individual's life history in any remarkable way.

What does matter, however, is the degree of collectivity of the event in question. The more people who are involved in or aware of an event, the more likely it is that some kind of folklore will develop around it. We could imagine a sliding scale running from totally private experiences to events with a very high degree of collectivity.

At a purely **private** level, the experiencer is alone, although the action is initiated by another person or some other outside force. Examples from my material include receiving emotionally upsetting phone calls or reading letters that turn out to be decisive for the life paths chosen by the narrators. Dramatic as such experiences may be, they concern only one individual at a time and they are not likely to become the topic of any collective tradition.

At a higher level of collectivity, action is experienced by a **group** of people, for instance family, neighbours, friends, workmates, or different kinds of clubs or associations. One woman retold items of family folklore about the fact that her mother had travelled with the *Titanic* on the journey prior to the fatal one. A man had memories of how the children in his school class tried to find out the best ways of manipulating the teacher into giving them the grades they wanted. One drafted soldier related how another group of soldiers, who were responsible for the distribution of fuel during the war, on Saturdays provided everybody with extra gas for the military lorries so they could go to Slite for a dance.

Any number of people, from a handful up to several hundreds may be included in these kinds of events, and they are likely to appear in similar form in several narrated life histories.

At a **local** or **regional** level we find events affecting many people or at least known to a substantive part of the population. Recurrent examples in my material are the 1930s

depression years, the 1936 Berlin Olympic games, and several events relating to World War II. Although Sweden did not take an active part in the War, of course everybody on Gotland, in the middle of the Baltic Sea, was affected by it. The consequences of the war can be heard in practically everybody's life history. A war as such, however, is too huge and too complicated to be part of an individual life history. To tell the story of a war you need the overview of the historian and the space of a grand narrative.

Individual experiences of the war events concern, for instance, mobilisation, at which time young men from all over the country were grouped together and shared their worries and their tobacco, as well as their experiences and their stories. At home, women had to use all their creativity to feed themselves and their children in spite of the food rationing – if you were not lucky enough to have relatives in the countryside who could send you some potatoes and a pig's leg hidden under the double bottom of a suitcase.

LEVELS OF PARTICIPATION

Just as the experienced events can show higher or lower degrees of collectivity, the individual who is the object of the action can be more, or less, involved in it. We might talk about higher or lower levels of involvement or participation.

In my material I have found examples of at least three different levels of participation.

We can speak about **direct participation**, when the narrator has been personally involved in the event (Kjell, again!). One woman remembered how her mother had scolded her when she had by accident dropped a bottle of cream and broken it. One man told how, as a boy, he was not allowed to visit other children's homes because he had lice. Another man had, also as a boy, taken part in pushing a railway carriage up a hill and then riding it downhill again and again until a supervisor stopped the boys and the whole area was fenced off by the railway company.

Such cases where the narrator was an eyewitness, or was in one way or another affected by an event without taking part in it (Britt and Gustav) we might speak of in terms of **indirect participation**. One man related how his wife's father died when the *Hansa* sank. A woman told about the rough swimming school instructors of her childhood. One of them had thrown her friend into the water so carelessly that the girl's hip was seriously injured. Another woman had a father who suffered from Parkinson's disease and alcoholism. On his way to hospital in Stockholm, he jumped off the boat and drowned himself.

At a third level, the narrator has information about an event, often by word of mouth, but was not directly involved in it, nor affected by it (Edvin). We could name this level, **awareness**. Here are some examples from my material:

Between Visby and Roma, the train went so slowly that people used to step off and walk beside it, picking flowers.

The workers in the limestone quarries used dynamite to kill pike in the river.

There was a saleswoman in the main square who was called Little Friend. In the mornings, when the rich ladies came shopping, her prices were high, but in the

afternoons, when the working class wives came downhill to shop, everything was much cheaper.

To describe my suggested model graphically, we could imagine the narrated event sliding along a horizontal scale between the extremities, 'private' and 'collective'. Around the narrated event, we could figure a series of concentric circles, running from the innermost 'participant' through the middle 'eyewitness' to the peripheral 'word of mouth'.

The narrator's level of participation does not necessarily have to coincide with the event's degree of collectivity, although it often does. There are purely private experiences in which the narrator is an eye-witness or is just aware of rather than being a first-hand participant. Seeing the house cat taking a mouse or finding out that the paint used last summer has dried in the can, are events with very low degree of collectivity that can also be experienced at rather low levels of participation.

Both the quality of the narrative and the credibility of the narrator are influenced by the narrator's classifying the experienced event as having higher or lower degrees of collectivity and their positioning of the narrated "I" at higher or lower levels of participation in relation to the narrated event. An event with a low degree of collectivity can be narrated with high authenticity and credibility, if the narrator was closely involved in or affected by the event. Take as an example the sad story about the boy who was forbidden to play with his friends because he had lice, when it is told by himself. The story would lose presence and directness, if told by somebody who had only heard about it. And imagine what would happen to the story about the sick father jumping from the boat, if it were told not by the daughter but by a stranger. It would lose much of its strong emotional tension.

Narratives about events with a high degree of collectivity are subject to qualitatively different rules than the more private ones. If you were on the *Estonia* when it sank, if you survived the 2004 tsunami, or if you saw the World Trade Center towers collapsing, your narrative will certainly be loaded with authenticity and credibility. Although far from everybody in the world was there, events of this class are known to a substantial number of the world's inhabitants; in a way they belong to all of us and we all have some right to tell our version of them.

And, equally important, those who actually were there are not totally free to tell memory stories that deviate too radically from the officially accepted ones. In August 2009, at the Nordic conference for ethnology and folkloristics in Helsinki, I heard my Norwegian colleague Professor Anne Eriksen relate the example about the sole survivor of the 1902 Martinique earthquake (he survived because he was locked into a subterranean prison vault), who constructed ever more fantastic stories about the catastrophe the more times he told the story, because nobody could object to them.

My argument so far can be summed up in some simple cultural principles:

A high degree of participation gives you an exclusive right to tell events with a low degree of collectivity.

A low degree of participation does not exclude you from telling events with a low degree of collectivity (but who would want to hear them?).

A high degree of participation gives you a special, but far from exclusive, right to tell events with a high degree of collectivity.

A low degree of participation does not exclude you from telling events with a high degree of collectivity (but again, what interesting aspect could you add?).

QUALITIES OF THE DOMINANT UNITS

The wording “dominant units” that I have been using here and there in this text, is inspired by the concept *dominant of tradition*, which was coined by the Swedish folklorist Albert Eskeröd 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 words *dominants of tradition*. By dominants of tradition 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 dominants of tradition, for instance supernatural beings, can be identified by their power to attract features that in other traditions typically belong to other beings. The process is usually called motif attraction. It seems that those elements in life history narratives that I have called here dominant units possess a similar capacity to dominate local traditions. But in these cases we seldom find supernatural beings; instead the dominant units can be:

years (1914: the shots in Sarajevo, 1918: the end of World War I, 1929: the Wall Street crash, 1932: Ivan Kreuger’s suicide in Paris, 1936: the Berlin Olympic games, 1939: beginning of World War II, 1945: the year of peace, 1958: Sweden scores second in the World Soccer Championship, 1959: Ingemar Johansson becomes the first Swedish heavy weight champion of the world),

places (Norrgatt café, Norderstrand beach, Nordergravar recreation and skiing site, Länna farm and neighbourhood just outside the city wall),

events (Children’s Day’s annual festivities, travelling circus shows, the Tourist Association’s concert entertainments, the Queen of Roses beauty contest, games with visiting national or international soccer teams),

values, ideas, accepted emotional attitudes,

which all have the common quality of having become so firmly established in people’s minds that they possess the agency to call for dominant positions in all historical narratives.

The 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. They stand for different levels of collectivity and they are told by persons with different degrees of participation. By positioning themselves in relationship to these dominant units, narrators inscribe themselves in the collective body or emphasise 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.

Anybody inspired by Richard Dawkins's (1976) meme theory would probably consider these dominant units as examples of memes, living a life of their own as they seem to be, struggling for a place in everybody's life history. Or, if you prefer, you might regard several of them as examples of the Bakhtinian chronotope (Bakhtin 1981). The narrated versions of the sinking of the *Hansa* ship, for instance, certainly represent a powerful crossing point between time and space where war-time events hit Gotland without mercy.

The term dominant units indicates the strong agency of memes without the – to my mind – slightly disturbing biological/anthropomorphic association caused by the Dawkins analogy with human genes. Furthermore, the dominant units can represent the same forceful meeting point between time and space as the Bakhtinian chronotope without excluding mental and emotional connotations. However, the dominant units are not simply crossing points between temporal and spatial axes. Rather, they should be understood as cognitive nodes connecting significant chains of events with possible story lines, fitting them into existing value systems and expressing them in certain emotional modes.

The phenomena I want to call dominant units could probably without problems be covered by the common folkloristic concept of 'narrative motifs'. What my suggested term emphasises is the inherent strong agency of these motifs, which tends to render them dominating positions in life narratives.

Let me give some examples of such dominant units taken from my material.

Dramatic Events

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 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 appearing that often.

During the war, Sweden was organised in accordance with military principles to be prepared to defend itself, if needed. The conscripted army (including most men between 18 and 45) was mobilised and distributed over the country to arm strategic positions. Food supply was nationally controlled by the state through a system of rationing. All night-time illumination was prohibited. Dramatic interferences in citizens' private lives such as these appear as motifs in many life narratives.

However, the most common collective utterances from the war period, aside from the sinking of the *Hansa*, are rather romantic. Several Visby women (who were teenag-

ers or in their twenties at that time) said that they had wanted the war to last longer, because there were so many soldiers in town to dance with. They also said that they liked to see the streets of Visby filled with young men in uniform.

Some people were said to have met their future partners during the wartime black-out periods, since young people used to walk the dark streets where they could hug and kiss without the risk of being watched.

Drafted soldiers used to call Gotland “The Limestone Hawaii” when they first arrived, but when they had to leave, they had made lots of friends here and did not want to go home.

Economic Facts and Lifestyle

At the beginning of the 20th century a considerable construction of new homes started outside Visby’s old city centre, which was still encircled by the medieval city wall. Some were single family houses built by members of the well-to-do upper middle class; others were apartment blocks for working class families. Southeast of the city centre was a neighbourhood where the high school boys had to walk through the working class district on their way to school inside the city wall. A recurring theme in the narratives is that these boys used to hide their school caps inside their coats, so as not to be recognised as high school pupils and, consequently, beaten by the elementary school boys.

A substantial number of Visby’s citizens had relatives in the countryside who supported the city dwellers with food (mainly pork, potatoes and fruit) during the war years of food rationing. Farmers were obliged to deliver most of their produce to government controlled public stores and they were allowed to keep only as much as their own families were calculated to need. Food shortage in the city led to black market affairs and smuggling, and, of course, to an abundance of stories admiring or condemning popular creativity in these fields. Both ingenuity and solidarity are praised in the narratives.

Among the personal qualities often mentioned in a positive light are the inclination and the ability to behave as an honest, straightforward, matter-of-fact person, to appreciate the little things of everyday life, and to be satisfied with one’s fate. Some leisure activities that fill these requisites are mentioned more often than others.

In the 1950s, everybody walked to Norrgatt café on Saturday evenings to watch the television shows.

In summertime, everybody packed lemonade and coffee and went to the Norderstrand beach, or to Nordergravar if it was too windy.

When there was snow in the winter everybody went skiing and riding toboggans at Nordergravar. Some young men had built a toboggan of their own that would run all the way from Norrgatt café through Nordergravar and out onto the ice at the sea shore.

The preference for a quiet, laid-back lifestyle is articulated in sayings like: “After a couple of hours in Stockholm you will start running just like they do.”

Moral and Ethics

A commonly expressed view is that today's society is more violent than before. This opinion is expressed in sentences like: "When boys were fighting in old times it was always fair play. No blows under the belt. Never two against one. Never hit somebody lying on the ground."

Other recurrent motives illustrate personal sacrifices made to help those in need, solidarity with the sick and poor, and cooperative efforts (preparing a soccer field, clearing the bathing shore of reeds and seaweed, building a bridge for swimming, raising a cottage for the children and teenagers to play and gather in) for the common good.

Technological Innovation

Speaking of the arrival of modern technology, several people pronounce utterances like: "I will never forget the first time I put on the earphones of a radio receiver and heard music sounding through the interfering noises." Or, a generation later: "When we read in the newspapers about television, we didn't believe that it would be possible. Transmitting pictures through thin air – that will never work, said my father-in-law."

THE EMERGENCE OF GRAND NARRATIVES

As individuals we mould pieces of our personal memories into consistent stories, and so do groups, communities and nations. The formation of collective stories is an attempt to create meaning in our existence at a level above the individual; it is our common endeavour to define ourselves as a group. In collectively created and distributed grand narratives groups formulate, explore, question, and communicate what they have in common. Distinctive – and group specific – interests like class, gender, generation, religion, political affiliation become visible at different levels. Individual experience narratives – like those of groups – can confirm or contradict higher level grand narratives about the same events.

The moulding of collectively accepted 'truths' should not be regarded as simple accumulative processes, but as the results of complicated patterns of negotiation. Groups of different sizes compose the life history of their specific association that helps them to define themselves, both internally and externally. Historical events are retold by people concerned by them (and by others as well) again and again, until one (or two, or several) accepted, more or less fixed version(s) become(s) formulated.

Some grand narratives, however, are never finished. Constantly open to re-negotiation they – unlike conventional folkloristic genres – never attain a definite, fixed form. Some of them may, as a matter of fact, never appear as verbally formulated narratives, but have an existence only as cultural abstractions; frames of reference that we as members of a group or of a society are supposed to be aware of and to which we should relate.

In the collective process of constructing grand narratives, established facts and agreements, narrative elements or motifs, customary expressions and formulations all

function as foundations upon which new stories – individual or collective – may be erected. In individual life histories these may appear as troublesome obstacles; in the construction of collective identities they are important mile stones. Loading them with symbolic value, linking them together into coherent narratives, representing them to ourselves and to others are some of the constitutive elements in the construction of our immaterial cultural heritages.

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