

Folklore in Old Norse – Old Norse in Folklore

Edited by
Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pedersen



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Folklore in Old Norse – Old Norse in Folklore

Edited by Daniel Sävborg and Karen Bek-Pedersen

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Continuity: Folklore's Problem Child?

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Abstract:

This essay examines the role of continuity in the study of medieval Northern popular cultural. Among other issues, it questions: the nature of continuity as a concept; the roles “tradition” and “continuity” have played in the development of folklore studies historically (e.g. Finnish Historical-Geographic Method, the “superorganic”) and their value today in relation to, e.g., memory studies and performance theory; and the use, and the misuse, of such tools over time, including by the National Socialists. I note that that the value of our ability to employ continuity as a scientific concept rests on our ability to demonstrate and evaluate four factors, namely, *communality*, *variation*, *continuity* and *function*. Importantly, far from being static, the role of continuity in the telling or enactment – the ‘doing’ – of folklore, is a dynamic, communicative and re-contextualized conception of inherited materials.

Introduction

Few topics play a more central role in the way scholars have thought – and, in some cases, continue to think – about medieval folk cultures than has the issue of continuity.¹ The possibilities of making useful and empirically grounded connections over time between and among cultural documents, understood broadly, are indeed enticing, especially for those focused on northern Europe, where unbroken chains of tradition might lead us from our late medieval data back into the deep past, to the earlier worlds hinted at in the writings of Adam of Bremen, Rimbart, even Tacitus, as well as to the recoverable outlines of late Iron Age material culture revealed by modern archaeology.

Thus, with luck and hard work, it was hoped, the continuity argument might fill the interstices of our textual data, and, correspondingly,

¹ My comments here build on and extend my presentations at the 2011 meeting of the Old Norse Folklorists Network in Tartu, Estonia, and the Folklore Roundtable in 2012 at the 15th International Saga Conference at Aarhus University, Denmark, as well as several previously published works (especially 1991; 2000; 2007; 2009; 2012). I am very grateful to Barbro Klein, John Lindow, Jens Peter Schjødt, and several anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

clothe the postholes and other echoes of “lived lives” of countless dig sites in cultural context and human values. By means of continuity and tradition, scholars could make the leap from, say, the thin gruel of an insouciant reference by a Latin author or the settlement design of some immiserated polar outpost all the way forward to the spectacular “thick descriptions” provided by 13th- and 14th-century Icelandic sagas and other writing.² Thus, in the first case, Paul the Deacon’s 8th-century story of how Frea tricks Godan into giving victory to the Lombards over the Vandals can be better understood against (and, in turn, give a more comprehensive understanding of) the 13th-century prose introduction to the eddic poem *Grímnismál* (see Martin 2000). And in the second instance, one can appreciate how the discovery of the so-called Þjóðhildarkirkja, the chapel at Brattahlíð in Greenland, which, according to the traditions recorded in *Eiríks saga rauða*, was built – not without controversies – for Eiríkr’s wife, Þjóðhildr, allows that discovery to become much more than the unearthing of the foundation stones of just another *úthús* (cf. Þórhallur Vilmundarson 1961).

This is heady stuff, and one need not be hopelessly romantic to see that such connections can have important consequences – the fascinating recent debates surrounding the figures from Lejre and Uppåkra (Christensen 2010; Helmbrecht 2012) are only some of the latest discoveries to underscore the significance and consequences of the continuity argument. It is, however, also clearly difficult terrain to untangle from, on the one hand, the seemingly futile but intellectually-driven search for authenticity, to borrow the evocative phrase used by Regina Bendix in her important study of folklore’s social and academic roots (1997), and, on the other hand, the echoes of a field which, like its sister disciplines, archaeology and physical anthropology, was all-too-easily seduced by National Socialism’s racially-motivated hyper-nationalism.³

With post-war awareness, it is difficult indeed to read, for example, the works of a man like Otto Höfler on our topic, although he was

² On such traditions, their durability (i.e. continuity) and purpose, see Gísli Sigurðsson 2002; 2004. I note at this juncture that although some writers are content simply to wave off such parallels in the historical record as mere accidents or coincidences (without, it is important to add, suggesting alternative explanations), I find such stances unsatisfactory, to put it mildly.

³ Bendix 1997; for an excellent overview of the relationship of these disciplines to Nazi ideology, see e.g. Arnold 2006 (especially on the so-called Cinderella explanation); Lixfeld 1994; and the essays in Dow and Lixfeld 1994, and on the related area of runology, Andersson 1995. For additional analyses, especially with regard to the Nordic situation, see the essays in Raudvere, Andrén and Jennbert 2001; and Garberding 2010.

certainly a scholar capable of great insights.⁴ A follower of Rudolf Much's views about the continuity of Germanic traditions and culture and himself a prolific writer on the topic, Höfler was, one has to believe, a much more enthusiastic supporter of the Third Reich than the relatively neutral post-war judgment of him as "merely" an intellectual fellow traveler (*geistiger Mitläufer*) makes him sound. When his observations about scientific matters, often of real substance and interest, are held up against such moments as his urging that a broad image of German origins capable of overcoming the occasional 'breaks' in its development be created (or shaped, designed, and so on: *zu gestalten*), the resulting dissonance between scholarship and political activity, made all the worse by his dedication to the cause of National Socialism, easily makes one question the quality and motivations of all his judgments.⁵ I raise this point, not to pull at the sutures of wounds from an evil era back before most of us were born, but exactly because this history is the moral and biographical predicate that has shaped many of our personal, and institutional, reactions to discussions of continuity since the middle of the last century,⁶ and it has no doubt also played its role in the view many folklorists have developed about continuity in recent years.⁷

⁴ Of course, Höfler is far from the only example, the best-known and most influential figure in this group surely being Jan de Vries.

⁵ The final gobsmacking sentence of his address reads: "Wenn es der Forschung gelingt, das Schema, in dem unser vorwissenschaftliches Geschichtsdenken befangen ist, zu berichtigen und ein Großbild unserer Herkunft zu gestalten, das über allen 'Brüchen' der Entwicklung die alles übergreifende Einheit unseres Lebens gerecht zum Bewußtsein bringt – dann wird eine solche Klärung unseres geschichtlichen Selbstbewußtseins nicht Leben zerstören, sondern ein Dienst am Leben sein," Höfler 1938: 26; *cf.* Höfler 1937. See e.g. the critique in Behringer 1998 and the literature cited there.

⁶ *Cf.* the comments in Gerschenkron 1971, which highlight some of the important differences between the German and Anglophone experiences with this issue. Many years ago, my own anodyne (and, I suppose, typically American) views of the consequences of the continuity debate – a perspective I would characterize as broadly positivistic and historicist – came up against those of a departmental colleague, a gentle, older scholar of medieval drama, and, significantly, a childhood survivor of the fire-bombing of Dresden: as I came to perceive, he simply could not accept a purely academic discussion of continuity. Having grown up in, and survived, a world shaped by the perversions of such views, he regarded all discussions – and uses – of the tradition and continuity question as politically charged and deeply suspect.

⁷ Of course, many times this is a matter of where one's intellectual heart is, but this knotty history may *help* explain (although not fully address) the eschewing in recent decades of the past as a research area by many folklorists, who, under various theoretical guises, deeply, too deeply some may think, embrace an emerging paradigm of intellectual presentism. *Cf.* the remarks by Strömbäck 1979, as well as my own attempts to contextualize this debate in Mitchell 2000.

These are all important factors in modern receptions, perceptions and discussions of continuity, and I admit that I raise all of this in a slightly confessional mode, precisely because I *do* believe in both the empirical reality of *some* continuities and traditions within northern Europe (although I hasten to emphasize, not in any blanket fashion or with any predetermined political perspective on their value); moreover, I am also convinced that such *provable* links to past practices, belief system, codes of behavior, linguistic usages, and so on offer us useful data points and insights into the study and understanding of the past.

Thus, I start, and end, my thinking about this issue with the view that even if such concepts as continuity and tradition have been abused by some and employed toward horrible ends, or have been determined to be intellectually suspect or unfashionable by others, the facts remain what they were: traditions exist; there are connections and continuities over time; these realities influence behaviors, as they have always done; *and* if we want to understand those bygone worlds, then we must figure out what to do about, and with, such materials as key access points to historical cultures.⁸

The Place of Continuity in Folklore Studies

In giving a tour of Harvard to a German colleague some years ago, I had just pointed out that hallmark of the American college campus, a building about which tales of a peculiar, even bizarre, bequest by the donor circulate. Enraptured by the strangeness of it all, I assume, my colleague burst out excitedly, “I love it! It’s like Britain – it makes no sense, but it’s *tradition!*” That remark is no doubt unintentionally uncharitable both to a very great nation and a very durable cultural concept, but it reflects the sort of view about the nature of folklore once held by luminaries in the field.

After all, to many early scholars, folklore was that cultural oddity that did not fit in or make sense in modern society, e.g. the superstition about the number thirteen or the business about the black cat and bad luck; in other words, folklore was understood to be like the famous scene Andrew Lang paints of the flint spearhead being found in a freshly plowed field, *viz.* – a cultural artifact from the past that emerges unthinkingly and awkwardly in, and into, the present.

⁸ Cf. Gailey 1989: 144, “Dan Ben-Amos put the situation succinctly when in a conference in 1984 he noted that ‘In folklore studies in America *tradition* has been a term to think with, not to think about.’”

Or in Lang's own words: "There is a form of study, Folklore, which collects and compares the similar but immaterial relics of old races, the surviving superstitions and stories, the ideas which are *in our time but not of it*" (1893: 11; emphasis added), to which he adds:

...the student of folklore soon finds that these unprogressive classes retain many of the beliefs and ways of savages, just as the Hebridean people use spindle-whorls of stone, and bake clay pots without the aid of the wheel, like modern South Sea Islanders, or like their own prehistoric ancestors. The student of folklore is thus led to examine the usages, myths, and ideas of savages, which are still retained, in rude enough shape, by the European peasantry. Lastly, he observes that a few similar customs and ideas survive in the most conservative elements of the life of educated peoples, in ritual, ceremonial, and religious traditions and myths. Though such remains are rare in England, we may note the custom of leading the dead soldier's horse behind his master to the grave, a relic of days when the horse would have been sacrificed (Lang 1893: 11).

Of course, the concept of *tradition*, with its inherent sense of agency etymologically secured (< *to hand over, deliver, entrust*, and so on), has given rise to any number of attempts at dissection, both its place in the study of folklore, and as part of grander schemes for the illumination of history and human nature.⁹ By contrast, the more amorphously constructed concept of *continuity* (< *hold together*) has, it seems to me, been much less subject to analysis, but the two ideas can never be entirely divorced from each other. I want to mention just a few approaches which I have found useful in considering the kinds of materials that history and the archives have serendipitously bequeathed to us and which suggest how we might fruitfully investigate these concepts.

One important early strand of this discussion concerned the so-called "superorganic." This neologism, used first in 1862 by the British sociologist Herbert Spencer, was enthusiastically embraced by, and is now more frequently associated with the works of, Alfred Kroeber. At its heart, and appearances notwithstanding, the concept of the superorganic is largely concerned with agency; it is an attempt to give expression to the reality of "social life or culture,"¹⁰ by contrasting the "cultural society of man" with the "cultureless pseudo-society of the

⁹ Cf. from the folklore perspective, e.g. Ben-Amos 1984; Bronner 2000; Gailey 1989; Glassie 1995, as well as from such adjacent fields as sociology, e.g. Shils 1981.

¹⁰ Kroeber 1918: 634, who suggests as possible synonyms, "the civilizational or superorganic or, better, superpsychic." Cf. Kroeber 1917.

ants and bees.”¹¹ It is not difficult, of course, to see how Kroeber’s formulation – [a] “body of ‘superorganic products’ that is carried along from individual to individual and from group to group independent of the nature of these individuals and groups” – would find ready acceptance in the folkloristics of the early 20th century, as well as in allied disciplines, as a useful means of conceptualizing both tradition and continuity, especially when viewed in the context of folklore’s emerging theoretical paradigm, subsequently codified as *Die folkloristische Arbeitsmethode* (Krohn 1926).¹²

The work, aims, and methods of this view of folkloristics, what we today call the Finnish Historical-Geographic Method, clearly anticipated and overlapped with the concept of the “superorganic.” Already in the 19th century, Julius Krohn had developed a view of Finnish folk poetry that, although very interested in, for example, the biographies of its practitioners, nevertheless understood the materials as in some sense possessing an existence ‘above’ or ‘beyond’ the level of the individual. As Jouko Hautala writes: “Julius Krohn thought of folk poems as if they were organisms independent of their carriers: nobody had created them, but they have originated spontaneously, under the influence of psychological laws, and their development has also followed laws which work in an almost mechanical manner” (quoted in Kögäs-Maranda 1963: 77). The hallmarks of the Finnish School – its careful documentation of materials, the organization of these materials into motif-indexes (and the usefulness of Inger Boberg’s *Motif-Index of Early Icelandic Literature*, even if incomplete, is not lost on anyone in our field), the search for archetypes, and so on – are well-known and famously became the dominant approach to folklore in the early 20th century. Subsequent critiques have naturally tended to focus on the rather intellectually arid aspects of the approach and drawn pictures,

¹¹ “That the social insects do not learn or acquire knowledge as groups; that they totally lack tradition; that substantially all their activities are inborn and determined by organic heredity, or depend on individual psychic experience acting upon hereditary faculty; in short, that they totally lack any body of ‘superorganic products’ that is carried along from individual to individual and from group to group independent of the nature of these individuals and groups,” Kroeber 1918: 643.

¹² To some extent, Kroeber’s views draw on, and look to mediate, the opposing perspectives of Spencer, Durkheim and Boas. See also the discussion and literature in Mitchell 2007 and 2012, where I have attempted to tease out the possible continued usefulness of Kroeber’s ideas in several Nordic-themed essays.

not wholly undeserved, of a remote and uncaring view of folklore and its users.¹³

On the other hand, at a time when Lang and many others viewed folklore almost exclusively as a survival from the past, and at the same time Kroeber was developing his views of the superorganic, Kaarle Krohn, as Elli-Kaija Kõngäs-Maranda has noted (1963: 78): “clearly objected to the survival theory and stressed the point that folklore is an integral part of folk life and carried on by the force of its function.” Folklore as cultural goods may still have been conceived as existing independently of (‘above’, ‘beyond’, and so on) individuals but, on the other hand, it did not exist outside of society or the experiences of those who make up such communities.

In a key reconsideration of the superorganic in the late 1940s, David Bidney took up exactly this issue – and added, so far as I know, a new term to our vocabulary, the *mentifact*, described by him as a conceptual symbol “comprising language, traditions, literature, moral, aesthetic and religious ideals.”¹⁴ And very importantly, he argued:

cultural objects *per se*, whether artifacts, socifacts or mentifacts, are but inert, static matériel or capital for cultural life, and that of themselves they exert no efficient, creative power. Only individuals or societies of men can spontaneously initiate and perpetuate cultural processes which may result in superorganic cultural achievements, and

¹³ Indeed, if one's only experience of the results of the Finnish Historical-Geographic method were, e.g., Archer Taylor's Black Ox study, one could certainly be forgiven for having strongly sceptical views about the interpretive possibilities of such an approach: many details and much hard work, one imagines, but exactly what is the intellectual pay off?

¹⁴ I have no idea who originated this term and its cousin, sociofact (or socifact), but certainly the widely bruited about view (e.g. Wikipedia's entries for “Mentifact” and Huxley himself as of the date of this writing, 3rd February 2013) that mentifact “is a term coined by Sir Julian Sorell Huxley” in his 1955 editorial in *The Yearbook of Anthropology* cannot be correct, given that already in 1947 Bidney uses the word without bothering to note its origins. Neither *The Oxford English Dictionary* nor any other dictionary I have been able to consult lists the term. On the other hand, given Huxley's fame as a popular science writer, the fact that his essay states the following undoubtedly contributed to the notoriety of the term:

...a culture consists of the self-reproducing or reproducible products of the mental activities of a group of human individuals living in a society. These can be broadly divided into artifacts – material objects created for carrying out material functions; sociofacts – institutions and organizations for providing the framework of a social or political and for maintaining social relations between its members; and mentifacts – mental constructions which provide the psychological framework of a culture and carry out intellectual, aesthetic, spiritual, ethical or other psychological functions (Huxley 1955: 16–17).

hence there can be no autonomous cultural process independent of human intelligence and voluntary effort... (Bidney 1947: 384).

Although the soci- or sociofact appears to have had some scholarly traction, the idea of the mentifact is not one that seems to have found much favor with either humanists or social scientists. It is not difficult to see how the mentifact proceeds from the theory of the superorganic and looks to cover some of the same territory, like it explaining the persistence of beliefs, narrative and behaviors over time, and how it still – the deeply wrong-headed notion of these materials as “inert” and “static” notwithstanding – suggests a useful analytic tool in other ways. And as Bidney’s comment underscores, there is no inherent conflict between the continuity of such cultural goods across time and the necessary input of individuals who tell, use, and ‘own’ such goods.

Although not concerned exclusively with folklore as such for the most part, a series of important discussions about the nature of memory and past awareness, of mnemohistory, has contributed importantly to this debate through the past century.¹⁵ In fact, it would seem obvious that to a high degree the notion of memory would be paramount to the study of continuity in folklore, yet that “obvious” fact is not much in evidence, much of the work in this area having been developed by social historians working within a Durkheimian framework.¹⁶ From Maurice Halbwachs’ innovative studies of *collective memory* and the social construction of memory (1925; 1950), to the notion of *ethnic memory* and its focus on pre-literate-normative societies (e.g. Le Goff 1988), to the discussion of *cultural memory*, the *handing over* [!] of meaning across generations, and the idea of *communicative memory* between individuals (e.g. Assmann 1992; 1995; 2006), memory studies provide a very productive framework for the consideration of the transmission and preservation of traditions.¹⁷

Among these broad categories of theories with important ramifications for considering the traditions of past societies, I will mention

¹⁵ On this issue, see especially DuBois 2013, as well as, more generally, the other essays in Hermann and Mitchell 2013.

¹⁶ In fact, memory studies has deep roots within the social sciences, going back to Emile Durkheim and extending from Frederic Bartlett to Maurice Halbwachs to Fredrik Barth; it holds that remembering is always social in that those semiotic systems with which we are inculcated by our interactions throughout life shape not only what, but how, we remember.

¹⁷ On the ramifications of memory studies for medieval Norse studies in general, see the essays in Hermann and Mitchell 2013; Hermann, Mitchell and Agnes S. Arnórsdóttir 2014; and, e.g., Hermann 2009, on the significance of these findings for the study of Old Norse literature.

just one more, an approach to folklore that looks to put the telling or enactment of folklore, the 'doing' of folklore, at its center, that is, a view of folklore that promotes a dynamic, communicative and re-contextualized conception of past materials.¹⁸ The various approaches I am somewhat awkwardly gathering together in this group developed to a significant degree as dissatisfied responses to what was understood to be the overly positivistic approaches of earlier scholars, as exemplified by those associated with the Finnish School. Thus, as two of its advocates write: "A second major shift of perspective captured by the notion of performance occurred in folklore, founded on a reorientation from a traditionalist view of folklore as *reified, persistent cultural items – texts, artifacts, mentifacts* – to a conception of folklore as a mode of communicative action" (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 79; emphasis added).

As the authors' tone makes apparent, this approach was to a great extent developed in reaction, and even in opposition, to earlier theoretical orthodoxies, or as Bauman himself had earlier reasonably summarized his, and many others', frustration with this older ossified image of folklore as: "...collectively shaped, traditional stuff that could wander around the map, fill up collections and archives, reflect culture, and so on" (Bauman 1986b: 2). Instead, he notes: "[m]y concern has been to go beyond a conception of oral literature as *disembodied superorganic stuff* and to view it contextually and ethnographically, in order to discover the individual, social, and cultural factors that give it shape and meaning in the conduct of social life."¹⁹

Continuity and Old Norse Folklore

The significance of the analytic stance Bauman advocates, which draws inspiration from performance studies, speech act theory, communication theory, studies of living oral traditions (so-called "oral theory"), and a variety of other approaches, has been profound, not least in Bauman's own work, when, for example, he applies these ideas to Old Norse cases (1986 a; 1992). And one readily sees the effects such enlightened approaches as "oral theory" have had among those working in

¹⁸ Within Old Norse studies, important applications can be found in, e.g., Bauman 1986 a, 1992; Gunnell 2001; DuBois 2006. For an overview, see Mitchell 2013.

¹⁹ Bauman 1986 b: 2; emphasis added. See my comments on this point in Mitchell 2012, and for an excellent example of this question in the Nordic context, see the treatment of Grýla in Icelandic, Faroese and Shetland seasonal traditions in Gunnell 1995: 160–78.

disparate and often archaic traditions, such as Gregory Nagy and the late John Miles Foley.²⁰ And as the example of all three of these scholars makes apparent – pointedly, Bauman as well – there is no inherent conflict between respect for the older empirical data and the application of modern theoretical stances. In other words, the occasionally heated and even hyperbolic rhetoric of an emerging theoretical position notwithstanding, there is no reason to throw the baby out with the bathwater: one can take forward-leaning theoretical views of the materials, yet at the same time recognize that some of the traditional approaches to folklore studies (e.g. motifs and motif-indexes) can continue to be useful tools.²¹

In my own attempts several decades ago to struggle with these issues in the case of the Icelandic *fornaldarsögur*, a set of texts whose signature characteristic, I argued, was their perceived continuous relationship to Nordic traditions, I looked to resolve the question of what tradition meant by pointing to several factors: that the narratives were shared within the Icelandic community (*communality*); that they were anything but ossified but rather showed a great deal of individualization and reworking (*variation*); and that they had roots going back over time in their Nordic environments (*continuity*). Moreover, I argued that these texts did not merely exist in some sort of vacuum but rather were important psychological tools in the arsenal of the colonized late medieval Icelanders and could be, and were, used in the service of both their authors' and sponsors' personal ends and to support an embryonic sense of nationalism (Mitchell 1991: 44–46 *et passim*, and the literature cited there). Thus, the genealogies of leading Icelanders (e.g. Ari fróði, Haukr Erlendsson, Steinunn Óladóttir) are sometimes carefully tied to the heroic figures who people these texts (Mitchell 1991: 123–25), pointing to a fourth important aspect, *function*.

In an attempt to capture the essence of this argument, I used a biological metaphor in *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* as a means of explaining continuity and tradition in the case of narratives and beliefs, an image to which I would like to return, demonstrating what I had in mind with a single, more recently developed example.²² Walking in a field or forest,

²⁰ The examples here are voluminous, but to mention just a few, Nagy 1990 and 1996, and Foley 1991 and 1995.

²¹ See e.g. the essays in the special issue (volume 34) of *The Journal of Folklore Research* on “Tools of the Trade: Reconsidering Type and Motif Indexes.”

²² On the historical dangers involved in using such metaphors, see Valdimar Tr. Hafstein's intelligent arguments (2000); on the other hand, I do not sense that this one falls afoul of his warnings. I should note that I owe this useful metaphor to conversations long ago with my wife, Kristine Forsgard, an ethnobotanist by

or in our own yards, we are likely to encounter the sight of mushrooms growing, often large clumps of them, sometimes “arranged,” seemingly, in so-called “fairy rings.” Yet those mushrooms (or other fungi) are only the most visible signs of something much larger taking place out of sight. For unseen by our eyes, yet existing virtually everywhere in temperate climates, is the truly active, vegetative part of the fungus, the so-called mycelium, made up of fine filaments, the hyphae, running through the soil (or other medium). It is this part of the organism which under various conditions will form a so-called “fruiting body” and push up as a cluster of mushrooms (*cf.* Mitchell 1991: 179–81).

In a similar vein, I would argue (and have),²³ the parallel situation *can* (but need not) obtain in our materials and, again, *can* offer us one avenue for understanding them. As folklorists interested in medieval Nordic materials, we are necessarily in possession of data points only, and very, haphazardly preserved over time – information recorded by one circumstance or another but before modern times, surely not as the result of anything like a scientific process. Therefore, we must necessarily learn to work with serendipitously recorded information.

To take what I believe to be a remarkable example of this process in our historical materials, of this metaphor in action, several late 15th-century Swedish trials involve accusation of rituals and the worship of Odin in the Stockholm-Uppsala area (*cf.* Mitchell 2009). These trials are also generally connected not only with charges of apostasy from the authorities but also with attempts on the part of the accused to acquire wealth. Are such trials “mere” coincidences, or do they fit larger patterns? And if larger patterns emerge from the empirical data, are we justified in hypothesizing how they may have suited the arsenals of survival with which medieval and early modern Swedes sought to arm themselves against poverty and starvation? I certainly believe we are, and in pursuit of such an explanation was astonished to discover that in the centuries after these late medieval trials very similar scenarios emerged from the archives: a 16th-century Swedish chronicler states that people who amass wealth “serve Odin”; an early 17th-century trial in Småland concerns a man who goes through a ritual pledging himself to Odin in order to get money; and a late 17th-century commentator,

training, who first drew my attention to the similarities between tradition and the way mycelium functions. The fact that I am writing up these notes as I work at The Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in buildings originally given by Gustav III in honor of Carl Linnaeus, the “flower king,” only strengthens my sense that this is a particularly apt parallel.

²³ Most directly in Mitchell 1991; 2007; 2009; 2012, although I have understood this to be a useful strategy in other instances as well, if more obliquely (e.g. 2011).

also in Småland, notes in marvelous detail that those who want to get rich invite Odin to their homes, and even cites examples of those who found temporary success from such rituals; and there are other similar modern data points. All of these cases involve both Odin and wealth, and when we look back in time at the evidence, the association apparently made by early observers between this god and the Roman god of commerce and trade, Mercury, takes on added significance, as do references in the medieval record to Odin's association with wealth (e.g. a 14th-century runestick from Bergen which invokes Odin in an attempt to recover lost wealth [B 241 M]; *Ynglingsaga's* statement that Odin knew about hidden treasures).

In other words, I believe we have here a parallel to our mycological analogy: just as mycelium may run through the ground without developing into a fruiting body, and then suddenly erupt into a clump of mushrooms, so too here, I suspect, there has existed a tradition according to which Odin was connected with wealth and therefore appealed to by people in order to acquire riches; moreover, it was a tradition that continued over a number of centuries, at least from the medieval period until the 18th century, if not both earlier and later. Or so I have argued based on the evidence.

After all, what else could such data points mean? They are consistent in their references to Odin and wealth, not merely random references to the name or the like. Could they all possibly be “mere coincidences”? Are they simply proof of the so-called “infinite monkey theorem”? Or is there not more to the fact that the data just happen to line up correctly, by which I mean they are coherent, fit known or discoverable patterns, and are explicable based on empirical data? As opposed to a nihilistic world whose alternative explanation must rest on randomness and chaos, Occam's razor looks pretty attractive in my view.

Conclusion

I purposefully gave this essay, “Continuity: Folklore's Problem Child?”, a contentious title. This decision grew from my desire to address what appears to me to be a difficult moral and intellectual issue for our field, as well as the resulting trend in modern folklore studies away from considerations of temporality – that is, continuity and tradition. As I suggested above, historically this may be due to some degree to the evil ends to which the field was put by National Socialism. In that case, that

continuity has indeed been a problem results, of course, from those who have misused it, not from any inherent flaw in the concept or the sorts of information it can offer us.

But the tendency to avoid such concepts as continuity (and the historical component as a whole) may have other roots as well. Thus, for example, in an influential article, Robert Georges and Alan Dundes formulate a concept of tradition that notably relies mainly on multi-formity and, importantly, tends to leave aside the temporal dimension, certainly so as a necessary ingredient in any event:

By *traditional* we mean that the expression is or was transmitted orally and that it has or had multiple existence. Multiple existence means that an expression is found at more than one period of time or in more than one place at any one given time. This multiple existence in time and/or space usually, though not necessarily, results in the occurrence of variation in the expression (Georges and Dundes 1963: 117).

Of course, this perspective, it could be argued, may be especially relevant to American and other immigrant-dominant situations, or perhaps, less intellectually, this was just the opening salvo in the attempt within the sharp-elbowed academic world to hive folklore as a discipline off from history and language departments.²⁴

But even for those whose research interests are entirely focused on popular culture and the “now,” it cannot be without important evidentiary value that a cultural entity can be shown to have existed over time within the community that has, practices, tells or otherwise uses an item of folklore, even though that may in itself be insufficiently explanatory, of course. An obvious example of this point to me would be the

²⁴ The intellectual, and administrative, independence of folklore as an academic field has been at the heart of much debate and strife, in the United States at least as much as elsewhere. For an excellent overview of the early history of the discipline in the U.S., see Zumwalt's 1988 *American Folklore Scholarship*, whose sub-title, *A Dialogue of Dissent*, underscores the often fractious nature of this history. Cf. the remarks in Dorson 1972, which are mainly of interest today as a rather under-, or even ill-, considered view of the issue. With regard to the desirability of identifying “American folklore,” rather than “folklore in America,” it seems obvious to me that Dundes and Georges are looking for an efficient means of removing the study of American folklore from its Old World swaddling clothes, the sort of view reflected in the remarks by William Wells Newell in his 1888 description of what the work should be of the newly founded *Journal of American Folklore*, where he famously cites various categories of folklore in America, that is, “the fast-vanishing remains of Folk-Lore in America, namely: (a) Relics of Old English Folk-Lore (ballads, tales, superstitions, dialect, etc.). (b) Lore of Negroes in the Southern States of the Union. (c) Lore of the Indian Tribes of North America (myths, tales, etc.). (d) Lore of French Canada, Mexico, etc.” Newell 1888: 3.

ritualized exchange of insults, so-called ‘dozens’ (‘sounding’, ‘woofing’ and so on), a phenomenon well-studied over the decades with respect to modern American youth culture (and even commercialized in the *Yo Momma* TV series), but with important roots and analogues in Africa (e.g. Ewe *halo*) and Europe (e.g. Old Norse *senna*).

In the hope of avoiding being branded theoretically retrograde, let me note that I heartily and emphatically approve of and embrace emerging approaches to our material, but with the difference that I do not want to do so at the price of losing what was best about the old alliance between *folklore och filolgi*, a view I note that I share with many others (e.g. Bauman 1996; cf. Mitchell 2000). With that thought in mind, I want to close this brief theoretical perambulation by quoting a man who perhaps knew more about the nature of tradition in the Old Norse world and the possibilities of continuity than anyone else of his day, Dag Strömbäck.

Shortly before Strömbäck’s death in 1978, in contrasting the folklore studies on which he had been nurtured with the emerging trends of the mid-70s, where tradition and continuity were being actively demoted as windows into the thought world of folklore, he wrote: “I willingly admit that my heart is captured more by the study of traditions from olden times, particularly from the Middle Ages, and by the approach which interweaves historical fact, philological interpretation and textual criticism” (Strömbäck 1979: 10–11). Here, I think Strömbäck had, as was so often the case, the *bons mots*. But perhaps not the last ones: for one can share, and accept the value of, Strömbäck’s love for “historical fact, philological interpretation and textual criticism,” and marry that perspective to folklore’s modern search for meaning. In my opinion, both views are enhanced by a proper appreciation of folklore’s “problem child”, continuity.

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