

Aspects of Belief in Supernatural Threatening Figures, with Reference to the Traditional Verbal Social Control of Children in Newfoundland and Labrador¹

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The use of traditional threats to control the behaviour of children in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador was investigated in some depth in the late 1960s and early 1970s.² The research revealed a wide variety of threats and of threatening figures typically employed in a complex system which parallels those in many other cultures. At the time of the investigation these figures comprised three principal categories:

- A. Supernatural, mythological, fictitious and invented figures
- B. Human beings
- C. Animals, objects, locations, and natural phenomena.

Category A has been the focus of attention in most of the comparatively few studies of these traditions. Although in the Newfoundland data, as elsewhere, it is clear that adults who used these in the verbal process of threatening children did not normally believe in them, it would be wrong to conclude that this was always the case. Certainly, at least until recently, adults in many cultures invoked figures in which they themselves partly or wholly believed. This element of belief in the actual or possible existence of the figures is also reflected in other folklore genres. It is found, for example, in the Swiss legend where the would-be frighteners, who are disguised as supernatural figures, are themselves frightened when on turning round they discover that horrifying supernatural beings are actually there behind them.³ Belief or partial belief in supernatural entities was an important aspect of the whole threatening process, certainly for children. Such beliefs inevitably vary from culture to culture and may be linked directly with the function of threats as, for example, when religious figures are used to discourage behaviour regarded as sinful or immoral.

In the Western world it would seem that there is proportionately more belief in the supernatural agencies which are found in the upper ranks of a given religious hierarchy. While in Christian society, for example, belief in the deity should be taken for granted, there remains a lingering belief in ghosts and other supernatural entities. Belief in the diabolical antithesis of a god, even though such a figure is simply a personification of evil, is understandable. The way in which some aspects of the Christian ethic are explained to a child, for instance by references to the conflicting voices of good and evil or of a good and a bad angel, implies the same basic duality of presentation as that in which God is seen as symbolic of good and the Devil symbolises evil. Indeed, for the layman good and evil are to some extent seen as equally powerful forces constantly at war with each other.

The world of the supernatural may be regarded as man's invention, as a projection both of human aspirations and fears. This includes the conventionally accepted deities of established religions, all of which of course are supernatural or have supernatural attributes. Although deities are usually regarded with mingled love and fear, it is fear, perhaps better

defined as awe, which is often the dominant emotion involved in the belief. As deities are seen as having limitless power, the concepts of omniscience, omnipresence, and the vengeful god, for example, inspire considerable awe in the believer. In some creeds this is ameliorated by a measure of love, mercy, compassion, or other sympathetic characteristics which certain deities are said to possess. Nevertheless, deities are generally conceived by the believer as awesome and, especially through emphasis on their more fearsome qualities, they can be invoked as restraining influences in the codes of conduct of both adults and children.

Belief in one spiritual world suggests that it is not unreasonable also to give credence to other supernatural entities which inspire both awe and fear. As everyone experiences fear at some point in their lives, it is not illogical that this sense of fear may be utilised in efforts to control juvenile behaviour, whether or not the particular figures used are believed in or feared by those exercising such verbal control. Apart from its sociological function, the figure concerned probably has little or no significance for us, and yet the child who is threatened may still be afraid of it, not least because the figure is presented as especially fearsome. This is not to deny that we could have experienced similar fears ourselves. As many reports suggest, adults may remember being afraid of such figures in their own childhood, and it is not inconceivable that they still fear them or believe in them to some extent.

Traditional secular beliefs may also be linked with religion, as is illustrated by the remnants of belief in fairies and other supernatural creatures in Newfoundland,⁴ as well as in Ireland and elsewhere. As in Irish tradition, the fairies in the Newfoundland study were sometimes identified with the fallen angels as if this was an element of Christian belief. Such beliefs were clearly still evident in Newfoundland as recently as the 1970s, and von Sydow's assertion that figures used in threats are merely "pedagogical fikts"⁵ therefore requires modification when applied to the local situation both in Newfoundland and elsewhere. While fully agreeing with von Sydow's admirably concise statement regarding the social function of such figures, it should be noted that not all of them are fictitious. This point has been made by Jeanne Cooper Foster who, while agreeing that the figures are often fikts, points out the possibility that supernatural beings may have been associated with certain specific locations at some earlier date, and implies that this argues some measure of belief.⁶ Many threatening figures are adaptations of beings already existing in traditional belief.⁷ These deep-seated elements of belief tend to decline only slowly, and although the figures concerned may have evolved for other reasons, their supposed existence, often in certain specific locations, is utilised in the threatening process whether or not adults still believe in them.

Ranke's ideas coincide with those of von Sydow in his assertion that it is a law in the history of religion that on the one hand beliefs, with progressive enlightenment, retire to the nursery as bugbears, and on the other hand the frequent misuse of such concepts undermines any belief in them which still exists.⁸ Just as von Sydow points out that, at least for adults, many of the figures were simply humorous, Ranke holds that, in the threatening of children, such figures can be used only if there is no longer any serious belief in them. Ranke's assertion, however, is contradicted by reports from Newfoundland and elsewhere which make it clear that figures of serious belief may indeed be used in threats. For example, Christian

believers who use God as a threatening figure rely on this element of belief to help ensure that the function of the threat is fulfilled in the effective control of the child.

Nevertheless, the supernatural figures adapted for use in threats of course have no proven existence. Whether God, the Devil, spirits, and fairies really exist is itself a matter of faith or belief, and as such is inevitably liable to cultural and individual variation. Other figures with supernatural powers, such as the numerous members of the fictitious bogeyman group, on the other hand, are either pure invention or have lost any elements of belief on the part of adults which some of them might once have had. To the young child, however, all these entities, whether supernatural, mythological, invented, or real, can be equally horrifying, because in their threatening function they are spoken of in the same formulaic way and given the same overtones of fearsome power. Indeed, the use and effectiveness of the threatening figures is essentially bound up with concepts of power and otherness. The child tends to identify them all as figures of fear and to interrelate their identities. In Newfoundland, for example, the policeman and other human figures used in threats are sometimes endowed by the threateners with the characteristics and powers of supernatural or invented figures such as the Black Man (Devil) or the boogie man, and may even be identified with them. Quite apart from their similarity of function, all threatening figures therefore have a great deal in common, especially in their extranormal powers and characteristics.

Ranke's suggestion that figures which are frequently misused as bugbears eventually become less credible because the very frequency of usage makes them less potent⁹ is substantially borne out in the Newfoundland study. The evidence here indicates a tendency, when utilising figures in the supernatural/invented group, to employ such invented figures as the boogie man, which are not believed in by adults, rather than figures of actual or potential belief such as God, angels, ghosts, and fairies. A notable exception to this is the Devil who was frequently invoked in threats.

In the same passage, however, Ranke is careful to point out the impossibility of deciding the degree to which certain figures become credible or less credible. Each seems to have a different credibility rating which varies from place to place and culture to culture. It is therefore virtually impossible to assess how such figures vary in potency and credibility. Just as God's power is believed in by Christians, so may that of the Devil. Belief in spirits, fairies and the like may also be justified by reference to religious teaching. When used in threats in Newfoundland and elsewhere, these figures can still be thought to have fearsome powers, and even those who do not believe in them or are sceptical about the existence of such beings may take care not to invite trouble by acting unadvisedly. As we have seen, the traditional patterning of social control can also be reinforced through myths and legends, in which some adults may still believe, which warn of the consequences of failure to conform to accepted modes of behaviour and belief.

While Ranke makes no claim that his list of threatening figures is comprehensive, it is clear that they are drawn mainly from traditional belief. He points out that new figures arise relatively seldom, and that already existing figures of belief are the norm. Indeed, as noted earlier, both Ranke and von Sydow, together with other European scholars, concentrate their

discussion on the supernatural/invented figures and pay less attention to any human figures which have a similar function. Ranke refers to these human figures of “sober reality” in the context of the final stage of disappearing belief in supernatural figures. He suggests that the reason for the use of such living figures as the policeman is solely that for the child they may be associated with certain frightening concepts.¹⁰

Figures of popular belief which have survived from earlier times may be adapted to new functions in modern society, whether or not people continue to believe in them. In Newfoundland, a number of these figures of belief were still used, and were still believed in to some extent. Alongside them, however, were not only many invented or adapted figures with supposed supernatural powers, but also figures of “sober reality”, notably those with authority, such as the policeman, the doctor, and the teacher. Similar developments may also be seen in those parts of Europe where there is still a strong vibrant tradition of the supernatural, which is only now being replaced in the threat process by invented or living figures as the older supernatural tradition declines. The evidence from the Newfoundland material suggests that, to the child, the newer authority figures drawn from real life can be as fearsome and powerful as the supernatural or invented ones. Whether the figure is supernatural or not is irrelevant, provided that the child believes in it to some extent. It is this element of belief which is crucial in the successful functioning of the threat process. Children’s fear of the unknown, which their limited experience cannot explain, reinforces the power which threatening figures may have, and helps to ensure a measure of effectiveness in their function. Adults exaggerate the threatening potential of the figures, empowering them in various ways, and enhancing their perceived power.

The responsibility which parents feel for their offspring also plays an important part in the threatening process. Leaving children unattended and out of control may expose them to danger, and in some cultures in the past traditional narratives helped to maintain the belief that various figures might really take them away. A vivid example of this, among many, is found in Zuni mythology:

“When the earth was soft Su’uki used to come into the village and go around. Sometimes the women took their babies to the peach orchards and put them to sleep under the trees while they worked. Then if the mother went to the spring or anywhere out of sight Su’uki would come. She was always watching. She could smell out the babies and she always waited around the peach orchards near where the mothers left their babies and as soon as the mother left the sleeping baby and went to get a drink of water Su’uki came and took the baby and put him in her basket and carried him off. Finally she came home with the baby. Then she put him down and came back and took another one and put him in her basket and took him home too. Then the mothers came back happily after having a drink at the spring, and there the babies were gone! They saw Su’uki’s tracks. She went barefoot and had long toenails. Then the mothers cried very much, but they were afraid to go after their babies. Then the women who had lost their babies came home and told the people, and they all went out to look for the babies, but they never found them. Finally they came to where the people used to dry their peaches. They knew that Su’uki lived there, and they watched for an opportunity to kill her because she had taken their babies.”¹¹

Adults may thus use threats not only because society expects this but also because they feel it is the right thing for them to do for the sake of the child. They believe or at least fear that if they do not act to protect the child in this way it may be in real danger, either from the natural environment or from some malevolent act or misfortune.

The natural environment also had a bearing on the traditional methods of threatening and the figures used. In an agrarian environment, for example, variants of the Kornmutter and other spirits of the corn might be expected, whereas in maritime areas, or near rivers, lakes and ponds, water spirits and demons, or their substitutes, in which some element of belief perhaps continues, were typical. In one area adults might wish to keep children away from growing crops, but in the absence of crops such threats would of course be inappropriate. Although the purely functional aspect of social control through specific prohibitions emphasised by von Sydow is important, it is by no means the only consideration. In Newfoundland, for example, as is widely true elsewhere, traditional threats were often used simply to discourage unacceptable or annoying behaviour in general rather than to prohibit or discourage specific activities. Although children might be threatened for their own good not to go to certain places, or to come in out of the dark, for example, threats were also used for the more general social reason that parents felt responsible if the child was exposed to danger.

It is at this early stage of children's development that parents probably feel the strongest responsibility for protecting them, just as in the traditional beliefs of some cultures various counteractive measures were taken to ward off the "böse Mächten", the evil powers, which were thought to be especially harmful to the very young child. Individuals may believe, however, that certain things are dangerous because they have been trained to believe so when they were young. Similarly, social patterning may not only emphasise that the young child is particularly vulnerable, but also suggest the means for counteracting this vulnerability.

In the early years the threats were used for the child's own protection, but behind the threatening process there lies the child's growing awareness of parental and adult authority. The verbal controls constantly remind children that by acting against the wishes of their parents they risk alienating their affection. In some ways, the whole pattern of threatening can be seen as an extension of the parents' sense of responsibility. They are responsible for the safety and protection of the infant, but older children are simply warned about the actual dangers and prohibitions which exist, and gradually learn to cope with them. As is amply demonstrated in the Newfoundland material, the young child assumes that parents and adults know what is going on in the world, and tends to accept their authority, especially in the early years. If parents persistently assert that particular consequences will follow if a social convention or taboo is violated, the child is inclined to believe this, at least partly out of apprehension or fear about what the consequences may be. A young child is easily frightened, and if adults do not explain away these fears, but play on them and exaggerate them instead, the child's own experience may be inadequate to cope with them, and so they play an important part in directing behaviour.

Until the recent past, when threatening the credulous young child, parents or other adults created or adapted any terrifying figures they wished for the purpose of social control, and encouraged the child to believe that these existed and had power to punish. Even when children outgrow this type of control, its original function may well persist in that the child has some concept of authority, often as embodied in various human authority figures. The invoking of figures and what they represent continue to make children aware of what is socially acceptable and what is not. Of course, children may react negatively against the controls, even from their earliest years, and deliberately violate taboos and act against the wishes of parents and other members of society. As children get older, however, it is assumed that they are able to look after themselves, and the original protective function of many threats used in early childhood becomes irrelevant.

Nowadays, the use of traditional threats, and especially those involving supernatural, fictitious, or invented figures, is no longer commonplace in most of the English-speaking world. Positive, rather than negative, means of verbal social control have largely superseded them, together with more open-minded and enlightened explanations of the consequences of unacceptable behaviour, and the use of encouragements, offers of rewards, and reinforcement of approved behavioural norms. Nevertheless, many of the older patterns of verbal threats are still heard, but the parents themselves, along with other human authority figures, have largely taken the place of their more frightening supernatural and fictitious predecessors.

Notes

1. This is a revised version of a paper first presented at the Millennium Conference of the Folklore Society, University of Edinburgh, March 24th, 2000.
2. See J. D. A. Widdowson, *If You Don't Be Good: Verbal Social Control in Newfoundland*, St. John's, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1977.
3. See G. P. Smith, "The Origin of an Illinois Tale", *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, VI, 2 (1942), 89-94.
4. See B. Rieti, *Strange Terrain: The Fairy World in Newfoundland*, St. John's, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1991, and P. Narváez, "Newfoundland Berry Pickers 'In the Fairies': Maintaining Spatial, Temporal, and Moral Boundaries Through Legendry", *Lore and Language*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1987), 15-49, rpt, with revisions, in P. Narváez, ed., *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, Lexington, Kentucky, University Press of Kentucky, 1997, pp. 336-367.
5. C. W. von Sydow, "The Mannhardtian Theories about the Last Sheaf and the Fertility Demons from a Modern Critical Point of View", in L. Bødker, ed., *Selected Papers on Folklore*, Copenhagen, Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1948, p. 101.
6. J. Cooper Foster, *Ulster Folklore*, Belfast, H. R. Carter Publications, 1951, pp. 106-107.
7. For a discussion of belief in such figures, see B. Tommola, "Yliluonnolliset Olennot Lastenpelotuksina" (Supernatural Beings Used for Frightening Children), *Suomi*, CVII (2), Helsinki, Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 52-55.

8. Ranke, F., "Kinderschreck, Popanz", in E. Hoffmann-Krayer, and H. Bächtold-Stäubli, eds, *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, IV, Berlin and Leipzig, Walter de Gruyter, 1931-1932, col. 1367.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. R. Bunzel, "Zuñi Katcinas: An Analytical Study", *Forty Seventh Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution*, 1929-1930, Washington, United States Government Printing Office, p. 938. See also, for example, R. Ploss, and B. Renz, *Das Kind in Brauch und Sitte der Völker*, 3rd edn, revised B. Renz, Leipzig, Th. Grieben's Verlag, 1911, p. 112: "Lässt man Kinder allein auf dem Abort sitzen, dann werden sie vom 'Hoggermann' geholt."