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"IT IS STORYTELLING LIKE 'IN THE OLD DAYS' WHEN I NARRATE"

NOSTALGIA AND AUTHENTICITY IN CONTEMPORARY ORAL STORYTELLING IN DENMARK[1]

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A new interest in oral storytelling has emerged in Denmark over the last 20 years. Performances of oral storytelling take place in cafes and libraries. There are courses where the participants are taught how to tell a story; there are storytelling circles where storytellers practice storytelling together, and books are published with instructions on how to tell a story. Storytelling festivals where storytellers perform stories are regularly arranged. Every Whitsun, the seventh Sunday after Easter, a storytelling festival is held in Lejre in the middle of the island of Zealand in Denmark. It takes place in an open-air museum called The Land of the Legends, which was known until 2009 as the Centre for Historical-Archaeological Research and Communication.[2]

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1 In 2010 I participated the Folklore Fellows' Summer School in Lammi where I benefited from discussing the content of the current article with fellow scholars from Finland and around the world. I would like to thank the working group and teachers, professor Pekka Hakamies and professor Ulf Palmenfelt, for sharing their knowledge and inspiration. This article is a revised version of an article published in the Danish peer-reviewed journal *Kulturstudier* 2011:2 under the title "At ændre nutiden gennem fortiden - mundtlig historiefortælling i Danmark".

2 Prior to my study, the new interest in storytelling has not been a subject of research in Denmark. A similar interest in this kind of oral storytelling can be found in neighbouring countries like Norway, Sweden, Germany and England as well as in the USA. In those countries too, research in this field seems to be relatively scarce so far. The new interest in storytelling also appears in some places in Finland; 'Nordiska röster' is an example: http://www.sydkusten.fi/Site/Widget/Editor/148/files/StorySlam-broschyr%202010.pdf

The storytellers perform their stories all over the museum area, for example at the evocative Sacrificial Bog where the audience look down at 'sacrificed' carcasses while listening to ancient heroic legends. Alternatively, the listeners sit around a fire in a reconstructed Iron Age house while a storyteller tells his story. Other storytellers perform in big circus tents pitched around the area of the museum. Walking around, you notice volunteers and museum staff dressed in historical costumes, for example from the Iron Age or the nineteenth century. The past is present in the physical space in the form of the historical surroundings, as well as in the narrative space when storytellers tell stories set in former times.

To sum up, at the storytelling festival you get the impression that storytelling has a connection to the past. But to which period? I visited the storytelling festival for the first time in 2008 and, in a reconstructed house at the Iron Age village, I heard a storyteller narrate stories about Christian priests. The stories bore a resemblance to traditional legends told by Danish peasants in the nineteenth century. As a result I began to wonder about this blending of periods and to consider the meanings the contemporary storytellers associated with the past. Obviously, the storytellers who arranged the festival did not find it important that the stories should match the historical period of the setting.

Later I have talked to several storytellers about the event, and explained my surprise at this anachronism. The storytellers were themselves very surprised to hear that I found such issues relevant at all; they had never given the subject any thought. At the same time, it is evident that the past has significance in relation to oral storytelling in Denmark today. References to the past often occur in relation to storytelling performances, and when storytellers write and talk about storytelling. As the anachronism of narrating stories about Christian priests in an Iron Age setting shows, some details of the past are not considered important. The storytellers create their own interpretations of the past, and to a certain degree this past differs from the account of the past that professional historians and similar scholars would give on the basis of the critical examination of historical sources. This triggered a curiosity about the subject that became the starting point for a research project on the meanings of the past in oral storytelling in contemporary Denmark.

Since there have hitherto been no investigations of contemporary oral storytelling in Denmark, I conducted fieldwork on the Danish island of Zealand in the autumn of 2008 and the spring of 2009, interviewing 15 storytellers aged 35–72. My article focuses on the storytellers' own accounts of their storytelling, and the study primarily draws on these interviews. I also participated in a one-week storytelling course, and observed storytelling performances in cafes, libraries, lecture rooms, museums, parks and other places where stories are told. In addition, I have familiarized myself with storytellers' instruction books, browsed through storytellers' websites and subscribed to a mailing list where storytellers share knowledge.

Among the 15 interviewed storytellers were four participants in the storytelling course – newcomers to the storytelling milieu. In comparison, other storytellers interviewed make a living out of storytelling and have identified themselves as storytellers for almost 20 years. In this article, it has not been relevant to distinguish

between professionals and amateurs. The storytellers interviewed are not necessarily representative of the storytelling milieu, and the storytellers are just as varied as all other human beings. Nevertheless, when their statements and conduct are observed, some common features emerge. The aim of this article is to point out some of these common features and tendencies.

People tell stories every day and all the time, but this study is not about the spontaneous storytelling of everyday life. In this context the term *oral storytelling* refers to the activities of storytellers who, without the use of any manuscript, perform a prepared story live in front of an audience.

In Denmark, storytelling performances may take place in several different public places. Typically, the events are advertised on the Internet, in newspapers or perhaps by posters in the public domain, just as public talks and theatrical performances are advertised. Often an admission fee is paid at the public events. In addition, closed events are held, for example at schools, firms, associations or at private gatherings. Sometimes storytellers perform alone, sometimes several storytellers perform together and take turns narrating. Some storytellers narrate anecdotes, while others prefer to tell one long story that may last over an hour without interruptions.

This study will not examine the stories that the storytellers perform. Suffice it to say that a few storytellers specialize in subjects like Norse mythology, Bible stories or narratives of personal experience. Generally, it is characteristic of storytellers that they have a varied repertoire of stories and genres. They may for example tell myths, legends, folk/fairy tales, stories of their own invention, stories of personal experience, stories from fiction or from the Bible. With a single exception, all the storytellers interviewed had some kind of historical stories in their repertoire. These could be tales collected by folklorists or created by writers in the nineteenth century, or stories from Norse mythology.

History and nostalgia

Nostalgia and authenticity are the focal points of this study of storytellers' use of the past. Both concepts have been assigned a variety of meanings and values throughout the ages. The term 'nostalgia' is often used dismissively. The American political scientist Kimberly Smith writes that Americans have learned to mistrust their positive notions of the past and dismiss them with an ironic attitude out of fear of being accused of nostalgia (Smith 2000, 505). Similarly, the Russian/ American literary scholar Svetlana Boym points out that nostalgia is a 'bad' word and that people find it insulting to be accused of it (Boym 2001, XIV). Nostalgia is a difficult research area because the field has been – and to a certain degree perhaps still is – associated with negative value and prejudice. The meaning of the concept must be clarified before one analyses nostalgic elements in the storytellers' accounts of the past. The aim of this study is not to dismiss the storytellers' nostalgic notions of the past, but to understand their meanings.

Storytelling festival in the archeological open air museum called Land of Legends in Lejre on the island Zealand of Denmark. At the festival, storytelling is placed in historical surroundings; however, this is not a manifestation that the storytellers aim at reconstructing a historical situation. Here we see an illustration of a storyteller in the potters' workshop in the reconstructed Iron Age village narrating legends about Christian priests. Anachronisms like that are not assigned any importance by contemporary oral storytellers. (Photograph: Danish Folklore Archives, 2008).

In order to comprehend nostalgic attitudes towards the past, it is relevant to take a look at the more wide-ranging concept of history as such. The American historian David Lowenthal characterizes history as protean: "What it is, what people think it should be, and how it is told and heard all depend on perspectives peculiar to particular times and places" (Lowenthal 1996b: 105). The writing of history always involves an interpretation. The training of professional historians at the universities involves learning how to choose relevant historical documents and investigate them critically, subsequently producing an account of how events in the past were played out. In the often-quoted phrase of the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), the ideal for historians has been to present *"how it really was"* in the past without letting one's own opinion influence one's work (Iggers 1973, 459). Today, historians acknowledge that in practice, complete objectivity is impossible to achieve. The writing of history always involves an interpretation. Still, most historians believe that through their work they may produce stories that are relatively close to history as it was once enacted (Lowenthal 1996, 107–112).

Images of people gathered around a campfire in the past often occur among contemporary storytellers. At the storytelling festival in Lejre the audience is given the opportunity to sit around a campfire in reconstructed Iron Age houses while listening to storytelling. (Photograph: Land of Legends, 2004).

However, professional historians are not the only people who write and talk about history. Everyone talks about the past to a greater or lesser extent – either at a personal level or in a broader perspective. Everyone looks at history through certain spectacles, and sometimes the spectacles are rose-coloured and the past is presented in a favourable light. This is what we called nostalgia. If the concept of nostalgia is scrutinized it becomes clear that it is a field filled with different interests, perceptions and feelings (Johannisson 2001, 161). Nostalgia as a concept derives from the Greek words *nostos*, 'return home', and *algos*, meaning 'pain', 'ache' or 'longing'. The word was first used by the Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer (1669–1752), who wanted to describe the homesickness of Swiss soldiers in 1688. Leaving their homeland to go to war, some of the soldiers fell ill. The symptoms of the illness included melancholia, insomnia, anorexia, fever, nervousness and mental illness, and in severe cases it could lead to attempted suicide and death (Wolf-Knuts 2000, 183; Smith 2000, 509f). Nostalgia was characterized by emotions of homesickness that were so strong that the body was overpowered by them. Nostalgia was literally a physical illness, and after death the doctor could record somatic symptoms like an infected or 'broken' heart, or lungs that had grown together in a strange way (Johannisson 2001, 156–57). Cases of

nostalgia were recorded among soldiers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and until the end of the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century psychologists and physicians diagnosed 'nostalgia' in immigrant servants, factory workers and other kinds of former rural residents who had moved in the process of industrialization and modernization.

At the beginning of the twentieth century physicians ceased diagnosing cases of nostalgia. The concept of nostalgia was redefined as an emotion rather than a physical disease, synonymous with an extreme degree of homesickness. In other words, a shift in meaning occurred so that the concept was removed from the initial spatial dimension (longing for another place) into a time-related dimension (longing for a former time). The nostalgic person had not necessarily experienced the wished-for time himself or herself; it was only imagined to be a better time (Johannisson 2001, 8; Smith 2000, 512). The historians Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw conclude: "Our present usage of the word is therefore distinctly modern and metaphorical. The home we miss is no longer a geographically defined place but rather a state of mind" (Chase & Shaw 1989, 1).

Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw were part of a new wave of interest in nostalgia. In the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s a new focus on nostalgia evolved, this time not among physicians but among historians. This was linked with the emergent discussion of the lack of historical awareness and historical relativism. In this context nostalgia was considered to be a kind of falsification of history, and as such appeared to be a threat to historiography in the eyes of historians (Johannisson 2001, 27–28). In 1989, Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw stated: "Of all the ways of using history, nostalgia is the most general, looks the most innocent, and is perhaps the most dangerous" (Chase & Shaw 1989, 1). In the same anthology, the historian David Lowenthal commented:

> "Just as nostalgia shed its seventeenth-century scientific skin to become a nineteenth-century symptom of social rather than medical malaise, so within the last few years has it lost its innocence and become a social pariah" (Lowenthal 1989, 18).

Nostalgia was viewed as a cultural disease of modern society, and was considered a response to modernization.

Nostalgic notions of the past have also been associated with contemporary oral storytelling. In an article from 1986, the folklorist Kay Stone writes of storytelling in North America: "Few urban tellers have been aware of the dynamics of oral telling beyond nostalgically sentimental notions of quaint old peasants sitting beside glowing fires" (Stone 1986, 20). Kay Stone categorizes contemporary storytellers' notions of the past as nostalgia inasmuch as she finds them inadequate in the light of the scientifically documented history of oral storytelling.

Recently, scholars have tried to re-evaluate the concept and to take a more value-neutral view of nostalgia. To cite an example, the American anthropologist Ray Cashman has introduced the concept of *critical nostalgia*. Nostalgic behaviour, as when

members of a Northern Irish community preserved and displayed local material culture, can lead to reflection on the present-day way of life. In this way, nostalgia can put the present into perspective and be used critically as part of the process of setting goals for the future (Cashman 2006). Likewise, Svetlana Boym mentions that nostalgia does not necessarily end in retrogressive inactivity; on the contrary, nostalgia may motivate action. "Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future. Consideration of the future makes us take responsibility for our nostalgic tales" (Boym 2001, XVI).

It is a striking feature that when people are nostalgic they often omit undesirable elements and emphasize positive aspects of the past. David Lowenthal argues in his book *The past is a foreign country* that the most compelling motive for altering the past is a wish to change the present (Lowenthal 1985 [1999], 27).

Inspired by Lowenthal's thesis that people often change the past out of a wish to change the present, it seems relevant to scrutinize the meaning behind some of the storytellers' nostalgic accounts of storytelling in the past in order to understand the new interest in storytelling. With a value-neutral approach to nostalgia as the goal, I want to look deeper into the storytellers' nostalgic view of storytelling in the past. The aim is to understand how the storytellers' notions and use of the past are meaningful to them. Asking the informants to describe their nostalgic images of the past turned out to be a way of gaining insight into the storytellers' intentions, hopes and dreams with regard to storytelling. As the article will show, the past is used as a counter-image to modern life and makes it easier to talk about the wishes and values attached to storytelling. The storytellers' accounts of the past have another purpose than those of historians, for instance. The comparison shows that the storytellers' main ambition does not seem to be to make reliable statements about the past, but rather to demarcate an alternative, better world. Their accounts of the past should therefore not be judged by the criteria one would apply to a scholarly account of the past based by a historian or other specialist on the scrutiny of historical sources.

Gathered around a fire. Nostalgic images of storytelling in the past

Today, when they advertise oral storytelling, the storytellers often emphasize the ancient historical roots of oral storytelling. To mention just one illustrative example, the storyteller Bettina Jacobsen writes on her website: "Down through all the ages people have told stories. Some believe that we developed language simply to be able to narrate."[3] She links herself and her own storytelling practice with history by stating: "It is storytelling like 'in the old days' when I narrate."[4] With this wording she suggests that potential listeners can expect authentic experiences as "in the old

3 http://www.bettinasfortaellinger.dk/Velkommen.htm.

4 http://www.bettinasfortaellinger.dk/Hvem%20er%20jeg.htm.

Two storytellers tell stories in the Sacrificial Bog of the Land of Legends (an archeological open air museum). In the background, the skulls of 'sacrificed' animals stick up from the bog that is greened by algae. Their story is about Bjowulf; the Swedish legendary hero that went to Denmark in order to help King Roar of the Danes to fight the troll Grendel who lived in a bog. Their story is based on a lay that was invented by an English bard in the 8th Century. "The manuscript is today preserved at the British Museum in London. And then it is preserved – maybe even more importantly – by all those who are getting it told," the storytellers write on their homepage. (Photograph: Danish Folklore Archives, 2009).

days" if they engage her to tell stories. Her use of the phrases "down through all the ages" and "in the old days" is imprecise about the period she is referring to. This is characteristic of the way today's storytellers talk about the past. The understanding of the past that underlies such statements can be illuminated by the historian David Lowenthal's metaphor of the past as a foreign country. He asks rhetorically: "But if the past is indeed a foreign country, is it not many lands rather than one? Like any place abroad, each past is unique – as unlike others as it is unlike the present." He answers: "...the whole past departs from the present, just as all alien lands are unlike our own" (Lowenthal 1996, 211).

The storytellers do not focus on the distinctions between different historical periods, but view the past as a unified whole. During interviews, they use terms like 'in the old days', 'since the beginning of time', 'in former times', 'in the course of time',

'formerly', 'the past', 'at all times', 'over the years', 'thousands and thousands of years' and 'always'. Characteristically, the storytellers use terms that are vaguely defined and indicate continuity over a long duration. But they mark off an epoch when they draw comparisons between 'now' and 'then' and thus raise a barrier between the past and the present, or what they call 'modern times', 'our time', 'present time' or 'my time'. In other words, the idea of a discontinuity in time can be observed. The storytellers' choice of words makes the past appear as a separate whole, as against the present as a separate whole.

When I did the interviews, I wanted to understand their conceptions and asked them how they imagined storytelling "in the old days" or "in the past." I deliberately used terms that did not specify any particular period. The idea behind the question was to make them express in words the images of the past that would spontaneously arise in their minds. A 65-year-old storyteller describes an episode from his own childhood:

> "My grandmother lived below us in a two-family house, and I took care of the stove, and she told stories from her life. And it was fabulous, right? It was sort of natural... it was easy to get into conversations where stories were told. Much more [than nowadays]."

It is characteristic of the storytellers' images of the past that people often told stories in former times. It came naturally to them. Another storyteller recounts: "Storytelling [...] was once a much more integral part of everyday life. [...] It would have been done at a family party or harvest festival. [...] At least, I have an idea that it was centred on some kind of collective thing." The storytellers entertain the notion that there was a sense of community around storytelling in the past. Furthermore, several storytellers express the idea that a sense of community was more evident in the past than in the present. "Storytelling has united people," one storyteller argues, while another expresses a similar opinion by stating that "storytelling bears fruit in the form of community spirit". Thus they express the opinion that storytelling was once of great importance to the strong community spirit that the storytellers believe formerly existed, but which they feel is missing today.

When the storytellers were asked, during the interviews, to visualize storytelling in the old days they always described rural surroundings. The setting could be a castle kitchen, a monastery, or more often a half-timbered house:

> "In most cases, there were small houses, so people sat really close together. Either there were just a few, for example telling stories for a child, or all the neighbours would be gathered at some kind of party and then a story would be told for them. In those cases they almost sat on one another's knees around the table while the fire was roaring in the stove."

This storyteller imagines that people of the past were physically as well as emotionally close to one another.

It is a distinctive feature that several storytellers describe the light source. They

mention that stories were told by the light of a campfire or fireside, by candlelight, a paraffin lamp or beside the fire roaring in the stove. One of the storytellers even says that he knows that many people would mention the fireside as their first intuitive response when imagining storytelling in the past.

The images of people of the past gathered around a fireside also appear in other western countries. At any rate the American folklorist and storyteller Joseph Sobol briefly mentions "the image of the fireside folkteller" in a book from 1999 and thus also seems to be expressing his own ideas of the past (Sobol 1999). According to the American folklorist Kay Stone, most storytellers' knowledge of the history of storytelling is limited to nostalgically sentimental notions of quaint old peasants sitting beside glowing fires (Stone 1986, 20). She characterizes their notions as nostalgia, but she does not examine the subject further. By taking a closer look at such nostalgic notions one can get an idea of what the storytellers long for. When people are nostalgic they focus on positive aspects while leaving out the negative ones. In the light of the thesis that people often change the past out of a wish to change the present, it seems relevant to scrutinize the meaning behind the nostalgic image of people gathered around a fireside.

Spending time by a campfire, fireside or candlelight accords with many Danes' idea of being in a congenial atmosphere. When people are gathered around some kind of fire, the light will shape the space around those present. The light illuminates the people around the light source, whereas the surrounding world is left in darkness. The light and the narrating voice become the centre of attention. This gives an impression of unity or a feeling of fellowship among the people present, who are at the same time turning their backs on the outside world. The image of storytelling by a fire thus illustrates the same unifying power of storytelling that the storytellers stress elsewhere.

Additionally, the source of light is a time-related marker. The following remark by one of the storytellers prepares the ground for an explanation that helps us to understand the emphasis on the fireside in former times when people are thought to have lived amidst a flourishing tradition of telling stories for one another:

> Storyteller: "I think that at some point in history everything started to go faster and faster in our society. So nobody told stories anymore."
> LA: "People stopped telling stories?"
> Storyteller: "I think so. [Another storyteller] says that electricity is to blame.[...] Sometimes it would be too dark to work but too bright to light a fire, right? What could you do at such times? Once upon a time grandparents had enough time. They told stories."

The idea that people ceased telling stories as society progressed is prevalent among the storytellers. Using a concept from the anthropologist Edward Bruner (Bruner 1986, 139–155), one could say that it has become a *dominant story* among storytellers that people stopped telling stories in Denmark during the twentieth century. "Storytelling has been sleeping like 'the Sleeping Beauty' since the fifties," as one storyteller

poetically put it. Presumably, the inspiration for this view can be traced back to the folklore collectors who stopped collecting folktales according to the traditional genre definitions in the middle of the twentieth century. For instance, the storytellers could read in the Danish folklore collector Evald Tang Kristensen's editions of folktales that the tradition of narration was dying out (see for example Kristensen 1901, 485–496). He and other contemporary folklore collectors were driven by a wish to collect as much as possible before it was too late. They were afraid that the telling of traditional folktales would soon become extinct, in line with the transition in society in general, as the traditional way of life was superseded by the modern lifestyle. In the course of the twentieth century, the collecting of traditional tales and legends ceased because the folklore collectors could no longer trace anyone who was able to tell the kind of traditional oral narratives in which the folklore collectors were interested. The Norwegian folklorist Reimund Kvideland concluded in 1990:

> ”For a long time it has been claimed that the narrative tradition has become extinct in modern Western society. This claim has been repeated so often that many people believe it to be true. But in later years more and more folklorists have discovered that people continue to tell stories, perhaps not the kind of stories folklorists wanted to be told, but people do tell stories” (Kvideland 1990, 16).

Pulling out the plug

Today, storytellers evoke a favourable image of the past when they are asked to describe their ideas of how storytelling was done in the past. However, the old storytelling community is believed to have disappeared today. The storyteller quoted above blames electricity and the electrical appliances that came along and entered the lives of people today. Instead of telling stories to one another, present-day people switch on the artificial light and let themselves be entertained by electronic media. The storytellers take a sceptical view of electrical appliances in general, and the television is viewed as particularly dubious. Most notably, television is blamed for the fact that people no longer tell stories – they watch TV instead. A few even think that watching television can have a damaging effect and accuse television of destroying the evocative power of human beings. One of the storytellers proclaims:

> ”It's a violation when you have a telly.” She explains: ”I haven't been told folktales […] but Hans Christian Andersen's and Grimm's fairytales have been destroyed for me. How? Because of Donald Duck and Disney! I remember the first time I read Cinderella. I missed the mice who were sewing and all that sort of thing. I actually found it quite boring. But I have worked at it, right? And now I can't bear to think of the way these fairytales have been completely destroyed.”

As a result she tried to protect her own children and did not own a television when her children were small, because she wanted them to create their own mental images of the fairytale world before watching Disney films. Some storytellers also express the opinion that screen versions of tales are less genuine and authentic than the written ones.

Not all storytellers agree that television is destroying human evocative power; nevertheless, they are generally sceptical of it; in particular, they find it troubling that television viewers sit passively in front of the screen receiving ready-made images. One of the storytellers also criticizes television as one-way communication. He points out that no human encounter is involved, as is the case with oral storytelling. The use of electrical equipment is generally criticized for separating human beings from one another. The storytellers talk about how electronic media interrupt and distort human interaction and intimacy. Several storytellers lament that people surf around on different media and seldom have time for absorption. One of the storytellers describes how her grandchildren are constantly seated in front of a computer screen, and how she is greeted by a machine whenever she tries to phone a public authority. ”It is very, very difficult to get to speak to another human being,” she concludes. Another storyteller says that people of today must make an effort if they want a refuge once in a while

> ”where we just spend time together as a family and where we say, ‘Now we’re just eating. No television is switched on. We shouldn’t have the mobile phone on while we’re eating.’ You have to work hard to create a space where there’s no electronic impact on your attention.”

It is revealing to compare this critique of the modern way of life with the idealization of the past. The images of the people of the past who found time to tell one another stories by the light of a campfire, fireside or candle is a counter-image to the present, which is crammed with electrical equipment that makes it difficult for us to get in contact with other human beings. As mentioned above, several researchers have pointed out that nostalgic perceptions of the past can be a motivation to change the present. The past seems to provide an ideal image and counter-image which the storytellers use as a starting point for criticizing certain aspects of the present.

Authenticity

In the eyes of the storytellers, storytelling provides an alternative to electronic, superficial entertainment. One of the storytellers says:

> ”I believe that people go to storytelling to experience intimacy, to sense that they share something authentic, something that isn’t in a hurry, and something with substance; something genuine.”

The storytellers often use words like *authentic* and *genuine* in relation to storytelling. *Authenticity* is another key concept with regard to people’s relationship with the past.

It is an ambiguous term that can be given several meanings. The word authenticity derives from the Greek word *'authentes*', meaning 'made by one's own hand'. Paintings and documents are regarded as genuine and authentic if they are made by the person whose name is written on them. A thing can also be considered authentic if it is possible to trace it back to its source, and if its characteristic features accord well with the corresponding category. Ethnic groups or individuals may be considered authentic if they live in ways that appear to be faithful to their biological and cultural backgrounds, as the American anthropologist Charles Lindholm writes (Lindholm 2008, 2).

For several reasons, authenticity is a complex concept. Research on tourism has noted that a tourist's experience of authenticity is connected to the tourist's prejudices and stereotypes (Oi 2002, 166). The Israeli sociologist Erik Cohen argues that objective authenticity is non-existent. Authenticity is in the eye of the beholder. Erik Cohen has noted that tourists use the word authenticity differently from scholars. He criticizes older studies that have aimed to reveal that things the tourists consider authentic are in reality (that is, by scholarly criteria) inauthentic. The researchers behind these studies have the underlying agenda that if the tourist had the same knowledge as the researcher, then the tourist would also see the lack of authenticity. Erik Cohen argues instead that authenticity is a social construct that is open to negotiation. The main focus of study therefore ought to be the ways in which the meaning of authenticity is negotiated, Cohen suggests (Cohen 1988, 374).

If 'reality' does not live up to pre-conceived expectations and stereotypes, the tourist may not experience authenticity. Conversely, if one believes that something is genuine, this may be enough to create a sense of authenticity. Because of such complexities the Finnish folklorist Tuomas Hovi introduces a distinction between two kinds of authenticity in connection with tourism: historically and scientifically measured authenticity, and experienced or felt authenticity (Hovi 2008, 81; Hovi 2010, 212).

Manuscripts, artefacts, buildings and other tangible things are not the only things that can be in focus when one is considering of authenticity. Non-material culture is also important. Charles Lindholm points out that it is more difficult to identify material than non-material culture. A painting is authentic if it is painted by the artist who has signed it; it is a forgery if it is a copy by another artist. In comparison, in art forms like oral storytelling and music there is no concrete object to copy. The art is manifested in the act of performance and this complicates the evaluation of authenticity. In the rest of the article I will take a closer look at the storytellers' ideas of authenticity from various points of view.

Authentic storytellers

The Danish storytellers' accounts of the past give the impression that storytelling came naturally to the people of the past. Storytelling was an integral part of their life, and they were part of an ancient tradition that is considered to have disappeared

today. In general, contemporary storytellers do not express a sense of community with the traditional storytellers who lived before them. It has become a dominant story among storytellers in Denmark that the ancient oral storytelling tradition died out. This may influence the way they view themselves and their own work. One of them indicates this by saying:

> ”I’m not a genuine storyteller because I am not .... well, I’m not a sailor who talks about rounding the Horn or...”
> LA: ”What do you mean by ‘genuine’?”
> Storyteller: ”Well, yes, I guess I mean, quite simply, that it is part of their everyday life. It is something that they don’t even think they do. [...] I have been very conscious of what I do myself because storytelling disappeared some years ago in Denmark.”

This storyteller does not feel that he is a genuine storyteller, because he does not consider himself part of a long, continuous oral tradition. He feels inadequate in comparison with his image of the authentic storytellers of the past. The positive images of storytellers of the past may inspire people to make a place for storytelling today, but there is no help to be had at the practical level, since the storytellers do not feel that the skills of those storytellers have been handed down. The storyteller emphasizes that it has been necessary for him to work consciously at becoming a storyteller, and that he does not feel that the ability to tell stories has come naturally to him. Opinions like these are reflected in practice when you examine the new interest in storytelling and the products offered in that context. Books are published and workshops are held on how to tell a story. There are several storytelling associations and groups where storytellers arrange tryouts and offer guidance to one another. This gives the impression that storytelling is a skill that comes as naturally to present-day people as it is thought to have done before.

The storytellers agree that to become a competent storyteller, you have to master certain technical skills. In the first place, the storytellers interviewed regard it as poor storytelling if you learn a story by heart and relate it word by word exactly as in the written text. The written text is not regarded as a ‘crib’; on the contrary, the storyteller must develop his or her own version of the story. One of the storytellers admits that he memorized the stories when he was a novice storyteller.

> ”Then I realized that if I have an agenda that I have to follow word by word, I don’t listen to the room. I don’t even listen to myself. […] You’ll know immediately if the storytellers are reading aloud from a text inside their heads, because their eyes are a bit absent, and it almost seems that inside their heads they can see the lines they are reading for you because they have learned them by heart.”

According to this, the vital contact with the audience is seen as hampered if the storyteller concentrates on remembering the right words. Instead the storytellers

have a technique for remembering and telling the stories fluently. Most storytellers emphasize that they imagine the stories, and when they tell them they put the pictures they imagine into words. Mastery of this storytelling technique is regarded as a sign of your competence as a storyteller. More importantly, they see it as the job of the storyteller to help the audience create their own mental images of the story. The essence of storytelling is not the words of the story, but the images that the words trigger in the minds of the listeners. In the view of the storytellers, the listeners are taking part in a creative activity, and the storytellers rate this phenomenon highly. The listeners may thus also have a negative influence on the story. One of the storytellers describes it like this: "Sometimes you sense that it isn't working, and then you just want it to be over. It's a bloody mess. It's a terrible rut to get stuck in." On the other hand, she explains, if the storyteller senses that the listeners are paying attention, she will dwell on and extend the story and use longer rhetorical pauses.

Several storytellers mention the importance of eye contact with the audience during storytelling performances. Yet the sense of contact is not restricted to visual responses like meeting one another's eyes, or auditory responses like laughter. One storyteller explains: "You have to get in contact; you have to get in real contact. You have to know: We stick together." A feeling of contact with the listeners is thus a sense of sharing something with them. This recalls the storytellers' images of storytelling in the past, when storytelling bonded people together around the fire.

Another storyteller talks about her experience with a colleague who did not look into the eyes of the listeners. "She was inside herself. She was watching [the story in images]. You could sense that. But you felt that she was authentic." She was relating her personal experiences of a visit to the war-torn former Yugoslavia. Her 'authenticity' seems to have been connected with the fact that she was able to communicate her experiences from the past to the listeners such that the listeners got to share her experience. In other words, this is about the *feeling* of authenticity.

"It's truly unplugged"

The storytellers emphasize that it is good if stories can be told without any involvement of electricity. "Basically, there's nothing there but the storyteller and the listener [...] There are no other media. There isn't even electric power, necessarily," as one of the storytellers explains. This storyteller demonstrates a connection with the narrative of the old days when stories were told where there was no electricity. Nevertheless, if we take a look at the actual storytelling events, oral storytelling does not always takes place without electronic aids. In some cases, as in the park or at the storytelling festival at the archaeological open-air museum, the storytellers perform 'unplugged'. In contrast, in cafes, libraries, lecture rooms etc. microphones, loudspeakers, spotlights and other electrical equipment may be involved. Nevertheless, the very idea that stories can be told without electric power seems to be of key importance for some storytellers.

> ”It’s truly unplugged. At least we have that option. Some storytellers choose […] to use a microphone and have a big audience. I think that’s against the nature of storytelling. […] I don’t think it’s genuine. I don’t think it’s the real thing.”

In the eyes of this storyteller, it is the real thing if it is unplugged. The English word *unplugged* has entered into the Danish language; and quite interestingly, it has taken on a double meaning in Danish. The word *unplugged* can be used in the literal meaning that it has in English – that is, unconnected to any electric power source, as when an artist performs on acoustic rather than electric instruments. In addition, in the figurative sense *unplugged* has come to mean genuine, pure and unspoiled in Danish. (See ‘Unplugged’ in the Danish dictionary *Den Danske Ordbog,* 2005). To conclude, in the Danish language there is a connection between *no electric power* and *genuine* – and this convergence of meanings is recognized with sympathy by the storytellers.

It is an ideal for many storytellers that storytelling is antithetical to electricity. One storyteller points out:

> ”To some extent, it riles me that it has been forced up to a higher level where microphone and audience are scheduled, and for me somehow or other it’s about making those who attend feel that it’s just as intimate as the other kind of thing.”

Circumstances may demand that electrical equipment is involved in the storytelling event, but the people present ought to feel that this is not the case. There should be a feeling of intimacy. The audience should sense the contact among people without the detachment and artificiality that the storytellers associate with electrical equipment. In other words, when there is a feeling of human contact, the experiences are called genuine.

Charles Lindholm, who has published the book *Culture and Authenticity,* distinguishes between two approaches to authenticity in the performance of classical music: a historical and a romantic approach.[5] The historicizing musicians think that the performance of music should be as faithful as possible to the original music, while musicians with the romantic approach try to convey the emotional essence of the music. Until recently, the performance of classical music was dominated by the romantic mode of thought. The musicians of the nineteenth century did not mind changing compositions and performance techniques to make the music appeal more to their own taste. They believed that the classical tradition was something living, and that they were its rightful heirs. A romantic musician can play Bach’s music on the guitar if he feels that it would flow as in the mind of Bach, and the romantic musician would then regard it as authentic. In contrast, historicizing musicians often

5 I have not succeeded in finding studies of authenticity among performers of oral storytelling, but I think this study of authenticity in classical music can be usefully applied to the study of the oral storytellers.

play on so-called original instruments and would never even play a piece by Bach on the piano, because the modern piano was not invented until after the death of Bach. In the eyes of the historicists, Bach's keyboard music should be played on a harpsichord (Lindholm 2008, 25–29).

Returning to the use of electrical equipment in storytelling performances, we can establish that the storytellers are like these romantic musicians: they want to recreate an experience that resembles what once has been. The electrical equipment may therefore be used if it is kept in the background. If the storytellers take a historicist approach they may refuse to use a microphone etc. on the grounds that the storytellers of the past did not use such things. None of the storytellers interviewed expressed such ideas. They do not try to re-enact a situation from the past in detail; they strive instead for a feeling of genuineness and authenticity.

When it comes to the tangible, visual manifestation of the stories, the storytellers do not maintain that storytelling should look like something from the past. Very few storytellers wear costumes. The few who do wear costumes from time to time do not dress up as a storyteller from a specific historical period to match the story they tell. The storytellers do not re-enact the past. In the eyes of the storytellers there is nothing wrong with choosing an Iron Age setting as a suitable place for narrating legends about Christian priests from the nineteenth century. This is because they do not take a historicist approach to authenticity.

Dead letters and living words

Several storytellers use life and death as a metaphor in connection with oral and written storytelling. One of the storytellers states, for example, that the stories died when they were written down. This is a remarkable point of view compared with the folklore collectors' view that collecting the stories would preserve them for posterity. As an extension of this, another storyteller states that writing down the stories gave them "an air of the museum." Words like 'archive' and 'museum' are given a negative value by several storytellers. These are places where extinct things are stored. This is not the domain of the storytellers, and they see their own storytelling as the opposite of storage in archives. On the contrary, they want to bring the dead stories to life. One of the other storytellers states:

> "We have an obligation to keep those things alive that were written down in the nineteenth century because if they lie on shelves at The Danish Folklore Archives they end up being something that has just been written in a book. Once it was oral, and it awaits oral storytellers who'll make it oral again."

Another storyteller adds that storytelling is of great value "if it gets shaken up, dusted down and emerges from the museum and is left to live." The storytellers want to infuse new life into the old, written stories by telling them orally to a live audience.

Storytelling is presented as a way of updating the stories and making them part of the present. Several storytellers emphasize that the stories are communicated in the best possible way by being told orally.

It is interesting that the storytellers see their own practice as the opposite of that of museums and archives, because there is a deeper meaning to this contrast than is immediately evident. It has to do with the fact that the storytellers' approach to the material differs from that of the specialists at museums and archives. Historians and similar scholars with a knowledge of historical criticism will seek out the primary sources. So if they wish to know how an old story was once told they try to identify the early text that the folklore collector wrote down from an oral storyteller. Using printed editions as a source is seen as problematical because the folklore collectors often edited or rewrote the manuscripts before publication. In contrast, none of the storytellers interviewed has used unpublished archive material such as the manuscript field notes of the folklore collectors. They use published – and, as mentioned before, often edited – printed texts as the models for their own oral stories. This is related to the fact that they have no intention of reconstruct the wording of the original stories as they once sounded. In other words, today's storytellers are not what Charles Lindholm would call historicists. The storytellers develop their own interpretations from the stories, and that is why they are similar to the romantic musicians who characteristically aim at conveying the spirit of the music.

The storytellers argue in favour of changing the stories to keep them alive and make them relevant to contemporary audiences. Some storytellers change small details – for example replacing or explaining archaic words, while others make bigger, more drastic alterations like changing the setting so the story takes place in the modern world instead of the past. There are great differences in the extent to which the individual storyteller thinks an oral story should differ from the written text, but they all take the view that a storyteller must make his own variant.

A few storytellers make a distinction between folk narratives handed down through anonymous oral tradition, with which they permit themselves to take liberties, and texts with a named author which should be narrated much more faithfully. For example if one of them tells a tale by the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875), this storyteller may make an exception and learn some of the author's characteristic passages by heart. This reflects a wish to protect the authenticity of the original work of art in the shape of the original author's wording. Similar ideas are manifested when storytellers ask permission from contemporary authors before they tell their stories.

A look back at the views of traditional folk narrative in the nineteenth century may provide insight into other views of authenticity that can put the contemporary storytellers' perception of the concept into perspective. The search for authenticity was a motive for collecting traditional folk tales in Europe during the Romantic Movement of the nineteenth century. Traditional society was then in transition as a result of technological and economic development, and intellectuals turned towards the traditional culture of the rural population that was changing. In order to write down traditional narratives, intellectuals like the German brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (1785–1863 and 1786–1859) set out to collect material from the common people.

The intellectuals were of the opinion that the people could remember the stories almost unaltered as they had been told in the Middle Ages, when they were thought to have been created anonymously and collectively by the people, in Danish *folket*. Accordingly, the folklore collectors called the collected narratives *folkeminder*, 'memories of the people'. The folklore collectors wanted to re-constitute the prototypes of the tales, and therefore tried to eliminate the creative additions of contemporary storytellers before publishing the tales. It was the ancient narratives that the storytellers regarded as authentic (Burke 1978 [2008] 4ff; Bendix 1997b, 15). Artists were also inspired by this current, and Hans Christian Andersen for example wrote new tales inspired by the tales he had heard in his childhood. However, the folklore collectors were not enthusiastic about the tales that the contemporary storytellers invented. In the domain of high culture, the identification of the creator was an important element in the process determining whether a cultural product was authentic (Bendix 1997a, 74). For example, whether a given fairytale manuscript was considered to have been written by Hans Christian Andersen. In contrast, the folklore collectors would call a tale authentic if anonymous authorship and an oral tradition could be proven. The early folklore collectors made a distinction between tales invented by artists, and traditional tales that were collected from oral storytellers in peasant society. This distinction was of vital importance in the folklore collectors' evaluation of the authenticity of the tales (Bendix 1997a, 74).

In comparison, not all contemporary storytellers seem to make a distinction between tales invented by artists and tales from oral tradition. A couple of storytellers express the idea that Hans Christian Andersen was also a folklore collector who set out to write down the traditional folk narratives of the peasants.

As mentioned before, the word *authenticity* originally meant *made by one's own hand*. Some of the storytellers have experienced that some listeners expect them to narrate a story exactly the way they can read the words in the written text. Children may interrupt by saying: "You aren't telling it right!" Comments like this conflict with the storytellers' own romantic notions that a storyteller should create his own interpretation of the text. Expectations influence the storytellers' choice of repertoire. One of the storytellers explains that he is "reluctant to tell Hans Christian Andersen's stories because they are so well-known and many people have an opinion of how they should be and don't listen ... they don't listen to me. They listen to judge whether I remember it all correctly." Consequently, some storytellers seek out stories from famous writers like Hans Christian Andersen that are less well known and thus avoid having to meet the expectations of the audience in this respect. In contrast, other storytellers take up the challenge and radically change the known stories. The result is creative stories like this one. After eating Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother the wolf marries the sniper who has shot Little Red Riding Hood. When the storyteller makes it clear that he has invented a radically different version, the listeners do not seem to react to his narration as 'wrong' because it is apparent that the story is not the one from the Grimm brothers. He has made the story *by his own hand*. Conflicts between a storyteller and an audience are rooted in different views of authenticity.

The storytellers take the 'romantic' approach and add an interpretation to the story. Some of the listeners, however, take a more historicist approach and expect the storyteller to remain faithful to the original wording of the text.

With respect to offering their own interpretation of the story, the storytellers point out that they are doing what the traditional storytellers once did. They argue that the reason many variants of the same tales exist is that the old storytellers each made their own version. This is incidentally a view they share with folklorists in general. In the words of one of the storytellers:

> ''Good storytellers have always renewed the story. Always. I have heard that more than a thousand versions of Cinderella have been collected [...The story is] known all over the world in all cultures, in more than a thousand versions. For me this can only mean one thing: every single storyteller has looked at it and thought: 'I'll make these changes'.''

Another storyteller concludes: ''As someone who invents stories I feel I am absolutely in line with the old storytellers.'' This comment must be seen as an indication that he feels like a successor to the storytellers of the past. He interprets the stories according to his own time, in line with the practice of the storytellers of the past. According to the categories of Charles Lindholm, this can be seen as an expression of the romantic mindset.

On the whole, though, comments like this are not common among storytellers. Characteristically, they say they do not really feel any connection with the storytellers of the past. If they have any such inclinations, they are directed more towards the folklore collectors with whom a few storytellers feel they share a common interest because they are preserving and passing on an old storytelling tradition (although in a reinvented form). This too should probably be viewed in the light of the *dominant story* – that the storytelling tradition died out and contemporary storytellers are creating a new tradition.

Conclusion – the past in the present

This study has examined how the storytellers' view of the past and its use is meaningful to them. The storytellers' accounts of people gathered around a glowing source of light in the old days give us important clues to the goals sought by storytellers today. The ideal image of storytelling in the past may serve as a reminder that other experiences are possible than those that dominate the present. Nostalgia is associated with criticism of the modern way of life, and the storytellers feel that electrical equipment distorts people's sense of intimacy with other people and makes them passive.

By reviving a storytelling practice they think has died out, the storytellers want to create a space for other kinds of experience for present-day people. According to the dominant story of the storytellers, storytelling does not come naturally to people today. Before they are able to excel as storytellers, they have to work consciously to master the techniques. It is considered to be good storytelling when the storyteller

is able to trigger an inner creative and imaginative process in the listeners. The aim is to arouse feelings and call forth experiences that feel genuine and authentic. The storytellers stress that the storyteller and the audience should feel they are interacting and sharing in the creation of the story.

The storytellers' use of historical narratives gives the impression of a romantic rather than a historicist approach. By altering the old stories and relating them verbally, the storytellers aim to make the old written stories relevant to the audience, and thus to pass on the essence of the stories to the present. In so doing, some of them point out that they are doing the same as the old traditional storytellers, who also created their own variants of the stories of oral tradition. The storytellers do not try to reconstruct historical settings or retell the stories as they were once told. Electrical equipment can be discreetly involved in the storytelling events, and the storytellers use digital media to promote oral storytelling. The past is gone forever, and the storytellers do not seriously wish themselves back in time – but they long to change the present a little.

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