

The Knights of the Road

Creating a dignified identity on the margins of society.



Kristin Hammerås

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Visual Cultural Studies program, Institute of Social Anthropology

Faculty of Social Science, University of Tromsø

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1. INTRODUCTION

For the first time in my life I was going on fieldwork. I was going to follow the everyday life of some people that I until now never had seen face to face. The uncertainty and excitement was enormous. Would they accept me? Would they tell me to get off, or would I be able to get to know them? I went to meet the Knights of the Road for the first time in a big market called Døllefjelde Musse Marked in Lolland in the south of Denmark. In this atmosphere of uncertainty and excitement, I met Mursejler. He was going to be my main informant for the fieldwork, but I didn't know that before one month after this first meeting:

In the early evening around 5 pm I went to the market inn to get some food. I spotted a vagabond by a table farther down in the room and moved closer to ask if I could sit with him while eating. He had placed his hat in front of him on the table. It was a hat with a fur tail of some kind, fastened across the whole pull so it looked like a Mohican hairstyle. He had a brown full beard and dark curly hair. On the floor by his feet, rested a quite big yellow dog that looked a little like a lion. I asked if I could join him while eating, and he accepted. I think I asked him some questions about what he was doing, and he was joking and saying something about his coffee pot that was standing on the table beside his hat. During the meal he told me about his past when he was a competition diver. When I asked him why he stopped – he raised his glass filled with beer and said – too much of this I guess. I asked him why he was on the road? He said – I am living my life on the road, and it is the best life I can imagine. I would not exchange it for any other life. I asked him why? He thought for a while – then he said – you got me there! I haven't thought about that. After a while again he said: I think it must be because I love the nature. I am a man of the nature; enjoy listening to the birds singing and all that. Yes! That was a good question.

I thought this was interesting but felt that it could not be the whole answer to why he was on the road. But this was how he wanted to present himself to me, and I didn't ask more this time.

We met again one month later at Hjallerup Market, when Kommandanten, another vagabond informant, asked him if he would take me for a walk on the road. After he accepted this, I followed him for two and half months in his life on the road. Later, as presentation of self became one of the major themes in my analysis of my fieldwork experiences, I found this situation suitable for opening my thesis. This situation entails how he presented himself to me for the first time, and he was actually presenting me for some of the main themes in his existence in this brief encounter.

He presented himself and important aspects of his identity as a vagabond through the way he looked, his uniform, his hat and how he placed it while eating.

He told me something about his past – and by doing so he also showed me that he hadn't always been a vagabond, and he pointed to one of the reasons why he didn't succeed in his former life – his relation with alcohol.

The way he answered my question tells important things about how he looks upon his way of living – and his motivation for continuing this lifestyle – by telling me that he was satisfied with this way of living, and didn't want it different; he didn't want to exchange it for any other life. He also gave one possible reason for why he was continuing his life as a knight of the road – the nature and his relation to it.

All these themes will be explored through the thesis, with a major emphasis on presentation of self. Through my fieldwork I realised how important the vagabonds' movement between the front stage and the backstage are for their coping strategies¹ and how this movement is signalled by how they wear or don't wear their uniform and hat. In the encounter above I

¹ I am here referring to Goffman's analytical concepts (ref), but these concepts were also used by the vagabonds themselves – to be "on".

noticed how Mursejler placed his hat on the table while eating – using it as a sign of respect to the people watching, and thus with reference to the important codes of honour the vagabonds live by.

This first meeting also positioned me in a place where I stayed for almost the whole fieldwork: As someone that is in a place between the front stage and the backstage – not only in the front stage, but not completely into the backstage either.

1.1 Background for the project and research interest

Vagabonds, “landstrygere” (tramps), “landevejsriddere” (Knights of the road), “farende svende” (journeymen); dear child has many names. The group I have been following this summer is walking the roads of the Danish countryside, living their lives without a stable home or at least periodically without a permanent residence, on the margins of the society. Most of them are alcoholics. But in spite of these facts that if it was only this to it, might have put them at the bottom of the Danish society, they have a pride in who they are and what they are. They follow their own code of honour, are wearing a kind of uniform with medals and badges, and walk the roads with their belongings in carefully decorated prams. They are usually well received by the people they meet on the road. It seems to be some kind of nostalgic relation between the vagabonds and the Danes that puzzles and interests me.

I first heard about the Knights of the road when I stayed two years in Denmark and studied film and video, and worked with disabled people. A Danish friend of mine was very fascinated by them and kept telling me about this group in the Danish society. He is an experienced organizer of larps (live action role-plays), and when he organized a play about the road knights, I joined, and me and 5 other people played road knights on the road for 4 days in the role-play “the white road”

I am interested in people that find alternative ways of coping inside a larger society. And the knights of the road were living inside a society that I thought I knew quite well; in a way that I didn't know was possible. In my project description I stated:

*“This kind of life and this group of people continued to keep my attention because I felt it was touching on a theme that I always am coming back to, and which many times has been what I am curious about: **People that redefine their reality. Change their world, does something to make it change.**”*

During my fieldwork I was astounded to see how a marginalized group, which by my first glance seemed to have all the characteristics of a group that would be pitied, stigmatized and avoided by the rest of the society, on the contrary – most of the time was welcomed and greeted with joy and positive expectations by the people they passed by.

The recognition the vagabonds receive by the people they meet, has got to do with established social conceptions in and of Danish culture and history at large. In my fieldwork I have not explored these conceptions from the “Danish people’s” side. I’d rather try to address this issue by looking into situations where the vagabonds meet with people along the road, and how the vagabond utilise these conceptions in their coping strategies on the road.

I wonder about - **what knowledge and skills the vagabonds have that that makes them able to turn a marginalized position into a mutual and dignified exchange?**

2. THE SETTING

During my fieldwork in Denmark I often got the question if there are any vagabonds in Norway. I had to answer no. After reading Thor Gotaas book “På loffen” (2001) about vagabonds in Norway, and recalling my own experience, I would not think that it is a current group like the Danish vagabonds in Norway. Then the people mostly asked me why? After I had got the question a few times and been reflecting upon it, I came up with the answer that: The beer was too expensive, the winter too cold, there were too many mountains and hills in Norway, and the population is scattered over big areas. I do not think that these are the only reasons why there are vagabonds in Denmark and not in Norway. However looking back, my answers carry a perspective, which I think is important for understanding the life of the vagabonds. They earn their living from the surpluses of alms and charity through their relation to the Danish population, and they are walking the roads to establish routes that are built on a reservoir of knowledge based on the social and material landscape or environment. As Mursejleren says in my film when asked if there is a plan over places to go for vagabonds: *“No, we don’t need that, there are maps everywhere, and people speak Danish”*.

The vagabonds establish a walking geography, what one might call geography from the ground. I will give a short summary of the geographical, topographical and demographical features of Denmark, which may help contextualise, the nomadic lives of the vagabonds.

2.1 Denmark: A brief overview over some characteristics.

Denmark is a small country south in Scandinavia with a relatively high density of population. In an area of about 42 394 km² lives approximately 5.4 million people. This gives a population density of 121 persons pr km². (The population density in Norway, which is quite low, is as a comparison 13 persons pr km²).

Around ¼ of the Danish population lives in the capital, Copenhagen. The rest of the population is scattered within small or bigger towns, villages and cities quite close to each other, connected by roads, bus and/or train routes.

The living standard in the Danish population is quite high with a big middleclass and a well-



organized welfare system.

The climate in Denmark is temperate, with summer temperatures around 20 degrees Celsius, and winter temperatures around 0 degrees Celsius. There are a few days with snow each winter, but usually not long periods.

The Danish landscape is flat, with some slight curves. There are no high mountains, only hills, and the

highest point of the country is 170 metres above sea level. Another characteristic feature of the Danish landscape is the many islands, almost all of them populated, some connected with bridges and others only connected to mainland with ferries. The country is highly built out – leaving almost no big areas that are not cultivated in some way. 60 % of the land area is cultivated for farming. This is the highest percentage in the EU.

In Jutland, which is the mainland of Denmark – most of the land is used for big scale farming of different crops for sale and also meat production of pigs, cattle and chicken.

The roads are usually in good shape, and most of them have separate tracks for bikes in both directions. There are also railroads that cover the whole country. I think one might say that Denmark geographically has a highly cultivated landscape with as far as no “wild” nature.

The movements of the vagabonds in this setting:

The knights are moving all over the country, and I haven't heard of anywhere they don't go, even though it is seldom they move very far away from the train lines.

Usually a road knight develops a route during his or her years on the road. This will be a network of friends and friendly villages and good sleeping places. Many times the knight will come back to a place where he or she had a good experience of being, and maybe also have some regular customers at different places that he or she is returning to with approximately one year intervals. The movement might have a direction – some kind of overall intention of getting somewhere, but the time perspective and the route that leads to this goal is very much open for changes. Sometimes even the overall direction is changed. As my main informant – Mursejler uses to say: "Plans are made to be changed".

When deciding where to go the vagabonds take into consideration aspects like:

How far it is to the closest shop that sells beer?

Where is there a good sleeping place?

Is there someone I know in this area that I can stay with or get something from?

Are there some very steep hills and are the roads suitable for the pram?

Is it going to rain?

Is it very hot?

What have I heard from others about this place?

Is there anything special that is needed (for example hashish or beer) and where can I get it?

Are there places that one is likely to make money on this road –(that means: – is it likely that we will meet people on this road)

The little situation from the film "Knight of the Road" (Hammerås 2008) can illustrate this.

Mursejler and The Sheriff are breaking up from a bench where they have had a break. They are standing behind their prams, and The Sheriff is counting the different roads they can chose between.

Mursejler: Which road leads out of town?

Sheriffen(points):That one.

Mursejler: Shall we try to start with that one?

Sheriffen: Out of the town? There are not so many houses there.

Mursejler: Oh, OK what about that one? (points in the other direction)

Sheriffen: Yes, why don't we take that one?

Mursejler: Let's try that road.

The movement of the vagabonds is slow – usually they don't walk every day. And the distance walked is between 3 km to 9 km a day. Sometimes it might be more, and when a vagabond is on bike it might be as much as 20 km on one day, but that is not usual. The train is used if one wants to get away from a place, or need to get to a specific place quickly. This costs money, and is only an option if the financial situation allows it. It is also disrupting the expected image of the vagabonds among the Danish population.

The bus is not very popular since it is difficult to get the pram on the bus, and many times the bus driver will not allow a pram if it is not a child in it.

It is not good to be too many vagabonds in the same area, or to follow too closely in the footsteps of another vagabond. Then the resources might be exhausted in this area, and it should take some time before a vagabond goes back here because people might get tired of vagabonds and start to become negative towards them.

The three main markets are also having an importance when it comes to deciding where to go in the summer period of the year. The markets take place in different parts of the country, (see map) and are the three biggest markets in Denmark when it comes to how many visitors they have. The first weekend in May it is Døllefjelde Musse Marked on the island Lolland in the south east of the country. The first weekend in June, Hjallerup Marked takes place in the far

north of the country – north of the city Aalborg. And the third Wednesday in September it is time for Egeskov Market on the island Funen in the middle/south of the country. To get to the markets the vagabonds usually take the train if they are not close by. Some walk from a nearby town to make money on the way. Others again are driving in their own cars or hitchhiking with friends.

2.2 The cultural and historical setting of the vagabonds in Denmark:

As far as I have understood there has been some kind of organized vagabond society in Denmark since the middle of 1700. (Dyrlund, 1872, refers to the election of a “stodderkonge” - a vagabond king, in the book “Tatere og natmandsfolk I Danmark”)

Thor Gotaas also mentions the “stodderkonge” existing in Norway at this time, as an office that was appointed to a man in the town by the town council. His job was to control that the beggars and vagabonds passing by were behaving well, and didn’t stay too long in the town. He was unpopular among the vagabonds as well as among the town’s folk. (2001)

Since then or probably also before that time, it has been a common feature in rural Denmark and also in Norway that different kinds of people are walking the country roads from town to town, offering their services, helping with the farm work, begging, and doing “dirty work” for the towns people like removing dead animals, emptying toilets, selling small things and so on. Further back in history other travellers that might be related to the vagabonds of today were troubadours, entertainers, beggars and pilgrims that walked from place to place.

One of my informants – Peder Guitar – an old vagabond who does not walk much anymore, emphasised the connections between the vagabonds, the travelling journeymen (“farende svende”) and the beggars that went from farm to farm begging for alms.

Today the vagabonds in Denmark elect their own king and a whole monarchy from inside the vagabond community, at their annual thing at Egeskov market at Fyn. They enforce their own

code of honour, and have rituals of including new members into the group. Exactly when this more internally organized community started, nobody knows for sure. Peder Guitar stated in a conversation we had that:

“It started as an imitation of the village thing, where the farmers were discussing the harvest and other things around the thing three. And then we kept it like that, even though the villagers changed their ways.

Some informants say the vagabond community started 500 years ago, and some say 100 years. It is quite uncertain exactly when and how since the organization very much is based on oral sources. But what



is sure is that the vagabond community utilises ancient historical references in the way they organize their group, building on old Germanic or Norse concepts: The thing three as the assembly place and the monarchy.

On the history website for Funen (the island where the vagabond thing is located)

(<http://www.fynhistorie.dk/node/836> ,13. May 2008) it is written about the thing place that it



existed in almost every village, and was the place for the villagers to meet and discuss matters that concerned the community. Above is a drawing from this site of how one today imagines that a meeting at the thing place looked like in the medieval times.

Just for the comparison I put two pictures from the vagabond thing that took place in September 2007. These pictures originate from the webpage made by a vagabond called Spøjsen: <http://landevejsridder.dk>, and they are taken by Susanne. He is not walking much on the road anymore, but uses his time at home to for example maintain this web page.



To me it is interesting to see the similarities between the ideas one have about the old village thing, and the vagabond thing as it looks like today on the pictures. At the same time as the vagabonds live in 2008 with Internet and mobile phones, they also connect to, and utilize a very old tradition

of organisation.

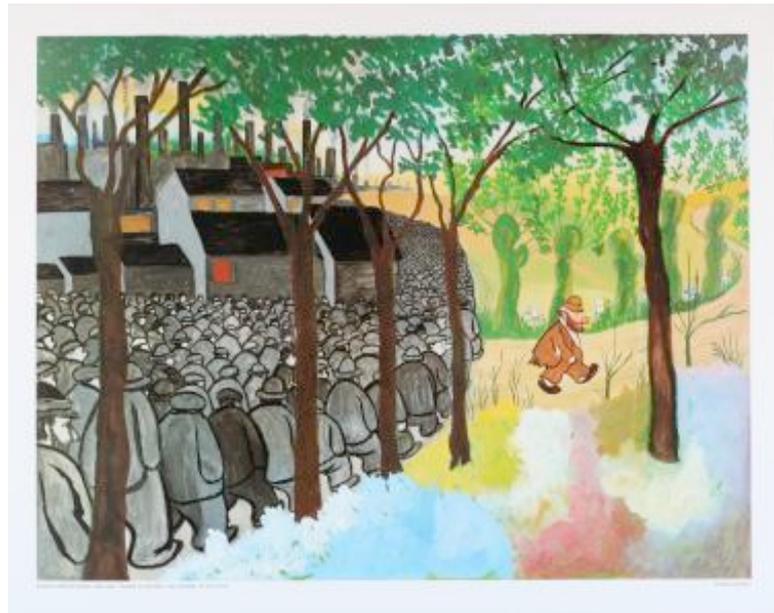
After the 2nd World war there was a shift in the attitude towards the vagabonds from quite negative towards a more accepting and friendly way of meeting them. (**Hansen, H.P.:** *Jyske skøjere og rakkere*, 1952)

At this time nostalgic sentiments were connected to the vagabonds, and this was reinforced by the work of two popular artists at the time: Storm P with his funny drawings, and the filmed versions of the books of Morten Korch with stories from the countryside in a national romantic style. Both of these artists were extremely popular in their time, and have a special love for the vagabond, who is portrayed as a funny and naïve character but with a subtle wisdom underneath the jokes.

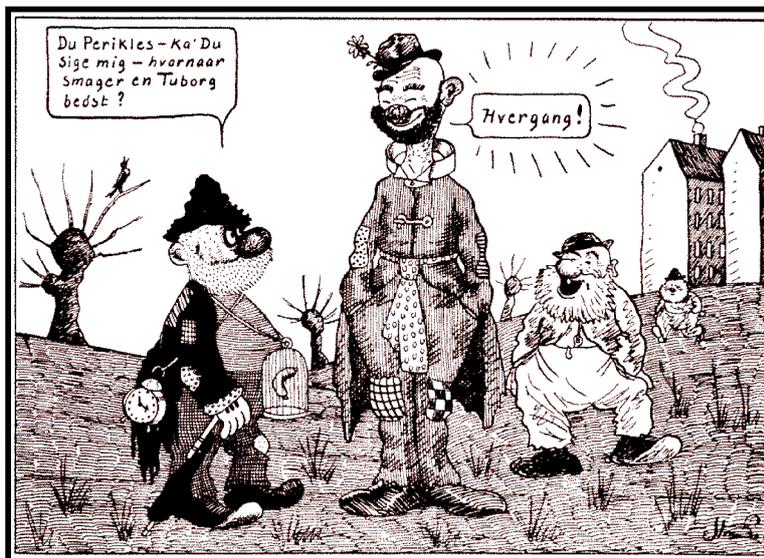
‘Tilbage til naturen’ or ‘Back to the nature’ is a quite famous painting by Storm P. (see next page). It shows how the people in the city is living in a grey and crowded place while the vagabond is leaving this for the colourful and bright road into the nature. This is an expression for an attitude towards the vagabonds that I met many times during my fieldwork,

that they are people that left the grey everyday life of the “wage slaves” for a life filled with adventure and new experiences in the countryside.

An important social theme in Denmark is beer. Drinking alcohol and especially beer



is an important part of being Danish. A bottle of beer can be enjoyed anytime. It is for example socially accepted, and sometimes even expected in many professions of manual work – plumbers, carpenters and so on, to drink at work. The alcoholism in Denmark seems to be more accepted in the society than I was used to from Norway. Everywhere I met people who drank quite a lot, but still was not strongly stigmatized in their community.



As one of my vagabond informants who had been to Norway told me:

“There (in Norway) they have to hide themselves. They stand in the gateways and the alleys and drink secretly. It is much harder to live that way. Here at least we don't have to think about that.”

So one can say that there is already a high tolerance for drinking a lot and the limits between being an alcoholic and just a happy party animal is blurred.

From the perspectives above, one might say that the vagabond community in many ways tune in on correspondent values in Danish culture, historically and also in contemporary popular culture. It seems like they utilize historical and cultural references and motives to connect to a tradition that also is enforcing their positive place in the minds of the Danes to day.

2.3 The vagabonds inside the Danish welfare state

In the Danish official welfare system the vagabonds are classified in different categories depending on if they have an address or not and if they are able to work or not basically. (Hjemløs i Danmark 2007) There are no special measures taken towards the vagabonds as a group in the Danish welfare system.

Previously the existence of vagabonds was acknowledged by the welfare system. Peder Guitar told me about an established system where every municipality had a register of vagabonds, and when you got to a new municipality you could go to the social welfare office, tell them your name, and they would look you up in the vagabond register and give you a single amount between 30 and 120 DKK. You only got this amount once every time you visited this municipality. The vagabonds called this “Skrub av penge” or “Get off money”

I do not have official statistics about the vagabonds (if it exist?), but I have tried to systematise my knowledge from fieldwork in order to give an estimate of some numbers, which can give an idea of the vagabond phenomena.

During my fieldwork I have met or heard about 74 persons with a specific vagabond name who were associated with the vagabond community. Not all of them have been ceremonially given a name or baptized, and not all of them might be walking on the road. There might very well be a few that I still haven't heard mentioned, but I can't imagine that it is so many since the community needs to be small enough to be able to have the overview over how people

behave. Considering this, it might not be totally wrong to estimate that there are around 100 vagabonds in Denmark.

Of the 74 I met or heard about, there are 53 men and 21 women. The age span in the vagabond community is between 20 and 65 with the majority between 35 – 50 years old.

None of the vagabonds I met and heard about have a steady job. All of the vagabonds I met, and all, except one, that I heard about, were alcoholics or former alcoholics.

Of the 74 persons I met or heard about, I will guess that more than 85% receive some kind of welfare money. It might be because they are unemployed or because they are considered unable to work and are entitled to a pension. To receive welfare money you have got to have an address. Many of the vagabonds get a flat from the state in connection with their welfare money. Then the monthly rent is subtracted from their welfare money before they are paid to the recipient. As Mursejler states in the film – he gets 4000 DKK from the state every month after his rent is paid. This means that most of the vagabonds have some kind of permanent base. How much of the time the person stays in this flat or house varies greatly from person to person.

2.4 Different groups of travelling people around the world, and how they are similar or different to the vagabonds in Denmark.

Many groups of people are travelling around the world. The nomadic indigenous populations all over the world like the Sámi, the Inuit and numerous others. The Gypsies around Europe and the Travellers or the tinkers are moving around in Ireland. In US have the Hoboes at least historically been a group of travelling people on the freight trains, and we have New Age Travellers in UK, backpackers around the world that are travelling for a while, different kinds of migratory workers for example travelling artisans from Germany, Austria and Switzerland. When defining the Danish vagabonds as a travelling group – there are some traits that are differentiating them from indigenous nomads, gypsies and the Irish travellers. They are not

born into their group, and do not define themselves on the basis of their origin or background.

Barth writes:

“A categorical ascription is an ethnic ascription when it classifies a person in terms of his basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by his origin and background. To the extent that actors use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and others for purposes of interaction, they form ethnig groups in this organizational sense. (Barth, 1982, p.13)

Following this definition the vagabonds do not form an ethnic group. To become a vagabond has been a decision the members of the group have made themselves as young, or middle-aged adults. For different reasons they chose to leave the life they used to live, and join the vagabond community. For the same reason there are no children walking on the road as vagabonds, and not really any families, but changing relationships of friends, partners and lovers. The traditions and rules are passed on between friends or as it used to be before, and still is the ideal – the traditions is passed from a master to an apprentice during a 1-year partnership.

Those traits are associating the vagabonds with the travelling craftsmen or artisans from Germany, Austria or Switzerland – the “Zimmerleute” and other travelling artisans. This group is travelling for between two years and three years and one day in relation to their education as carpenters or other craftsmen. In the late medieval times this was a very common and the black dressed men with their hats could be seen everywhere. Today it is between 500 – 700 persons a year that are on the road or as they call it “on the waltz.”

As Peder Guitar pointed out, the vagabonds themselves are counting these travelling artisans to be one of the origins of their lifestyle, and there are many similarities as to the strict moral codex, the way of moving around and the apprenticeship.

Another central trait of the vagabonds in Denmark is their relation to alcohol. Most of the vagabonds are addicted to alcohol, and drinking is a big part of the social life when the vagabonds are gathered.

There are other groups of nomadic drinkers around the world –James P. Spradley are writing about what he calls urban nomads on the skid rows in Boston, US, and how they have created a community around the alcohol: *“They have defined alcohol as in many non-Western cultures, where it is a symbol of solidarity and friendship, and where group drinking and collective drunkenness is an acceptable aspect of the culture.”*

(1965, p 117) But while this trait is similar to the lifestyle of the Danish vagabonds, Spradleys description of how the drunkards in the Boston skid row are forced to become nomads and adapt an attitude of invisibility because of the persecution from the police and authorities, is partly in contrast with the vagabonds coping strategies.²

The vagabonds in Denmark might also be mentioned in the same breath as the Hoboes and the tramps in the US – vividly described by Douglas A. Harper in the book Good Company (1982) as migratory workers travelling on freight trains around the country to get work on the farms. This lifestyle is an option for individuals that for some reason want to be on the move for a while. It is not connected to ethnicity, or religious views, the choice is made by every individual him or her self for economical or social reasons. This similarity was closer before the extensive industrialisation of the agriculture in Denmark when the vagabonds used to work on the farms, but the origins of the groups seem related, and both are mainly rural phenomena. The vagabonds in Denmark differs from the Hoboes of US and other migratory workers or as Spradley mentions – urban nomads, in the respect that they belong to a organized group with an elected leadership – a monarchy, they are following a code of honour and there are formal requirements that has to be fulfilled for an individual to be allowed to join the group. There are also sanctions for the ones that don't follow the code of honour – they are given quarantine and are not allowed to associate with the rest of the group.

² Even though the background for the vagabonds nomadic lifestyle might not be so different, they adapt a strategy of visibility and not of invisibility.

In UK a quite new group of people are travelling on the roads in refurbished caravans and trucks. They are called “New age travellers” and are described by Kevin Heatherington in his book by the same name (2000). This culture emerged from the new age festivals and alternative gatherings during the 60ties and is motivated ideologically from the new age movement. While this is different from the vagabonds that do not have any common ideological view, at least not outspoken, a similar trait is the way of meeting and making a living. The new age travellers are travelling from festival to festival during the summer, partly socializing with other travellers and partly making money from selling crafts, entertaining or doing odd jobs at the same festivals. (ibid) The vagabonds are travelling from market to market during the summer for many of the same reasons. And these markets are central for their community. But while the New Age Travellers according to Heatherington are deeply unpopular among the rural population and the authorities, the vagabonds are usually received with open arms in the Danish countryside.

3. ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES:

As I stated in the introduction, during fieldwork my first surprise was how people received the vagabonds. I saw how a welcoming, humorous and dignified atmosphere marked most of the interaction between the vagabonds and other groups and individuals.

During my fieldwork I realized that it is a very complex situation to be on the road. It is underlined many times by my informants that it is a hard life. The alcohol and the lifestyle are damaging the health of the vagabonds so that the average life length of a vagabond is between 55 and 70 years. Very few are getting older than 65, and most of them are quite sick and in a bad shape in the last years of their lives.

On the other hand many informants told me that if they didn't go on the road, they would be dead long ago. They point out that the fresh air and walking, the fun, the freedom, the new experiences and the peace of mind they get from the life on the road makes it worth the

hardships. Mursejler also many times pointed out to me that it feels like a privilege to be a vagabond because of the good treatment he gets from people he meets. One of the central themes when on the road is exactly this relation to the people one meet. A vagabond meets many people every day. Most of them are strangers - people he or she didn't meet before. And it is crucial to be well received by these strangers. That is the whole life foundation for the vagabond. Money, food and alcohol are resources that come from the people they meet along the road and in the cities and villages. And the vagabond has got to know how to get access to these resources.

The vagabonds need to develop a complex combination of knowledge and skills to be able to utilize this resource. In order to search for answers to my research question about what knowledge and skills the vagabonds have that make them able to turn a marginalized position into a mutual and dignified exchange, I want to explore a few different aspects of the life on the road. I need to explore what it is to be a vagabond, how the vagabonds are negotiating their identity which is not given, but constantly questioned. I will also explore the analytical perspective of the performative aspects of identity connected to Goffmans use of role, presentation of self, impression management and definition of the situation, and look upon how the presentation of self in order to make people understand that you are a vagabond, is an important skill that are developed through trying and failing. In the group of vagabonds there is a strong social control over the individual members, and the concept of identity is also useful in order to explore the relation between the group and the individual. To know the norms and rules of the community is an important part of the knowledge a vagabond needs to live on the road.

To be on the road is also to live a nomadic life in close contact with the environment.

Referring to Ingold I will argue that this environment is consisting of course of the road, the weather, and the nature but as the vagabonds are moving around in one of the most densely populated areas of Europe, also a big part of the environment consist of people, and the skill

of handling people is of great importance for the vagabonds to be able to get access to the resources they need.

The concept of identity deals with existential questions like: *“How do we know who we are, and how do others identify us? How does our sense of ourselves as unique individuals square with the realisation that, always and everywhere, we share aspects of our identity with many others?”* (Jenkins, 2004, p.3)

How does a social identity come into being? And how do we perform to assert an identity in everyday life? The self is coming into existence in the relation between the others and the person. This is as Jenkins writes, building on Mead (1934) and Cooley (1962):

“...An understanding of selfhood as an ongoing and in practice simultaneous, synthesis of (internal) self definition, and the (external) definitions of oneself offered by others. This offers a template for the basic model, which informs my whole argument, of the internal - external dialectic of identification as the process whereby all identities - individual and collective - are constituted.” (Jenkins 2004, p. 18)

In this is implicated that an identity is dependent on that other people recognize the identity one takes:

“It is not enough to assert an identity. That identity must also be validated (or not) by those with whom we have dealings. Identity is never unilateral.” (Jenkins, 2004, p.20)

To explore aspects of recognition or neglect I will look for situations where key relations are performed or take place, the vagabond vis-à-vis other vagabonds, vis-à-vis “potential customers” and vis-à-vis persons from their former life, family, friends etc.

Identity is thus constituted in a dialectical process between how others are looking upon one and how one looks upon one self. This processes is as Jenkins writes going on simultaneously. It is impossible to separate it in “real experience”. We can only do it for analytical purposes.

Analytically I will take into consideration two different aspects of identity:

- The cognitive aspect where identity is constituted by symbols and stereotypes based on presuppositions from others and ones own assessment of these presuppositions as described above,
- And the performative aspect of identity

Barth points out: *“Goffman argues that agreement on a definition of the situation must be established and maintained to distinguish which of the participants’ many statuses should form the basis for their interaction.”* (Barth 1981a, p.36)

This performative aspects of identity are dealing with how we play out identity in everyday situations, negotiating, and trying to influence how others are defining us by over- or under-communicating different sides of our identity in attempt to control the definition of a situation and which one of the participants’ many statuses should be relevant in this situation. I will explore how the vagabonds use visual and verbal means to influence on the definition on the situation to make their status as vagabonds relevant in the interaction.

Goffman writes:

“ Regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in mind and of his motive for having this objective, it will be in his interests to control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of him. This control is achieved largely by influencing the definition of the situation which the others come to formulate, and he can influence this definition by expressing himself in such a way as to give them the kind of impression that will lead them to act voluntarily in accordance with his own plan.” (Goffman, 1990, p.15. my underlining)

An important point in Goffman’s theory about defining the situation and impression management has to do with region behaviour. A region is defined as any space that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception. If an actor wants to create a specific

definition of the situation by his or hers performance, there will also be a need for an area where this performance can be prepared. Goffman calls this region the backstage, in opposition to the front stage where the performance is played out. The backstage is sheltered from the intended audience of the performance, and allows the actor to display actions that are not supporting the role he wants to play in the front stage region. In this frame of reference I am trying to analyse how the vagabonds are coping with their constant public exposure. To do this I will look into how they use their uniform as a sign of being “on” or “off” as vagabonds.

In my analysis I also need tools in order to find ways of analysing the collective aspect of identity to understand the relation between the individual vagabond and the group of vagabonds. As Jenkins writes: *“The proper sociological place for the concept of “identity” is at the heart of our thinking about the relationships between the concrete individual behaviour, and the necessary abstractions of collectivity.” (2004, p.18)*

Jenkins is distinguishing between “a group for it self” which is a collectivity that identifies and defines itself, and “a category in it self” as a collectivity that is identified and defined by others. The relation between these aspects are in many ways relating to the individual level of identity as both levels are partly created in a dialectical process between the outward categorization and the inward identification.

The vagabond community – also contains a given organisational structure with hierarchies and fixed statuses and rules to follow with sanctions for the ones that fail to comply. This level of collective organization is about power and thereby control over the members of the group.

As Barth points out, this level of institutionalization might be explored with the same concepts as Goffmann addresses for discussing how a person is selecting from his total repertoire of gestures and idioms which serve his needs for impression management namely the concepts of **role and status**, to understand *“how a multiplicity of individual decisions*

under the influence of canalizing factors can have the cumulative effect of producing clear patterns and conventions.” (1981a, p. 36 -37)

I will use this for example in exploring the processes that are shaping how the vagabonds are performing their role towards people and how their experience of the reactions of this behaviour when it meets or doesn't meet the expectations of the audience, are creating patterns of appreciated behaviour that again are formalized in the rules of conduct of the community.

What Barth is addressing is also to grasp the generative aspects of change, no institution works in a vacuum of rights and duties, but a set of simple rules and statuses in a community might generate many different ways of performing these statuses, that is; many different roles, but that these roles eventually might cluster around some empirical behaviour based on the punishment and reward of varying degrees of success.

When Barth introduces a distinction between status and role, where statuses apply to the structural level of social life, and roles to the performative and creative and continuous ongoing processes of social life, I also look for a way to include the environment as an aspect in the analysis of a situation. The categories of status sets link to language and cognitive aspects of knowledge, but the knowledge the vagabonds use is by no means only verbal.

It is also related to skills and practises and tasks related to the given or potential situation.

Ingold addresses such issues in his book 'Perception of the environment' (2000) like this:

“Tasks are the technically skilled activities of particular persons with particular social identities.” Or: “to see an activity ... embedded in a social relation is to regard it as what I shall call a task.”

(p. 324, 2000)

Ingold writes:

“...The particular kinds of tasks that a person performs are an index of his or her personal and social identity: The tasks you do depend on who you are, and in a sense the performance of certain tasks makes you the person who you are.” (p. 325, 2000)

Ingold’s ideas about the skilled practice as something that is developed by trying and failing until you get the “feel” of it, is closely connected with the environment of the practitioner and his or hers involvement with it. The environment is shaping and being shaped in a meaningful way by the people that move in it.

An important skill for nomadic people is the skill of knowing the environment and how to relate to it and to be able to utilize the resources this environment offers. Tim Ingold is writing about how the landscape constitutes a “taskscape” in the meaning of *“the entire ensemble of tasks in their mutual interlocking... Just as the landscape is an array of related features, so – by analogy – the taskscape is an array of related activities.” (P.195)*

The environment is open for exploration, in a constant process of discovery and recognition whereby people, through experience, are developing their repertoire of possible ways of relating to their surroundings. This is a continuous, creative exploration and learning process, where the person in the environment and the environment are mutually influencing on each other. Ingold is describing this when going into the concept of “niche”:

“...far from fitting into a given corner of the world (a niche), it is the organism that fits the world to itself, by ascribing functions to the objects it encounters and thereby integrating them into a coherent system of its own.” (19... p. 42)

In this view, a *niche* is not an organism’s one-sided adaptation to a place in nature but a place in the environment that is created in an intercourse between the factors that are present.

These thoughts might be help me explore the question about what skills and knowledge the vagabonds have developed while working to create a dignified place for themselves in the Danish society.

4. ACCESS, POSITIONING AND SOURCES:

4.1 Obtaining and developing access to the field

In January 2007 I sent my first email to the editor of the vagabond newspaper to ask him if I could meet some of the road knights and how it could be done. He suggested that I went to the first market in the season – Døllefjelde Musse Marked in Lolland in the south of Denmark, which started 3rd of May and ended 6th of May. There they would all gather, he told me.

I was very nervous before approaching my informants in person the first time – sitting in my tent in the market camping ground surrounded by young people partying and trying to build up the courage to go out to the place where I knew they were sitting, and talk to them, tell them about my project and what I wanted to do. I was terrified to be turned down and told to leave. In the afternoon I finally pulled myself together and went up to the inn where many road knights were sitting in the evening, and said hello. And I was warmly welcomed. I bought one beer, and I think it was the only one I bought for the rest of that market. The road knights, or some of their friends, gave the rest of what I drank to me, or it was exchanged for beer tickets, which they made sure I got.

Drinking, partying and a constant nervousness about what to do and say next signified the first market for me. Everything was unpredictable and happened quickly and seemingly without any warning.

This first evening they welcomed me, but they didn't believe that I would stay more than this market. But when I returned again and again, they started to open up to me in another not so party like manner.

Slowly I was let further into their inside world, and I was allowed to film and participate in their life. They showed me an almost scaring trust and generosity. It went as far as that when I

was broke in the end of the fieldwork – Mursejler and me survived by what he was able to make of money during the day.

During my stay with different people, I shared their way of living. It wasn't really any other possibility. If I had stayed in a hotel and been driving around to meet them at different places, my access would have been totally different. I also think that the experiences I got from sharing the living conditions with the informants gave me a feeling of their life that would have been impossible to get in any other way.

So I got myself a pram, and put sleeping bag, tent and other necessities in it. Then I stayed more or less the total time of my fieldwork with the informants – except from two weeks when I was on holiday in Norway, and a few days when I had to go to Copenhagen to fix my passport. I was on one weeks visit in September to observe the thing at Egeskov, and in April this year I went back to Denmark to show the finished films to the ones that were in it.

Mursejler and his companion Badekarret met me at the airport and we travelled together to Døllefjelde Musse Marked.

The main part of the fieldwork can be roughly divided in three periods:

3. May – 14. May:

The first two weeks when I met the group of vagabonds at the Døllefjelde Musse market and walked together with one of them – Saerback - to the next market, which was Dalager Market in Borris in the west part of Jutland.

15. May – 30. May:

Two weeks of staying in the house of two vagabonds, Kommandanten and her husband Vendelboen in Videbæk in the west part of Jutland.

1. June – 15. August

Starts with Hjallerup market north of Aalborg in the north of Jutland and is followed by 2 and a half months of walking together with Mursejleren around Denmark including a break when I went to Norway between 29. June and 16. July.

Then two shorter visits after the main part of the fieldwork was completed:

17th to 23rd of September

Visited at Egeskov to observe the thing, the election of the new monarchy and the baptizing of new vagabonds.

10. April – 21. April 2008

Travelled from Copenhagen to Døllefjelde Musse Marked on Lolland together with Mursejler and Badekarret. Stayed at the market at Døllefjelde for 4 days.

4.2 How was I perceived? What Identities was I given? Positioning.

“It is not enough to assert an identity. That identity must also be validated (or not) by those with whom we have dealings. Identity is never unilateral.” (Jenkins, 2004, 20)

When I arrived and started to present my self to the people, I told them that I was studying anthropology. Since I usually got the reply – what did you say? With a very confused face to follow, I started to use the explanation that it meant to study people – and how they were living together. Many times people were replying quite humorously to this information. I got comments like – ”You should come home and study us”, or ”Oh, that is just what I am doing too – studying humans.” with a knowing wink of the eye and a smile.

I had the advantage of speaking quite well Danish after staying two years in Denmark on previous occasions. So the language did not pose big problems to me.

In the group of the vagabonds I was mostly referred to as the small or the little something – student, journalist and Norwegian was some of the words that was used to refer to me.

I was often given the role as the vagabond that just started to walk on the road. And for me this was a nice role to have. I was sometimes ordered around – but in a nice way – to get

water, to go to shop things and stuff like that. And I was mostly happy to be of some kind of use. This was a quite natural role to take for me since I didn't know so much, and really was interested in all the corrections I got if my behaviour wasn't the way it should. Some of the knights wanted to give me a roadname – but there was no agreeing upon any name – names like – Happyforfood, the Norwegian Backstay (Den Norske Bardun) (because I was tripping in the backstays in the camp) and the Photographer was proposed, but none of them stayed. When I was on the road – it was a little complicated, because when vagabonds walk together their economy is shared, and when they split up they divide what they have made between them. So when I walked with Mursejler and Sheriffen, and with Mursejler and Badekarret and also with Saerback, it was enough that I was walking along with them for them to consider me in on the shared economy. I made a few attempts to stay out of this economy, not to be a burden for them, but I decided to accept the role because it was interesting for me to see how the economy was managed. And it really helped me in the end of my fieldwork when I had no more money because of some misunderstanding with my loan, and lived on what Mursejler and me was making during the day. I must in many ways have been a burden for my companions, but they never complained about my uselessness.

When I was on the road I did not walk with the coffee pot and beg for money directly. But sometimes people gave me money just because I was there, and I quickly learned not to refuse. I was smiling and talking to people when they addressed me, but left most of the decisions that had to be made to the ones I was following. I did not know how sharpen knives, but I could look after the pram when the others went to press doorbells. I helped in the camp, setting up the tent, sometimes cooking, and doing odd jobs. The longer into the fieldwork I got, the more active and involved I became in the setting. To some I looked like a vagabond and at to some I didn't. As Mursejler said: *"I never get so much soft drinks and chocolate*

milk as since I have been walking with you. When I walk with the Sheriff and any other, we always get only beer” So somehow I was probably not looking like a vagabond in their eyes.

4.3 The camera in the field

The road knights I met are well aware of what a camera is, and most of them have the experience of being filmed or interviewed for TV, radio or newspapers. Some of the old vagabonds are even placing some guilt on the mass media for ruining the original function of the annual meeting at Egeskov. They say that how can you take up sensitive issues about specific people when it will be broadcasted to the public the next day?

So the reprimands and corrections that before was given the day of the election is today made some of the days before.

For me it was important to stress that I was not a journalist and that I am not after the scandals or «secrets». I also made an agreement with them that they would see the rough cut of my film and have the chance to tell me if it was anything they really didn't want to have on tape. I kept this promise and went back to have their approval in April which I got. This was not anything they asked from me, but I felt it made my presence in their environment less threatening. It made me feel more comfortable, and I hope it also made them feel more relaxed. I also made it clear that the film was not intended for television – this was what people most often asked me about. They reacted sometimes with relief and sometimes with a little bit of disappointment.

When I started my filming there was only one restriction. It was very clear and it continued to be a restriction all the time I was filming: I was not allowed to film when they smoked hashish. This was because as they said – it is legal on the road, but it is illegal in the Danish society, and they didn't want to be associated with it, mostly because it might harm their reputation among the public. There were a few other occasions I was asked not to film – when

a man was very drunk – his wife did not want me to film, and once when a toilet was being destroyed by some youth in the vagabond camp, they didn't want me to film.

I was also not allowed to film inside the church during the funeral of a road knight by the family of the deceased.

Other restrictions were more some that I put upon my self – not outspoken by them. After a while I started to feel when it was not appropriate to film. The camera sometimes annoyed Mursejler because he said that it made it more difficult to ask people for money when there was a big expensive camera around. The camera also made a scratch in our performance as road knights. If I didn't film and speak too much – people passing by could take me for a road knight too.

4.4 Sources:

During the whole fieldwork I made written field notes to remember situations and my own reactions. I was also filming during the whole fieldwork and ended with 71 miniDV tapes each with 40 minutes recording on them, of which 50 selected minutes comprise the film “Knight of the Road”. When I started the writing of the thesis, both the written field notes and the video material have been of great help to my work. Through working with my written and visual material I have discovered the main themes and key situations for my research. (Emerson, 1995).

During the writing I have also utilised material from web pages by and about vagabonds in Denmark especially <http://landevejsridder.dk> a page made by the vagabond Spøjsen where he is writing about what it means to be a vagabond, and have a blog and a picture gallery, and www.vagabondavisen.dk, specifically the guestbook which serves as a messageboard for vagabonds and people that wants to get in touch with someone associated with the vagabond community.

5. EVERYDAYLIFE AS A VAGABOND IN DENMARK

In this chapter I will describe some situations that I think might be essential in understanding how the vagabond identity is established, maintained and developed. I will start out by looking into one important backstage arena, how the vagabonds cope vis-à-vis the vagabond community, and continue with the front stage arenas and how the vagabonds act towards the public.

In their everyday life, vagabonds are living with a distinguished division between backstage and front stage (Goffman 1954). In the front stage arenas, which the vagabonds themselves call – “out in the society” (ude i samfundet) or “on the road” (på vejen), the vagabonds are performing their trade and developing and using their skills in the meeting with the public, which they call “Mr. And Mrs. Denmark” or “the customers”

At any moment when a vagabond is on the road, he or she can be approached by someone and expected to perform as a vagabond. Considering this, one might say that the vagabonds are moving in a very big front stage area, and a very small and vulnerable backstage area.

The backstage arenas are played out in the vagabond camps at the markets or in the homes of other vagabonds or close vagabond friends. Here the hierarchy and the rules of the society are strengthened:

5.1 Inside the Vagabond community. Maintaining a good reputation for the group:

Being a vagabond is in many ways a quite lonely profession. Most vagabonds are scattered around Denmark during the year. When the vagabonds gather at a market it is a much-appreciated chance to socialize with colleagues and relax.

“When I go to a market I feel at home, then I relax when the camp is set up. (...) It is another way of living than when you are out on the road. Because the camp is made, and you can go to sleep and wake up when you want to. You can’t always decide that yourself when you are walking around. Then there are certain times when you have to be up and awake. You don’t go into a schoolyard before after a certain hour in the evening for example.” (Mursejler)³

In the vagabond camp, it is the vagabonds themselves that decide who might be there and who might not. People coming by are defined as guests and visitors. They are usually not “customers”, so the vagabonds don’t try to make money from them.

The markets are opportunities to organize the society, strengthening the network inside the group, drink in a safe environment and having fun. It is the central arena for controlling how the collective reputation of the vagabonds is taken care of, and a place for passing on traditions and knowledge to each other. Here also the rituals of the community are performed. The year has a certain rhythm when it comes to what happens during a summer.

The market season starts with **Døllefjelde Musse Marked** at Lolland in the south east of Denmark. It has around 125 000 visitors during the 4 market days in the beginning of May. At “Dølle” which it is called by the locals, the vagabonds gather for the first time after the winter. In connection with this market the church is organizing a “Gøglergudstjeneste” - a service for the market people in the local church. The vagabonds are honoured guests at this service and are allowed to bring their dogs and beer into the church.

The first weekend in June there is **Hjallerup Market** in the north of Jutland – north of the city Aalborg. This Market is the biggest and possibly the oldest outdoor market in North of Europe with more than 200 000 visitors during the 3 market days. At Hjallerup new vagabonds are given a name in a ceremony where they are soaked in beer. To get a name, at

³ Source: video recording.

least one of the older and baptized vagabonds has to recommend the newcomer, and he or she should already have been walking on the road for one year, living after the rules of the vagabonds.

Egeskov Marked is marking the end of the summer season. It takes place the 3. Wednesday in September, on the island Fyn, in the middle/south of Denmark in a small town called Kværndrup. Here the vagabonds have their thing place. It is on a small piece of land that tradition says that the count of Egeskov Manor gave to the vagabonds to be theirs forever. Here grows the thing tree, which is surrounded by a circle of stones. Every stone belong to one specific vagabond, and he or she has inherited it from an older vagabond. To have a stone at Egeskov is a big honour and a mark that one is able to conduct oneself in accordance with the rules of the vagabonds. To be eligible one has to be name given at Hjallerup and then baptized at Egeskov.

As Peder Guitar says in the film (Hammerås, 2008):

“If people new that you had a stone at Egeskov, then they knew that they could trust you, and all doors were open to you.”

The election of the new monarchy and the baptizing of the vagabonds take place during the thing. Usually a person has to have been walking on the road for one year after the namegiving at Hjallerup before he or she can be baptized at Egeskov, but this is the rule and not always the practice. The Vagabond thing takes place the Thursday after the market.

Peder Guitar is an old vagabond that is not walking on the road anymore, he lives in a camper in a camping site. During a conversation we had in his camper – me him and Mursejler - he told about how the whole organization of the vagabond society came into existence around 400 years ago, because of the need to make sure that the people walking around had a good reputation:

“...there where travelling journeymen (farende svende) that walked around to get work because it was not enough for them to do in the villages. But then it was also alcoholics and beggars and singers (gårdbisser) that went around to the farms. And some of them behaved badly or put fire to the farms, and then one realized that it was too many closed doors – one couldn't come to the places where someone had behaved badly. That's why one made such a thing place. First it was at Hjallerup, but then it moved to Egeskov. One decided that one wanted a king, and in the beginning it was no queen, only a king and his partner. And they decided things like: “you can't come anywhere anymore because you put fire to Hans Pedersens farm, and you made something bad there, and you stole there” and so on. And that was how it slowly came into existence because it had to be some discipline if one wanted to be free birds and walk on the road all year round, one needed a good reputation. And that is how the moral rules slowly came into existence with politeness, humbleness and honesty, and respect for other people.”⁴

The moral rules are as Spøjsen is writing on his homepage

http://landeveisridder.dk/vagabond_regler.html (15th of may, 2008): 1. Don't steal. 2. Don't lie (unless everyone can hear that you are lying), 3. Don't take any hard drugs. 4. Be polite and respectful towards people. These rules are many times in short expressed as “Honesty, love and respect” (Ærlighed, Kærlighed og Respekt)

In addition to this there are a lot of unwritten rules, and I will go more into this in the last part of this subchapter.

Hierarchy

Inside the vagabond community there are two kinds of hierarchies that sometimes coincide. It is the hierarchy of the elected monarchy with the king or the regent first, and then the crown

⁴ Source: video recording.

prince, the queen and the “freeloader” prince (nasseprinsen). If there are some disagreements at the market or a place where the vagabonds are gathered, it is the one present that has the highest position in the monarchy who has the last word in deciding the outcome. The members of the monarchy also have some duties like being the ones that give out the beer and food tickets at the markets, look after the group and make sure that they behave more or less according to the rules of the vagabonds – both the written and the unwritten.

Then there are the hierarchy of the oldest on the road. This one might call the hierarchy of experience. Depending on when a person started to walk on the road, and how much he or she has been walking all year round, the person’s status is set. Mursejler told me:

“When you talk to someone that are older than you on the road, then you should listen respectfully, and don’t argue. You do as the older ones tell you.”⁵

One might say that if there are many old vagabonds present, and the king has walked for a shorter time on the road – many times the older vagabonds have more authority than the king, as we will learn from the situation described below. Ideally the king would then ask them for advice if he is in doubt and then make his decisions. This may all sound very organized. In a way it is, but in another way it also is a highly chaotic situation to be at a market with a lot of alcohol involved. When you consider that quite a few vagabonds are drunk most of the time, it is obvious that there has to be some mistakes made at times, some confusions and misunderstandings. But still it is some kind of system in the confusion and it doesn’t happen often that the rules are broken.

⁵ From written fieldnotes.

Other personality traits that gives a person respect in the vagabond community is to have decency/being polite/ have common sense (at have pli), and to be good at grasping a situation quickly – (At have situationsfornemmelse).

Breaking the rules – jeopardizing the collective reputation:

At the markets the ones that are stepping outside what is acceptable for the vagabond community, are corrected. This is done by the ones that are old and experienced on the road towards the ones that has walked for a shorter period of time. It can be small things and bigger things.

At Egeskov Marked the summer of my fieldwork, I experienced how a vagabond called “MrX” (this is a pseudonyme), first was officially cleansed for an old quarantine he got for stealing, and then afterwards was given a new quarantine because of some other things he was accused of. The incident started with a fight between him and Peder Gitar, and Peder seemed to think that MrX should get kicked out of the community. He didn’t say why, but held on to his opinion in spite of protests from outsiders that were watching.

The new king Sprældemanden was standing close by. He is not so old on the road, elected king just an hour ago, and still quite insecure about the situation. The new queen – a woman with a loud voice called Hallo, who is one of the old women on the road, came over to him pointed at MrX and said he should not be on the road. Sprældemanden said – then what shall we do, throw him out? She replied: It is you who are the king! He answered: But I don’t know! I wasn’t there at the time.

After some back and forth he explains to Birthe, who is the oldest woman on the road, and also sits quite close, that the rest of the monarchy thinks that MrX should have a new quarantine. MrX wants to know why. He says that he was just cleansed. Birthe agrees about that. Sprældemanden doesn’t know what to say, but gestures to Hallo to explain. She comes,

pointing at MrX saying – “Young girls, bad treatment of animals and drugs. That is why”. MrX repeats that he is cleansed now. But Hallo points out to him that he is cleansed for stealing but not from the rest. She says: shall Peder guide you out or are you going your self? She also accuses him for pouring flammable liquid over her and her friend MrX denies everything, but she says – then you can ask the others. He is then allowed to take some food, and then he leaves with his sleeping gear and backpack.⁶

To me it seemed like a highly chaotic situation at the moment, with a lot of different things going on at the same time. What struck me the most was how helpless MrX was against the accusations – no matter if he protested – if the monarchy and some old vagabonds agreed that he should have a quarantine – then he would get it, and then he would have to leave, and he did.

The actions he was accused of performing are highly sensitive in the vagabond community. Especially the one connected to sexual connections to young (underage) girls.

As Peder Guitar said before the thing: *“We can’t have people on the road that are fiddling with the children of the bourgeoisie”* To have a good relationship with the children is of a great importance for the vagabonds. Many times it is through the children the vagabonds come into contact with the adults – by making balloon animals, and having funny and attention catching decorations on their prams. Mursejler told me: *“The road to the parents wallets goes through the hearts of the children.”* It is crucial for the vagabonds that the parents are not afraid of letting their children talk to them. There are unwritten rules of conduct that are made to minimize any chance that a vagabond might be accused of being a child molester. For example I remember one incident from my last visit in Denmark in April

⁶ Transcript from video recording.

2008, when I was walking with Mursejler and another male vagabond called Badekarret, who had been walking 3 years on the road.

Badekarret needed to pee, and he went around the corner where there were some bushes.

Mursejler realized that he wasn't there and asked me where he was. I answered that he went to pee over there by the bushes. Then Mursejler got very upset, and pointed at the children's school behind the bush. When Badekarret got back he got a scolding for peeing like that close to a place with lots of children. "What would you do if one of the children came by and started to point at you and ask what you had in your hand? You just don't pee places like that! It is an unwritten rule!" Mursejler continued his yelling for a long time, ignoring every attempt from Badekaret to justify himself.⁷

In the case with MrX who was getting quarantined for the accusations about "young girls", I don't know if the people had any proof of this, or if it was only rumours. But somehow the rumours of child molesting is just as damaging for the vagabonds' reputation if they are true or not. This means that a vagabond must be extremely careful with his conduct, not only to behave good, but also not to give any reasons for rumours about bad behaviour to spread. Not among the public and not inside the vagabond community.

These two situations show both how authority works, and how crucial the conduct is to provide a good reputation. This seemingly so free life of the vagabonds might not be so free after all. The strong social control with simple but strict rules is limiting the vagabond's possible choices of conduct both when together with the group, and alone or with a partner on the road. If the rules are broken or the rumours starts that they are broken, there is no room for

⁷ From written fieldnote.

negotiations or tolerance and the vagabond will most likely be excluded from the group. A vagabond needs to be constantly conscious about how his or hers behaviour is understood.

5.2 Everyday life on the road with Mursejler. Signalling an identity through performance

In the following I will start by describing a situation that took place when Mursejler and I was on our way to visit Peder Guitar at Tåsinge. I will follow up some of the themes that appear in this situation by describing a discussion Peder Guitar and Mursejler had about these events when they met the next day. With this I aim to describe how this incident involves skills in the self-presentation on the front stage, which both deals with verbal and visual aspects. It was the 21st of July the weather was perfect, sunny and warm:

“After a small hour walk on the road to Tåsinge – a small island in the south of Denmark, we came to a little farm that was also having a wine shop (Skjold Burne). A man was standing outside on the road, sweeping the entrance. Mursejler started to talk with him, asking where he thought we were going. They were standing for a while talking, about the summer, the festival at Langeland and Mursejler told about what route he was planning to walk after the festival. Then he said that he was coming back this direction at the time when Egeskov Market takes place. The man replied by telling Mursejler that if he needed a place to sleep he could come by them – they had people sleeping in their shed before. Mursejler was quite interested and told that he had passed the farm before. The daughter of the man comes and Mursejler changes the subject. A few minutes later the man asks Mursejler if he is sharpening knives. He says, yes, he does, and we were invited into the farm to sharpen some knives.”⁸

⁸ Source: Video recording.

In this situation Mursejler never directly asked for a place to sleep, he never referred to himself as a vagabond or said that he sharpened knives. All this information was presented to the man visually – by how Mursejler looked – with a beard, a hat with badges on, a leather vest, the pram filled to the brim with stuff and decorations and a sharpening wheel on the top, and the dog. And also by the verbal performance - how Mursejler was talking about his route ahead. For the man this was enough to define the situation as one where a man from a farm meets a vagabond, and he reacted accordingly. It took approximately 2 minutes from they greeted each other until the man asked Mursejler if he needed a sleeping place.

The vagabond is dependent on people's recognition of them as vagabonds.

This gives access to some resources that vagabonds or people that are not as convincing in their performance might not get access to.

When we started to sharpen knives in the yard of the farm, the man's wife told us about another man that had visited them before:



“Wasn't it last year, we saw a man sitting out by the road having a break? Yes, we went out and asked if he wanted to eat the evening meal with us. We have enough anyway. He got food and coffee, and I made a food package for his breakfast, and then we guided him up to the shed.” The daughter said: “But he was really very thin, one could see his ribs.”

They started to talk about other things, and Mursejler asked if the man had a dog with him.

The wife replied: "No he didn't. But I don't think he was quite genuine."

Mursegler: "You can't remember his name?"

Wife: "No, I can't"

Mursegler: "But he had a cart?"

Wife: "No, just a backpack"

Mursegler: "But he was genuine anyway?"

Wife: "It was some kind of... It wasn't quite right. Because it was that now he wanted to catch the bus, and he had a flat in Copenhagen and..."

Mursegler: "Oh well, when could this have been last year then?"

Wife: "It was in the autumn."

Mursegler: "Then maybe he had been at Egeskov Market?"

The husband comes by again, and he says it wasn't at that time; it was later, because it got dark early. And the man wanted to sleep somewhere sheltered from the wind.⁹

These characteristics of the "not genuine" vagabond are something that has been mentioned many times during the time I spent with the vagabonds. To have a flat or not, to be walking or taking public transportation, is for many signs of if you are a real vagabond or not, and you should also look the right way, which at least means to have a pram and a hat. Most vagabonds have experienced that their "genuinity" has been questioned.

Today approximately 85% of the vagabonds in Denmark have some kind of permanent place to stay even though many don't use it much. And all the vagabonds I have talked to, take the train at times. Quite a few also receive welfare money in some form. This does not disqualify anyone from being a vagabond seen from inside the vagabond community. Towards the rest of the Danish population though, this is in dissonance with the picture of the "genuine"

⁹ Source: Video recording.

vagabond. Most vagabonds are aware of this, and chose different strategies to under communicate this part of their lives when they meet people that are not inside the vagabond community. But there are also attempts of explaining their way of living to people and create accept for this change in lifestyle. Like Mursejler does in the situation in the film – where he explains to an old lady that he has to have a flat to get welfare money, even though he doesn't use it. And that the 4000 Dkk he gets every month is spent in 14 days.

So one might say that there are influences from both sides – the expectations from the Danish population about what a genuine vagabond looks, behaves and lives like is shaping how the vagabonds present them selves, but through their self presentation the vagabonds are also trying to influence how people think it's ok that a vagabond is living.

This seems to be a dialectical process in the relation between the audience and the vagabond.

In the self-presentation that Mursejler is performing, there are 3 aspects of his identity that has to be presented. First he has to present himself so that people understand that he is a vagabond. Secondly he has to present himself in a way so people understand that he is nice, polite, harmless, friendly, fun – in short: A person they want to get to know. Thirdly he has to present himself in such a way that people understand that he needs their help and assistance. Ideally the two later aspects he is presenting should be incorporated in the understanding of what a vagabond is. By doing his best to present him self in a way that communicate all these three aspects at the same time, Mursejler is constantly trying to influence on what content the audience put in the vagabond identity.

A few days after the visit at the farm, we stayed with Peder Guitar in his camper, and Mursejler and him discussed what had happened there as a part of a discussion about how people are walking around as vagabonds without being a part of the vagabond community:

Peder: "The last years I was walking we had to warn people when we said farewell: "Take care if someone is coming because there are so many that makes bad stuff."

Mursejler: "I got to know, on a farm we passed by, that they had had a visit from a man, and he had been really nice and all, but they didn't think he was one of ours. He was probably not quite genuine (ekte) they said. I thought: genuine – what is it to be genuine – didn't the man have a backside? He is just as genuine as me..." Peder: "No, but be aware of imitations."

Mursejler: "Yes, okay, maybe inside the vagabond community he might not be what we call genuine, but the man is genuine enough anyway." Peder: "Yes, but if he is not inside the vagabond community then you can never be sure if he doesn't steal. That's it. And then he isn't genuine." Mursejler: "No, they had the impression that he was quite harmless, but they were not quite certain if he was genuine." Peder: "He might be nice, but what was good about keeping the tradition was that if one told people who one had been the apprentice of, then they felt safe, and if something bad happened, they knew it didn't have anything to do with the vagabonds. But it is not like that anymore, now any city bum might get out and do something bad, and then the whole vagabond community gets the blame."¹⁰

The concern about how the people they meet are conceiving of them is an important theme among the vagabonds. They know that the look can deceive – a person might look like a vagabond to an untrained eye, but he or she might not know the norms of the community.

If a person like that have been pressing doorbells in a neighbourhood, it might be impossible for a vagabond coming afterwards to make anything there.

In a suburb to Odense, I experienced this together with Mursejler. The day before this happened we had been sitting outside a shop in the area talking to customers, sometimes asking for money, but mostly joking, playing the harmonica and so on. We also had a chat

¹⁰ Source: Video recording.

with the local alcoholics. They told Mursejler that it had been a vagabond called Sheriffen in the neighbourhood not so long ago. Mursejler replied that it was only one Sheriff at the roads, and she was a woman and right now she was in Jutland somewhere, so it had to be some kind of city bum.

“It was around noon, and Mursejler had been pressing something like 10 doorbells and got quite nice replies, some money and some cigarettes and things were ok. Then we got one “no”. And Mursejler turned towards me and said: “From now on we will get a lot of no’s. You’ll see.” And quite right – mostly people didn’t open the door. Mursejler came back – he said – “they just came to the door and saw who was standing outside – and then they left without opening. Somebody has been doing some shit here. And it is not I. I have never been here before.”

Mursejler explained the negative responses he got at the door by the actions of some city bum that had been posing as a vagabond, begging at the doors. When he got answers from a few doors he did his best to be very polite and not pushing to get anything. In this way, he told me, he hoped he could mend some of the damage the other person had caused.”¹¹

As I see it the vagabonds are moving in an environment where they feel that every vagabond’s individual actions has consequences for what resources the whole group get access to. This is expressed for example in their concern for “Opening doors” which means to create a friendly attitude towards vagabonds in a house. When a vagabond leaves a place, he or she is concerned about if the people they just met will be good to the next vagabond that press their doorbell, or to him or her self when she or he comes by the next time.

¹¹ Source: Written fieldnotes.

It is considered bad manners to press all the doorbells in an area. One should leave some houses if there should come another vagabond after one self.

To cultivate the resources like this is an important consideration behind many of the actions of the vagabonds. Also the annual cycle of movement is regarded a way of not exhausting goodwill and friendliness of the people in an area. Mursejler talked with annoyance about a man that was associated with the vagabonds, but used to stay for months in the same spot in the same town. This was not good he said, they must be terribly tired of him after such a long time. As a basic rule one stay three days at the same spot. It is of course different if the vagabond has friends at the place. But even then, more than a couple of weeks are not usual. Through this movement the vagabond is also building up a network of customers around the country that he can come back to if needed.

The vagabonds' skill of presenting themselves in a way that gives access to the resources they need, is developed through trying and failing. In the following situation Mursejler was failing to get access to what he wanted.

After meeting some people in a small town in the north of Denmark, the three of us were all offered to have a shower and wash our clothes. It ended as a quite unpleasant experience, but it started out as a nice offer. Mursejler was persuaded to cut some of his beard and the people offering the shower were grooming him – much against his will:

”After a while Mursejler came out from the shower. He looked very different from before, his beard very short, and with styling gel in his hair. He had also got a new t-shirt and a pair of shorts that was made out of a pair of jogging pants where the legs were cut off.

*He told me that he was not so happy about this. He stroke his short beard and said that this could easily cost him money, because he didn't look like a bum and a vagabond now, and then people might not treat him as nicely as they would if he had a big beard and was dirty*¹²

And later the same day after some unpleasant experiences, Mursejler tried to get access to a trampoline in the neighbourhood to cheer himself up:

*“Mursejler went over to try to borrow the trampoline at the neighbours. He was not allowed. He came back, and said – “wonder if it is because my beard is so short and I look so clean – if I looked like I did before, maybe the children would have let me try it, to see the vagabond jump?”*¹³

Whatever the reason was for the people not to borrow him the trampoline – Mursejler was quite certain that it had to do with his own performance as a vagabond and it was the visual image of him that was not good enough.

A spotless performance is necessary to be believed to be “genuine”. If the audience are not convinced that they see an authentic road knight, the knight will not have the privileges he or she would have got otherwise. The reception depends on how well the vagabond is presenting him or her self, and also upon the audience's attitude towards vagabonds based on previous experience – if it is positive or negative.

¹² Source: Written fieldnotes

¹³ Source: Written fieldnotes

5.3 Juggling with identities: Over and under communication, front and backstage:

The vagabonds are like most people moving in and out of many different social situations.

These situations can be in the front stage area as vagabonds – “out in the society” and “on the road”, in the backstage area as vagabonds – in “the vagabond camp” or “at home”

But they can also step out of their vagabond identity totally, and make this part of their identity invisible to some extent by taking off their hat and uniform, and dress in “normal” clothes.

In this chapter I will take a look into how the vagabonds are using their outfit to define for themselves and others what kind of situation they are in, and thereby how they are supposed to act, because what you look like is important when it comes to what you can allow yourself to do. Mursejler would not beg or ask for money if he doesn't bring his pram and his coffee pot. Depending on where the person is and with whom, he or she is using different parts of their identity. Here it might be relevant to look at a person as having many different statuses thereby connecting the concept of status and identity: Status is here defined as

“institutionalised identification viewed in the abstract, as ‘a collection of rights and duties’”

Jenkins 2004, p. 140) one could say that Mursejler has the status vagabond, but also for example as son, friend and Danish male. Depending on the context, different statuses will be the most significant. But even if a person is in a context where one status is more significant than another, other statuses as embodied practises is still a part of the persons performance.

Ingold writes about this and in his notion a person is growing into an identity by performing tasks, that by practice, trying and failing in an environment becomes skills that form a part of a persons *“modus operandi”* (Ingold 2000).

I will try to go into this by exploring the way a vagabond is relating to his or her uniform, and especially the hat in different social situations. (Spradley, 1980 p. 39-52)

The hat is deeply personal for the knights of the road, and the owner carefully decorates it with things he or she feels is fitting for his or her identity. It is called the “toppsejl” (which directly translated would be something like the sail that is on the top of the mast in a boat). Some vagabonds told me that the toppsejl is in a way sacred – that nobody must take anyone’s toppsejl, leave it on the floor, or treat it without respect.

Mursejler told me that one of the most humiliating things a vagabond could experience at a market was if someone took your toppsejl and ran away with it. Maybe one can say that the toppsejl somehow is a symbol of its owner, and to treat the toppsejl with disrespect is somehow to treat the owner with disrespect?

I was talking with Mursejler on a later occasion and I just told him that I started writing about the meaning of the toppsejl. He then added that the toppsejl was a way of recognizing a vagabond:

“Imagine if someone says that they have seen a vagabond with a beard and a pram, then it is not so easy to know who it might have been. But if one can describe some details from the toppsejl, or the coffee pot, then it is a lot easier to know who it might be. For example me – if you see someone with a tail on top of the hat and a red coffee pot with an apple on it, then it has to be me.”¹⁴

All of the vagabonds I have met have a toppsejl of some kind. It differs to which degree they have decorated it and how close they feel to it, but it is rare to see a vagabond without anything on her or his head. As another vagabond – Spøjsen is writing on his homepage – the hat and the uniform are signs of the identity as vagabond:

¹⁴ Source: Written fieldnotes.

Identity

At some point it happens that the Vagabond is taking over ones identity. It feels strange not to wear uniform and hat when one is moving around in society. I have always said that I don't wear uniform in Horsens and Silkeborg since that is where I live; this has been necessary for me, to keep Jan and Spøjsen apart. It sounds confusing, but I can't explain it better.

(http://landevejsridder.dk/vagabond_identitet.html ,14th of may 2008)

From this it seems like wearing the uniform is what marks you as “on stage” as a vagabond or not. Spøjsen writes later on the same web page:

“When you are on the road in uniform, then you are always “on”. You must constantly be ready to live up to the demands of the vagabond, and you must be ready to answer questions (mostly from children) that you have answered 100 times before. This is quite alright, we live by the people we meet, and therefore we also have to be ready to give something in return.”

Expressions like – “having free time” “being off duty”, “being in civil” or “being a tourist”, is used by the vagabonds to describe that they are not wearing the uniform, and are walking in the society as ordinary people. I experienced this switch between relevant statuses a few times; one time was in Århus when Mursejler was visiting his family on a family gathering. He wanted to show me a forest that was near by, where he used to go when he was a boy. We borrowed two bikes and went to see it.

Mursejler didn't put on his uniform or toppsejl. He was wearing ordinary clothes – a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. He told me – today I am just a tourist.

We stopped by a shop to buy beer and some food for the trip. Usually when we came to a shop and Mursejler was in uniform, we could stay outside the shop for 4 – 5 hours, talking to

people that came by, and ask for money. But this time Mursejler didn't want to stay for long. He didn't exactly remember the way, and had to ask someone for directions. He went over to a woman that was about to enter her car. And even if he didn't wear the uniform – the body language with the slight bow, and the polite and humble phrases he used – “Excuse me miss, you couldn't tell me the way to Moesgaardskoven?” seemed oddly old fashioned and out of place in the setting. When he came back he shook his head and said – “it is difficult to leave the vagabond manners behind, even though I am in civil.”¹⁵

One cannot say that Mursejler left his vagabond identity behind with his uniform and toppsejl. The identity seemed so much a part of his way of meeting people that it stayed even though he consciously wanted to have a break from it, as his own comment upon the situation also shows. For the actor him self, the toppsejl and the uniform is the signal that he or she uses to show if he or she is on stage as a vagabond or off stage and not a vagabond. But as the example above shows –just taking of the hat and the uniform doesn't turn off the vagabond identity.

5.4 Working as a vagabond

When working as a vagabond – the job is including some actions that are seen as humiliating and degrading by some. Begging, being humble, always be on the bottom of the hierarchy, being drunk and feel the pitying and scornful looks from people might also be familiar to city bums and drug addicts.

The identity as a vagabond – signalled with the hat, the uniform and the pram is somehow giving a protection for this – with the outfit that is breaking the norms of what is normal, showing a humorous and clownish attitude towards the world, taking a role where these

¹⁵ Source: Written fieldnote

actions – that might have been pitiful if a person “like us” did them, is accepted and expected, not as a defeat but as something the person chose with dignity.

The vagabond attitude:

To play the role as a vagabond properly is including a special kind of attitude. The vagabonds are using their good mood, and humour as important tools to make a living. When the mood is good, everything is working. For example like this morning in July, around 11 o’clock, on the road to Langeland:

Mursejler was in a good mood, and thought we should try to make some money. So we went to sharpen knives in the houses nearby the shop. In the first house, a man came out with his dog. He didn’t have any knives, but, he gave 20 kroner for ”Dagen og vejen” (the day and the road). Mursejler was pressing a few more doorbells, but nobody opened. We met a man that came walking on the road, smoking his pipe, and asked him about the route back to the main road. He showed us where to go, and put 20 kr in the coffeepot at his own initiative. Mursejler became quite happy, and said that he could feel that his good mood would give us money on the road today. So we were not going to press more doorbells. We went back to the main road and walked south. It was coming a lot of cars towards us from Langeland, and almost all of them were waving or honking their horns to greet us as they passed. We went with our arms in the air all the time to greet them back. This was also adding to the good mood.¹⁶

The mood is important for making money. If you are in a bad mood you won’t make anything. A vagabond has to smile. Like Erik Nordmand, a former road knight told me when we visited him in his house:

¹⁶ Source: Written fieldnotes.

“You ought to know that it is a big act to walk on the country road. Towards Mr. and Mrs. Denmark that is. If you want to make some money, it is no use to be sad and depressed. One has to say “Howdy missus, do you have any money for my good mood bucket?” (Hej og hopp frøken, har de en skilling til humørbøtten?) One should not say: “Please would you give me some money for my sick mother” If one is sad, then one drinks a couple of beers and put on the smile and goes out and makes money. The sad stuff one can save until one is sitting in the sleeping bag alone at night.”¹⁷

To do a good job as vagabond it is important to smile, and joke and make the people around oneself smile too. The vagabonds are also using this to distinguish their way of being from the common city beggar or drug addict. They are very conscious of this as a part of their image. Humour is usually always easing up a tense situation. But sometimes a person is in a bad mood, and a vagabond is no exception. This is a situation that has to be under communicated as much as possible. As Erik Nordmand said before – save that for when you are alone in your sleeping bag at night. The mornings are especially hard, due to the hangover from the last day’s drinking. I was told many times by different vagabonds that: *“You can’t earn anything if you are hung-over and in a bad mood.”* To help on the mood most vagabonds try with some alcohol. For the good mood, alcoholic beverages that contain a high amount of sugar is considered a good remedy. The vagabonds call this “Snakkevann” or “Talkingwater”, and according to them it goes straight into the blood and makes you talkative and happy. To get started in the morning the vagabond needs to have a small amount of money or a reserve of alcohol – a “start capital” to get the right amount of alcohol in the body so it is possible to get out and earn money.

¹⁷ Source: Written fieldnotes.

6. CREATING A DIGNIFIED PLACE ON THE MARGIN OF SOCIETY.

The craft of asking nicely and the resource perspective:

To ask in a way that you get what you need, or better, to behave in a way that you get what you need just because people understand by themselves that you need it, is a skill that is learned when one are on the road.

It is a mixed situation. To beg is a task that in most of society is connected with a feeling of humiliation. But when a vagabond master this, and has made it into an incorporated part of his or hers identity, it is a source of pride.

Kommandanten a female vagabond that I lived with for 2 weeks told me:

I can't walk with the coffeepot (beg) if I am sober. I need some liqueur inside to be able to get out and ask people. I asked her why, and she said: It has to do with the embarrassment around it. It is a barrier to cross.

I was told many times that I didn't have to go with the coffeepot. As one vagabond told me: "You don't start to walk with the coffeepot (beg) before you are ready." Others told me: "If you really want to understand what it is like to be a vagabond then you have to try to go with the coffeepot" I got the feeling that when you knew how to beg, or "to ask nicely" as the vagabonds put it, then you could call yourself a vagabond.

To ask nicely is to be humble and funny, and always accept when you don't get anything.

Mursejler talked about this:

"I don't exactly go out and say "Give me the money!" No, I show them my coffeepot, make some balloon animals, or play a little on the harmonica, and have a nice conversation. Sometimes they have some money to spare, and other times not."¹⁸

¹⁸ Source: Written fieldnote.

Different vagabonds have different styles when it comes to how to ask. Many times special ways of saying things are developed. For example Mursejler many times uses this phrase when he got some money:

“Thank you so much, we promise to use it sensibly! It goes to a bite of food for the dog, and the rest we drink up – then I haven’t lied. Because I am not allowed to lie by my union.”

Other vagabonds have other phrases they use, and the vagabonds are paying attention and listening to each other to learn new ways of asking. The phrase should always be polite and it should have some kind of humoristic twist to it. If the vagabond is turned down, the reply should be just as polite as if she or he got anything. She or he might for example say: *“But thank you for your cute smile/your good mood!”*

To know where to ask in what way is also important. The context is playing a role when it comes how the vagabond can get access to resources.

Gas stations are for example known as good places to stay for a while. There are toilets, beer, and customers available. It is no use to sharpen knives there, but talking to people and asking for some money might work well. If one wants to walk and sharpen knives and beg at the doors – the suburbs with their villas are the right kind of place. A bench in the city centre, or anywhere there are children, might be a good place to make balloon animals and just sit and talk to people that come by.

It might all seem quite simple. But to manage also the difficult situations when things are not working out, takes a lot of skill and strength. One of my last experiences together with the vagabonds taught me something about this. It was in April 2008 at the same market I met them for the first time, one year before. I visited just to say hello and show the film to the ones that were in it. I felt very much welcomed among the vagabonds they all was happy to see me and vice versa. On the Saturday of the market it was a “ladies lunch” where 800 women were served lunch and free beer and wine. Everybody was dressed up in fancy hats, and the vagabond ladies were also a lively part of the festivities. I was wearing a uniform

jacket that I had got as a gift for the wedding the day before, and it made me look like a vagabond. I felt very much a part of the vagabond group, like I was able to perform as a vagabond, and I enjoyed my self. A few hours into the party I got a new hat that some of the vagabond women had found on the dance floor, and I used this for an hour or so. Then:

All of a sudden a furious woman approached me and pointed at the hat I was wearing. She was screaming that it was her hat and that I was a thief and a filthy woman and a bitch and how could I dare to wear that hat and she kept going like that for a while. For me it was a shock. I quickly gave her the hat back and said sorry and that I didn't know it was hers, but she was just as furious as before yelled some more at me, and then she left. I could feel the tears were coming to my eyes. The other vagabond women tried to find out who was to blame and to find the woman and apologize to her. Then they continued to party and tried to cheer me up by giving me beer and cigarettes. I felt stupid, because I couldn't get happy again really quick. It was just a small incident but somehow it affected me, and I continued to feel like crying, even though I knew that it wasn't my fault, and I strongly felt that it was not an appropriate behaviour to cry at this place, where one were supposed to be happy and in a party mood. After a while, trying to continue partying like nothing had happened, I decided I would go back to the camp.

To get to the camp I had to go through the crowded market place. I was still really upset, with tears in my eyes, and I was wearing the vagabond uniform and my own hat. People were looking at me, I felt very visible and that people pitied me, and it made me even more upset. After walking 100 meters like this, I just couldn't take it anymore, I went behind some tents, and took off my uniform and hat, used 30 minutes to brush my hair and just sit quite still and alone, and then I walked down to the vagabond camp with the uniform folded under my arm.¹⁹

¹⁹ Source: Written fieldnote.

To me this experience showed me some of the vulnerability one feels by being visible and sad, and I started to feel from the inside how important it must be for the vagabonds to be able to control the expression of their feelings. Keeping the dignity is closely connected with avoiding that anyone feels pity for you, and if you want to avoid that, it is better to show a happy face outwards, no matter what you feel on the inside.

In the beginning of the thesis I asked the question **“What knowledge and skills do the vagabonds have that make them able to turn a marginalized position into a mutual and dignified exchange?”**

Through my thesis I have tried to explore different sides of the life as a vagabond in Denmark not necessarily to find the final answer to the question but to understand some of the forces that are at play when a vagabond for example seemingly effortlessly are joking with a person passing by, and this person gives him money and continues smiling on his way.

I have gone into how the vagabonds as a group are organized. I found that what might seem like a free life from the outside, is not so free after all. Strong social control is enforced through a few simple but strict rules, and it is no tolerance or room for negotiating if the rules are broken. It seems like the rules and the code of honour is concentrated around issues that have to do with keeping up the good reputation of the vagabonds.

What the vagabonds themselves call to have a good reputation I will interpret in terms of Jenkins, that the people that are not vagabonds are categorizing the group in positive terms. Every individual vagabond negotiates this collective reputation in encounters with people outside the vagabond community. And it is a strong consciousness among the vagabonds about that their individual actions are influencing how people look upon them as a group.

When “on the road” the vagabond works constantly to maintain and develop a positive content of the status “vagabond” among the audience and utilize this positive attitude to get access to the resources she or he needs. This is a concern that is going on 24 hours a day. As Mursejler said it when I asked him what he was thinking of when he was walking with his pram along the road:

“I think about what will happen around the next corner, the next person that will come by, what we are going to talk about. And then how I shall manage the next penny, for the next beer and the next box of food for the dog...”

And later in the same conversation:

*...all those things one have to figure out during the day: Where can I put up my tent, what am I allowed to do, and what am I not allowed to do. It is not a leisure to be a vagabond”.*²⁰

For the vagabond it is important to present him or her self in a way that is defining the situation as one where the vagabond identity is relevant and positive. Following Barth who emphasises how the definition of the situation is influencing upon what rules or relevance the actors can agree upon, and thereby what are the relevant capacities of the participants in the situation. (Barth 1981b) The vagabonds use both visual and verbal means to define a situation where their status as vagabonds is forming the basis for the interaction.

The correct presentation of self is a skill that is learnt by trying and failing. Experience is teaching the vagabonds what are important traits to over-communicate, and what are important traits to under-communicate to be well received by the audience.

²⁰ Source: Video recording.

And who are the audience? The relevant status set in this transaction is between the vagabond and the “customer” As mentioned in chapter 3, the vagabonds use different words to describe the other part. It might be called “Mr and Mrs. Denmark”, “the customers” or “the people” To understand what expectations and stereotypes different “customers” have towards him or her is an important skill for the vagabond in order to shape his performance in a way that will result in a friendly and favourable definition of the situation. Favourable in this context means situations where the vagabond gets access to the resources he or she needs.

A person who has a good understanding of what one can expect from different people, and not at least, what those people expect from them, the vagabonds call “a judge of the human nature” (“en menneskekenner”)

When a vagabond is on the road he or she is living in the public space. This means that there is no house or door to lock when one wants to be alone, sleep or anything else. Everything is public or can become public. My idea in the introduction that the vagabonds are signalling if they are “on” or not as vagabonds by wearing or not wearing the uniform seem to be partly accurate. In situations where the person does not consider the status as vagabond to be relevant – he or she is not wearing the uniform. But it is not thereby said that the identity as vagabond is left behind. The embodied identity stays with the person independent from the artefacts the vagabond is using to signal his or her identity.

As far as I see it the uniform does not signal if the vagabond is in the front or backstage region. It is more an indication of if the vagabond status is relevant in the situation. And the vagabond status might be just as relevant in the front stage arena on the road towards the customers, as in the backstage arena in the vagabond camp towards the other vagabonds.

Going back to my main research question – it implicates that I think the vagabonds “**turn a marginalized position into a mutual and dignified exchange**”

But do they? I think I have found through my material that, yes, the vagabonds are well received by most of the people they meet and they are seen as good and friendly people.

Behind this lies hard work from the vagabonds’ side using their knowledge of their audience and the skill of self-presentation to create a relation where this exchange can take place.

As a part of this the vagabonds are under-communicating the pain and humiliation that lies in the begging and the drunkenness. By keeping up the appearance of a happy and easygoing person that loves his or her way of life, the vagabond wants to give the audience no reason for pity.

Mursejler was making this clear by his presentation to me the first time we met when he said:

“I am living my life on the road, and it is the best life I can imagine. I would not exchange it for any other life.” I in my ignorance asked him why. But the important message in his presentation was not what kind of life he lived. The subtext he was communicating to me was – I love my life – it is no reason to feel sorry for me. And this could make me think – what about me? Do I love my life? Which one of us chose the better part?

In my film from the fieldwork there are a scene where this is played out. By a gas station Mursejler meets a middle-aged couple and they start to talk. In the beginning the wife is quite critical to him and his way of living. But during the conversation her attitude gradually turns and in the end she asks herself – “What am I doing with my life?” (*Hammerås 2008*)

Even if they are doing something very similar to what the city bums, the alcoholics or drug addicts do, the vagabonds differentiate themselves from this group. This is extremely clear when it comes to attitude. For a vagabond it is no option to sit behind a paper cup, looking miserable. The pride comes from the skill of handling people. They are able to relate, joke,

ask, and communicate with people in a way that makes these people give them what they need in their everyday life, and be glad to give it. They know the art of asking nicely.

Many vagabonds are expressing that it is a great feeling of freedom and pride in the knowledge that one is able to walk out on the road without any money or any resources, and make a living just by the skill of handling people. And this, I think, makes the connection back to the ecological perspective I started out with in the beginning:

For the vagabonds as for other nomadic people, it is absolutely essential to know their environment and be able to utilize the resources in this environment. The landscape they move in constitutes a taskscape with a whole string of related activities. And an important part of this is different tasks related to people. One might look at people as a part of the landscape so to speak – and in such a densely populated area as Denmark, people are a very dominant part of the landscape. If the vagabond knows how to behave, the people will give him or her everything he or she needs to live. By moving around in, and relating to the landscape the vagabonds are developing their skilled practice by constantly trying and failing to get the ‘feel of it’ In this way they are shaping the landscape in a meaningful way, and are at the same time themselves being shaped by how the environment is reacting on their actions.

To be a vagabond is a hard and in many ways uncomfortable life. The picture of the vagabond that lies in a meadow, chewing on a straw, is not really in accord with reality. To be on the road is a life of constant work, and no real privacy. To never know how the next day will turn out is not easy. A high alcohol consume is also adding to the hardships of living like this. So why is it worth it?

In my view the vagabonds are experiencing that by their way of living they are met with respect and friendliness. In this settings, their problems - drinking and not wanting to stay permanently in one place, is not a problem, but expected elements of the lifestyle. By developing the ability to make a living trough mastering the skills of handling people and

presenting themselves according to the expectations of the audience and their own code of honor, the vagabonds are creating a dignified place for themselves on the margin of the Danish society.

Mursejler: I always wanted the free life. And it is not impossible. It can be done.

Father: When you went to school you did the same. Then you would rather sit under the table than on a chair.

Mursejler: Yes, and you know what – I am making a decent living this way.

Father: You do that now.

Mursejler: Yes.

(Knight of the Road 2008)

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Illustrations in the thesis:

Frontpage photo – also used on page 44 is taken from the film “Knight of the Road” 2008.

Map on page 10 is copied from: <http://www.wikiclone.org/no/wiki/Danmark.html> 15. April
2008.

Photos from the thing place at Kværndrup 2008 is taken by Susanne.

Drawing of a mediaval thing place is copied from:

http://www.fynhistorie.dk/node/1773?size=_original 6th of May 2008.

Storm P’s painting “Tilbage til naturen” on page 16 is copied from the webpage:

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Storm P drawing on p. 16 taken from:

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