

## Address to the ISFNR Belief Narrative Network Conference in St. Petersburg (Russia), May 17th–19th, 2010

### The Problem of Belief Narratives: A Very Short Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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*The village of ... was in uproar. At the house of farmer S. a child has died. It had been bewitched and beghosted, it was told. Because people who would know such things had heard strange things in and around the house. At night chains were rattling in the barn, and they had seen invisible shapes wandering around, going in and out without opening doors or windows.*

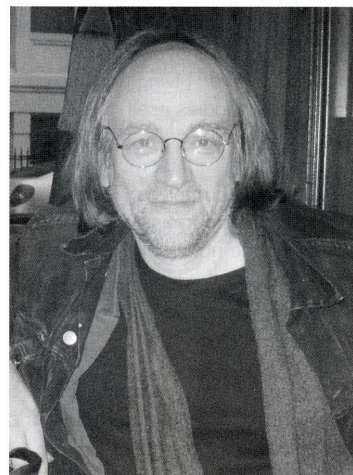
I have translated this newspaper report as literally as possible (beghosted is thus a neologism, meaning affected by a ghost). It appeared in 1926 in a Dutch daily newspaper. Here it may serve as an example to illustrate two issues that I want to put to you at the beginning of this conference. One: how should we deal with 'narratives'? Two: how should we approach the concept of 'belief'? For now I will skip the question as to how different topics classified as 'belief' (in this example witches and ghosts) can be combined and about the usefulness of the concept of a 'belief system'. We may want to address this at a future conference. There may be other problems and I hope you will raise them in the course of the next days. There may be other solutions than the ones I am going to suggest. After all, this is just to wet your appetite.

My examples tend to be mostly Dutch or Flemish, just because that is the area I am most familiar with. Other places have, of course, produced different examples, but what is important to stress is that to understand any sort of 'belief', it has to be localised, situated and contextualised. If you want to use the emic-etic distinction: the indigenous, 'emic' view deserves preference. 'Etic' merely turns out to be 'academic', an interpretation imposed from above that hinders rather

than helps. Applying this to what we have agreed to call 'belief narratives' causes a certain kind of friction.

Newspaper reports obviously contain some sort of narrative. While the study of 'legends' used to be concentrated on oral narratives (etymology notwithstanding), the distinction with papers is less strict than it seems at first sight, for one reason because the vast bulk of legends has only survived as texts – written down and often neglected in folklore archives. But orality and print are primarily media and people may retell what they have read in papers and papers may print what people tell. It is much more important to take account of that other distinction: that newspapers are supposed to report truthfully and that legends may be considered just stories, that is to say products of the imagination. While there is some 'truth' in the opposition, it also needs to be questioned. It would certainly be foolish to ignore the fact that the newspaper report quoted above (and hundreds if not thousands of similar ones), did refer to events. A child died (which can be checked in the death registers); people told stories about it. While a narrative in itself, the report also refers to other narratives. It may moreover be seen as a part of a greater narrative, to be constructed by the researcher; whether about the farm, the particular village, about witchcraft, or about 'belief narratives'.

In other cases newspapers reported on the unwitchment specialists who were consulted on the maltreatment of witches, or people who were instrumental in causing phenomena that were interpreted as ghostly. These are all 'facts' (if you want to call them such) and in a number of cases they



Willem de Blécourt has published extensively on magic and witchcraft in European history, including the book *Werewolves* (2005).

Photo by Ülo Valk.

can be corroborated by other sources. Stories are never free-floating, autonomous entities, but are embedded in the society they circulate in, are part and parcel of daily life experiences. It just may not always be possible to contextualise a story properly when all there is, is a text. On the other hand, there are many more texts than those collected by folklorists. And when it concerns present-day research, a simple collecting of tales may not be enough. I have always found it very revealing to hear from Linda Dégh that only eighteen years after her last visit to the Hungarian Kakasd, people began to tell her things they had never mentioned before.

*This time, women took me into their confidence more as an equal, as well as an old acquaintance who came from far away to visit and remember old times and old people who are not with us anymore.*

*They were very open and sincere. They spoke of human weaknesses, family feuds, intrigues. They told me secrets. 'I will kill you if you tell this to anyone,' warned one woman jokingly, but not laughing. I had heard gossip in Kakasd before, but none treated sensitive themes.*

Anthropologists have had similar experiences, meaning that our work is never finished and that there are always deeper layers to penetrate.

If you allow me to dwell a little longer on the work of Linda Dégh: she has, of course written seminal contributions to our subject and I would strongly advise everyone who has not done so yet, to get acquainted with her work. At one point she remarked: "that all legends are based on beliefs" and that the term 'belief legend' would thus be a pleonasm. I doubt whether changing the subject of research into 'narratives' would make much difference here. As long as these narratives are supposed to be about 'beliefs', there still lurks the ghost of circularity, which on the one hand defines the stories by their subject and on the other takes the subject itself for granted. What, then, are 'beliefs'?

Journalists, or their local correspondents (teachers, among others), tended to report these kinds of things to combat what they called superstition. Although the newspaper reports on witchcraft, ghosts and visits to lay healers may have had some entertainment value, they were foremost meant to educate by way of warning example. "How is this still possible in our enlightened times?" was the general, if not always expressed, complaint. The implication is that the reported 'beliefs' were not just approached from an outside and usually hostile perspective, but that the very definition of these 'beliefs' and their categorisation depended on it. In that respect the journalists were proper descendants of earlier clergymen who used to fulminate against anything 'superstitious', meaning anything that did not suit their particular denomination,

even within Christianity (Protestants denounced Catholics as superstitious, for instance). However little we may like it, this tradition still constitutes a formative part of our research interest. In the course of the nineteenth century 'superstition' may have been replaced by euphemistic terms such as 'folk belief', although the subject matter remained the same.

'Beliefs' are thus defined in opposition to both religion and science, especially medicine, and if we seriously want to engage with them in a critical way, we will have to pay attention to precisely those contrasting but also encompassing fields. Although we no longer regard such beliefs as survivals of pre-Christian ideas, we often do not pay proper attention to religion, to 'religious beliefs'. To return to the opening report: this stemmed from a Roman Catholic area in the Netherlands and it is therefore very likely that the people who thought their child bewitched, had consulted Catholic clergy and applied Catholic counter-measures. Even if they had not done so in this case, it was certainly done in others. There are subtle differences between Catholic and Protestant ghosts, too. In cases of illness, people had at least the choice to consult a physician, a priest or a witch-doctor; the relevant 'belief narratives' should enlighten us about the mechanisms of precisely such choices.

The discussion of saints, legends and miracles within the context of 'belief' legends is a relatively recent development. Given, however, that devils and 'popular religion' were already incorporated in surveys of 'folk beliefs', this is only a natural development. Now we even consider disbelief and competing 'beliefs'. Indeed, not everyone held the same 'belief' and it would not be very difficult, for instance, to find someone who does believe in ghosts but not in witchcraft. All the more reason to focus on individual expressions.

In themselves statements by informants are always 'true', although it

would be very exciting to conduct a study of indigenous concepts of untruths, or 'lies'. But even a lie is 'true' in the sense that it is uttered. What has often been questioned in the case of 'belief narratives' is their referential value. If there are no witches and no ghosts, people who talk about them must be referring to something else, to neighbourhood conflicts, for instance, or to adolescent anxieties. It can be fruitful to proceed in that direction, but it is often forgotten that people often acted the way they did precisely because they were convinced of the existence of witches or ghosts. (This line of argument becomes even more interesting when applied to the notion of a god.) Others have, of course, instrumentalised 'beliefs' and used them to achieve their own ends.

People adopted a whole range of positions between 'belief' and 'disbelief' and it may be necessary to take their expression of different opinions in different situations into account, depending on how they fitted into the relations of power; and also to take into account that they told differing stories to their families and their neighbours, and again different versions to teachers, policemen or judges. And even the position of the folklorist within this spectrum cannot always be taken for granted. Here the concepts of 'register' and of 'discourse' come in useful. When your interlocutor does not 'believe' in witches, you simply switch to a rationalist discourse and agree. "No, my grandparents used to believe in witches, but we know better now." Within a particular context, that may not even be a lie, but just the application of a different discourse.

In other words, 'belief narratives' are problematic in a number of ways. This also makes them extremely fascinating. I wish you a very fruitful conference.

<sup>1</sup> Reactions and discussions are very welcome. Please write to the author: Willem de Blécourt, wjc.deb@googlemail.com