

TACIT ASSUMPTIONS*

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The problem which I shall refer to here under the designation "tacit assumptions" is one that troubled me a lot both in my student days and also for many years afterwards, and which now for the first time I think I am gaining some clarity about. The reason why I wished to take it up here is that I believe that it is not peculiar to me but common to us all. In order to understand it, one must try to imagine oneself back to that time when one first became acquainted with the study of folklore. There was so much that was implied and about which one did not know how one should contrive to ask. Some of it was made up of the conscious theoretical foundation of the field, and it gradually became clear. When one reads a number of the historical-geographic treatises from the first half of this century, it is clear that to a large degree they share a common theoretical foundation, but that is not what I understand by tacit assumptions, inasmuch as the assumptions for these treatises can be found

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in Aarne's *Leitfaden*, Olrik's *Grundsætninger*, and Krohn's *Folkloristische Arbeitsmethode*. Other folkloristic trends also have more or less well-formulated theoretical treatises as a basis, and one can acquaint oneself with them. But there remains behind an unconscious, or less conscious, foundation of presuppositions and assumptions that are so obvious for the writers that they do not find it necessary to argue them. A number of such tacit assumptions can be found mentioned in the literature, furnished with such adverbs as "obviously" and "naturally," or such adjectives as "evident" or, as the Swedes say, "självkänt." Remarks of this kind are interesting to notice because they express the author's half-unconscious credo. They are particularly striking when one reads very old treatises, which not infrequently take things for granted that we may have serious doubts about.

Most tacit assumptions, however, may be analyzed further, as I can show with an example. If I say that "the sky is blue," then I presuppose a lot. First of all I presuppose a shared language as a basis of communication--the sentence is meaningless for an Indonesian who does not understand Danish. Second, I presuppose knowledge about what "sky" means; it is not that which God and His angels dwell in, but something one can see.¹ The message is directed to someone who can see. Third, I presuppose a scale of colors in which "blue" appears. Fourth, "is" can be understood in two ways: either I am expressing something which is always valid, and thereby mean the sky which is above any clouds that may be present, and in the daylight, or I am expressing something which is for the moment valid, and thus say that the sky is free of clouds at the moment, and that it is day-

time. The context determines which significance of "is" I mean.

The example is very simple, and yet we have already established four tacit assumptions. All communication rests, of course, on a huge number of such assumptions. If we could not take them for granted, each message would have to be laboriously constructed piece by piece. If I should explain to my hypothetical Indonesian that the sky is blue, we would first have to create a common language, or one of us would have to learn the other's language.

As soon as we pass on to more complicated examples, the number of tacit assumptions naturally increases immensely--especially when we begin to work with abstract concepts. Reasonable agreement can be reached concerning the concept "blue," even though people certainly do perceive differently, and even though there are several languages that do not distinguish blue from green and/or black. But when one passes on to work with concepts such as interest folklorists, then one has no objectively measurable referents. We can agree that the word blue is used only to signify light with certain specific wavelengths, and this agreement will be able to be understood, if not necessarily accepted, in Indonesia. But there is no objectively measurable referent for words such as, for example, "folktale" or "poetry." If we use these two words, we refer to something culturally and historically specific, but not only that: we also imply a perception among ourselves, the validity of which may be much more limited than we believe. When we adopt such a concept, it is not certain that we completely understand which tacit assumptions determine the concept we adopt at the same time. This, I think, lies behind much of the confusion which

inevitably troubles a folklorist in the first years of study, and perhaps much longer.

It was not chance that I mentioned the words "folktale" and "poetry." I had in mind a sentence which stands in the Introduction to the Grimm brothers' 1816 edition of *Deutsche Sagen*: "Das Märchen ist poetischer, die Sage historischer" ["The folktale is more poetic, the legend more historic"]--a sentence frequently cited, which presumably is the first attempt to distinguish genres of folk narrative. I have worked with folktales for the last three years, so that I have in mind to take my examples from folktale research.

The sentence contains a number of tacit assumptions, but I shall content myself with looking at two of them. The one lies in the pair of concepts--poetic, historic. We are clearly dealing with a kind of opposition, or at least with a scale, in which poetic and historic each denotes an extremity; the cautious comparative form indicates that both folktale and legend contain something of both elements, but folktales are accordingly closer to the poetic end of the scale, and legends to the historic. Now one may infer from the context that by historic the Grimm brothers mean something on the order of "real." Legends claim to report on real occurrences, even though they can be placed in a distant historic past. In contrast, folktales are placed in what the romantics call the "poetic distance." When, for example, Propp in 1928 writes that folktales reflect reality only to a slight degree, actually he is only repeating what the Grimms had said. Folkloristic literature contains many statements that point in the same direction: folktales, in contrast to legends, are not considered true. They are pure poetry, play of fantasy, entertainment. The result of this view is that one does not look for traces of reality in

folktales all the way until Röhrich's **Märchen und Wirklichkeit** in 1956. A tacit assumption in the attitude of romanticism to folk literature comes in this way to have a governing effect on research for almost a hundred fifty years--it appears so obvious that it requires a real effort to shake it off.

The other tacit assumption in the statement cited is concealed in the way **das Märchen** and **die Sage** are spoken of--as an abstract, ideal whole that comprises all folktales, and another that likewise comprises all legends. This way of viewing them recurs right up to the present, especially in German literature but also in other countries. Let me name such titles as **Versuch einer Theorie des Märchens**, **The Folktale**, **Das europäische Volksmärchen**, **Betrachtungen zum Märchen**, or the current project **Enzyklopädie des Märchens**. Jolles reckons the folktale among his **einfache Formen** just as he does the legend, the saint's legend, and so on. If one goes through, for example, Bolte-Polívka's collection of **Zeugnisse zur Geschichte des Märchens**, one gets the impression that the folktale has an enormous dissemination in time and space, and that in former times it was cultivated by all social strata. When one then studies the actual appearance of the folktale in the 19th century, one must inevitably draw the conclusion that we are dealing with the dying or decaying remains of something which was once mighty; that is exactly what romantic folkloristics maintains. (This is what Dundes has aptly defined as the "devolutionary premise" in folkloristics.)

Closer observation of the state of the sources shows that the picture is false. **Das Märchen** is a fiction. It contains several genres, each of which has its own character. It is very probable that in the old days

kings and princes listened to folktales, but even though such instances are mentioned in history, we do not know what kinds of folktale they were. Where such situations are mentioned in fictional literature--**Panchatantra**, **The Seven Wise Masters**, **Disciplina Clericalis**, etc.--they have had to do with moral tales and stories about clever deductions, Solomon-like judgments, and the like. They say they are to train the princes in intelligent and just rule, and they are found in great quantities in the Middle Ages and later. When, on the other hand, it is a question of tales of magic, the sources before Grimm are rather sparse, and where they are found they point in another direction. One of the few known ancient folktales, *Amor and Psyche*, is put in the mouth of a poor old woman, and it is possibly the same kind of tale that Plato and other writers refer to when they mention nursery tales and old wives' tales. In any case, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries one finds that the magical tales are found chiefly among the rural proletariat: small-holders, rural hand-craftsmen, servants, paupers, beggars. When one finds folktales among the well-to-do, the farmers, and the like, they are in part nursery tales, and thus stories told to little children, and in part anecdotes and comic tales. **Das Märchen** is therefore too comprehensive a concept: it contains several genres, each with its own distribution and also possibly each with its own history.

If one proceeds from the assumption that **Das Märchen** must be conceived as an original whole, one must view the documented social distribution of the material of folktales as the result of a breakdown. The theory proceeds, as is known, with the notion that only the lower stratum of the population has preserved a number of older

cultural elements; either they are alone in preserving something which everyone previously partook in, or they acquired it because of its having sunk down from the higher strata. (We observe in passing another tacit assumption, namely that a division of the population into higher and lower strata based upon property and/or education--or birth--is transferred by analogy to cultural conditions: the economically and educationally lower strata of the population are assumed also to be culturally lower.) This conception of folktales as relics, in connection with the belief that they, qua poetry, do not describe reality, makes impossible an interpretation based upon the assumption that they could be an expression of the old rural proletariat's own experience of reality.

In mentioning the different occurrences of the genres of the folktale in the population we touch upon another of the tacit assumptions of romantic folkloristics, namely that concerning **das Volk**, the folk as an ideal whole. Terms such as folktale, folk song, folk music, folk costume, folk belief, and others all refer in vague generality to this folk. We go around with a more or less unconsidered notion of a traditional folk culture borne by people who went in homespun peasant's coats with silver buttons; lived in beautiful, old-fashioned farmhouses; told folktales and sang ballads; held celebrations at the great festival days of the year and of life; believed in **nisser**, elves, nixes, and so on; and played old-fashioned folk music. This romantic picture of folklife, which is known from many portrayals in writing and in pictures, and which is still cultivated and maintained in regional associations and popularizing literature, is in reality very incorrectly drawn. The

Danish material can document that magic tales were collected almost exclusively among the rural proletariat. The same is true for the majority of the folksongs and of the folk music. On the other hand, almost all of our descriptions of festivals derive from the farmers; it is also they who wear folk costumes and live in beautiful, old-fashioned farmhouses. Scarcely any items of clothing belonging to the proletariat are preserved: their huts were torn down long ago, and if they celebrated festivals, the celebrations were not of such a character that anyone found it worth the trouble to write about them. In short, the great class differences that were found in the countryside when our folklore was recorded, are overlooked. Whether these class differences were found in the same way in the rest of Scandinavia, others must say. I believe it is the case in southern Sweden as also in Germany and elsewhere on the continent--but our folkloristic studies have not as a rule noticed class differences and have therefore failed to pose some questions which could be of central significance for the understanding of our material.

It is consideration of problems of this sort which last year led me to withdraw from the dictionary-of-terms project of the Nordic Institute for Folklore. I reached the conviction that the abstract, artificial classification of material, which the project aims at, veils important problems and creates a pseudo-reality which is of doubtful worth to force upon a new generation of folklorists. I do not have the time to document the basis of this decision now, but let me point to a single phenomenon: when I used to work with proverbs, I discovered that the attitude in proverbs that have been found in school-books since Peder Laale's time² and have

been printed by well-meaning proverb collectors, is as a rule strict, serious, and conservative, whereas the attitude in proverbs that were written down from the non-literarily influenced oral tradition is very often humorous, ironic, disrespectful, downright rebellious. It is of doubtful worth to gather together such heterogeneous material under the general classification "proverb." There is some evidence, for example, that the use of metaphors in the oral proverb tradition is richer and more exciting than in the literary tradition, and the same may be the case with other aspects: rhythm, alliteration, and so on.

Back to folktales. The notion that in a distant past they were in a fuller bloom than in the present, and that they belonged to the folk as a whole, drew attention away from the fact that in reality there were not very many persons who told them, and possibly never had been. The controlling concept also drew attention away from the fact that different narrators might have extremely different repertoires. I have, for example, found that men and women typically prefer different folktales; such differences could only with difficulty be related to the controlling concept, which is probably the reason the reason why they were ignored for so long.

The idea of the decay of an original community of culture, in union with another of the nineteenth century's tacit assumptions, that concerning development, led to the assumption that the lower strata of the population were intellectually less developed than the higher strata, and that they preserved reminiscences of older cultural stages--a dogma which was preserved for a very long time. Since development--progress--was viewed as produced by single individuals, and since

the folk were behind, they could not be individualistic. It became a dogma in the literature of the nineteenth century that the culture of the folk was collective, and so the question was whether the culture had been created by single individuals and afterwards had sunk down into the collectivity, or whether it had been collectively produced. It is easy to see now that the whole posing of the problem was distorted by the fact that scholars proceeded from the romantic idea of the creating genius as a tacit assumption. Some persons tried to solve the problem by adopting the so-called folk individual as the actual creator of folk culture.

When the psychoanalysts began to interpret folktales in 1908-9, they brought along from their own research the idea of the unconscious as the creator of dreams. They found similarities between dreams and folktales and therefore concluded immediately that the real content of folktales was latent, that is, hidden beneath the manifest, superficial form. They adopted the dominant notions about the development of folk culture and quickly came to place signs of equation between the unconscious, the primitive, the childish, and the folkish.³ I do not have time to go through this in detail, but I refer to psychoanalysts such as Franz Riklin, Otto Rank, and Karl Abraham, who express this view directly. Completely exaggerated, the same view recurs in Rudolf Steiner, who claimed that folktales were created in a distant past by especially well-informed persons who had preserved recollections of times when people still could behold the spiritual world directly. This esoteric knowledge could reach those who listened to folktales just as secretly and unconsciously as does the value of the food we consume. Common to these theoreticians is still the tacit assumption

that the people who actually told the folktales did not themselves know what they were saying. As I have said, these people were the rural proletariat. It is really striking to see how inevitably folklorists and psychoanalysts look completely away from the narrators, except insofar as they discuss the extent to which the narrators have destroyed the folktales through time by not taking good enough care of them. The literature on folktales all the way to the middle of the twentieth century is, with few exceptions, characterized by an attitude to the narrators which today we must describe as condescending. To be sure, the most recent generation has changed its attitude insofar as it has gotten increasingly interested in the bearers of tradition, but the change is far from radical. This I have observed in the last two years when I have spoken here and there about the method I have developed to interpret folktales and which presupposes that the narrators were very well informed about the content of the folktales they told, including the significance of the folktales' symbols.⁴ The incredulousness I have met with many times rests upon the complex of tacit assumptions I have pointed to.

Now it would be a misunderstanding to believe that we take over without any thought at all the tacit assumptions contained in the research we appropriate. When we encounter something that we cannot accept, we stop and protest. We only take over the views of the past when they are not inconsistent with our own--so the question remains why it has first been in our generation that folklorists have seriously set to work to overthrow many of the ideas that have dominated our field since its founding. Why are we sitting here today, gathered for a seminar on theory and methodology which

twenty or even ten years ago would have been viewed as superfluous by most persons? Here we come to the question which is my real errand to talk about.

My hypothesis is that the tacit assumptions I have talked about are class prejudices--our own class' implied assumptions.

Do we constitute a class, then? That is not very easy to answer because, so far as I know, there does not exist any socio-economic analysis of folklorists through time. But there does exist an abundance of biographical material, and it is rather unambiguous. By far the majority of the folklorists who have been of significance to the historical development of the field have been academics of middle-class origin. It would no doubt be worthwhile to test this assertion sometime in detail, but I am convinced that it is essentially correct. There are, in my opinion, several strikingly common features in the history of folkloristics and of the middle-class which indicate important connections.

The first phase in the history of our field is connected with the growth of nationalism in the wake of the Napoleonic wars. Viewed historically, Germany is of central significance here. The Germans had use for a new means of withstanding the strong French pressure--military, political, cultural--when the German-Roman empire was crushed in 1806, and the nation or ethnic group was split into a large number of little states.⁵ They chose to build upon the nation as an idea, as we know. At that time there were, with the partial exception of France, no national states in Europe. The states were conglomerates of various nations, and the fewest national groups dwelt gathered within a single state. The most common condition was that one national group controlled--

dominated--the state, and the others were subject to it. Consider the relationship between Sweden and Finland, or the relationship between Denmark, Norway, and the national groups on the North Atlantic islands. In Denmark the relationships were complicated by the strong German dominance with anchorage in Holstein and South Slesvig. All the larger European states of the day--England, France, Spain, Austro-Hungary, Turkey, Russia--contained large national minorities within their boundaries. Under those conditions the concept of the national state had to develop in most places as a revolutionary idea.

The old states were administered by aristocratic officials for whom it did not make a great deal of difference to which national groups their subjects belonged. From the standpoint of economics, it was unimportant whether the people who produced the modest agricultural surplus spoke one language or another. It was a different matter already during the period of absolute monarchy in the towns in which the middle-class, which supported itself by handicraft, trade, and manufacturing, was growing into a significant power-factor. It was the middle-class that overthrew the absolute monarchy in France in 1789. In the rest of Europe in the nineteenth century it constituted an expansive class that needed an ally in the battle against the old system, which entrenched itself in its position after the Napoleonic wars. And this ally the middle-class found in the rural population, which was becoming economically interesting within the form of society that was being fashioned. The transition to the capitalistic mode of production demanded an increase of the work-force in industry and at least a scanty school education. Here the language problem

becomes of much greater significance than before. Already in the eighteenth century there was talk in Denmark, during the great agricultural reform period, about the necessity of making the farmer into a responsible, enlightened citizen. In the middle-class there awoke a sympathy for and interest in the rural population--often in outspoken contrast to the royal power, the aristocracy, and the clergy--that often was both romantic and passionate but also showed itself in a warm feeling of belonging together, a **Wahlverwandschaft**, paired with a belief in progress. In such an atmosphere the concept of the national state came into existence, and the field of folklore was part of it.

Against this background it is perhaps not so hard to understand what did become a puzzle for the folklorists of later times, that "the folk" came to be practically the same as the rural population (with overtones of unspoiled, original naturalness),⁶ and that the identification with this folk in several lands went so far that the middle-class devoted itself to learning its language in order to strengthen the alliance against the foreign rulers. Finland is a good example of its succeeding; Ireland is an example of its failing. For the middle-class, "the folk"--in this special significance--was a unit; differences **within** the folk could never be so meaningful as the community, the living organism. I shall not work out this observation in detail, but it can be done perhaps in another connection. It is the middle-class' enthusiastic rediscovery of "the folk" which raised the traditional songs and narratives to a status of "national" treasures, in spite of the fact that very few of them are specific for any ethnic group and in spite of the fact that the impoverished persons who entertained themselves

with this sort of thing had scarcely anything that could be called a national consciousness. It was the same idealistic attitude which created concepts such as "the folk-tale," "the folksong," and so on without reference to the differences these concepts came to cover.

It was natural for the middle-class, which was struggling for independence, to create for itself an ideology which would justify its demand, and since nearly every European national group, except for the Jews and the Gypsies, who were immigrants, had been independent at one time or another in the past, the middle-class had to make a connection with this past and create its dream starting at that point. Against this background the so-called folk were appointed guardians of old "national" treasures, which they themselves, of course, were no longer capable of utilizing but had transmitted faithfully from generation to generation. I believe that we can derive most of the tacit assumptions of romantic folkloristics from these circumstances. They presumably also are the basis for the fact that the study of folklore has generally been strongest in those nations that were not independent states in the nineteenth century.

The situation changed slowly in the course of the nineteenth century. The middle-class gradually gained power in most places in Europe and did not any longer need for its striving the ideological underpinning which the national dream had constituted. It became less national, and, not surprisingly, folklore also became less national. When one reads, for example, Axel Olrik's nationalistic works, from the 1890s and afterwards, it strikes one how little they are in step with the times. Here in Oslo he delivered a lecture in 1898 on "Nordic National

Distinctions in their Earliest Appearance," and it was perhaps able to excite some folklorists and philologists, but it awakened little enthusiasm compared with the works of the Grimms, Grundtvig, Lönnrot, and others a few generations earlier. The dominant trend in folklore around the turn of the century, namely the historic-geographic school, was as international as can be imagined. But it still built upon the assumptions of the thinking of that time--that the folk were ignorant, primitive, instinctive. One almost notices an accentuation of this attitude, as it was crystalized, for example, in theories about the mechanical regularities which governed symbol-formation in the unconscious, the epic structuring of material, and the processes of transmission. In the "superorganic" theories from the first decades of this century the folk were undifferentiated, instinctive masses. From their having been allies in the struggle against *L'ancien regime*, they had become a major adversary whose independent qualities of mind must not gain admittance. It was expressed perhaps most unambiguously by Hans Naumann with his theory of *gesunkenes Kulturgut* and his absolute denial of the folk's independent creative abilities.

If one then has the leading folklorists of that time pass in review before one's mind, as one knows them from the biographies and in some cases from personal experience or through the accounts of others, the impression that prevails for the folklorists of older times is reaffirmed: the great majority of researchers are still the sons, now sometimes also the daughters, of the established middle-class. The romantic love of the middle-class for the peasants, however, is at an end, as an attachment long since gotten over. A little weakness is perhaps

still found in a corner of the consciousness, but minds are dominated by resistance to the quickly growing working class, and in the middle-class' battle against it, the field of folklore has no place. Its significance dwindles.

The most recent generation has seen a new orientation in folkloristic research into the folktale--several of them, in fact, but we cannot manage to talk about all of them. I am thinking here about the growing interest in the personage of the narrator, and for that matter also, of the singer, the musician, and so on. By bringing this problem into the research, the field of folklore has broken with its romantic point of departure, and I do not believe that we have yet lived through all of the consequences of this break. Gone are the historic dreams, but also the impersonal, superorganic laws, the stiff systems, and in their stead we have gotten a new kind of cultivation of the folk's best artists. In Denmark this tendency found clearest expression perhaps in music research and ballad research, but I shall willingly concede that my own interest in folktales is characterized to a certain degree by something comparable. While the older currents in folkloristics seem to be connected with the development of Central and Western European societies, this new current has received strong contributions from both the United States and the Soviet Union. The full picture will perhaps only be evident in a generation or two, but one can point to a couple of circumstances.

In America, folklorists have never had any obligation to a national dream. On the contrary, many of them have had a connection with anthropology, which since the 1920s has been characterized by functionalist thinking, which is inclined to be ahistorical.

In the Soviet Union, research has had consciously to settle with older middle-class ideologies. In earlier times the middle-class was a relatively small group which included the academic profession. Today the middle-class is a large and very diffuse group, and far from all academics are recruited from this group. The last point is perhaps the most important. In our day it is far from given that we gather at the university with a community of experiences, outlooks, and interests that we share with our predecessors in unspoken obviousness. This can be seen immediately, if one thinks about what is comprised by the central concept of the field, the mystical word "folk." The "folk" were once the traditional rural population to whom the middle-class attached its national hopes; then it became diffuse, because a new, large class of people, the workers in the cities, pushed forward; today we do not know what the word should cover--one finds, for example, a complete abandonment of ascribing to it any precise meaning in Dundes' **The Study of Folklore**, in which he goes so far as to say that it can refer to "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is."⁷ When in the last number of years "the folk" have come to play a large role in the political left in Europe, I believe that the explanation lies in the attempts of a new class to take over the strategy of the nineteenth century's middle-class: **Wahlverwandschaft**, but with the formation of a new political front.

I must come to a close here because of time. Let me do so with a pointed summary of my thesis. The tacit assumptions in our view of folk tradition are formed probably to a much higher degree than we think by the prejudices, experiences, and interests

that are characteristic of the class we come from. If the social position of this class changes, or if the recruitment of folklorists changes, then the tacit assumptions in our work change and, along with them, our theories and working hypotheses. In these last years when we have become far more interested in questions of theories and methodology than before, which are connected with the fact that our historic and class assumptions have changed, therefore a seminar on theory and methodology should concern itself with our position in society.

NOTES

1. The Danish word "himmel" means both "sky" and "heaven."
2. Peder Laale made a compilation of Danish proverbs that was first published in 1506. [Translator's note]
3. This notion is often stated in the form of a thesis: "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny." It was, I believe, first formulated by Ernst Haeckel, the German biologist, around 1866, but was quickly adopted by psychoanalysts, anthropologists, some folklorists and linguists, etc.
4. See now Bengt Holbek, "Eine neue Methode zur Interpretation von Zaubermärchen," **Jahrbuch für Volkskunde und Kulturgeschichte** 23 (1980): 74-9. [Translator's note]
5. The American reader may need a brief introduction to European terminology here: when writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries speak of "nation" they have in mind what modern Americans think of as an "ethnic group," i.e., people sharing a common origin (Latin *natio* = birth), culture, and language. A "state" is a political structure, the organization of government. The great striving of nationalism was--and still is--to make the "nation" congruent with the "state." The "nation" differs from the

"ethnic group" in its strong attachment to a specific geographical region and its awareness of historical continuity of existence there.

6. It may be noted that "nation" and "nature" are derived from the same root: it is **natural** that **nations** form independent states.

7. Alan Dundes, ed., **The Study of Folklore** (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968), p. 2.