

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Prophet and the Sorcerer: Becoming a Cunning-Man in Nineteenth-Century Norway

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### ***Abstract***

Cunning-folk offering a wide range of mostly supernatural services were a common part of European popular culture until at least the early twentieth century. Still, insight into how they established themselves as people with extraordinary abilities is limited. In this article I approach two of the best-documented cases of nineteenth-century Norwegian cunning-folk. The preacher-prophet, healer, and clairvoyant Knut Rasmussen ('Vis-Knut', 1792–1876) and the diviner and sorcerer Eilev Olsen ('Spå-Eilev', 1814–1891) were 'living legends' who attracted clients from all over the country for more than fifty years. A wealth of historical and folkloristic sources allows us a rare glimpse into their early career stages and the dynamics by which two uneducated day labourers managed to become central actors in a local power play. An analysis of the local 'folk religious fields' details strategies, practices, and narratives used to cater to different factions, to convey claims of supernatural efficacy, and to create a regional market.

### ***Introduction***

The Norwegian Folklore Archives (*Norsk Folkemинnesamling*) hold thousands of legends about so-called cunning-folk (Norwegian *kloke folk*). They cured illnesses when no doctor could help, staunched the flow of blood when someone was injured, stated the whereabouts of missing persons and lost cattle, exposed thieves on the surface of a bowl of water, told fortunes, found treasures, twisted fates, and read the minds of those they met. To the folklorist browsing through the material, many of these professional clairvoyants, healers, dowsers, and fortune-tellers soon become familiar characters. They are connected to a wide network of intertwined narratives collected in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In these sources we hear about their specific areas of expertise and the legendary roots of their powers. While many folk medical experts and charmers could rely on formulas and recipes from family traditions or popular lay medicinal guides, cunning-people were said to have mastered one of the infamous black books, to have experienced an empowering encounter with elves (*huldefolk*) or demons, Sami or gypsies, or to have received a divine calling.<sup>1</sup> Accounts of their actual practice, however, are not quite as diverse as this variety of origin stories may suggest. In the folkloristic material tales about specific practices tend to blend with migratory legends that address universal fears and hopes, phrase generic critiques of the upper classes and their moral conduct or pose puzzles about what is possible and what is not. Many clairvoyants, for example, would be associated with episodes like the following involving the healer and diviner Vis-Knut (Wise Knut) from Gudbrandsdal:

Those who visited Vis-Knut had to have a good conscience. Because Vis-Knut saw right through them, as old people will tell you even today. A rich peasant once came

from Toten. He had lost his pocket watch, he said. It was a gold watch and quite expensive. Vis-Knut sat there brooding for some time. Then he said with a stern voice: 'You will find your watch on the floor of the barn where you slept with your maid last summer'. (Møller 1980, 63)<sup>2</sup>

Similar stories are told about the clairvoyant Spå-Eilev (Scry Eilev) from Telemark, who defended himself against accusations of dealing with the dark arts by claiming to 'just lie to people' (Flatin 1912, 50):

Once, it was court day in Bø, and Eilev was there. The judge was keen to amuse himself by getting a hold of Eilev: 'Can you lie a little bit for me today, Eilev?' he said. 'Well, this can always be done', Eilev said. And so he sat there for a while with his chin cupped in his hand, leaning on the court desk. 'The judge slept with his maid before he came here, and they agreed to meet at the same place when he gets home', he said and stared into the judge's eyes. The courtroom filled with loud jeering, but the judge was rather speechless and did not want to amuse himself on Eilev's expense anymore. (Flatin 1912, 51)

Rich peasants, clerics, doctors, or law enforcement agents tend to be the butt of the joke. Stories like these entertained because they dissected the social order, even when the protagonists were long gone. But when told in a contemporary setting, with the cunning-men still around and sought after in times of need, they had additional connotations. Migratory legends seem well-suited to establish the persona of a miracle worker and can thus be seen as building blocks for the 'construction' and acceptance of individuals practising popular magic or working miracles (Alver 2011). Recent folkloristic research has highlighted how generic narratives served to 'negotiate conflicting perceptions' of their practice, how they were used as 'social valuation of their services' and functioned to outline modes of conduct during a consultation (Tangherlini 2000, 290). A narrative demonstration of power, for example, would caution listeners to approach the wise ones with respect and care. The familiar motifs could substantiate claims of the practitioners, whose activity, in turn, would reinforce the stories told. But how were these dynamics triggered in the first place?

In his call for case-based and thoroughly historicized studies on cunning-folk, Willem de Blécourt posed the question of 'why people chose to consult *particular* specialists' (Blécourt 1994, 303; emphasis added). As Owen Davies has shown for the case of England, there was a significant market for cunning-folk in early modern times and throughout the nineteenth century, but this market was highly competitive and constantly challenged by religious and legal authorities as well as popular scepticism (Davies 2003). In terms of 'attractiveness to their clients' (Blécourt 1994, 301), a certain credit of trust, a plausible identification with a valid tradition and reports or rumours of earlier achievements seem necessary as a basis for a successful career. In the case of travelling cunning-folk it is reasonable to assume that 'empowering' narratives preceded them, creating a prototypical image they would then embody (e.g. Champagne 2007).<sup>3</sup> Most of the more renowned Norwegian miracle workers, however, were neither travellers nor incomers, but locals in small-scale communities, often known since childhood. And not all of them inherited a family tradition to build on or any form of privileged access to arcane knowledge, factors that may have increased their 'career prospects' (Davies 2003, 69). How did they make a name for themselves? The following case study analyses the historical

settings in which two day labourers managed to establish themselves as cunning-men 'from scratch'.

The aforementioned Vis-Knut and Spå-Eilev or, with their full names, Knut Rasmussen Nordgården (1792–1876) from the small village Svatsum in Gausdal parish (Oppland) and Eilev Olsen Hagen (1814–1891) from the settlement area Holtsås / Hjuksebø in Sauherad parish (Telemark) belong to the earliest and most prominent miracle workers in Norwegian folklore collections. In the following I will outline the settings in which Knut Rasmussen and Eilev Olsen made their first public appearances as 'extraordinary individuals'. In the case of Rasmussen, it was in 1818, when he, together with a small group of supporters, created a scandal by hijacking the local church for a public revelation and started acting as a prophet. In the case of Eilev Olsen, it was in 1838, when he was summoned to the local court as a witness and unexpectedly became the defendant in an anachronistic and chaotic sorcery trial. These rather outlandish events will then be contextualized within the folk religious field, understood with James Kapaló as a 'meeting place of various agentive forces; clerical and national ideological, secularizing and scholarly, and the lay actors', all of whom produce 'practices, actions and narratives' in response to self-perceived social and discursive oppositions (Kapaló 2013, 14–15). The approach allows one to historicize the rhetoric used, de-anonymize the constellations of local power plays, and understand the stratagems employed in order to kick-start a career as a cunning-man and become a 'living legend' in the early nineteenth century. The analysis shows that for communities and clients to accept a cunning-person, the strategic use of social tensions and the resulting political relevance was far more important than references to arcane knowledge or popular beliefs.

### ***Working Miracles: Two Tales of Conflict***

As young men both Knut Rasmussen and Eilev Olsen were day labourers (see Skar 1878; Hodne 1981). Growing up in humble conditions and without a substantial education, nor a family farm or business to build on, they were part of the large lower class of rural citizens with little reason to hope for social or economic advancement. The religious field held some prospects to gain social prestige, for example as a churchwarden or lay preacher, but was highly competitive and for the most part already allocated. A more dubious and economically worthwhile way to gain 'social prestige, respect from peers, and power within communities as well as over individuals' (Sneddon 2015, 34) was to become 'wise': a cunning-person. Due to the shortage and price of doctors, lay medical practitioners were in constant demand, and clairvoyants, often specializing in identifying thieves, would fill the function of law enforcement officials. Of course, these were delicate spheres of activity that required a significant credit of trust from notable parts of the small-scale communities. For locals with ambition, this often meant building on a given family tradition or basic medical training (see Holck 1996, 71; Bø 1972; Alver and Selberg 1992; Stokker 2007, 23–42).

Neither Rasmussen nor Olsen met any of these requirements. Still, they were able to establish themselves as two of Norway's most illustrious miracle workers. Active for more than fifty years, they attracted clients from large parts of the country. By the second half of the nineteenth century Eilev Olsen had worked his way up to become a farm owner (Heldal 2002, 417). Knut Rasmussen even became a sort of celebrity, although still living under moderate conditions. Accordingly, sources are rich. The many legends and memorates

(more than a thousand about Vis-Knut, several hundred about Spå-Eilev, with a significant amount collected during their lifetimes) are supplemented by a substantial collection of historical documents, including personal letters, court documents, locally distributed pamphlets, travelogues, and a steady stream of newspaper reports.

Journalists documented the cunning-folk's public appeal mostly in the form of polemics. For example, Rasmussen's claim that his divine gift made it impossible for him to touch money was often juxtaposed with anecdotal reports of clients being charged by his housekeepers (e.g. S[chulze] 1854, 14; *Morgenbladet*, 18 November 1862, 1). Both Vis-Knut and Spå-Eilev generally received their clients at home in individual consultations, but on occasional travels they drew large crowds: 'Spå-Eilev also came to Numedal last winter, and large crowds of people came to see him, as if he was a prophet. And Spå-Eilev knew how to profit from their superstition and was well paid for his prophetic talks, most of them concerning the boys' and girls' marriage prospects' (*Adressebladet*, 20 December 1865, 3). Knut Rasmussen became so famous that dozens of regional newspapers reported on his death in 1876 to keep those seeking help 'from taking the long journey in vain' (e.g. *Romsdals Amtstidende*, 14 June 1876, 2). One of the many death notices summarized his activities from a rationalist perspective:

Knut used his wit, observational skills and broad experience to say where one should dig for water and 'show' stolen goods; at the same time, he was a doctor and besides using medicinal products he often healed by stroking the affected body parts with his hands. Of course, it was easy for him to interrogate a client in a way that would tell him how to answer. Sometimes he was lucky, and therefore superstitious people saw in Knut not only a wise man, but a true prophet and miracle worker ['sand Profet og Mirakelmager']. (*Bergens Tidende*, 10 June 1876, 2)

The latter view is documented in the folkloristic material. Rasmussen attracted the attention of folklorists early on. He was featured as a popular curiosity in magazines (e.g. Botten-Hansen 1853, 63), and a first collection of legends devoted to him appeared as early as 1863 (Hansen Nygaard 1863). After one of the first folk high schools had been founded in Gausdal in 1871, a group of academics became interested in the rumours that connected so well to national romantic ideas and the emerging discussion about paranormal phenomena (Engen 1988, 196–205). Among them was the folklorist Johannes Skar, who published the first major monograph about a Norwegian miracle worker in 1876—a work built on a collaboration with Rasmussen himself (Skar 1876; 1898; cf. NFS Skar 64).<sup>4</sup> Though less prominent, legends and memorates about Spå-Eilev were also collected by dozens of folklorists, sometimes including interviews with former clients (e.g. Gunnheim 1915, 79–110).

Already by the early twentieth century, commentators drew parallels between the two cunning-men: 'Spå-Eilev resembles Vis-Knut closely' (Flatin 1912, 49), and while he was 'less known, he was just as interesting, as he also received frequent visits from people from near and far' (*Smaaleneses Social-Demokrat*, 28 November 1932, 1). There is an imbalance in the way they were depicted, though, with Spå-Eilev 'a somewhat more dubious personality, also with regard to morals' (Qvisling 1909, 27). Knut Rasmussen claimed divine inspiration and mostly explained his miraculous deeds as acts of God. Eilev Olsen was associated with a different story of empowerment, according to which he had

travelled to the 'north' and become engaged to a Sami girl in order to learn her family's dark arts (*trollkonst*). Once he had learned all there was to learn, the story goes, he abandoned his bride and returned to Telemark (e.g. Flatin 1912, 49; Gunnheim 1915, 80). Based on these stories of origin, Knut Rasmussen was mostly discussed in the framework of popular religion and folk medicine (e.g. Møller 1980; Amundsen 1995; Holck 1996), while Eilev Olsen was referred to as a prototypical practitioner of popular magic (e.g. Hodne 2008; Johannsen 2013). Still, their actual practices were strikingly similar. The stories of origin and the subsequent classifications as 'magic' or 'religion' were the result of different constellations in which the two cunning-men first gained influence: Rasmussen took the role of a prophet to undermine the church's religious monopoly; Olsen acted a sorcerer (*trollmann*) to undermine the administration's legal monopoly.

### **The Making of a Prophet: Vis-Knut**

Knut Rasmussen grew up on a farm called Nordgården in Svatsum, Gausdal parish. Religious life in the region was shaped by several factions. Clerics, officials, and many of the more influential peasants identified as 'rationalists' or, sometimes, 'freethinkers'. They considered Protestantism to be a religion in accordance with enlightened thought. Most of them were members of the local chapter of the learned Society for the Good of Norway (Selskabet for Norges Vel; see *Budstikken*, 3 April 1812, 117; and 8 November 1811, 258–59). Another significant part of the local population, with centres in nearby Øyer and Lom, identified as 'Haugians', followers of the pietistic preacher Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771–1824) (Bang 1875, 418). They were well connected through regular conventicles (lay religious gatherings) and spending time as wandering lay preachers. Knut Rasmussen's family belonged to the third and largest group, which lacked an institutionalized forum: adherents of the more classical pietistic faith as it had been promulgated by the earlier Danish church (cf. Amundsen 2005).

As a child Knut was diagnosed with epilepsy and had to leave school. His father died in 1808, a brother in 1812. The latter left Knut a copy of *Kingo's salmebok*, the hymnal commonly used in church services. Rasmussen later reported that it was in the following year that he had his first audition (auditory 'vision'): With his inner ear he heard angels sing hymns from the *Kingo*, while he carefully followed the text, verse by verse, with his finger, thus learning how to read. Through song he also received a call to preach and to heal (Skar 1898, 7–30). But it was not until 1818 that he entered the public sphere with his 'aerial songs' (*luftsanger*).

Svatsum's church was an annex, serviced only every eight to nine weeks by the Gausdal parish priest Hans Henrik Thaulow (1754–1823). In 1808 he had taken office as a convinced rationalist and articulate critic of the Haugian movement (Thaulow 1919, 222; Bang 1875, 78 and 119). He made moral education and agricultural reforms a priority, used his own manual instead of Luther's catechism during catechization (probably NFS Skar 64: 3) and, at some point, exchanged the trusted *Kingo* hymnal for the more sober *New Evangelical*.<sup>5</sup> However, his ideas of a spiritual and economic modernization were poorly timed. Four cold winters followed by the infamous 'frost winter' of 1812 left the peasants without seeds, and in 1813 the Danish monetary reform following the Gunboat War against Great Britain devalued their savings (Kleiven 1926, 109–23). Poverty rates and forced tax sales skyrocketed, creating a sharp contrast to the relative prosperity of earlier days. Some of Svatsum's peasants were notably dissatisfied with the ways authorities addressed these

challenges. After his father's death Knut Rasmussen worked for his neighbour Ole Pedersen Klåpe (1774–1820), a fatherly friend and an outspoken critic of the local authorities. In 1814 Klåpe was sentenced to a large fine for publicly insulting the district's procurator who, together with the judge and priest Thaulow, constituted the district commission of the Society for the Good of Norway (*Budstikken*, 14 May 1813, 206). Klåpe filed for appeal in 1815 and humiliated the local authorities when he won his case at the Christiania High Court (*Den Norske Rigstidende*, 3 January 1816, 3).<sup>6</sup> Three years later he became Knut Rasmussen's most influential supporter when local tensions erupted into open conflict.

On 7 June 1818 Knut Rasmussen attended a church service in Svatsum. When Thaulow asked the churchgoers to sing from the *New Evangelical*, Rasmussen collapsed into what seemed to be an epileptic seizure. Still in a catatonic state, he was carried out of the church, where he began to sing hymns from the *Kingo*. Two days later he and a small group of supporters forced entry into the church:

On Tuesday the 9th of June he [Knut Rasmussen] was forced and driven by the spirit of God to go to God's church in Svatsum, annex to the Gausdal parish [written as *Gudsdal* = God's valley] . . . When he came so close to the church that he could see it, he had to go directly towards it, across rosebushes and turnips and on unusual paths . . . and after entering the church he fainted, and at this moment it was spiritually commanded to him to sing three psalms from the old hymnal . . . [H]e said: Go away from me, out of the temple [*tæmpelen*], I will lie here for two hours. When he awoke, he was sitting on the floor of the church and said what is written below, commanded to be documented. (Revelation, June 1818, in NFS Skar 64: 60)

What followed were eight commandments, most of them directed against Thaulow. They denounced Thaulow's catechetic manual, called for the old hymnal ('banished from the temple') to be reinstated and found educational and agrarian reforms to violate the word of God: '[T]he voices of angels [*englerøst*] I write . . . If you do not listen to these commandments, God will send his sword, with pestilence and bloody wars, and they will fall like grass' (NFS Skar 64: 60). The proclamation was signed by Svatsum's teacher and two peasants, then copied and distributed within the community.

Thaulow was not happy, especially since none of this came as a surprise. In a letter to the bishop he explained how he was approached and threatened before the event to not intervene and described the 'spontaneous' revelation as an announced and enacted spectacle. Rather than an 'instrument of God', Knut Rasmussen seemed to him an instrument of radicals, and he initially suspected the 'halfwit' to have fallen for a Haugian plot: 'In my opinion he should be committed to a hospital or the insane asylum as soon as possible'. The Church Department, however, suggested he keep calm and monitor the development (Skar 1898, 45). In the meantime, Ole Pedersen Klåpe provided Knut Rasmussen with a handwritten testimonial of his honest character, signed by a group of eight supporters (NFS Skar 64: 10). What followed were some turbulent months of creative religious conduct: Thaulow and the local civil servants explained Knut Rasmussen's seizures as resulting from sickness, and Rasmussen's supporters agreed, but claimed this sickness to be one of the parish. Thaulow argued for an enlightened form of Christianity in accordance with a scientific view of the world. Rasmussen's group responded by arranging public experiments: Rasmussen was blindfolded and presented with either the *Kingo* or the

*New Evangelical.* Inevitably, the latter would drop from his shaking hands. He would get seizures from touching luxury items and money, or wearing a hat, and even from the mere sight of a sheriff or a judge: a brilliant move (and very well-understood as such by the authorities) for openly denouncing them as depraved without giving them a chance to hold him accountable for offence. Another legal grey area was the series of private religious gatherings he attended. Knut Rasmussen would give inspired speeches, practise the laying on of hands and trigger ecstatic visions, a stark contrast to the established format of Haugian conventicles, but simply declared to be the same. Since Rasmussen never acted as the formal host, the administration had little chance of proscribing the charismatic meetings without antagonizing the Haugians. Rasmussen was expelled from several parishes, but after the first attempt at enforcing this order almost led to a riot most sheriffs kept a low profile. To Thaulow, the developments posed a riddle: 'It is hard to believe that anyone would be so gullible to let this goofy fool pose a threat as an enthusiast; big mistake!' he wrote to the bishop. 'They conduct pilgrimages to him from surrounding parishes, and this imbecile is called (horribile dictu) the wise boy' (Skar 1898, 45).

Declaring himself an 'instrument of God', Knut Rasmussen had made a forceful entry onto the local religious stage. He had taken on the role of a peasant prophet, well known from the tradition of celestial letters that was still common in Norway (cf. Devlin 1987, 140–64; Amundsen 1995). Political and economic divides in the small community were exposed by a social misfit. The church officials, the administration, and the Haugians were forced to address the events, but not on their own terms. Rasmussen's new way of communicating religion and social critique left them in a reactive position. Many local peasants observed the spectacle from a sceptical distance (e.g. Johannessen 1990, 201). It remains unclear whether any of Rasmussen's early supporters saw him as a prophet or simply as a chance to antagonize their well-organized opponents. It did not matter, though. For the social dynamics, the persona of a renegade prophet was far more important than belief in his abilities. The conventicles were a refuge, where attendees were at liberty to express individual religiosity and harsh social critique. It was not until 1820 that the radical revival lost its momentum, when Hans Nielsen Hauge called Rasmussen out for being a fraud (Kvamen 1972, 270; cf. Erichsen Bjørge 1820, 29): 'I had hoped, after receiving diverse reports about you, that a good spirit would have called you', one of his open letters began. Hauge urged Rasmussen to moderate his radicalism and opposition against 'the authorities' so not to 'cause war in the parishes', and he enumerated Rasmussen's alleged misdemeanours in great detail:

You work many types of miracles, scry etc. But . . . nothing you do is similar to Jesus' and his apostles' miracles . . . You try to heal sicknesses; but show me just one who was actually cured! Instead, you approach women inappropriately, touching their bosoms. You try books, if you can pick them up with your hand. So wrong! You should read the books . . . (Kvamen 1972, 291–93)

After this setback, a period of sickness, and the death of Ole Pedersen Klåpe, Knut Rasmussen settled with a small group of followers. There are no further reports about prophetic 'aerial songs' after 1820. But his two years as a peasant prophet had provided him with a name to build on. When the bishop's assistant paid the region a visit in 1828, he found a profitable healing business to have emerged from the former movement. His

followers would now collect the money that Rasmussen could not touch (Knutzen 1922, 86). A medical doctor pressed charges for quackery and Rasmussen was sentenced to a high fine and two weeks of arrest in 1829, but the sentence just created a new wave of rumours (NFS Skar 64: 58).<sup>7</sup> In 1837 Norway established municipal self-government, and among the first elected chairmen in Gausdal were several of his early supporters. In 1840 they allowed for alternative religious gatherings (Engen 1988, 79 and 111). Knut Rasmussen was now free to receive visitors from all over the country until his death in 1876. His seizures, initially declared to be manifestations of God's judgement, remained a recognizable feature of every aspect of his practice as a clairvoyant and healer. They indicated water veins, were triggered when he 'heard' about events that took place far away, marked the location of an illness in the body of a client, and accompanied all acts of divination.

### **The Making of a Sorcerer: Spå-Eilev**

The second case of a day labourer establishing himself as a cunning-man in nineteenth-century Norway unfolds twenty years after Knut Rasmussen's initial appearance. The discursive framework in the case of Eilev Olsen was that of secular law, but the social dynamics triggered by his initial claim of spiritual communication were similar to those seen in Rasmussen's case. Like Rasmussen, Olsen managed to play local oppositions against each other and to make manifest underlying conflicts, compensating for any lack of belief in his abilities.

Eilev Olsen was born in 1814. His mother died early and his father, a tenant, faced economic hardship, forcing him to give up most of his leased farmland (Hodne 1981, 10). Young Eilev Olsen worked as a day labourer. He was 'proficient' and had a 'good reputation', as the parish priest attested in 1837, but this testimony became obsolete the following year. In November 1838 Olsen was summoned to the Lower Telemark district court as a witness.<sup>8</sup> One of his friends had reported the theft of half a ton of barley from his barn and accused his neighbour Tollef Pedersen Slåttekåsa. A dozen witnesses were summoned, most of them agreeing that Pedersen Slåttekåsa was the likely culprit. Eilev Olsen could even report that the accused's daughter, Torgon Tollefsdatter, had, in private, already admitted to her father's crime. But when Torgon was asked to give her testimony, the mundane lawsuit changed pace. She declared that an act of divination was the only reason why her father had been brought to court: Eilev Olsen claimed to be 'omniscient' and to have 'shown him [her father Pedersen Slåttekåsa] in the water'. Conjuring an image in a bowl of water was a common magical technique for identifying thieves (or future spouses) with a long European tradition, often described in early modern Norwegian black books (cf. Mencej 2015, 142; Bang 1901, 680–88). Torgon claimed that Eilev had blackmailed her, threatening to take her father's health (again, by magical means) and to surrender him to the devil if she did not pay for the missing barley. At that point in the court hearing things became tumultuous. The plaintiff conceded that he had heard rumours about Olsen acting as a diviner, but found these to be unrelated to the case. The court documents note an interjection from Torgon, shouting at the plaintiff that he had approached her, remarking: 'Your father is the culprit. Eilev has shown him in the water'. He admitted to having said 'something along these lines', but 'only to make her realize her father's guilt'.



The judge was stunned by this unexpected turn of events and called every witness to the stand for a second testimony. The witnesses who had previously referred to the neighbour's bad reputation now openly agreed that it was Eilev Olsen's act of divination that had identified the culprit. Olsen, it turned out, claimed clairvoyant powers. Only one of the witnesses admitted to believing in Eilev's abilities as a clairvoyant, though: 'As proof, he said that Tollef was identified as the culprit, and that he, according to Eilev, actually wanted to steal wheat, but because he found some weed in it took the barley instead'. Eilev Olsen denied his guilt, but admitted to 'possibly' having read fortunes from cards 'for the fun of it' and to 'possibly, for fun, having said what had happened there [at the barn]'. Olsen did not show up for a later court session in December, and after the court heard several new testimonies about his misdemeanours and the parish priest calling him a blasphemer, he was charged with 'fraud by superstitious arts'. In April 1839 Eilev Olsen was sentenced *in absentia* to three years of hard labour and subsequent expulsion from the 'king's lands and realm'. The court had made anachronistic use of a law from 1687 against minor forms of witchcraft that included clairvoyance (Denmark-Norway 1687, bk 6, chap. 1, §12; cf. Hodne 1981).

Several weeks later Eilev Olsen turned up and was arrested, stating simply that he had been 'to the north'. The obscure comment may indicate that the legendary root of his powers, the magic of the indigenous Sami, had already been used as a *topos*. In any case, it may have helped spread the rumour later on. Back from 'the north', Eilev Olsen filed for an appeal, which was tried in the court of appeal (*Akershus Stiftsrett*) in 1839. In the court of appeal Olsen was asked to defend himself by presenting five people who could vouch for his character. The testimonies provide an interesting glimpse into his early attempts to act as a cunning-man, who told fortunes 'just for fun' and in a hardly convincing manner. Olsen claimed to have been tricked into reading from the cards by Tollef Pedersen's family, who wanted to damage his reputation. But his chosen witnesses countered the account and stated that he had declared himself a diviner since 1838 (shortly before the initial trial), when he came back from a journey to the mountains and was too ill to work for a long period of time. One of the witnesses had even had his fortune told, but with meagre results: 'It was something anyone could have said'. In the end it did not harm Eilev. According to a curious piece in the law gazette *Norsk Retstidende*, not even Olsen seemed to believe in his ability to scry, and he had certainly not forced the belief on anyone: 'He seems guilty of careless and false claims, for example that you should not pray to God but to him, and that a person will come at the end of times and he is the one, and similar things. Otherwise, his reputation seems to be good' (Brandt 1861, 244). When the case was reviewed by the Christiania High Court in 1840, the judges turned out to be more concerned with the procedural error of sentencing Olsen in his absence and the district court's decision to expel a Norwegian citizen from the 'king's lands and realm' than with local 'superstition' and theft.<sup>9</sup> Eilev Olsen was reprimanded, but his conviction overturned. He was a free man. The district judge, however, was disciplined by the high court, and, based on his bad reputation, Tollef Pedersen Slåtekåsa was sentenced to hard labour for theft. The witchcraft laws were officially abolished in 1844.

The prominent trial was the beginning of Olsen's long career as a cunning-man (e.g. *Den Constitutionelle*, 20 February 1840, 3; *Den Norske Rigstidende*, 22 February 1840, 3). As in the case of Knut Rasmussen, it may not be important whether any of the initially involved parties actually believed in Olsen's divinatory skills. With the outcome of the trial,

Eilev Olsen was established as an extraordinary individual. He had humiliated the local judge *and* got a disliked (alleged) criminal convicted. It was a victory for 'the people', later celebrated in dozens of legends, which describe him as a trickster who constantly challenged the authorities while catching thieves they failed to find. The strategy of creating ambiguity about his powers, successful in the trial, now became his signature feature. When asked if he could read a person's fortune from coffee grounds, he would reply: 'Well, I don't know anything, but we can sit and talk for a while'. He offered 'to lie to me [ljugá litt for meg]. Yes, that was what I wanted. . . . I offered him payment, but he did not want it. I gave it to him anyway, and he took it. He never asked for money' (Gunnheim 1915, 93 and 104–105). Several accounts of his practice emphasize how thieves would confess or return the stolen goods once they heard that Spå-Eilev had been contacted (e.g. Gunnheim 1915, 88).<sup>10</sup> The rumours created their own reality.

### ***Cunning-Folk and the Folk Religious Field***

The events by which Vis-Knut and Spå-Eilev made a name for themselves were certainly extreme with regard to the repercussions provoked by a 'coming out' as a miracle worker. Still, they represent more than just anecdotal evidence of the general mechanisms by which cunning-men could first enter the regional religious market. Cunning-folk can be seen as main proponents of a folk religious field, 'where communication with the divine or metaphysical is contested and where access to spiritual and practical resources for the resolution of this-worldly troubles and the assurance of other-worldly futures is disputed' (Kapaló 2013, 4). James Kapaló recently pointed out that this field should not be seen as disconnected from major religious and political debates and discursive formations, but rather as the result thereof. Inscribed in the category '*folk* religion' is the specific modern 'European experience of religion as a discursive field dominated by Christian Churches, nation states, the ideology of romantic nationalism . . . , and Enlightenment and secularist thought' (Kapaló 2013, 4). Speaking of a folk religious field (as opposed to 'vernacular' or 'popular' religion) and understanding it as a 'shifting site of competing agencies' (3) thus highlights how specific religious practices were produced against the backdrop of this experience, as local responses to modern ideologies and identities. It enables us to contextualize local power plays within their contemporary macro-national political context and shed new light on the role of 'popular beliefs'.

### **Local Power Plays: We the People**

In 1814 Norway's union with Denmark was dissolved. Norway gained its own constitution and became part of a united kingdom with Sweden. The question of what 'people' constituted the new nation was in full swing and far from limited to the major centres. The terms used in the historical documents to comment on the events revolving around Knut Rasmussen and Eilev Olsen point to the new discursive dynamics that were triggered by these major political developments: Where 'the commoners' (*almuen*) were accused of superstitious practices by 'the learned' (*lærde*), as they had been for centuries, we now find responses attacking the 'authorities' (*øvrigheter*) as libertine 'freethinkers' (*fritenker*), indebted to French-influenced Danish law and theology and thus unable to judge the genuine faith of 'the people' (*folket*). But who were 'the people' who, according to the new constitution, should make the law? Which theology would correspond to the nation's

needs? Abstract debates on these matters developed into full-blown conflicts, where the social organization was unstable and based on provisional arrangements.

Crucial for both cases is that they unfolded in peripheral regions of already remote parishes, located dozens of miles from the places where the priest and sheriff resided. As the course of the trial against Eilev Olsen illustrates, the local residents were expected to create a form of self-regulated community. In case of theft, they had to provide evidence and sufficient testimonials to get an alleged thief convicted. In a way, this is precisely what the aggrieved party did, but the judge rejected their means – clairvoyance – as ‘superstitious’. Svatum annex church, in which Rasmussen declared himself a prophet, was serviced only every few months. In between services the honorary bell-ringer was supposed to maintain order and organize devotions. He was later interrogated by Thaulow, but could not agree to the latter’s verdict of ‘superstition’. To him, Rasmussen’s message was relevant and worth being heard. Again, religious authorities had expected the locals to organize in a self-regulating community, but interfered with the results. While Olsen’s divinatory skills or Rasmussen’s revelations may have seemed dubious to many, there was reason enough to deem their messages politically legitimate and therefore not to side with the judge or the priest.

Add to this initial constellation a second dynamic that unfolded in the cunning-folks’ rhetoric, as well as in regional rumours, and is fully visible in the folkloric material. For the locals, the events were based on known animosities between families, quarrels with the priest, previous legal and religious conflicts, etc. Yet already in the first narrative accounts these communal struggles were made invisible. In Rasmussen’s early letters, for example, he describes being mocked by ‘the priest’, contradicted by a ‘Herod’ (the sheriff), silenced by ‘soldiers’ (e.g. NFS Skar 64: 4). In his account the opposition was made faceless, and his group of supporters became ‘the people’. Rumours following this narrative pattern spread rapidly (Skar 1898, 79), as they were meaningful and could be related to even outside the specific social constellations of Gausdal, and they merged easily with the wide range of migratory legends. As prototypical narrative characters in a prototypical conflict, the cunning-men became manifestations of ‘the people’s’ agency. In the folkloric material, legendary Vis-Knut and Spå-Eilev are always haunted by ‘authorities’, an anonymized collective of judges, land barons, and priests. Of course, as seen in the examples from the introduction to this article, they always came out on top.

### **Folk Religion beyond Belief**

With the conflict-ridden social situations providing a basis on which commoners could take a prominent position in the discussion of power structures and qualify as extraordinary individuals, it is possible to rethink the role of belief in the work of cunning-folk. The local milieu has never been the cunning-folk’s target audience (cf. Macfarlane 1999, 121). Visiting Svatum around 1854, the British tourist Henry Thomas Newton Chesshyre noticed how belief in Vis-Knut’s divine gift ‘was held in high estimation, not so much by his immediate neighbours as by those at some distance’ (Chesshyre 1861, 79; cf. Kjerulf 1866, 53). Also Spå-Eilev’s neighbours ‘were no strong believers in his abilities’ (Qvisling 1909, 30). Several local residents recalled perceiving Rasmussen as a sort of ‘bogeyman’ during childhood, with their parents threatening to call him when they were unruly (Søegaard 1868, 135; Fosse 1941, 45). But even though the relationship was ambiguous, the locals acted as important facilitators. In spreading rumours and, later on, catering to journalists

or folklorists (often still a part of local power plays), they made use of the socio-political potential embodied by ‘their’ miracle-man.

Of course, the sources also reveal concrete economic interests. The law that prevented cunning-folk from charging their visitors boosted the local goods economy when visitors brought tobacco, spirits, coffee, leather, and wool, or bought gifts from the local farmers (e.g. Fosse 1941). The chairman of the Gausdal peasant association, Paul Hansen Nygaard (1801–1877), published a promotional biography of Vis-Knut, first in 1863 and then in four enhanced editions up until 1875 (Hansen Nygaard 1863; 1875; cf. *Den Norske Rigstidende*, 24 May 1860, 1). In his booklet he conceded that many legends seemed unbelievable, but did not fail to mention that most clients were happy with the results when they ‘came to the author’s house for overnight accommodation’ (Hansen Nygaard 1863, 3–5). Eilev Olsen provided his neighbours with interest-free loans, another economic surplus created by successful religious entrepreneurship (Gunnheim 1915, 95).

In accordance with a pattern that ‘seems typical in the European clients’, it was the wider region, disconnected from local feuds, but still informed through rumours that provided a steady stream of clients (Mencej 2015, 118; cf. Behringer 1994, 94). Like the locals, though, these clients were no homogeneous group of ‘believers’. The standard legend motif of sceptics testing the cunning-man’s abilities documents, if anything, the prevalence of doubt (cf. Correll 2005). Consultations were rarely private, and many reports made by witnesses to consultations confirm that this doubt was by no means a façade when talking to priests or folklorists. Some clients came with a slight hope or, in the case of theft, with a belief in the social effect a consultation would cause. Others came ‘for fun’ (Gunnheim 1915, 85) or with a casual attitude, ‘just to see if he could say something’ about the future or where to dig for the well they would be building anyway (Kleiven 1926, 304). Others saw a chance to talk about their own visions or religious experiences and get them validated (Fosse 1941, 143). Visiting an ‘odd sorcerer [*runekall*]’ such as Spå-Eilev, having him read coffee grounds and one’s thoughts ‘was an experience’ (Gunnheim 1915, 90). The largest group was probably those who were desperate (cf. Davies 1999, 72–73). Unsuccessful attempts to find cures, the distress of losing a child, poverty preventing people from going to the doctor—these were dominating topics reported from conversations with cunning-men.

Both Eilev Olsen and Knut Rasmussen openly addressed the disbelief of their visitors and proved flexible enough to cater to different target groups. While Knut Rasmussen established himself in a pronounced pietistic setting and organized prayer groups until old age, not everyone was confronted with readings from the Bible or songs from the *Kingo* hymnal (which he also used for bibliomancy). When ill, some obtained medical recipes (often involving spirits and blueberries in various combinations), others received religious admonitions and prayer instructions, and yet others were advised to perform classical magical rituals like taking a bath in a specific river on three Thursday nights.<sup>11</sup> To some, it was emphasized that the healing power of his touch came from God or that information about a cure came from the angels. Keeping up with the times, others learned about the ‘telegraph’ in Rasmussen’s head or the ‘magnetism’ or ‘electricity’ in his fingertips (e.g. Fosse 1941, 124 and 217).<sup>12</sup> Sometimes he simply recommended they consult a doctor, just like Eilev Olsen would sometimes simply suggest ‘looking’ for missing property, or reassure clients that, one day, they would find a spouse.

Their practice was probably effective with certain forms of illness, recovering some stolen goods or finding a good spot to dig a well. It definitely provided peace of mind. After Rasmussen told an old woman that her son who had emigrated had a good life in the United States, 'the distressed mother's joy was obvious' (*Romsdals Amtstidende*, 14 June 1876, 2). To a student who witnessed such a consultation, Rasmussen confided: 'Nobody can tell anything for sure before a letter [from the United States] arrives, - but I comfort the poor souls as good as I can' (Dahl 1870, 7). Eilev Olsen's assertion: 'I just lie to people . . . and they are so crazy that they believe me' (Flatin 1912, 50) may have been spot on, but 'people' had sufficient reasons to do so, even without having recourse to 'popular belief'.

### ***Conclusion***

In his foundational chapter on cunning-folk in the age of witch-hunts, Keith Thomas suggested that cunning-folk 'maintained their prestige by a combination of fraud and good psychology' (Thomas 1991, 289). While the cases discussed corroborate this assumption, Thomas may have underestimated the clients' ability to detect fraud. The learned commentators of popular 'superstitions' in the first half of the nineteenth century certainly did. Analysis of the wider "'person field" in which [cunning-folk] operated' has shown that not only did cunning-people play 'their own power games' (Blécourt 1994, 302–303), but their practice was connected to very specific religious, political, and economic interests in the local communities. The local cunning-man was no outsider preying on the simple-minded. He was attractive to his clients for having successfully challenged the authorities in the name of the people. He had demonstrated the legitimacy of their needs and means, their beliefs and hopes.

The approach adopted in this case study has aimed at historicizing cunning-men without declaring them 'children of their time', but by showing how conflicted local constellations opened up for strategic actions by which they were able to position themselves at the centre of pre-existing social conflicts. As characteristic proponents of the folk religious fields, they not only participated in the dominating debates of an emerging modernity, but manifested them. The two day labourers were each able to adopt a persona compatible with traditional accounts of miracle workers and become 'living legends' when they took the centre stage in their conflicted local communities.

To build a following, Knut Rasmussen and his supporters exploited latent conflicts between adherents of a rationalized understanding of Christianity and different groups leaning towards pietistic forms of Christianity. By embodying such conflicts in auditions and revelatory seizures, Rasmussen externalized the tensions as an outspoken dichotomy of 'the people' versus 'the oppressors'. By the time his radicalized movement was stopped by the Haugians, Knut Rasmussen had transformed into 'the wise boy'. Rumours of miraculous events, disconnected from the specific setting of the local community, had spread to the wider region from which he now received his clients.

The starting point of Eilev Olsen's career as a cunning-man who specialized in telling fortunes and detecting thieves was a court trial he did not enter on purpose. Still, the unfolding dynamics were similar to Rasmussen's case. Oppositions were played against each other when one man made manifest previously silent conflicts. Olsen's role in showing the alienation between 'the people' and 'the authorities' spread the word beyond the local community. With the successful outcome of the appeal, and the thief convicted, he became attractive to his first actual clients: believers, those who expected others to believe, those

who found 'it hard to tell what one should believe' (Gunnheim 1915, 174), and those who wanted to believe.

As a 'meeting place of various agentive forces', the folk religious field is never static (Kapaló 2013, 14). In the initial phase in the early nineteenth century, folk religious debates and practices in Norway were shaped by early modern religious traditions like celestial letters and dominated by the classical protestant factions, rationalists, and pietists. But soon, the debate on the nation, the folkloristic enterprise, and post-positivistic understandings of science changed the folk religious field's character. By the second half of the nineteenth century, cunning-folk were forced to develop new marketing strategies. They had to relate to an ever growing corpus of folkloristic publications that canonized 'their' tradition, they had to cater to a national press that popularized the emerging debates on parapsychological phenomena, and they found themselves in a shared marketplace with new religious movements. Whereas Eilev Olsen tried to shield himself from the growing public sphere, Knut Rasmussen was the first Norwegian cunning-man to systematically adapt to these changes. He collaborated with folklorists, toned down the religious message connected to his practice, aligned his narrative accordingly, and became a model for future generations of Norwegian miracle healers (cf. Bergo 1974; Parmann 1974, 45–51; Foros 1977, 16; Lerum and Grimstveit 1988, 147; Andreassen 1984, 54–55; Kraft 2010). Becoming a cunning-man and being perceived as a living legend in nineteenth-century Norway did not mean persuading people of one's miraculous powers, but rather making one's claim relevant to many actors in a constantly shifting folk religious field.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Boundaries between charmers, practitioners of folk medicine, and cunning-folk were fluid (cf. Davies 1998). In this article 'cunning-folk' refers to practitioners who marketed a wider range of supernatural services (cf. Blécourt 1994; Davies 2003). Most previous research on cunning-folk has been done in the context of historiographies of witchcraft, as identifying witchcraft was one of their core areas of expertise in early modern times and beyond (e.g. MacFarlane 1999; Thomas 1991; Simpson 1996; Gijswijt-Hofstra 1999; Blécourt and Davies 2004). 'Unwitching', however, plays a minor role in nineteenth-century southern Norway. While legends about envy causing harm are quite frequent, evidence for professional supernatural action is scarce and few identifiable cunning-people seem to have acted as witch-finders. For some regions of Norway this may be due to alternative explanations of mischief in the 'local cultural tradition', as Ronald Hutton has argued for the case of Ireland (cf. Hutton 2011, 71). Although witches are never mentioned in the sources presented in this article, the cunning-men's practices largely overlap with the practice of cunning-folk documented from other European countries.

<sup>2</sup> All translations from Scandinavian sources are mine.

<sup>3</sup> For nineteenth-century southern Norway, newspaper reports and folkloristic material suggest that wandering ragmen and beggars as well as gypsies and Sami were 'myth-enshrouded' to a degree that made it difficult for them *not* to be identified as potential practitioners of magic.

<sup>4</sup> In early 1873 a newspaper had published a fierce attack against the founder of Gausdal's folk high school, Christopher Bruun, calling him out as 'the new Vis-Knut': where the old soothsayer had tried to cure sick peasants, the anonymous author stated, the new 'political quack' was trying 'to cure the sick state', even though he knew as little about politics as Knut Rasmussen knew about medicine (*Bergens Adressecontoirs Efterretninger*, 9 February 1873, 2). Bruun then asked his brother-in-law, Johannes Skar, to compile this folkloristic (and sympathetic) study about Vis-Knut. In 1877–78, 'national poet' Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, who had recently settled in Gausdal, published a popular re-

narration of Skar's account that made Vis-Knut an iconic figure (Bjørnson 1878). Bjørnson's highly fictionalized account captured the *Zeitgeist* by merging national romantic ideas with criticism of the church and parapsychology.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Henrik Thaulow was a vocal nationalist and a candidate for the Eidsvoll constitutional assembly. While in Gausdal he wrote regular contributions to the national journal, using the pseudonym Haakon Haraldsson Thorsklubbe (Thor's club). He argued for the Norwegian parliament's 'sacred duty' to claim compensation for the years of Danish oppression (*Det Norske Nationalblad*, 21 November 1815, 147–50) and a controversial reform of allodial rights (*Det Norske Nationalblad*, 22 February 1816, 122–24).

<sup>6</sup> He was later said to own a 'black book' and consequently to have magical powers, a rumour that would often follow an unexpected juridical victory against superior adversaries (Johannessen 1990, 200). We cannot rule out that the legend holds true. The Norwegian Folklore Archives include a significant number of black books from the region: three from the neighbouring parish of Fron dated to around 1750–1800, others from Ringebu and Dovre, and a later copy from Gausdal.

<sup>7</sup> Medical doctor Jørgen Hasberg, from distant Kongsberg, pressed charges after one of his patients had travelled to Gausdal on behalf of a group of sick people, told Knut nothing but their names, and received a list of diagnoses and recommended treatments for the individual patients. The arrest, however, was for violations of the Conventicle Act in the years 1818–20. The sentence was signed by the same judge humiliated by Ole Pedersen Klåpe fourteen years earlier and might have come as a late revenge.

<sup>8</sup> SAKO Nedre Telemark sorenskriveri, Ekstraretsprotokoll 1835–42, 261–64 and 266–68. Ørnulf Hodne has kindly provided me with a transcript, also including notes on the appeal: Høyesterett L. nos 1–17, 1st session 1840, folder 3, case 52, and a copy of the high court's verdict: Høyesterettsdommer for 1840. Justisdepartementets forskjellige protokoller, no. 58, case 52.

<sup>9</sup> RA Høyesterett, Voteringsprotokoller, 1840, 21a–22b.

<sup>10</sup> According to several accounts, when called to a farm after a theft he would gather the suspected maids and workers and hand them a glass of spirits, filled to the rim. Staring at them, he would see if any of them was afraid and shaking in order to identify the thief (e.g. *Arbeiderbladet*, 4 August 1934, 19–20; Gunnheim 1915, 86 and 89). Owen Davies describes this 'deterrent effect of their reputation' (Davies 2003, 97).

<sup>11</sup> Knut Rasmussen's Christian profile, however, remained relevant in attacking competitors. In Hansen Nygaard's promotional booklet (1863, 22), potential clients are warned not to consult charmers (*Signekjæringer*) or similar 'superstitious' practitioners because it would make Rasmussen's work much more difficult: sick people who had done so 'should expect a severe lecture'.

<sup>12</sup> Newspapers had their breakthrough as a mass medium in Norway in the early nineteenth century, and they would soon feature modern explanatory frameworks that emerged with regard to spiritual powers and traditional forms of metaphysical practice. Critical discussions of topics such as animal magnetism (e.g. *Morgenbladet*, 13 November 1819) or detailed reports about fraud committed by travelling cunning-folk (e.g. *Morgenbladet*, 28 December 1841, 4) were framed by romantic legends about popular beliefs, magical formulas reprinted 'for the sake of curiosity' (*Drammens Tidende*, 24 December 1829, 1–2) and advertisements for magic kits like 'The Little Sorcerer', or the latest pocket edition of *Damernes Orakel, eller det smukke Kjøns Sandsiger* (The Lady's Oracle, or: The Fortune Teller of the Fair Sex) (e.g. *Morgenbladet*, 21 December 1838, 2).

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RA = Riksarkivet (National Archives of Norway), Oslo, Norway. RA Høyesterett [Supreme Court of Norway], E/Eb/Eba/L0029, Voteringsprotokoller [Minutes of the proceedings], 1840, case 52, 21a–22b.

SAKO = Statsarkivet i Kongsberg (Regional State Archive in Kongsberg), Kongsberg, Norway. SAKO Nedre Telemark sorenskriveri [Lower Telemark district court], F/Fc/Fca/L0006A: Ekstraretsprotokoll [Minutes of the extraordinary court hearings], 1835–1842, 261–64 and 266–68.

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