Traditional Rural Community in Norway

INSTITUTIONAL NETWORK AND SOCIAL GROUPINGS*

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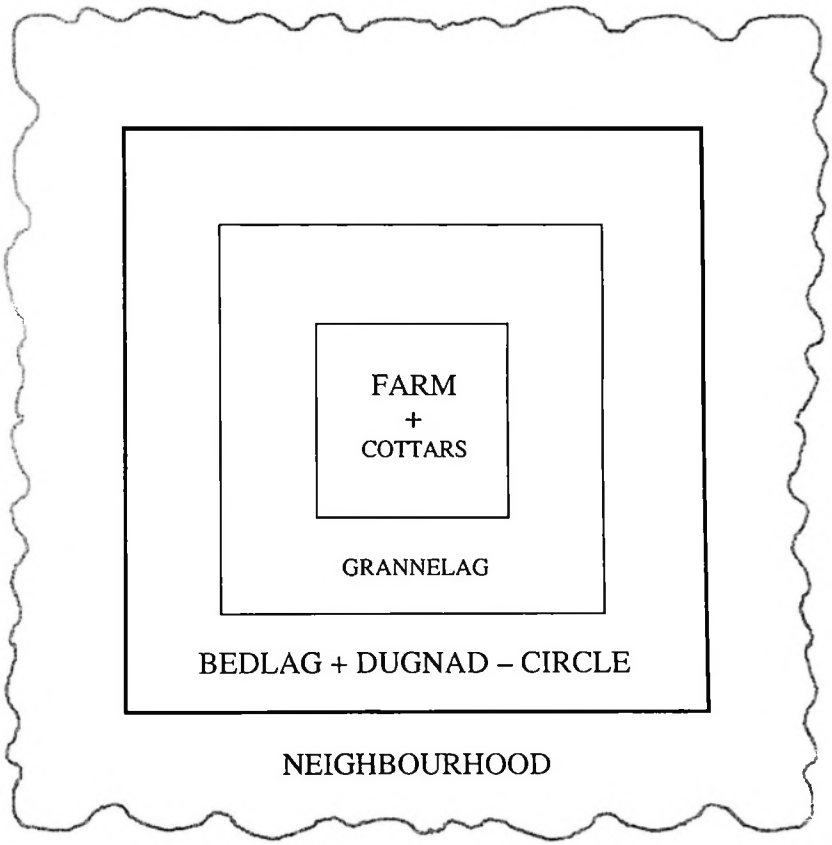

The topic I have chosen to deal with, the traditional rural community in Norway, lays particular emphasis on the agrarian side, and is based mainly on unpublished material

from the investigations undertaken by the Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, Oslo. This was founded in 1922 and at first concentrated chiefly on the Study of the Arctic Cultures and some Arabic languages. Then, in 1928, a comparative study of the development of rural communities was added to the Institute's programme, at the suggestion of the historian Edvard Bull (1882–1932). In conjunction with Max Bloch and Alphons Dopsch, he pointed out that in this field Norway could provide evidence of particular value for international comparative research since it had retained many of the ancient characteristics up to that time (1928). He mentioned specially the subdivided farms with clustered settlements and ground divided into patches and strips and also the contrast between the single farms in the plains of eastern Norway and the multiple ones with land held in common which were found in the south, north, and above all, in Western Norway.

The first subject chosen for the nationwide investigations, the history of the *seterbruk* (hill-farming, out-farming, shieling), has resulted in a series of publications.

The next to be worked on was called 'Farm Communities and Neighbourhood Communities in Norway'. The planning for it was partly done during the war-years of 1943–45, but the field-work could not be started until 1946–47.

The traditional rural community in Norway has never been one and the same throughout the country: natural features, living conditions and occupations vary greatly from one part to another. Norway runs from 58°N to the northern tip of Europe at 71°: the contrast between winter and summer caused by the changes in daylight conditions, climate and weather is striking over the whole land, but varies a great deal in different areas. The mountains in the South as well as in the North divide Norway lengthways into two main parts: a coastal one, with oceanic conditions; and an inland one where the difference in climate between summer and winter is more Continental.

The agricultural area in Norway amounts to less than three per cent of the total 324,000 km², the inland region having the best part of it, while conditions in the mountain and coastal districts are rather marginal for agriculture. The census of 1801 shows that eighty per cent of the total population was living mainly by agriculture and forestry, often combined with fishing. Up to about 1850, when modern industrial development first began, peasants throughout Norway tried as far as possible to be self-sufficient in agricultural products, however poor conditions might be for farming. In mountain districts and along the coast this self-supporting economy continued, to some extent, up to the 1920s and even the 1930s.

Now Norway is a highly industrialised country, with less than ten per cent of the population engaged in agriculture. The total number of people amounts to a little more than four million, nearly three-quarters of them living less than ten miles from the sea. The remaining one-quarter is dispersed over the rest of the country — mainly in the towns, in the valleys, and on the plains of the inland eastern area.

The transition from being practically a self-sufficient agricultural country to a highly developed industrialised one has taken a fairly short time. But along with this development,

old fashioned conditions still prevailed well into this century in some remote mountain districts and coastal parishes. In these places it has been possible to study the social life with the old customs being carried on in exactly the same way as in earlier generations.

It was not until 1857 that an effective enclosure law was passed to further the re-allocation and consolidation of the individual farmer's land. In many instances the farms were most extensively sub-divided, and various kinds of joint ownership were practised. A hundred years later the process of enclosure was still going on. Today there is hardly any joint ownership left in infield property; but in grazing areas, mountain *seters* (shielings) and even sometimes in forests, some degree of joint ownership may still be found.

In the old days inter-dependence and co-operation were typical features of the communities which developed from the sub-divided farms. The more numerous the holdings, the greater the inter-dependence and need for co-operation among neighbours. This influenced all farm work: it was practised in the cornfields, the hay fields and the forests; even the number of cattle to be admitted to the common grazing areas had to be decided on jointly, each farmer being allowed a certain number of beasts in accordance with the size of his individual holding of land. Another way of dividing the pastures was for each farmer to have the right to graze as many animals as he could feed through the winter: cattle had to be stall-fed for several months of the year because of the climate, even in the milder coastal districts. Large quantities of hay were collected for winter fodder, but spring would seldom come early enough to save the cattle from starving. Dr I. F. Grant has shown us a similar picture in parts of Scotland. It was essential to enable the greatest possible number of cattle to survive until the spring, when the greening mountain pastures would soon give new strength to the weakened animals. They would then be able to produce milk for the butter and cheese which was so necessary for the next winter's supplies, with a surplus amount to sell in order to pay taxes. Correct administering of the mountain pastures was therefore essential for survival: it was a vital part of the extensive farming system. A great deal of co-operation among neighbours was needed in their daily lives; it was also a necessity that everyone should be willing to submit to what was generally agreed upon within the society.

Those were the conditions that prevailed in places where dwellings were reasonably close to each other. In areas of scattered settlement there would be less co-operation or common action among the farmers. This, as a rule, was the case in the richer agricultural districts with dispersed farms, especially in the Eastern district where agricultural methods were most advanced. Modernising of methods and implements had begun around the 1850s, and the transformation of the old society followed a few decades later, about 1870–1880. This period is very interesting to us today, because it coincides with the limit to which history from oral sources can be trusted to reach back with accuracy. It means that we can have direct access to the time when the disintegration of the old society had just started in the agriculturally most advanced areas, and so can trace the breaking-up process of the social institutions there.

In the more remote areas, however, a change did not come until about 1920, or even later, in some places.

In the old society, people had a feeling of responsibility towards their neighbours. Even when they were unrelated, they were always free to turn to one another for help. There are old sayings: 'A neighbour is the brother of his neighbour', and 'It is better to have a good neighbour nearby than a brother far away'. Neighbours would not always be on friendly terms, of course. They might disagree, they might quarrel, they might dislike each other, but they would still be bound together within the neighbourhood and would therefore always be ready to give help when it was needed. Even those living far away in the wilds, so to speak, (whether a family or a single person) would always be considered as belonging to the nearest neighbourhood. They would never be left totally alone: if they were in any danger or difficulty they would be given assistance from the neighbourhood they belonged to.

The members of the farming population were more or less of equal social standing. To some degree a stratification did exist, but only in the wealthiest agricultural districts in the South-Eastern regions, or in the richer parts of Trondelag, could one say that it was of any importance. In those districts a social distance really was observed between the farmer, on the one hand, and his farmhands and the cottars who worked for him, on the other: a family tie between the farmer and a subordinate was not socially acceptable — but of course would sometimes occur all the same.

In the coastal and mountain areas it was different. Here the servants were treated, on the whole, as members of the family, which they also often happened to be. The cottars, too, were frequently related to the farmer's class. Nevertheless, it was possible everywhere to find a social difference based on difference in economic power.

The individual farm was the centre for all those who in one way or another belonged to it. These were, first, the farmer and his family and household with the servants; next, the retired farmer and his wife, who generally lived on the farm either within the general household or on their own; and then there were other people living within the bounds of the farm who did not belong to the farmer's household, the cottagers, craftsmen, and perhaps others of lesser social significance who were trying to make a living in some way. As long as the practice of the old society was kept up, the farmer and his family felt a responsibility towards all the people living on the domain of the farm, at least in some ways. Those people would all have a special link with that farm, even if the link were weak. It gave them the security of belonging to a centre. In some connections, this belonging might lead on to a larger group, the neighbourhood, but this was not a matter of course. More often the road for the people of lesser social importance would end at the farm, but as long as the paternalistic order prevailed, they were provided for. Every obligation was due to the farm and its farming population: more consideration was given to it than to the actual farmer and his family, as we shall see in more detail later. One could say that the current farmer and his family were seen as guests for their life-time on the land which had been handed down to them

from their forefathers, and which they themselves would in turn hand down to their own descendants. The bond between that family and the farm — the landed property — was extremely strong.

The Norwegian farming population seems to have formed a highly self-regulating community. It would otherwise be impossible to understand for certain how the Norwegian settlement patterns originated. The provincial laws for the Middle Ages give no evidence of any settlement-planning, and there is no parallel, in Norway, with the detailed regulations to be found in Danish and Swedish laws. There is also no mention whatsoever to be found in records of the Middle Ages of the social groupings which we are going to look at next. There are, though, a number of directions given about the mutual obligations of neighbours: that they should have equal rights to joint property, should bear witness to the births and deaths in the neighbourhood (particularly for the purpose of securing rights of inheritance), and so on. In early directions of this kind we might hope to find the roots from which more recently known groupings in a neighbourhood could have grown.

There were a great number of duties to fulfil in each neighbourhood, and for this purpose a number of different groups, varying in size, had formed themselves through the ages. One of medium size, called the *grannelag*, consisted of the closest neighbours. Its main object was to provide mutual help and support in any eventuality that went beyond everyday needs. Its members voluntarily came together when they knew help was needed. When a baby was born the women from the *grannelag* would help watch over the baby in turn until the child had been taken to church and christened. It was believed that evil could come upon an unchristened child if it was not watched over continually. In sickness, the neighbours would take it in turns to sit up with the patient, when needed. When someone died, the men in the *grannelag* helped with the coffin and its transport to the graveyard, and there they would even dig the grave. The *grannelag* was a fairly well-defined group, a stronghold of close neighbours, who rendered help voluntarily, with no thought of immediate return. Some other day one of them might need the helping hand. The principle was mutual help in cases of need.

The smallest group of neighbours — it could hardly really be called a group — consisted of two close neighbours, or more rarely of three or four. They would practise *bytesarbeid*, 'exchanged work', together. This was not simply a matter of doing each other a favour but was an exchange of work, usually strenuous, founded on an agreement. *Bytesarbeid* was a convenient arrangement that was customary on smaller farms with few hands, and belonged mostly to a time when farms had to be self-sufficient. Farms with a large enough staff of servants and labourers would never arrange for *bytesarbeid*, so there is hardly ever any record of it in the richer agricultural areas in former days. However, only a few decades ago a peculiar turn of events came about. Because of high wages, and, still more, the scarcity of farm hands, the big farmers to some degree took to *bytesarbeid* by forming a kind of 'co-operative'.

In the old days the arrangement of *bytesarbeid* largely depended on family ties, on friendship, or on an occasional agreement between a few neighbours. It was carried out either when a task was too heavy or difficult to be completed single-handed, or when it would go more smoothly and be less monotonous if performed in company with others. The principle of this exchange work was that it was done in return for work of a similar nature.

Bytesarbeid might include both men's and women's work, and tended to be seasonal. The men on two neighbouring farms, for instance, would agree to do the slaughtering of cattle as exchanged work, first on one farm and then on the other. Work exchanged among more than two people could be digging potatoes in the autumn, or threshing corn.

The women would arrange exchange work for the baking of *flat-brød* ('flat bread' is a very thin, hard, unfermented bread, baked on large round plates, for long-term keeping). Two people were needed for this work, which usually lasted for a week or two every spring and autumn. The women — like the men — would very often arrange for exchange work at slaughtering time, as it was their task to prepare the meat, offal and blood, for winter supplies. The women would also resort to exchange work for the annual spring-cleaning when they would clean everything in the house that possibly could be cleaned — walls, ceilings, furniture etc.

There was no name for the small group of neighbours practising *bytesarbeid*; they only said that they perform exchanged work — (*gjør bytesarbeid*). These groups were quite informal, as was the *grannelag*.

In contrast to these informal groups, there were larger groups attached to the neighbourhood that were strongly formal, even institutionalised. They again could be of two kinds: (1) institutions functioning within the neighbourhood on its own premises exclusively, but still being quite formal; and (2) those through which official authorities imposed special obligations on the population, almost like a kind of tax. The farmers within a certain area would be made collectively responsible for these official obligations, but would often be free to administer for themselves such things as the upkeep of a bridge on the main road, or a joint contribution to the poor (before the Poor Laws of 1900 abolished the old custom whereby paupers had to move from place to place in the parish). This kind of neighbour-grouping is of great interest, but here I would like to concentrate on the groups which were working exclusively for the benefit of the neighbours themselves, and within the neighbourhood. I have chosen two strong groups which for centuries acted as real institutions but were wholly administered by the neighbours. These two groups, or institutions were: the *dugnad* circle, which dealt with practical tasks; and the *bedlag*, whose most important functions were concerned with the high points of human social life, weddings and funerals. Both groups were often the same size, usually larger than the *grannelag*, and embracing the whole neighbourhood.

The dugnad circle

The *dugnad* circle (*dugnadskrinsen*) operated in everyday life when more labour was needed than the individual farmer possessed on his own farm. When people combined to help an individual in this way, the name *dugnad* was applied. It means something like 'help given to someone'. This circle, or group, was large enough to provide the necessary number of hands for the heaviest normal tasks, but was flexible in that for a minor job only a few members of it would need to be called upon.

The work in question differed greatly. It might be clearing stones from a patch of new ground, or transporting hay from distant hayfields down to the farm. A man who for some reason had fallen behind with his seasonal work in spring or autumn might call for *dugnad* help. Transporting timber for house-building after a fire, for instance, was another kind of *dugnad* work. In treeless areas the transport of timber could be a burdensome job, and in roadless mountain parishes, where it had to be done during the winter when frozen lakes and rivers could serve as roads, it was difficult and exhausting for men and horses alike. Tasks which had to be completed in a short time would also call for the many hands of the *dugnad* circle. The old-fashioned kind of roofing, of birch bark and turf, which is seldom seen today but was formerly used both for living quarters and outhouses, could almost be called a *dugnad* speciality. This roofing work was difficult, and required a certain number of people in relation to the length of roof as they had to be placed close enough to be within reach of each other. Also the roofing material was sensitive to the weather. Windy weather and rain had to be avoided, as also had hot sunshine. The best time for roofing with birch-bark and turf was late afternoon or evening so that the whole job could be completed in a single day.

When the hard labour was finished, the *dugnad* host would reward the workers with a party, where there was an abundance of the very best of food and drink. Usually only the men took part in the task but the women of the *dugnad* circle would most likely be busy in the kitchen preparing and serving the food.

Who would be entitled to receive help from the *dugnad* circle? Anyone who was in need of it would receive *dugnad* assistance provided he lived on the domain of one of the farms belonging to it. Everybody, from the wealthiest farmer to the poorest cottar, might be in need of such help at one time or another. It was a form of mutual help which was both a privilege to receive and a duty to give, and nobody could refuse to participate in the *dugnad*. A farmer might join in *dugnad* work several times during his life without ever being in need of such help himself. Here once more we come across the point made earlier, that more consideration was given to the farm as a whole than to the farmer-family currently living there. This is seen clearly in connection with the *dugnad* obligation. It was considered that it was the *farm*, not the farmer, that both received the *dugnad* help and was obliged to render it (a farm might have received help in a previous generation or might come to need it in a future one).

The Bedlag

Like the *dugnad* circle, the *bedlag* neighbourhood-group must be considered an institution. The significance of this group is indicated in the word itself, which means 'a group of people (*lag*) who are invited', understood here to mean invited to the important social entertainments and feasts within the *bedlag*. These feasts often lasted for several days.

As far back as the evidence goes, the *bedlag* had its most important functions at weddings and funerals: at a funeral to take leave of the dead person who had belonged to the community, at a wedding to welcome the bride and bridegroom into the society. (A young couple acquired, on marriage, a new and quite different status in the community. In the old rural communities, unmarried people, both men and women, had a much lower status than those who were married.)

Since funerals and weddings were the main functions of the *bedlag*, years might pass between each gathering. All other occasions in human life were regarded as being of interest only to the family concerned and to a few of the nearest neighbours. Even the birth of a child, and the christening, did not involve the *bedlag*. Personal anniversaries were not celebrated in earlier days. Christmas might be celebrated by a gathering of quite a small group of neighbours, but never by the whole *bedlag*, whereas the Midsummer Feast extended far beyond the *bedlag* and people from the whole parish would congregate for it.

A *bedlag* would often be defined geographically by the particular terrain. A river, a mountain, the shape of a valley might mark the limit of reasonably easy communication between farms and so the boundary could be drawn naturally. These boundaries were nearly always fixed, which meant that the same people from the same farms would gather together on all the solemn occasions within the *bedlag*. A *bedlag* with fixed boundaries would generally be *named*, after the most important farm or a certain local feature. Sometimes there was an interesting reason for a particular boundary-pattern.

It is important to stress that, even though the boundaries of different *bedlags* might overlap throughout the various neighbourhoods, *the bedlag boundaries for each individual farm were always well established and fixed.* The farm would invite and be invited to the same neighbouring farms over and over again.

The *bedlag* was exclusively an institution of neighbours, with no connections outside it whatever, not even with relations unless they also happened to be neighbours, but in that case they belonged *as neighbours*. (As a matter of course relatives were invited to a wedding or a funeral however far away they might live, quite distant relations being counted as close in earlier days, both second and third cousins.)

The size of the *bedlag* could vary from four to five farms to twelve or even twenty-five. One might ask whether everyone living within the border of the *bedlag* was certain to belong to it fully, by virtue of being invited and inviting people back. No general answer can be given, since the social order varied in different parts of the

country. The farmer and his family automatically belonged to the *bedlag*, as also did the *kårfolk* (the 'old people', grandparents). The servants usually went along with the family they worked for, if they were treated as family members which was the case in the greater part of the country, the south, west and north, and even in the east on the small and middle-sized farms. The position of the cottars was less straightforward. In the areas where the servants were treated as family members, the cottars would generally belong, in the sense that they were invited to all farms within the *bedlag*, but very seldom would they be in an intermediate position, being invited to the farm to which his plot belonged, but nowhere else. In some parishes in the east the cottars might be invited to their master's feasts, but mainly to look after the guests' horses, although they would always be asked to join the party for a while. In such cases one cannot say that the cottars belonged to the *bedlag*, and that is probably why, in some eastern parishes, they formed circles of their own for social gatherings, usually inviting the servants in the neighbourhood to join them. But it is difficult to be more specific about this because underlying feelings, as well as customs, are strongly linked to social standing. People of lower social status living on the territory of a farm but not working there, might perhaps be invited to the farm they lived on when there was an occasion for the *bedlag*, but they would not be invited to the other farms — which means they did not, in fact, belong to the *bedlag*

Funerals

Funerals would of course have to take place regardless of the time of the year. In the winter the size of the host's house might make it necessary to reduce the number of guests invited from each one of the farms, and to do this, old accepted rules were followed so that no one should feel insulted at not being invited. For funerals the guests would not bring their children with them unless it was a close relative who had died.

Weddings

The wedding parties would generally take place at midsummer — *mellom onnene*, 'between the seasons' — after the spring work had been finished and before the hay-making had begun. If the weather was fine, it was possible, and pleasant, to spend the days of the festivities out of doors, when the number of guests would not be limited by the size of the house. The days were long and light, the barn was empty (there was no hay left) and had been decorated for the dancing. Neighbours would provide sleeping quarters for most of the guests while the nearest relatives and the old people would stay in the house where the wedding was. The number of guests would easily be about 100 or much more, sometimes 300. The relatives of both bride and bridegroom were invited, as well as the entire *bedlag* of each of the two. In a wedding party all the generations would be there, from the very old to the very young. Relatives who seldom met would arrive from far and near.

The amount of food and drink for such a gathering of people, which might last for anything from three to seven days, could not possibly be met out of one year's produce from a single, self-supporting, farm. It was therefore the custom for the guests to contribute to the feast by bringing a certain amount of food (as they would, too, for a funeral). They would bring fresh meat, butter, *lefser* (like bannocks, but thinner); they would also bring sour cream for the making of the bride's porridge, the most ceremonial meal of the wedding feast, and any other food they liked.

The name of such a gift of food was *sending* or *føring* — meaning what they (the guests) sent ahead of them, or what they brought along with them. The quantity each brought would depend partly on the number of persons in their family, partly on the size of their farm. Here again the farm is significant, and it is also interesting that only farmer families were expected to bring the *sending* or *føring*. Such a gift was not expected from the cottars' families if they were invited — nor from unmarried people, who would be counted with the family they belonged to (they would either be sons or daughters, or else the servants). It emerges clearly here, as so often, that the farms and the farmer families were the backbone of the old rural society.

Bedlag Patterns

The *bedlags* assumed different shapes under different conditions, bearing in mind that each individual farm had its own *bedlag* with firmly fixed bounds which meant that the same group of farms invited, or were invited to, each other over and over again.

Examples can be found in two types of settlement:

(1) the linear settlements, found in a valley or along a fjord; and (2) the broad settlements, which were on the plains of the inland parishes especially of eastern Norway and could easily extend in almost every direction without meeting any geographical impediment.

There are three kinds of *bedlag* boundary patterns in both these types:

(a) *Faste*, 'fixed' — boundaries that were the same again and again.

(b) *Skjoten*, 'the junction'. When two *bedlags* bordered on each other it would often happen that two farms, one from each *bedlag*, feeling they were close neighbours, would exchange invitations thereby crossing the boundaries between the two *bedlags*. They still belonged to different *bedlags*, but were inviting each other as friends (in addition to inviting the farms in their own *bedlag*).

(c) *Skiftende grenser*, 'changing bounds'. Even though each individual farm held certain fixed bounds to its own *bedlag*, it could happen that every single farm within that *bedlag* would regard the *bedlag* bounds differently, so that no two farms would have an identical view of them. In a linear settlement, the *bedlag* pattern would be like a chain composed of interlinked rings. In a broad settlement, the pattern would look like a net, with the border lines continually crossing each other.

Since the *bedlag* tradition has been so rich, over the greater part of the country, it seemed worth trying to gather as much knowledge about it as possible. Collecting work was carried out by the Norwegian Country Women's Association, in addition to what was previously done by the general collaborators of the Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture. When the collected mass of material can be analysed fully, I hope it might throw some light on what is still obscure about the *bedlag* institution. What to me seems absolutely unintelligible is the fact that there is no reference to be found to the *bedlag* in the Middle Ages, nor to any other institution that can be compared with it. The nearest we can get to it is in a passage in the old medieval law which states that when a person died the master of the household was free to ask for help from his neighbours to bring the dead to the church-yard to be buried, but might ask only so many men as would allow him to be the sixth man himself. This does not at all indicate any fixed circle of neighbours.

The only kind of neighbour-group known from the Middle Ages is a group of three or four neighbours who were bound to meet at Christmas and drink their Christmas beer together, toasting Christ and Mary, under threat of a fine to be paid to the King and to the Church. This had been turned into a local custom which still persisted in some western parishes for some time after the beginning of this century, under the name of *grannaskål* — meaning 'neighbour toast'; but it does not correspond to the *bedlag* institution either.

There are many features about the *bedlag* that are still obscure. It was a firmly rooted social system in all parishes south of Troms; but the two northernmost counties, Troms and Finnmark, have no traces of the *bedlag*, except for some inland parishes in Troms which were settled at the end of the eighteenth century by the people from valleys in eastern Norway, Gudbrandsdalen and Osterdalen. The settlers brought their own domestic customs with them, with the result that the old *bedlag* system functioned here, partly, until the Second World War and some traits are still known. The fact that, in the North fishing had such an important place may account for the *bedlag* institution not taking hold in the rest of Troms, and in Finnmark. But much is still uncertain: the material collected from those two counties has not been sufficiently analysed yet. At the moment it can only be said that it seems as if the crews of the fishing boats meant more to the men than the neighbourhood did, and that the women kept up the sense of neighbourliness in the area while the men were away. Moreover, a wedding company there was held to be only for the family concerned, so even that occasion was irrelevant for the neighbourhood as a whole.

If we want to know what the situation is like today for the old *bedlag* tradition in Norway, it seems clear that there is hardly any part of the country where it is kept up fully. Some traces of it are found here and there, but that is all — and then, mainly in connection with funerals. The tradition has been on the ebb since about 1900, when

the richer agricultural districts took the wedding celebration away from the neighbourhood and restricted it to the family concerned and their private circle of friends; but in most other districts the *bedlag* tradition was still alive right up to the Second World War.

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