

The Role of Folk Consciousness in the Modern State: Its Efficacy, Use and Abuse

Jim Brown*

The overarching story of world history in the last 500 years, as it seems to me, is a simple, two-part one. First, with unprecedented new power, Europe and Europeanized powers first explored and then colonized much of the world. Second, the rest of the world fought back, but in part by mastering some of those same new European powers. Although the technological innovations in industry and the military is most visible factor at first glance, I would argue that it was a new kind of social mobilization that was the deeper, more powerful force, both in the early process of extending European control, and in the later success of the non-European reaction to end that control.

Later in this presentation I will try to connect this directly with storytelling. For now suffice it to say that folktale scholarship in 19th century Europe was, by and large, part of a larger project of nation-state creation through cultural nationalism. It transformed Europe, and proved exportable to much of the rest of the world as well.

From Rousseau's "general will" in the *Social Contract* of 1762 – his description of the emotion it would take to hold a state of free and equal citizens together, without aristocrats or kings – to the draft army brought into being by the Committee of Public Safety in August of 1793, modern political nationalism took clear shape (for good, or ill, or both). This was in the context of the Enlightenment, a most anti-historical movement, in that its primary project was to

* Professor of History, Stanford University.

destroy every social and political institution that did not fit the *Philosophes'* (rather optimistic) view of human nature, and replace it with a new institution that did. "The history of all misery," said Diderot in a perfect one-line summation of the Enlightenment in his 1772 "Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville," "is the conflict of natural man with artificial institutions." Rational individuals, with free access to information, could intelligently rule themselves. And so the key concepts of the age were natural right and law ("natural" meaning in conformity with their positive view of universal human nature), rationalism, and individualism. No matter what one's ethnicity or religious belief is, one could be a full citizen of this brave new state.

But modern cultural nationalism, which has proved to be a much stronger force than simple political nationalism, came from the Romantic Age reaction to the Enlightenment. To the Enlightenment's faith in rationalism and individualism was opposed Romanticism's belief in emotion, intuition, and group belonging. It was strongest in those linguistic units that did not yet have their own independent, united state – groups such as the Germans, Italians, Irish, Finns, Czechs, Hungarians, Polish, and European (especially Russian) Jews. The key basic concepts and vocabulary underlying this new cultural nationalism came from Johann Gottfried von (he was ennobled very late in life) Herder, who lived from 1744 to 1803. In his 1784-1791, *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, he argued that every group that had been around long enough to have its own language was a *Volk*. No matter whether large or small, literate or illiterate, such a folk group was to be valued if it contributed its own special color to the great stained glass window that was total humanity. Every folk group, in Herder's understanding, came from some seed-time in the past when some group of humans wandered into some land, and magic happened in the fusion of people and land. "Primitive" for him was a positive word, implying something more in line with the original seed time of culture. And "organic" – arguably the single most important word of

the Romantic lexicon – Herder took from biology to describe the way he believed a folk group develops the same way a plant grows, flourishing to the extent that it is true to a pattern in a seed.¹ If you cut off a 3” diameter oak, and try to transplant a 3” diameter maple top – even using all the best horticultural practices – it probably won’t live and certainly won’t do well. On this analogy, would it make sense to cut off Germanic culture in 1789 and transplant onto it a French top? From the Enlightenment’s anti-historical stance, the Romantic Age reacted with a virtual worship of history; it verged on a historicism that tended to argue that any institution of great antiquity was good, just because it was old.

The most famous names in folktales – both for the general public and for scholars – are surely the Brothers Grimm (Jakob 1785-1863, and Wilhelm 1786-1859). They were linked to Herder through their favorite law professor, Karl von Savigny. Herder’s influence on von Savigny is manifest, for example, in this paragraph from an 1814 publication:

But this organic connection of law with the being and character of the people, is also manifested in the progress of the times; and here, again, it may be compared with language. For law, as for language, there is no moment of absolute cessation; it is subject to the same movement and development as every other popular tendency; and this very development remains under the same law of inward necessity, as in its earliest stages. Law grows with the growth, and

¹ Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (title is loosely translated here). Abridged and with Introduction by Frank E. Manuel (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1968. See p. 45 for key passage on “national fictions spring from verbal communications.”

strengthens with the strength of the people, and finally dies away as the nation loses its nationality.²

It was in von Savigny's personal library that the Grimms first read the original sources of the German middle ages, in pursuit of their generation's project of understanding present-day law by looking at its Roman foundations of almost two millennia earlier, as modified by Germanic common law of almost one millennium earlier. In 1805, when von Savigny got into the French National Library with its huge German manuscript collection (partly looted from the German states by Napoleon's armies), he asked favorite graduate student Jakob Grimm to come and spend a year working on the project. In 1806 Jakob got an emergency communication from his brother asking him to come home; the French had occupied their home state of Hesse-Kassel, their mother was near death, and the economy was in shambles.

In the next six years, 1806-1812 – in a sense the worst years of German history because all German states seemed to be swallowed up and digested by Napoleonic France and any future existence of a “Germany” was moot – the two brothers really crystallized their life's work. Jakob became the greatest German scholar of medieval German literature, and Wilhelm turned north to the newly discovered ancient Scandinavian Eddas (still the best source of Old Norse mythology) and sagas. The real key to everything that came later was their realization that medieval German literature had emerged from ancient Scandinavian tradition: they had discovered dignified “roots” for German culture. The French had said for centuries, in effect, “We come from the Romans; you come from the barbarians. What can you expect to be?” So

² Karl von Savigny, *The Vocation of Our Age for Legislation and Jurisprudence*, Legal Classics Library, Div. of Gryphon Editions, Ltd., Special Edition, 1986), p. 27.

discovering such roots was a confidence-builder for every native speaker of German.

Their overall project was a piece of that “organic” Romantic mysticism, an attempt to discover everything they could about that supposed “pure” original German culture of northern Germany and Scandinavia of around 500 B.C. or so. If they could discover that original wellspring of culture, they could revive it and use it to reinvigorate “Germany” in their day. They had little in the way of written sources to go on, and so they invented what I would call their “model of cultural breakdown.” That original German cultural unit spoke the original German language, had its own religion (“Old Norse Mythology”), its own dress styles, wedding customs, etc. And then over time it disintegrated, either from pressures from the Mediterranean Greco-Roman cultures, or simply the logic of cultural decay. When the religion was no longer fully believed, the religious cement that held all the stories of the religion together was weakened, and the religion broke up in several great epics. A few hundred years later they in turn evolved into legends, which evolved into folktales, which got summed up in riddles and proverbs – and the final level of cultural decay was simple words, popular customs, gestures, and such.

For example, in the Old Norse religion there was a figure called the “valkyrie,” a maiden of the slain. Nameless, faceless, spiritual daughters of Odin, they came down to earth to collect the souls of human heroes slain on the battlefield, to take them to Valhalla (“hall of the slain”) where they might practice war for the rest of time. Then, when the last trumpet blew and all of the forces of evil came out against the gods at Ragnarok, from hundreds of doors in Valhalla would come thousands of the greatest human warriors ever produced, to help the gods in their ultimate hour of need. Every religion has to explain the meaning of it all, and this was a key part of the Old Norse conception. Then, by medieval times, came the great Siegfried epic. Brynhild, or Brunhilde, was the valkyrie

who was Odin's favorite – note that she now has a name and face. In flying down to earth to collect a hero's soul, her glance fell on Siegfried, most handsome and bravest of mortals, and she fell in love with him. Odin, enraged that his daughter had fallen in love with a mortal, put her in an enchanted sleep on a "Magic Mountain" ringed by fire, but honored her last request that Siegfried might break through the fire and rescue her. Centuries later, the Grimms collected "Sleeping Beauty." Not called Brynhild or even named at all, she is, in her enchanted sleep and magical awakening at the hands of the prince, a warped and woven fairy tale descendant of the medieval epic.

The Grimms were not collecting folktales for children, but because the folktales contained bits and pieces of what Wilhelm, the more poetic of the two, called "the splintered jewel"– the fragmented ancient religion and culture. The first edition of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (which should translate *Children and Household Folktales*, but which through the British prism came to be known as *Grimms' Fairy Tales*) was published in December of 1812 as Napoleon reeled back towards France after his disaster in Russia. This was the first – and frankly the sloppiest, academically³ – of all the Grimms' great publications, and were an integral part of their whole life's work – to discover the essence of that original Germanic culture of the seed-time, so that its elements could be revived in the present, and "Germany" once again be free and strong.

About the time the Grimms were born, British scholars in India had "discovered" Sanskrit, the classical language of the Hindus of India. In reading the vast treasure trove of Sanskrit literature from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* back to the

³ The best single work on the subject is Christa Kamenetsky's *The Brothers Grimm and Their Critics: Folktales and the Quest for Meaning* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992).

Rigveda, they were struck with the kinship of Sanskrit with European languages. As young adults the Brothers Grimm were in on the second generation of Sanskrit scholarship, which resulted by 1813 in the coining of the word “Indo-European” for the language family in which English is (meaning most European languages plus Sanskrit-derived languages). In the process this generation of scholars, including the Grimms, invented the new science of philology in their attempt to understand who the *Rigveda* authors were, and the nature of their relationship to Europeans. Translating literally as “love of words,” philology, to a historian, seems mainly to be about what comparative languages can tell you about the past. Jakob Grimm especially was a marvel of a philologist, with a working knowledge of seventy languages, living and dead. His “law of consonant shift,” of how aspirated consonants in the northwest of the Indo-European world gradually evolved to unaspirated in the southeast (English *two*; Dutch *twee*; German *zwei*; Romance, Slavic, Persian and Sanskrit variations on *do*, *duo*, *dva* and *dve*, for example). Philologists realized that every word was a bit of history, although not all were knowable. This brilliant new tool was now brought back to their model of cultural breakdown. Take, for example, as the Grimms did, the English word “berserk.” Most of the words beginning with A in English are from Latin, but most of the B words are from German. “Ber” comes from bear, and “serk” is an old word for shirt. Together they meant the hardened bear-hide chest protectors worn by the pre-Viking soldiers in battle. Apparently donning the breastplate, they cultivated the battle rage necessary for combat, and the dress came to stand for the mood. So now, for the Grimms, when written sources failed to inform them, they were now able to turn to a new level of unwritten ones to make up for the deficit.

Among their mature works were the *History of the German Language*; the structuring and partial fleshing out of the world’s best dictionary at that time, the Grimms’ dictionary of the German language (like the *Oxford English Dictionary*

which came later, based on historical principles); and Jakob Grimm's masterwork, the four-volume *Teutonic Mythology* (the usual English-language translation, or mis-translation, of *Deutsche Mythologie*). It was Jakob Grimm's attempt "to set forth all that may now be known of German heathenism," meaning the whole pre-Christian culture of Germany.⁴ There were chapters on the aspects and attributes of all the major deities, as they were believed to be by the ancient German people. There were chapters on beliefs about trees, and charms, and elves and wights. For the reader less well linguistically equipped than Jakob Grimm, every other page is unintelligible, as he amassed commentary in dozens of languages; but the summation in clear German (or English, in translation) has an authority based on all the research. German readers would have been convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt of the great antiquity and vibrancy of the original German culture. And the elements of the German past unearthed by the Grimms (and sometimes frankly imagined by them) would be used by writers, artists, musicians, and politicians as the main emotional force in the new pan-German patriotism and the political unification of Germany to which it led.

With time for just one quick case study in this topic, consider Richard Wagner, brilliant composer and *capellmeister* in Dresden, capital of Saxony, who was a frustrated thirty years old in 1843. He had encountered the idea of a German national theater, and this was fast becoming the goal of his work. In his time of loneliness, he buried himself in the past, in the newly popular antiquities of Germany and Scandinavia. It should come as no surprise that his chief inspiration was the work of Jakob Grimm. In Wagner's autobiography, he says that in that year he was taking the water cure at the

⁴ Jakob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*. Translated from the Fourth Edition by James Steven Stallybrass, in four volumes. (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1976); see original introduction.

Töplitz spa (today's Teplice, just over the mountains from Saxony in today's Czech Republic) in company with his wife, his mother and a sister. Nearly forty years later he still vividly remembered his encounter there with Jakob Grimm's major work:

. . . it had been noticed that I was always carrying around a rather thick book, with which I sat down to rest together with my mineral water in hidden places. This was Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*. Whoever knows this work will understand how the inordinate wealth of its contents, gathered from all sides and really intended almost solely for scholars, had an immediately stimulating effect on me, who was looking everywhere for expressive and meaningful symbols. Formed from the scanty fragments of a vanished world, of which scarcely any tangible monuments remain to testify, I discovered here a confusing construction which at first sight appeared to me as a huge rocky crevice choked with under-brush. Nothing in it was complete, nor was there anything resembling an architectural line, and I often felt tempted to abandon the seemingly hopeless effort to make something systematic out of it. And yet I was firmly in the power of its strange enchantment: even the most fragmentary legends spoke to me in a profoundly familiar tongue, and soon my entire sensibility was possessed by images suggesting ever more clearly the recapture of a long lost yet eagerly sought consciousness. There rose up in my soul a whole world of figures, which yet proved to be so unexpectedly solid and well-known from earliest days, that when I saw them clearly before me and could hear their speech I could not grasp the source of the virtually tangible familiarity and certitude of their demeanor. The effect they produced upon my innermost being I can only describe as a complete rebirth, and just as we feel a tender joy at a child's first sudden flash of recognition, so my own eyes now flashed with rapture at a world I saw revealed for the first time, as if by miracle, in which I had previously

moved blindly though presentiment, like a child in its mother's womb.⁵

Soul, rebirth, joy, rapture, revelation, miracle: Wagner had to go to the language of religious conversion to describe his experience. In the very next year, 1844, came the first of his "mature" operas, all based on Germanic sources or themes, and all researched in the scholarly works of the Grimms. As invisible as steam, cultural nationalism was nonetheless the motive power of the political reshaping of all of central Europe, as politicians as adroit as Bismarck diverted it to their own ends.

The first part of this paper, then, has tried to show the emotional power of the Romantic matrix from which modern folktale collecting and general folktale scholarship arose. It was an integral part of modern cultural nationalism, and – for good or ill – was deeply colored by that inspiration. The paper now turns to the general (surprisingly regular) pattern to the development of this cultural nationalism in many modern nations.

Language revival is the first and perhaps key development, logically enough since language tends to be the most important cultural group identifier. In most modern ethnic groups with no independent state, as of 1800 or so there was no single standard spoken or written language – no standard Greek, Yugoslav, Finnish, or Hebrew or Arabic for that matter. Most had a classical language from old manuscripts, or an archaic religious form of the language, plus widely varied regional dialects. Most of these dialects tended to be less than sophisticated, because the sophisticated element of society usually chose to speak the local "world-class" or

⁵ Jakob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*. Translated from the Fourth Edition by James Steven Stallybrass, in four volumes. (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1976); see original introduction.

“imperial” language. Aspiring Finnish families taught their children Swedish before 1814 and Russian after that, for example, not any sort of Finnish, so their children could get ahead in empires in which Finns were a small and denigrated ethnic minority.

There were usually four distinct parts of this language revival process. Ideally, a standard grammar had to be “harmonized” from the archaic classical language and the current dialects. Second, a dictionary of the newly harmonized language had to be constructed. Making up this dictionary usually included having to invent many modern words on the basis of ancient linguistic roots (Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, as Eliezer Perlmann renamed himself in Hebrew, did this for Russian-Jewish immigrants to Palestine; he even had to create a modern word for “dictionary” in his new Hebrew). Third, some writer of genius had to commit to this newly-created (or at least newly-refurbished) language. It could be a poet or a novelist or a translator, but the demonstration had to be convincing that here was a live language with no limitations and with unique capabilities of its own (Chaim Bialik, to continue the Hebrew-language example, proved to be this when he wrote his poem “City of Slaughter” about the 1903 Kishinev pogrom). Fourth, an educational movement had to at least try to re-teach the mother language to intellectuals, initially, and then to all young people of the cultural group (Ireland’s Gaelic League is a good example).

The second major development, which might be called literary recovery and new literature creation, closely followed the language revival. Collections of folktales and legends were a universal feature of this phase, but it also usually paid particular attention to epic. It was almost as if a people could prove it had an epic, it had the right to an independent state. So if a group had a bonafide epic, they dusted it off (Germany’s *Nibelungenlied*, for example – dismissed upon its presentation to Frederick II in the 1700s as “not worth a charge of power,” but called by a German historian in 1912

“the pride of the Fatherland”). If an epic outline could be discerned (or imagined) behind assorted folktales in the countryside, it needed to be scissored and pasted together (Finland’s *Kalevala*, so scissored-and-pasted and in fact partly written anew by Elias Lonnrot in 1835). If not even that slim basis for an epic existed, it seemed then to be the duty of some literary patriot to forge a plausible one, and hide the evidence of forgery for as long as possible (such was McPherson’s *Ossianic Poems* for Scots and by extension their fellow Celts the Irish). And in addition to this work with these three traditional forms of literature (or “orature”), some modern author needed to mine these literary veins, and use the material to create popular modern works (the “Anglo-Norman” W. B. Yeats was apparently convinced to mine Irish cultural themes of a folklore nature by old Fenian John O’Leary, for example).

Music revival and creation was a third major development, and it usually paralleled that of literature. The folksongs and dances had to be researched and popularized. Then sophisticated composers need to do two things to the admiration of their countrymen and foreign experts: a) use folk musical idiom – melodies, rhythms, instrumentation – as a mine for modern sophisticated works; and b) create musical tone poems around images of or feelings for the nation’s land or history.

A fourth fairly clear category was history recovery (or at least re-creation). The history of the cultural group needed re-writing by a member of that cultural group, with special emphasis on the “glory days” of that particular culture.

A fifth development began with a cult of physical fitness, usually motivated and justified by a looming war of independence with the occupying or imperial power. It often tried to turn young people of the cultural group away from “foreign” games and back to those traditional in their own culture (Michael Cusack’s Gaelic Athletic Association of 1884,

for example, calling for the replacement of English badminton and lawn tennis with the home-grown, more rugged Irish version of stickball, hurling). The usual end of this development was a paramilitary organization that drew on the physical fitness movement (the way the Irish Republic Brotherhood recruited from the G.A.A., to continue the example above).

Here is an illustration of the full pattern, in a group that has virtually ceased to have any self-identity just in the past twenty years – “Czechoslovaks.” They occupied Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia, and achieved proud independence by 1918, only to lose it to the Germans, and then the Soviets, after 1939; the state was reborn with the disintegration of the Soviet Union ca. 1989, and just three years later split (amicably) into a Czech Republic and a Slovakia. Fifty years ago there were millions of self-professed Czechoslovaks; today it would be hard to find a single one! But here is the important first half of that story.

Joseph Dobrovsky (1753-1829) was a Jesuit-trained Czech, a superb linguist. He wrote a Czech grammar and then a history of the Czech language by 1818. This was all written in German, of course, since he had to invent a harmonized Czech language himself. Joseph Jungmann (1773-1847) was a tireless translator of international great works into Dobrovsky’s new Czech, beginning with *Paradise Lost* in 1811. In 1825 he finished a massive *History of Czech Literature* based on extensive manuscript research, and written in Dobrovsky’s “new-and-improved” Czech language. In the last forty years of his life he worked on a Czech dictionary that eventually ran to 4500 pages. So together Dobrovsky and Jungmann regenerated the language, and after that came literature. As early as 1821 Jungmann could already see this future in three young friends of his, writers still in their ‘20s, Kollar, Safarik, and Palacky.

Jan Kollar (1793-1852) was the first good poet of the Czech language revival, even though he was Slovak. He wrote a sort of epic of sonnets, a love story on the surface, but a longing for independence underneath. The hero of the epic wandered along rivers that were sites from Slavic glory, but were now dominated by other peoples. For thirty years Kollar pastored a Slovak Lutheran church in Budapest, and wrote, said one author, as a “Slovak who sees his nationality threatened by Magyarization.” Paul Joseph Safarik (1795-1876) was also Slovak. As a young man he taught in Bratislava and became close friends with Palacky. He wrote on Slavic language and literature, and gravitated to Prague by the 1830s. In 1837 he published a book on Slavic antiquities, which meant at that time not just things but cultural patterns. The book triggered intense new interest in the early history of the Slavs.

Frantisek Palacky (1798-1876) was the first really great historian the Czechoslovaks produced, and his work in history led him directly into national politics. He was raised in a Moravian village where Hussite traditions were still secretly alive. He went to school in the great Slovakian city of Bratislava, on the Danube; not many Czechs knew the Slovaks as well as he did, and he liked them and sympathized with the oppression they lived under. When he too moved to Prague, Dobrovsky made sure Palacky had access to key private libraries and was sheltered from government censorship. Palacky researched the glory days of the Czechs and Slovaks before 1620 when their last independence was lost at the Battle of White Mountain. Historian R. W. Seton-Watson wrote that one can only understand the power of what Palacky wrote:

. . . in the setting of an enslaved nation, a long-neglected language, a hostile Church and a denationalized middle class

He brought them back to life, gave them courage and belief in a forgotten or despised past, and proved to them

that they had achievements in the moral and intellectual sphere of which any nation might be proud . . .⁶

By “denationalized middle class,” of course, he meant those educated families who raised their children to speak German, the official language of the Austrian state and the “cultured” language of much of central Europe.

At the time a fourth man shared the general reputation of the three above, although the luster has now gone from his name. Waclav Hanka (1791-1861) was once the most famous collector of West Slavic epics. In 1817 he made a wondrous discovery in an ancient church tower in northern Bohemia of some ancient Czech poems, the oldest epic yet found from northern or middle Europe. Dobrovsky published it. Then, miracle to say, Hanka found another epic in a castle in southern Bohemia. Even Dobrovsky got a little suspicious at that point, and modern historians are virtually unanimous that Hanka forged them both. Excitement over the epics, however, probably brought many people to the Czechoslovakian cultural nationalism movement who stayed with it even after the epics were shown to be fake.

Palacky became a major political voice for independence in the revolutions of 1848. In that same year Karel Havlicek (1820-1856), a popular satirical poet and journalist, founded his own newspaper. He hit on the idea of writing about Ireland’s civil rights and home rule struggles to get around the Austrian censorship, and let his readers draw their own obvious lessons about how all this applied to Czech and Slovak lands under Austrian rule (tangential proof that a single underlying pattern informs all modern nationalisms, thinks this author!). It was Havlicek’s best friend who became

⁶ Jakob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*. Translated from the Fourth Edition by James Steven Stallybrass, in four volumes. (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1976); see original introduction.

the biggest name in Czechoslovak musical cultural nationalism. Bedrich Smetana (1824-1884) was a school friend who later followed Havlicek to Prague. He defended the barricades and wrote revolutionary marches and a “Song of Freedom” for the occasion. Life thereafter in the autocratically governed Austrian Empire was depressing for him, and he took a job in Sweden. When Austria was defeated in a war with France in 1859, he came home to help work for home rule. No longer young, he tried to teach himself to speak and write Czech instead of his native German. By 1866 he produced “The Bartered Bride,” the first Czech national opera. For seven years he worked on a set of six symphonic poems called *Ma Vlast (My Fatherland)*, and most of them including the famous *Vltava*, were finished by 1875. This tone poem for the river running through Prague is better known, ironically, by the river’s German name *Die Moldau*.

In 1862 a gymnastics society called “Sokols” (“Falcons”) was founded by Fugner and Tyrs. Its distant inspiration was the German Turnverein from Napoleonic days, but it outgrew its model. Eventually its national assemblies would feature as many as 15,000 young athletes performing gymnastics in unison. The organization had strong political overtones. During World War I, the President-to-be of the 1918 Czechoslovak independent state, Tomas Masaryk, had as one of his two key deputies the current president of the Sokols.

So folktales were a celebrated part of virtually every case of modern cultural nationalism. And now, a final question: was such a celebration wholly a good thing, ethically speaking?

In the overall pattern, there are some disturbing elements from the very beginning. Herder, although amazingly receptive of most cultural groups’ uniquenesses, was openly anti-Semitic. In fact, he put anti-Semitism on a new philosophical foundation by identifying Jews as a culture that had outlasted its natural life-cycle and lived on only by parasitizing other peoples. “Turnvater” (“Gymnastics Father”)

Jahn, in the next generation of German cultural nationalists, famously said: “If you let your daughter learn French you might just as well teach her to become a whore.”⁷ J. G. Fichte, in his *Addresses to the German Nation* in the winter of 1807-1808, in French-occupied Berlin, called for a new sort of state, one in which “this love of Fatherland must itself govern the state and be the supreme, final, and absolute authority.”⁸ The Brothers Grimm did not have that level of overt Francophobia or totalitarian view of the new German state, though there is some echo of those emotions in this paragraph from Jakob Grimm’s masterwork, *Teutonic Mythology*:

Nearly all my labors have been devoted, either directly or indirectly, to our [German] earlier language, poetry, and laws. These studies may have appeared to many, and may still appear, useless; to me, they have always seemed a noble and earnest task, definitely and inseparably connected with our common fatherland, and calculated to foster love of it.⁹

And yet there had to be an overall positive value in preserving for the whole people what just a few people in the countryside held in their memories. There must have been positive benefits in terms of social integration and respect from so introducing illiterate and semi-literate people to the proudly literate heights of society as bearers of valuable culture in their own right.

⁷ Jakob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*. Translated from the Fourth Edition by James Steven Stallybrass, in four volumes. (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1976); see original introduction.

⁸ Jakob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*. Translated from the Fourth Edition by James Steven Stallybrass, in four volumes. (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1976); see original introduction.

⁹ Jakob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, vol. III. Gloucester MS: Peter Smith, 1976. P. lv.

Perhaps it is as simple as this: to the extent that folktale collection (and cultural nationalism generally) has enriched the lives of the whole linguistic group, and inspired them with new meaning in their current lives, it has been good; but whenever it has caused lack of sympathy for ethnic minorities in the state, or jingoistic foreign policies, it has been bad. Whenever cultural uniqueness is identified as superiority, a dangerous ethical boundary has been crossed.

Another paper could be written on the spread of this pattern virtually worldwide.

Russian Jews, for example, persecuted by a Russifying, and failing, imperial Russian government, began in reaction to celebrate their own culture – first making the street slang of Yiddish into a true literary language (in the hands of writers such as Sholom Aleichem) and then reinventing spoken Hebrew and carrying it in pioneer settlements to Eretz Yisrael, their ancient “Land of Israel,” or Jakob. As they displaced Palestinian Arabs who had every reason to believe they had traditional rights to farm the land, a Palestinian consciousness developed. The black-and-white checked khaffiyah so famously worn by Yasser Arafat first emerged as a Palestinian nationalist symbol from the peasant Arab protests at a major land transfer in the Jizreel Valley in 1909-1910.

British power conquered South Africa. One of the peoples so conquered were the first white settlers, from Holland, the Boers. From their Great Trek out of British Cape Colony in 1835-1843, including massacre of some by the Zulu in Natal and the Boer revenge at the Battle of Blood River in 1838, grew a folk legend. By century’s end cultural nationalism was celebrating Afrikaans as not just a dialect of Dutch but a separate language that demanded a separate state. In 1938 these Afrikaners, as they now called themselves, celebrated the centennial of the Great Trek with pioneer wagon processions about the country, registering voters as they

went. This was the background of the Nationalist Party's surprise election victory in 1948, and the beginning of apartheid, the most rigid racial segregation of modern times. In reaction to that process, of course, for over a century a black African consciousness was slowly forged. One of the young Nelson Mandela's most important mentors was Anton Lembede, who taught pan-black African cultural and political unity. He had grown up in the Orange Free State, perhaps the most racist party of the country, and had seen the power of Boer/Afrikaner nationalism. Mandela, in his autobiography reflecting on this time of his life, quoted one of Lembede's journal articles:

The history of modern times is the history of nationalism. Nationalism has been tested in the people's struggles and the fires of battle and found to be the only antidote against foreign rule and modern imperialism.

I am too new to Bhutan to know much about its history, its struggles, its cultural consciousness, and its patriotism; but this modern cultural nationalism has surely transformed Bhutan's two giant neighbors, India and China, in the past century-and-a-half, as well as every other major Asian nation. Something about the modern world demands that one has some belonging larger than family and clan, and smaller than all humanity – a unit large enough for economic and defense sufficiency. Some places are more easily defended than others – Bhutan and Switzerland have parallels in this regard long noted, and so an advantage for a small state in surviving near stronger neighbors. In some eras greater dangers from stronger powers mean that one needs to be patriotic to a larger and stronger unit just for survival. In less dangerous eras loyalty to smaller units satisfies those economic and defense requirements.

So what has all this to do with preserving Bhutanese storytelling and maximizing Gross National Happiness? If we were just dealing with the first, the solution would be simple:

isolation and poverty have historically been the greatest conservators of folk tales and folkways generally. But these days isolation is not really possible, anywhere in the world, and desperate poverty has a violence stitched into its very fabric.

There was one institution in the development of this new cultural nationalism in 19th and early 20th century Europe that I wonder if Bhutanese educators and decision-makers of the 21st century still might find of interest. It evolved in Denmark, which, unlike Germany (with Hitler's decidedly evil use of folk consciousness) had a positive, healthy experience with cultural nationalism. This was the Danish *Folkehøjskole* – literally the Folk High School, or more prosaically The People's College. The first one was established in 1844, and in the next 75 years or so the institution played a key role in the growth of literacy in the country from around 20% to upwards of 90%, in the transition from a monarchy to a very constitutional monarchy with all of the popular education that required, in the economic revival of the country with its flagship micro-industry (as I guess we'd call it today) of the Danish dairy co-op, and not least, in the growth of self-respect and self-confidence of the Danish people after their disastrous defeats in the Napoleonic wars earlier in the century, and the loss of Schleswig and Holstein in another war in 1864. It all began with one man deeply caught up in his country's traditional stories.

N.S.F. Grundtvig was born in 1783 (making him just two years older than Jakob Grimm, with whom he corresponded and to whom he has many parallels). His early education was at the hands of his mother; he was a precocious student and loved reading. Beginning at age nine, for six years he attended a Latin grammar school with emphasis on memorization and discipline – one he recalled with great distaste later in life, calling it “a school for death.” He went on to the national university in Copenhagen, the capital, taught of course in Latin – a university that was narrowly geared towards

producing Denmark's civil servants and army officers. By this time he had come in contact with the German Romantic writings of Herder, Goethe, Schiller and Fichte, and threw himself into study of Old Norse mythology despite the curriculum. He claimed to find there a vigor lacking in his own lack-luster age, and began his life-long work of reviving this in the Danish national consciousness. In line with the whole Romantic movement, he saw the continuation of language to be a key bearer of culture. Here is a translation of a verse of his 1838 poem on the Danish language:

The mother tongue is a chain of roses
it entwines people great and small
only in it does the spirit of the ancestor live
only in it can the heart move freely¹⁰

He took the common speech – “servant’s hall Danish” – as the vehicle for his great translations of *Beowulf* and the *Eddas*. In 1832, when he would have been almost 60 years of age, his masterwork *The Mythology of the North* was published, fruit of all that study of folk literature.

Along the way, in his chronological study of Danish history – in 1810 in his own life, when he was about 27 – he came to the conversion of the Danish kings to Christianity. It caused him to wrestle with the role of religion in his own life, and brought him after some personal crisis to a new understanding of religion and life. One reader’s synopsis of that change is quoted below; perhaps a Bhutanese reader will agree that it has more than a little resemblance to Lam Drukpa Kunley’s unusual understanding of Buddhism, albeit without the latter’s sharp sense of humor:

¹⁰ Lorenz Rerup, “N.S.F. Grundtvig’s Position in Danish Nationalism” in A. M. Allchin, D. Jasper, J. H. Schjorring, and K. Stevenson (eds.), *Heritage and Prophecy: Grundtvig and the English-Speaking World* (Canterbury Press Norwich, 1994), p. 240.

Theologians argue as to what one may or may not do, drink, dance, smoke, etc. Grundtvig believed in living life to the full and argued that what was according to nature was right. Of course one could not kill a man – that is not natural. But everyone has within him something which tells him what he may and may not do. What I may do is perhaps not the same as what you may do. But the first thing is to be human. One cannot be a full Christian without first being a full human being. We must realize our human potentialities before we can realize God. Some people will argue that it is necessary to be a Christian before one can be human but this is like being a man before one is a child.¹¹

Grundtvig's first public presentation of this in 1815 created a storm within the establishment, and within ten years he was virtually driven out of Denmark's official Lutheran church. But the power of his poetry, rooted in the old folk literature (perhaps half the hymns in the Danish Lutheran hymnbook are by him) and the attractiveness of his argument gradually ate away at the old conservative establishment, and in 1853, when he was 70 years old, he was made honorary bishop by the king. What an interesting fusion of the folk literature (mainly pre-Christian) and a romantically inspired Christianity. And this in turn led to a new idea about education.

If popular government was to work in Denmark, he reasoned, citizens would have to be educated in it, and educated in a way that didn't separate them from their livelihoods. As Grundtvig said, "It is just this we lack. Professors and learned folk can and obviously must be few, but Danish citizens – educated and useful citizens – we must all be." His solution was the *Folkehøjskole*, first publically proposed in that same 1832 *Mythology of the North*.

¹¹ Olive Dame Campbell, *The Danish Folk School* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928), p. 54. The first and second year curricula of Askov folk school, as of 1922-23, given later in this paper, are also from Campbell, pp. 101-2.

Gear it for young adults, age 18-25, said Grundtvig, those who are making many of life's critical decisions – of mate, of occupation, of mature religious understanding. Use books only sparingly (said this voracious reader and tireless writer); they are after all only valuable once one has the desire and will to use them. It was that desire – “for a truer and deeper understanding of life, a purer and more vital personal expression in the service of a better nation and a better humanity” – that had to be aroused by this People's College. That done, the young adults would themselves embark on “a hungry and endless search” for the exact practical knowledge they needed to carry out their life's purpose. Teach history first and foremost through the *Eddas* and sagas; richness of language and spirit are more important than objective, rational truth at the beginning of such a course. Equip the people with all of their Danish heritage – its language, its geography, its nature life, its social evolution, its economic conditions. World history should not be ignored, but was to be considered mainly as it explained the native.

There was a positive mood to his disciples, “the happy Grundtvigianer” as they were sometimes called. Denmark had suffered horribly in the Napoleonic Wars. It had tried to stay neutral, but first the British destroyed its fleet at anchor at Copenhagen, and when in reaction the Danes joined Napoleon they joined just in time to lose the war. They lost Norway, which they had held for 400 years, to Sweden. Massive economic depression followed after 1815, in peacetime, and by all rights the people should have been depressed as well. But Grundtvig said, “Out of loss, gain,” with a new focus on the Danish folk heritage and a new kind of spirituality.

Grundtvig originally thought of one single folk school near the geographic center of Denmark. The government refused to build it, so instead it began with private experiments. In 1844, a serious young man named Kristen Kold established the first Grundtvigian-style folk high school – in a parish that

had a Gruntvigian minister who had already prepared the ground for him. Within 20 years another ten were established, and then dozens more in the next few decades. They came just in time to help educate the mass of the people in civic matters (in 1831 the King had ordered the introduction of “consultative assemblies” in the different divisions of the country, and the first of these began work in 1835; eventually the Constitution of 1849 gave all adults the vote and religious freedom).¹² At the same time they played a key role with the transition of rural Denmark into the most famous dairy nation in the world. No more than 25% of young adults in the farming communities attended the folk high schools, but 80% of the heads of the Danish dairy co-ops had attended them, and most of the co-ops were established in the shadow of the folk schools. Free schools for younger children were often taught in the mornings, with adults coming in the evenings. Schools of practical farming classes also budded off of the folk high schools.

The *Folkehøjskole* began with winter courses for men only, later added women’s courses in the summer, and finally became coed. Gymnastics were gradually introduced into the curriculum. They kept up their religious association, and had a home-like quality of life, disarming the suspicions of conservative parents who often had to foot the tuition bill. Here is what the curriculum for a first and a second year looked like, in 1922 and 1923, at Askov, one of the more prominent of the schools (founded in 1864 just across the border from the lost province of Schleswig, as if to emphasize that “out of loss, gain” slogan of Grundtvig’s). Here is the schedule of the first year:

¹² Hans Henningsen, “The Danish Folk High School,” in A. M. Allchin, D. Jasper, J. H. Schjorring, and K. Stevenson (eds.), *Heritage and Prophecy: Grundtvig and the English-Speaking World* (Canterbury Press Norwich, 1994), p. 287.

The Role of Folk Consciousness in the Modern State

Hour	Students	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
8:00-9:00	All	Geography	Geography	Historical-	Historical-	Sociology	Sociology
				Mathematics	Mathematics		
9:00-10:00	Men	Danish	Danish	Engl/German	Danish	Danish	Engl/German
	Women	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	Gymnastics
10:10-10:20	All	Coffee	Coffee	Coffee	Coffee	Coffee	Coffee
10:30-11:30	All	Historical-	Historical-	History	History	Geology	Geology
		Physics	Physics				
11:30-12:20	Men	Arithmetic	History	Arithmetic	History	Arithmetic	History
	Women	History	Arithmetic	History	Arithmetic	History	Arithmetic
12:30-2:00	Men	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	Gymnastics
	Women	Handwork &	Drawing	Handwork &	Drawing	Handwork &	Drawing
2:00-3:00	All	DINNER	DINNER	DINNER	DINNER	DINNER	DINNER
4:00-5:00	All	Bible	Bible	Song	Drawing/	Drawing/	Song
					Hygiene	Hygiene	
5:00-6:00	Men	Hygiene		Hygiene			
	Women	Danish	Engl/German	Danish	Danish	Engl/German	Danish
6:00-7:00	All	Church	Church	History of	History of	World	World
		History	History	Literature	Literature	history	history

And below is the schedule of the second year. Notice how in both years math, physics and literature are all taught as “historical,” or “the history of.” This was to make a story out of these discipline (as for example how Descartes, in Netherlands refuge from persecution in France, had the insight that every regular curve graphed on an x-y axis could be expressed as a mathematical formula), to an audience that learned best that way.

Hour	Students	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
8:00-9:00	All	Practical	Practical	Geography	Geography	Book-keeping	Book-keeping
		Physics	Physics				
9:00-10:00	Men	History	History	Engl/German	History	History	Engl/German
	Women	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	Gymnastics
10:10-10:20	All	Coffee	Coffee	Coffee	Coffee	Coffee	Coffee
10:30-11:30	All	Historical-	Historical-	History	History	Geology	Geology
		Physics	Physics				
11:30-12:20	Men		Danish	Danish	Psychology	Danish	Danish
	Women	Hygiene	Danish	Danish	Hygiene	Danish	Danish
12:30-2:00	Men	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	Gymnastics	Gymnastics
	Women	Handwork	Handwork	Drawing/ Lab	Drawing /Lab	Drawing /Lab	Drawing /Lab
2:00-3:00	All	DINNER	DINNER	DINNER	DINNER	DINNER	DINNER
4:00-5:00	All	Sociology	Sociology	Song	Sociology	Bible	Song
5:00-6:00	Men		Biology			Biology	Biology
	Women	History	Engl/German	History	History of	Engl/German	History
6:00-7:00	All	Church	Church	History of	History of	World	World
		History	history	Literature	Literature	history	history

In conclusion, at this conference there has been much discussion on how to preserve and spread the traditional values-bearing stories of Bhutan. In Bhutan (as in most of the rest of the world) there is also the problem of keeping some of the “best and brightest” in the villages and farmscapes to keep these vital; young people the world over are attracted to the bright lights of the big cities to escape rural boredom and drudgery. In these regards perhaps the Danish folk high school has aspects worthy of emulation. More than any other single institution it brought little Denmark, depressed by great losses to more powerful neighbors, a renewed sense of patriotism and a healthy confidence in its own culture. It played a key role in civic education and rural economic

development, at a stage of political and economic development that at least superficially seems to resemble that of Bhutan in recent times. The government of Bhutan already has over 700 “non-formal education centers” established throughout the countryside. Limited mainly to instruction in literacy and numeracy of adults at present, this institution would seem a natural candidate to expand to a culturally-oriented folk high school. I wonder how such a curriculum as Askov’s, above – geared for young adults, to help them to a more fulfilling life in the village rather than remove them from it – might at this particular time in history be adapted to a Bhutanese context by those who know the country and its heritage best? It would surely feature traditional stories.