

Crystallized Belief

Objects of Tradition in Folklife Research in the Inter-War Years

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In 1934, the first number of the journal *Ord og sed* (“Word and Custom”) was issued to informants and interested public in Norway. The journal consisted in its entirety of questionnaires, collecting the first 22 of what in the end would be over 150 questionnaires collecting information on Norwegian folk customs and the words used to describe them (“ORD OG SED” 2018). The last issue of *Ord og sed* that was issued as a journal was in 1947, collecting all the questionnaires written in the last years of the war. The journal then turned into *Norveg*, which had a much larger focus on articles. Some questionnaires in the “Word and Custom” series were still published here, the last one in 1958. The *Ord og sed* journal is a central publication for understanding Norwegian research on folk culture in the inter-war years.

In this article I will explore what kind of research objects these questionnaires sought to collect and how the concept of “tradition” was understood in relation to them. By doing this, I hope to give a better understanding of how early ethnology understood the relationship between material and immaterial elements of tradition in their collection practices. As I will show, these collection practices formed a reading of artefacts, words and actions as historical and cultural sources that all hinged on a specific way of contextualizing “belief”. Since these ideas were embedded in the source material itself, they still play a part in our present day conceptualizing of material and immaterial cultural heritage and how beliefs are negotiated in and with heritage.

Many of the important institutions of Norwegian folklore and folklife collecting were established in the early 1900s. The

Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture (IFSK), established in 1922, was of particular importance for *Ord og sed*. It became a central institution in the development of European theories on cultural development in this period (Kyllingstad 2008). These efforts in comparative cultural research necessitated a standardization, not only of the research theories, but also of the research objects. Effective comparison necessitated that the research objects had to be constructed in a way that made them comparable (Kvern-dokk 2011:82–85). How this was done with regard to research objects for “folk culture”, we can see in the “Word and Custom” questionnaires. In them we can see a focus on the “objects” of tradition that was gaining popularity in the inter-war years. It represented a new line of research in Norwegian folkloristics, a focus leading to the establishment of ethnology or “folklife research” as an independent discipline in Norway. Folklife research was a way of describing a folkloristic research that studied the tradition of the people in holistic terms, as tradition as it occurred in the everyday life of the people. If research objects could be gathered with this context intact, they could later be read comparatively, so that broader patterns of history and culture became visible. Folklife research in Norway had a close connection to, but also had marked differences from, the folklife research of Sigurd Erixon and the circle around him in Sweden. The Norwegian version had stronger historical aspirations, seeking to make historical research objects. The most important man behind this development was also the editor of *Ord og sed*, the philologist, and later ethnologist, Nils Lid (1890–1958).

Other prominent exponents of this method were Svale Solheim, Rigmor Frimannslund (Holmsen) and Kjell Bondevik, all of them active in *Ord og sed* in their early academic careers,¹ and Solheim and Frimannslund were both central to the later development of folklore and ethnology, respectively. In this article, however, I will focus on Nils Lid, who held the first professorship in folklife research at the University of Oslo, and who to a large degree formed the premises for this early period.

The idea of “folk belief” was of the utmost importance for Lid’s and his colleagues’ framing of folk culture and the objects that were the sources for it. This had important consequences for the kind of objects they wanted to collect. The research leading to the publishing of *Ord og sed* was based on the premise that magical rituals were the origin of religious development. It was as sources for this premise that the research objects constructed in most of the *Ord og sed* questionnaires were of interest. But, if more or less ordinary objects were to say anything about the origin of religion, some work had to be done. First, I want to show the theoretical premises for this work before I show some examples from the questionnaires themselves of how it was done.

Crystallized Notions and Beliefs

The early folklife researchers based their theories of cultural development on the theories of the German mythologist and librarian Wilhelm Mannhardt (1831–1880). In the 1860s Mannhardt had started a collecting folk customs in Europe. Using one large questionnaire, translated into many European languages, he managed to collect

large quantities of agricultural customs. Although questionnaires had been employed as a method of collection prior to Mannhardt’s use, his pan-European focus and the standardization of questions necessary for organizing the answers to this multilingual questionnaire was unique for its time. The survey resulted in Mannhardt’s two-volume work *Wald- und Feldkulte* (Mannhardt 1963a, 1963b). In this work, he argued that the origin of mythology could be found in agricultural customs designed to ensure and extend fertility.² He further argued that customs were more temporally stable than myths, so that in order to look for the origin of religion, it was better to look for survivals in customs than in myths (Lid 1931:15). This was also the rationale for his questionnaire method. Scandinavian folklore researchers who took these ideas as a methodological framework have in the subsequent period been, somewhat pejoratively, named “Mannhardtians” (Hylland 2013:375–380; Nordberg 2013:308–338; Kjus 2013). It is important though, that the concerns of the Mannhardtians were formed by one of the early twentieth century’s most popular books on the origin of religion, James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (Nordberg 2013:312). This book, first published in 1890 as a two-volume explication of the custom of the golden bough in Nemi, Italy, soon grew into a twelve-volume work, compiling an array of examples from different cultures underscoring the point that the origin of religion and folk belief were originally magical fertility rites (Ackerman 1991:46–48). Frazer’s work became a rich sourcebook, but also of the utmost importance was his theory of magic (Frazer 1925:11–20). It was this theory that

served as a premise for Nils Lid and his research into folk belief.

In 1935, Nils Lid defined folk belief in the following way:

Folk belief is the inherited magical and mythical notions, as they are found in proper beliefs, and as they crystallize in folk customs and folk tales. The most constant of these elements are the customs, which is the centre that the popular notions revolves around. In contrast, the ideas themselves change very easily. Hence, the explanations people now have for their beliefs as a rule are secondary. They are mostly new inventions created to explain the tradition that has moved over time from its original soil (Lid 1935:1; my translation).³

As we can see, what Lid focused on was the magical and mythical beliefs that had “crystallized” in folk customs and folktales and that the most constant of these sources was the customs. In this definition we can see clear traces of Mannhardt, especially regarding the crystallized customs, and from Frazer concerning the magical notions. The definition also sums up the basis for the Mannhardtians’ focus on folk belief and how it related to folk traditions as a whole. And, going to the heart of what the *Ord og sed* questionnaires aimed to produce, there was a focus on “crystallized” notions and beliefs, the idea that in folk tradition, in folk customs and folk tales, one could find “objects” or “elements” pointing back to proper magical and mythical beliefs. Not only could many elements of “folklife” be seen as crystallized beliefs that originally were religious or magical, but it also created a notion of “tradition” as a consistent whole, and that this whole was based on these beliefs. The ordinary was thus also, in this

particular view, sacralized. It likened the crystallized objects to sacred artefacts. Thus, it bears some merit when the American folklorist Dorothy Noyes comments that tradition was for the romantics a secularization of the Catholic defence of tradition and that, following the romantics’ view, the vehicle itself, “crystallized” tradition, became sacred (Noyes 2009:236). This uneasy oscillation between the secular and the profane that is found in the idea of folk tradition was important for the popularity of folk belief in the inter-war years. Folk belief and folk poetry could tell about primitive spiritual life and the “destiny” of these notions. In this, folklore, religious history, archaeology and ethnography could meet and have a common goal, as Knut Liestøl put it in his inauguration speech for the folklore programme at the Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture (Stang et al. 1925:52–53). It was in this programme that Lid developed his early view of the importance of customs as sources for religious development.

Reading Textual Objects

In my reading of the *Ord og sed* series I have sought to capture this way of thinking about the folkloristic archive material as “crystallizations”, as objects more than primarily texts, which of course they are, materially speaking. In devoting special attention to how the research objects produced by the *Ord og sed* questionnaires were both, or alternately, understood as crystallizations and notions or beliefs, I bring to the fore the relationship between the material and the immaterial in these collection practices. I will thus take Lid quite literally when he speaks of crystal-

lized notions and beliefs, because, as we shall see, I find it a fruitful metaphor for what is actually taking place in the questionnaires and the practice of collecting folklore that they were part of.

To see these ideas in the questionnaires, I need certain tools for a close reading of them. The first is the concept of “focalization”, taken from the narratologist Mieke Bal. Bal uses the term to speak of the point of view that can be found in narratives, the “vision” chosen in descriptions of events (Bal 2009:145–146). The term is thus useful for describing how the text “looks at” certain facts, which is important for understanding how the objects of tradition are understood in the questionnaires. In describing some of these focalizations I also want to foreground how the described objects in the texts gains a status as *a* notion or *a* belief and thus functions as an immaterial “thing”.

Another way of understanding the relationship between object and description is in the French philosopher of science Bruno Latour’s term “figuration”. Latour defines it as “the flesh and features that make them [the actions] have some form or shape, no matter how vague” (Latour 2005:53). Figuration thus concerns how something in a textual description is given form. Lid’s way of describing folkloric sources as “crystallizations” is of course one such figuration, bearing with it the value and temporal stability of a crystal.

This brings me to the third term I will use in this text, the anthropologist Anna Tsing’s term “worlding”. Tsing states that figurations necessarily bring with them a certain “context”, an ordering of, or relations between, different objects, that form

certain stories the objects can be speaking of. She understands these storylines as “worlds”, a metaphor extending further than “story” or “narrative”, in that she understands this as an ordering of material and immaterial objects into “worlds” accepted as real or objective (Tsing 2010). In the texts presented, “tradition” may be understood as one such “world”. It organizes diverse objects as “objects of tradition” and thus infuses them with a given story, for example as objects pointing to primitive conceptions.

The last term I want to emphasize from the outset is the idea of “scale” as used in science and technology studies (cf. Latour 1993:32; Tsing 2015:37–42) to describe how research objects become able to expand or contract the topic they are made to speak of, without changing framework (Tsing 2015: 37–42; Latour 1993:32). Folk belief functioned as such a scale in the inter-war years, which becomes clear when Liestøl speaks of folk customs as pointing to primitive spiritual life. This contributed greatly to how the “world” of tradition was understood, and which objects could be part of it.

The Physical Object as Tradition

First, I want to show how physical objects were understood as tradition in the *Ord og sed* questionnaires. In the series, there was a large number of questionnaires that sought to collect “tradition about” different objects. Many of these were “natural objects”: plants, birds, insects, and other natural features, but also parts of buildings, tools and equipment and other man-made artefacts (Resløyken 2018:62–105).

As an example, I will present what is al-

so the first questionnaire in the series, *Ord og sed* No. 1: *Banabeinet* or “the killing bone”. The “killing bone” is the uppermost bone in the neck of animals and humans, where the head is attached to the spine. This bone has the scientific name “atlas”, a fact that is stated in the questionnaire and that is of some significance in the way this bone is figured in the text. I will come back to that later.

The first figuration (Latour 2005:53) that meets the reader of the questionnaire is the pictorial representation of the bone (see fig. 1).

Picture about here

This picture gives three examples of the same bone, as the text says, from a cow, a calf and an ox. The picture gives the reader a physical representation of the object. What immediately connects it to “tradition” is the strange name that is also the name of the questionnaire, *Banabeinet*.

The text consists of a two-page introduction and nine questions. The introduction opens by saying the following:

The furthestmost bone in the neck (atlas) in livestock has had a lot to say in the folk tradition. It has had different names in different parts of the country, names that must be explained in terms of the conceptions and customs connected to it. In many places it was called *the killing bone* [banabeinet], a name that must originate from the fact that, during slaughter, they used to strike the animal unconscious with a knife stab in front of this bone, and in this way “critically wounded” [bana] it (Lid 1934:7; my translation).

In this introductory text, we can see how

Lid places the object in the tradition while still carefully maintaining its objectiveness and keeping it close to the theories he had from Mannhardt and Frazer. In the first sentence, he opens by stating that the bone “had a lot to say in the folk tradition”. By stating this he also begins to let the bone speak, and inside of something thought of as *the* tradition. We may also note that in this sentence we have not yet heard the name of the bone. It is the bone itself that is focalized (Bal 2009:145–161). It is also here the scientific name (atlas) is used. The scientific name thus comes to the fore as the “real” or objective name of the object. We thus have an object, the bone, that we can see in the picture, that had a lot to say, and thus “spoke” in a place called “the folk tradition”.

In the next sentence, the text focuses on the name. It tells us that the bone has had different names in different parts of the country, but that all these names must be explained from the customs and conceptions connected to the bone. This connection between the thing or action and the word formed a basis for the method in *Ord og sed*, as the name implies. This shows an affinity to the “Wörter und Sachen” research, a method that sought to document the spread of cultural elements by following the development of their names (Bakken 1977; Levander 1936). The questionnaire further gives us an authoritative name for the object, *banabeinet*, which can be found “in many places”.

We can thus speak of a three-part object that Lid presents in this text. First, the object itself, the bone in the picture and the bone scientifically called atlas. It is this object that speaks in folk tradition. Second-

ly, it has a name that connects it to customs and conceptions and that differs in different parts of the country, but it can be referred to by one name, *banabeinet*. Thirdly, this name can be used because the connection between customs and the bone gives it meaning in and as tradition. Because it is these actions that makes the object able to speak “in the tradition”, the authoritative name can also be maintained. The object itself does not differ noticeably just because it has different names.

By establishing an object “in the folk tradition”, a translation between the modern and the traditional becomes possible. The names from the two domains, what “we” call “atlas” and what “they” call “banabeinet”, are highlighted as two equal but distinct conceptions of the same thing and thus translation of the conceptions can be done by pointing to the object. The Latin word that for “us” is connected to anatomy, the ordering of the different parts of the body, is for “them” connected to customs and conceptions, beliefs and actions, that define both the name and the thing “in tradition”. The translation presented in these lines is thus between atlas and *banabeinet*, a translation not first and foremost between names, but between “our” ordering of nature and “their” ordering of cultural artefacts.

Further in the introduction, the text again asks the reader to focus on the picture:

As one can see from the picture, the bone has the shape of some sort of face. And there has been a conception that this bone, which is so important in that it controls the movement of the head, has been a “life-bone”, so that they thought that after death it could be the foundation of a ghost of the animal (Lid 1934:7; my translation).

Again, it is the conceptions that are in focus, but now it is a likeness in the physical bone that makes it a “life-bone”, a material representation and bodily location, for the life force. This comes on the one hand from its physiological function and on the other hand from its likeness to the face. The text has suddenly changed its focus. It is now the physical bone’s appearance in the picture that is connected to conceptions and customs. And again, a translation is present, both “us” and “them” can agree that the bone looks like a face and that it is important for the movement of the head. We can both agree that it is a life principle. Where we depart from each other is when this principle becomes a foundation for a ghost. The difference between the tradition and the modern may thus be seen in the way tradition links likeness and belief. In tradition likeness and belief are intimately connected and lead to action. It is because conceptions and beliefs are inevitably expressed in action that this object of nature is able to “speak” of tradition.

This crystallization, or objectivization, of the objects of tradition also enabled Lid to make a profound move with traditions and how they connected to people and “the people”. Later in the introduction, Lid says:

All these names are about ritual actions with the bone. It was common to cut this bone out and throw it to dogs or ravens. The explanation that one could not eat the meat is secondary (Lid 1934:7; my translation)

In this quotation, and as we also saw in his definition of folk belief, Lid’s focus on customs and conceptions made it possible for him to say that people’s own explanations

for their customs often were secondary. The original or actual explanations for customs and conceptions were not what the people said they were. This idea had profound implications on the objects of tradition, for example the bone in question here. While the people might have explanations for their actions and things, this is often not the primary and thus not the actual explanation for tradition. The primary explanation can be found by reading the signs from the object in the right way. As a consequence, what folk tradition consists of in this figuration is not the traditions of the people or the ideas of the people. What tradition consists of is what the objects “themselves”, or as signs, speak of. As I have shown, in the introductory text to the questionnaire Lid established ways whereby the object could be read right from the beginning as signs by the informants. In Lid’s view of tradition, it is thus not the “culture” of the folk themselves that is the primary focus; instead, it is what makes the folk act as they do. Actions point to this, and as signs they speak of conceptions and beliefs. Lid’s research tradition was thus one that established an alternative voice for the objects of tradition. In this way these objects could become interlocutors in a dialogue between the modern and the traditional.

Cycles of Time and Belief as Chronology

The difference between the traditional and the modern was primarily a temporal division. When Lid framed customs to be the most constant and thus the best crystallizations, he was operating with the complicated temporality given to the objects of tradition. Actions, which is what customs con-

sist of, are by necessity ephemeral. But, for the dialogue between the modern and the traditional to have any value, the traditions had to be survivals from a time prior to the here and now. So how could the focus be kept on the objects and their speech at the same time as the objects were established as survivals from a different time? In the following I want to show how the atemporal signs of the objects of tradition could be read as temporal events.

It is interesting to note that most of the questionnaires that explicitly try to investigate the people’s conception of time in the *Ord og sed* questionnaire series do so in a strict, Mannhardtian fashion. As an example, we can use another of Lid’s questionnaires, or rather three questionnaires that all deal with the chronology of the people and that most likely were written together. The first one, number 11, is called “The sun and the stars in chronology” (*Soli og stjernone i tidsrekningi*) (Lid 1934:35–38). This rather long questionnaire is split into two parts, one dealing with reading of time in the daytime and with the help of the sun, and the other at night time and with the help of the stars. But it is also emphasized that the people used the stars to read the time in the wintertime and the sun in the summertime. This view is further elaborated in number 12 “Day and night” (*Døgret*) (Lid 1934:39–40) and 13 “The year” (*Året*) (Lid 1934:41–44). What is most striking in all these questionnaires is that Lid focuses on a duality, between day and night, summer and winter and the sun and the stars.

The short introduction to questionnaire 11 reads: “In rural districts there is still a lot of tradition about the old counting of time. Of great interest are the rules people had for

establishing time in the daytime or during the year, and the stars at night” (Lid 1934:35; my translation). Of interest here is the old way of counting time, relating to the movements of the sun and the stars. It is also stated that some of this tradition still exists in the rural districts. This is self-evident in that a lot of the signs discussed in the questionnaire are about how the sun moves in relation to large features such as mountains and farms. However, this is not the main interest in these signs. The main interest is that they are readings of natural signs.

Of the questionnaire’s two parts, the first is called “Markings from the sun” (Solmerke), the second is called “Markings from the stars” (Stjernemerke). Already in the title it is evident that it is these signs, and how to read them, that are of interest.

In the first part of this questionnaire, “Markings from the sun”, the first five questions are about the markings themselves. The first two of these ask for markings in relation to the farm, while the next three are about how markings are read in the outfields and the wilderness. In the next four questions the focus changes, and it is now on customs for celebrating the return of the sun. The first of these questions, number 8, asks about celebrations. The next question asks if it was common to give “butter to the sun” on this day. This custom draws attention to an offering to the sun. At the same time, it is asked whether it was a good sign that the sun “ate” this butter, thus focusing on the omens read from the same sign. The last of these questions asks if there was a day one could see the sun dance. The questionnaire gradually zooms in on the personifications of the sun: first by

focusing on the signs, then on the celebrations in connection with them, then on the active participation of the signifier, the sun, and lastly by the personification of the dancing and eating sun. Question 13 asks about rules of labour in relation to the sun, thus connecting the personified and celebrated sun with the yearly work cycle on the farms. Question 14 asks about how special days are found by using the movement of the sun. With a focus on the calendar of the people, we can see how labour activities and celebrations are put in relation to each other by the use of the personified natural sign, and the close connection between observing, offering and taking omens.

In the second part of the questionnaire, “markings from the stars”, it is mostly three signs that are in focus, the Pleiades (*sjustjernen* or the “seven stars”), the Big Dipper (*karlsvogna*) and Orion (*fiskane* or *fiskesveinane*, “the fishes” or “the fishermen”). All these questions relate to two quotations from Jacob Nicolai Wilse’s *Spydebergs beskrivelse* (*Description of Spydeberg county*) from 1779. In contrast to the first part, it asks about how the star signs are read in order to tell the time at night and in winter (questions 15 and 16), but also about the conceptions related to the names of the signs (questions 17 and 18) and also how they functioned as omens (questions 15–18).

Questionnaire 11 establishes connections that are further elaborated in questionnaire 12, “Day and night” (Døgret) and questionnaire 13 “The Year” (Året). “Day and night” ask mostly about how the day was ordered into periods of work. It also asks about signs that could tell these periods other than signs from the stars or the sun.

Questionnaire 13, with its 29 questions, is far more extensive than both number 11 and 12.

The first four questions in number 13 ask about the calendar instrument the primstaff, which marks the days of the year and has signs for all the masses during the year. These masses are asked about in question 5–9, which also asks for rhymes and mnemonic rules connected to them. Question 10 is about the natural markings of the shift between summer and winter, while 11–14 ask about the agrarian working year. Questions 15–25, on the other hand, all ask about conceptions and beliefs connected to the first two lunar months after Christmas, called *torre* and *gjø* respectively. These two, conceived of as the “male” and “female” month, formed an important basis in Lid’s theory of the fertility magic that seemed to serve as a basis for folk belief. Lid thought these two names could be connected to the dualistic principle of the year, with one part connected to growth, personified as *gjø*, connected to women, summer, the goddess Freya, the flax plant and linen. The other part, connected to the principle of harvest, was connected to men, *torre*, the god Ull and wool (Lid 1928, 1933a). In Lid’s view, customs from these larger primitive conceptions had been gathered together in the period around Christmas, and it was thus traces of these that could be found in Christmas customs as well as the conceptions related to the first two months of the year. It was this, for example, that made February the “women’s month” and was the basis for women being able to propose marriage on 29 February (cf. questionnaire 122 (Lid 1943:29–32)). The women’s month coincides here with the first signs of spring

and new life, making for the inauguration of the growth half of the year. The corresponding half, the dying of the god, was from harvest time, and the reason for all the harvest customs relating to the harvest of the grain. It was these customs that had been the focus of Mannhardt’s research and the personifications he named “die Korndämonen”.

The last four questions of the questionnaire ask about how dates was set in accordance with extraordinary events like floods and war. A last question asks about riddles and rhymes concerning time in general.

We can see how people’s timekeeping is always conceived of as a reading of natural signs. It is this that makes it interesting as “tradition”. Mechanical timekeeping devices, even though they are old and part of peasant culture in the same time period, are not part of the chronological practices of the people. The practice that is called “timekeeping” here is thus not so much ordered as temporal development as it is about what signs are read in order to tell time. “The tradition” thus, as opposed to the modern, orders its actions in direct relation to the natural cycles themselves, without intermediary devices. The signs that mark the events in traditional life are thus by definition cyclical and cannot be read in a linear, progressive fashion.

But still, there is a way that “we”, the moderns, can see progress in the people’s reading of time. The difference that shows temporal progress, or stages of cultural development, lies in how this reading is done in a *rational* fashion. For to what degree the people *believe* in the natural signs is a way of reading cultural-historical time, a way to

read the timespan of the tradition. The idea that primitives “personified” nature and that it was this that was the basis for folk belief beings and also gods, played an important role for making annual customs speak of folk belief and thus also making these actions part of a sacred domain. We saw, for example, how Lid associated the goddess Freya and the god Ull with both periods of time (*torre* and *gjø*), materials such as flax and wool, and actions such as harvest and sowing. We also saw, in questionnaire 11, how he forged connections between the reading of signs, offering to the signifiers and omens taken from them. In the people’s reading of time it was thus two components that made the tradition “speak”. On the one hand, it was the fact that the sign was natural or unmediated that defined the action as traditional. On the other hand, in what way the signifier was “believed in” was a way of reading the deep historical structure of culture. In other words, in this a timeline is visible, beginning with the worship of repeatable phenomena like the sun, the stars or the cycle of growth and harvest during the year, and ending in the mechanical clock that in no way needs to be believed in.

It is thus the events that the objects of tradition were put in that made the objects into survivals. On the one hand by locking them into a cycle of time that made them timeless and thus able to survive over long periods of time, and to be crystallized. On the other hand, they were given a temporality by utilizing the belief in the markings of the cycles. With this in mind, the objects of tradition became both part of a different time structure and a different rationality, but both, through the signifiers established,

were able to take part in the conversation between tradition and modernity. In other words, a “worlding” for the objects was established (Tsing 2010). The relationship between the objects was understood with reference to this other time and rationality. The worlding of the objects of tradition made them able to function differently as signs than would other historical sources. This way of understanding time in “tradition” also connected all the objects of tradition together and thus emphasized what they were meant to explore as research objects. With this, a particular story of tradition became part of the objects themselves, making them scalable as research objects with this story intact, on account of their perceived direct connection to nature and the human mind.

A Descriptive Method as Staging of Tradition

The examples from the *Ord og sed* questionnaires I have given here show that they made it possible for the objects to become actors in a story of tradition. We saw, for example, how the bone was described as speaking and the signifiers of markings in time also were personified. In these stories the actors are in focus as accounts of reality and it was thus possible for researchers such as Lid to focus on them as if tradition itself spoke. This made him able to portray his research as using a “descriptive” method (Lid 1928:7, 1933a:7). This had profound consequences for how tradition was seen in relation to other historical and social research. The particular techniques that I have shown here made, in sum, a set of research objects, the objects of tradition, that by being “crystallized” made them usable in oth-

er fields of research. With these objects, a particular story of folk culture was projected into other fields of research. Modern conceptions, instruments and institutions could be compared to this stable “tradition”, complete with its own reason for acting in the way it did and the place it acted in. This is for example what was the premise when the philologist Knut Nauthella and the economist Klaus Sunnanå studied fisheries in a questionnaire that was added to the first issue of *Ord og sed* called “On fisheries past and present” (Um fisket fyr og no) (Nauthella & Sunnanå 1933) and questionnaire 35 “The fisheries in Northern Norway and Trøndelag” (Fiskeriet i Nord-Noreg og Trøndelag) (Lid & Solheim 1935:55–78). Here past and present were linked to traditional and modern, making the rather precise switch between the two in the motorization of fishing boats. The same can be seen in the jurist Helge Refsum’s questionnaire on poverty, poor people and aid to the poor (Lid 1943:41–48), which places the gap between the two in the making of publicly financed poor relief. It is in this place on the other side of the gap, in the unspecified and stable “before”, that the objects of tradition were allowed to act. We can thus think of the idea of singular “tradition” as a *mise-en-scène*, a staging for these objects. Mieke Bal suggests the following on *mise-en-scène* as a concept:

Let’s suppose, for a moment, that *mise-en-scène* is this: the materialization of a text – word and score – in a form accessible for public, collective reception; a mediation between a play and the multiple public, each individual in it; an artistic organization of the space in which a play is set; an arranging of a limited and delimited section of real time and space. As a result of all this

arranging, a differently delimited section of fictional time and space can accommodate the fictional activities of the actors, performing their roles to build a plot (Bal 2002:97).

The idea of a singular “tradition” as a stable past and a reservoir of objects of tradition made these “actors” able to perform in a way that built a plot and made it accessible for a public, collective reception. It was this performance that Lid and others “described” in their works, and it was this plot that was activated in the questionnaires. In thinking of the questionnaires as a *mise-en-scène* of folk tradition it becomes easier to understand how irrational elements were given a voice and how non-human actors like the sun or a bone were made able to speak. But this *mise-en-scène* also gave somewhere to place, watch and describe all the irrational elements that were otherwise problematic in a plot-structure of progress. “Folk belief”, which was the irrational element that was “crystallized” in the objects of tradition, became an inherent feature of the objects themselves. With this, folk belief became a particular way of rationalizing irrational traits of culture. On the one hand it was done by making irrational traits part of folk belief and on the other by the use of analogy, by reading irrational behaviour and explanations as if they were crystallizations of belief. The survivals that are found in this research are thus not only objects that have the function of an historical source. They are also a link, something with an effect both in the past and in the present. We can thus problematize to what extent Lid and his colleagues also understood the objects of tradition, which made up the raw material of “the tradition”, as something that was constructed in their present and

with present-day effects. It is to this point I want to turn in the last part of this article.

Folklife Research – an Organic Whole

In the article “On folklife research” (“Um folkelivsgransking”) from 1933, Lid presents his view of what this new holistic approach to the study of folk culture should look like, and what kind of study it should consist of.

Lid starts his article by pointing to the fact that folklife research, or ethnology, is the study of the “living popular tradition, taken in its widest sense” (Lid 1933b:151). He goes on to say that divisions have often been made in these studies, for example between folk belief and the folk customs that have their origin in these beliefs, and how they were used in the old heathen religion. In principle, however, folklife research should have as its object of study “the old way of life, the people’s distinctive character in all its different manifestations and conceptions, as an organic whole” (Lid 1933b:151–152). Lid saw the reasons for studying and saving these cultural traits as extending further than just its scientific interest. He also emphasizes that this old culture has valuable contributions to modern culture. Since “a lot of the old culture-elements are condemned to death” it is important to save as much as possible before it is too late, especially of the oral tradition (ibid.). Lid goes on to show how collecting elements should be done. He emphasizes the process in two distinct stages and corresponding to them is the role of the carriers of tradition and science respectively.

The first part of research had to be done in as close collaboration as possible with

the carriers of tradition. In this process, Lid maintains, science can become “a part of the close living life”, that is, take part in the organic whole of culture (ibid.). Lid shows here that he is aware of the influence of “science” on “tradition” but that both can be a part of an organic, and I should add modern, whole, where the vital quality of tradition is maintained. The *Ord og sed* questionnaires with their explanatory introductions and leading questions become more understandable in this view. The “elements” they were trying to isolate were not only survivals of the old, but also modern products of a culture consisting of a popular and scientific view-point. Lid’s emphasis on “secondary explanations” also becomes comprehensible in this view. We could think of science as adding a history to the practices of the people in Lid’s view.

As we have seen in the questionnaires, Lid’s research also handed out distinct roles to play for the different parts of this organic whole. In relation to the questionnaires I have shown above, we can see how the objects of tradition are made into signs that are able to speak in this dichotomous relation that, on the one hand, consists of the people, the past and the superstitious, and on the other hand science, the modern and the rational. The way the objects speak is by translating between these two positions. It is in this way the *mise-en-scène* of tradition becomes such an important premise, because without this place to speak from, where “the people” as a singular actor can speak to the multiple audience that is the people, the practices of the people would have no way of functioning as signs, and science would have no object to add history to.

This way of making diverse practices, things and words into objects of tradition that functioned as concise signs was the foundation of the next stage of Lid's folk-life research.

The second part was the comparison and synthesis of the elements of tradition. It was in this part that the developmental work of science could take place. In his article Lid conceptualized this part as "the distinct versions of the same thing must be compared to one another, so that one can draw conclusions inductively. If one has enough variants of the same thing, all sources of error will disappear by themselves" (Lid 1933b:153, my translation). The comparison of the different variants of the same thing made it possible to draw sure conclusions, to find the primal explanations why the objects of tradition existed and what their real meaning was.

It was from this position, where the elements existing in the present time could be compared with other historical sources, such as archaeological and text material, that historical research could be done. The national tradition elements could now be compared also to the collections of tradition elements of other countries, and thus make statements about the international diffusion and development of culture. In this it was possible to reach back to a primitive stage of culture, where the origins of culture could be found. It was this that was the main goal of Lid's ethnology, but only after the collection, taking part in the first part of the method, was done.

The Co-construction of Folk Belief

As we can see from this exposition of the methods of early ethnology in Norway, it is

striking how the archival material is infused in the cultural theories of its time of collection. We must thus ask in what way this material should now be seen and how it can be used in order to give a meaningful picture of "folk traditions", a figure that, even though heavily criticized today because of the way it essentializes "the people", still plays an important part in discourse on the people and peoples. Folk tradition, much in the way that Lid understood it, tacitly shapes the popular view of different forms of cultural heritage, both institutionalized, that is, as part of museums and archives, and in general society. Too often the understanding of these elements is stuck in between critique and essentialism, between what is academic construction and what is "genuine" old culture. In one sense, these discussions of course are productive, making new stories of the material in question. But still we often lose sight of the complex relationship that existed between construction and reconstruction, which its collectors were also acutely aware of. "Folk belief" must thus be seen as a co-construction made in negotiation between people talking from the point of view of representing academic theories and the point of view of representing the people. The premise of this co-construction was that cultural beliefs could crystallize and become artefacts, words and actions, and that this happened in "the tradition", a place divided from modern times and modern life. A parallel to these premises can be found in the notion of cultural heritage, a notion that to some extent has substituted "tradition" for "heritage" but by way of its presentist focus keeps the crystallized objects intact. By focusing on how the past is constructed in

the present, the heritage discourse can get away from the overreaching cultural theories that, for example, tradition in the Mannhardtian sense necessitated. But as we also can see in this case study, the presentism of cultural heritage hides the strength with which these earlier practices of collection, through the objects they have produced, co-produces cultural identities as crystallized beliefs. A co-production that is not just between “the traditional” and the “modern”, but a negotiation of different periods theories of culture and the objects these theories produce as culture. I think the utilization of co-constructed objects still has the potential to produce interesting conversations with the past, but this calls for an understanding of the objects of tradition in which they all have to be seen as having partly differing histories. There is no longer a singular “mise-en-scène” they can point back to, but these objects, constructed as signs as they are, can point back to interesting stories of the co-construction of “culture”. Among these co-constructions are the crystallized beliefs and their ability to act as cultural artefacts.

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Notes

- 1 Svale Solheim was first archivist of the Norwegian Folklore Archives (NFS) from 1952–56 and professor of folklore at the University of Oslo from 1956. Rigmor Frimannslund was a conservator at

Norwegian Ethnological Research (NEG) from its beginning in 1946 and from 1953 worked at IFSK on a broad ethnological survey of farming communities, which she also led from 1962 until its end in 1976. Kjell Bondevik had a master’s degree in folkloristics but the major part of his career was as a politician for the Christian Democratic Party, including six years as the Minister of Education and Church Affairs.

- 2 Mannhardt developed this theory in two earlier preliminary studies *Die Korndämonen* and *Roggenwolf und Roggenhund* (Mannhardt 1868, 1866).
- 3 A note on translations: All texts cited in this article were originally in New Norwegian (*nynorsk*) and have been translated by the author. I have tried to keep close to the wording in the original text, in order to show the sentences and metaphors used in the originals. For some nouns that are not possible to translate without losing their meaning in the text, I have given the original word in square brackets and used an approximate translation of its meaning in the text. In titles of questionnaires and articles I have given the original title in brackets.

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