BOAT SPIRITS, SEA MONSTERS AND SEAL WOMEN

Fishermen and hidden aquatic dangers in the Faroe Islands

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Firouz Gaini

University of the Faroe Islands <FirouzG@setur.fo>

ABSTRACT: This article discusses aquatic mythologies of the Faroes with focus on the narratives about the shoveller (also called 'the man on board'), a boat spirit nesting in deep-sea fishing ships. The aim of the article is to examine and interrogate cultural representations of the relation between sea and land in the Faroes today by means of critical reflection on and analysis of the meaning of water-related mythology and folklore: what is the role of the stories and legends about the shoveller and other supernatural beings in present-day conversation about the sea, the islands, and the future? The shoveller, the seal woman, and the others on the 'other side' are protagonists of the polyvalent narratives shaping the folklore of the Faroes. They continue to reappear in new settings and among new generations. The spirits, water monsters, and seal women help people envisage what lies beneath the surface, the ocean, and the evident aquapelagic landscape. The shoveller is also a metaphor for the risk and danger in life beyond the fishing vessel today – he is a figure fooling, entertaining, frightening and confusing the islander in the age of globalisation, but also a kobold instructing and guiding the precarious islander in everyday struggle at home and away.

KEYWORDS: Aquatic mythology, water dwellers, islands, in-between-ness, the shoveller

The islands

The Faroe Islands (Faroes) is an island community in the North Atlantic Ocean, midway between Iceland and Norway (Figure 1), with a population of 54,000 inhabitants. It is an autonomous country within the Kingdom of Denmark and has been self-governing since 1948. The Faroes were colonised by Norse Vikings in the start of the 9th century AD, but people from Ireland and Scotland are believed to have lived in the archipelago for shorter or longer periods of time since the 7th century. There is very limited knowledge about the history of the islands before the Vikings arrived. The Faroes, consisting of eighteen islands and more than one hundred villages and towns, covers an area of 1,400 square kilometres. The Faroes were part of the Kingdom of Norway until 1814, when the Treaty of Kiel transferred the Faroes to the Kingdom of Denmark (which had been in a union with Norway since 1380). During the Second World War, British troops occupied the Faroes while Denmark was invaded by Nazi Germany. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Faroes developed to become a modern welfare society with a large export-oriented fishing industry. The severe economic crisis in the Faroes in the early 1990s resulted in a large wave of out-migration, very high unemployment rates, and the closure of many private

companies in the fisheries sector. The Faroese economy recovered rapidly because of successful restructuration of the economy and reconstitution of the political institutions. Almost 95% of the population is Christian, and roughly 75% of the islanders are members of the (Lutheran) state church – the Church of the Faroe Islands. According to a recent survey, more than 60% of the islanders say that religion has great importance in their life, a number that is much higher than in other Nordic countries (Skorini et al., 2021). The Faroes is still very dependent on fisheries, as more than 90% of the export incomes derive from fishery products. Farmed salmon represents roughly half of the Faroese export value today. The sea continues to play a central role in the lives of the islanders – economically (fishing, hunting, harvesting seaweed, tidal stream marine energy, tourist adventure, etc.), culturally (lore of the sea, local knowledge, symbol of Faroeseness, boat races, children's play, etc.), and as space for wayfaring (travel between islands and between countries, etc.). The sea "always drew the Faroese" (Franceschi & Heinesen, 1971, p. 10), and the sea is still being explored as a land of hidden gems and dangers.

Figure 1 – Faroe Islands' position in in the north-east Atlantic (Wikimedia Commons, 2022).

Deep-sea fishing and the shoveller

It was in 1872 that Faroe Islanders bought their very first smack in England. The smack (from the Dutch word *smak*, meaning 'small ship'), a fishing ship used off the coast of Britain and other parts of the North Atlantic in the 19th century, was a broad flat-bottomed vessel with two or three tall masts and sails. When *Fox*, as this first smack was named, arrived in the Faroes, it represented the start of the deep-sea fishing adventure and 'sloop

era' in the history of the Faroes. A century and a half, so far, of deep-sea fishing in the North Atlantic and beyond epitomises an odyssey through fantastic aquatic worlds inhabited by natural as well as supernatural creatures, according to the lore of the seas. "The sea is uncontrollable, as should be the stories told about it," says the phlegmatic ethnographer Christer Westerdahl (2009, p. 33) in a historic review of the 'ritual landscape' of the northern seas. He accentuates that the symbolic opposition between land and sea structures the magic, omen, and taboo associated with life on vessels. The sea is indeed uncontrollable and mystic, but the relationship between island-dwellers and water-dwellers, first and foremost as regards the traditions and practices of fishers and other seafarers, is being reconfigured. Some of the ancient water-beings are vanishing while others are remoulded as new curious creatures, and some are also popularised and exoticised in new cultural representations, as for instance in the case of the rejuvenated legend of the seal woman. For a millennium and a half, people have been living in the Faroe Islands, and, until deep sea-fishing with smacks started in the 1870s, the islanders had to put their trust in the traditional Faroese boat, a small open rowboat made of wood (essentially, a miniature Viking ship), for transportation and inshore fishing off the coast. In this long era, fabulous creatures from the land and the sea have been neighbouring, visiting, and sometimes also disrupting the human society. The islanders living on the coast had every confidence in supernatural communication and respectful coexistence with the non-humans that they shared their home with.

This article discusses aquatic mythologies of the Faroes focusing on the narratives about the freakish shoveller (also called 'the man on board'), a water spirit representing a Faroese cousin of the well-studied *klabautermann*. The shoveller of the Faroes is a supernatural being believed to inhabit ships and typically helping sailors. It is not unlike the *klabautermann* (a name derived from the low German verb *klabastern* meaning 'make a noise'), common to the Baltic and North Sea cultures other than that of Britain (Buss, 1973; Joensen, 1975a, 1975b). The diligent *klabautermann* is usually equipped with a caulking hammer. A further analogy can be found in the labour-related supernatural beings of Northern European mines, where the entities are referred to with a number of names including knockers and *kobolds*. The term *kobold* was also used for other helpful supernatural beings in households and on ships in Germany, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia. The aim of this article is to examine and interrogate cultural representations of the relation between sea and land in the Faroes today by means of critical reflection on and analysis of the meaning of water-related mythology and folklore: what is the role of the stories and legends about the shoveller and other supernatural beings in present-day conversation about the sea, the islands, and the future? The article starts with an introduction to the water spirit in the context of the Faroe Islands, and thereafter the spirit is examined in relation to other supernatural beings in Faroese folklore and also in relation to the role of the coast as liminal space between land and sea. Finally, it analyses the spirits' role and position in contemporary discussions about sustainable societal development.

The *lemparin* and fishing luck

The shoveller is a water spirit that got its name because of its typical work in the hold of the ship: noisily shovelling salt.[1] He is usually associated with the design of 19th century

[1] Before fishing boats departed shore with either ice or refrigerated storage areas, salt was used to preserve fish catches.

smacks and sloops. The Faroese ethnologist Jóan Pauli Joensen prefers calling the non-human fisher a 'trimmer' in his articles. He explains that crewmembers could hear (and in some cases also see) him "trimming the salt in the hold of the night" (Joensen, 1996, p. 107). The shoveller is an omen or phantom furnishing "the crew with important information such as warning of danger" (Joensen, 1996, p. 107). In the Faroes, the shoveller is known under the Faroese name of *lemparin*, which indicates that he is an agent moving and filling something relatively heavy with a shovel or scoop. The shoveller could provide fishers with intelligence about the environment, the weather, the fishing fortune, and diverse hazards ahead. The *dreymmaður* ('dream man') – or images from dreams in general – was often communicating the same message as the shoveller. In Faroese folklore, the *dreymmaður* is a living or dead person appearing in dreams to disclose something, for instance explaining to the shipmaster where he can find shoals of fish in the sea (Poulsen et al., 1998). This protective spirit of ships was 'discovered' in the old smacks imported from Great Britain in the last decades of the 19th century and is therefore not considered to be a member of the assemblage of ancient humanoid *kobolds* and other supernational creatures associated with the medieval peasant farmer society of the Faroes (Joensen, 1987). He did not dwell in the small traditional boats without any contained cargo. Before the deep-sea fishing era, the boat was a vehicle surrounded and encapsulated by risk and danger that the fisher needed to protect himself against, but there was no invisible man aboard (Nolsøe, 1997). The shoveller is the main character of several Faroese poems and short stories, for instance the beloved novellas *Tjúgundi maður umborð* ('The Twentieth Man on Board') by Sigurð Joensen (1987) and *Maðurin umborð* ('The Man On Board') by Martin Joensen (1949). In these stories, the shoveller is depicted in an entertaining and ambivalent style hinting the friction and interrelation between the (economic) rationality of modern deep-sea fishing and the entrenched need of help from 'the other side', a quid pro quo between the natural and magical fields of knowledge through the puzzling and whimsical communication aboard.

This humanoid water spirit, sometimes depicted as a headless man, by and large deals with the same tasks as other fishers. The shoveller is however usually not in close contact with the humans, who don't want to stress or provoke the (usually invisible) *lemparin* more than necessary. When you could hear him shovelling and spading salt in the hold of the ship, says a fisher, "it sang so sharply in the bucket – it was a good sign" (Joensen, 1975a, p. 85). Another fisher adds that when the "strong man on board," as the shoveller was nicknamed and reputed to be, was working in the hold, people would always confirm with satisfaction: "now, there will be much fish tomorrow" (Joensen, 1975a, p. 85). In his seminal article on the shoveller and Faroese smack fishermen, based on material from the early 1970s, Jóan Pauli Joensen (1975a) discusses empirical accounts and theses about the origin of the 'man on board'. Based on rich empirical material from the Faroes, he summarises that when a spirit inhabits a vessel, it is usually because of the fact that "a person died on board in a brutal and bizarre way, killed or the victim of a fatal accident" (Joensen, 1975a, p. 88, my translation). Some of the stories about the shoveller suggest that he was already aboard the ship – without any theory about his origin – when it was purchased abroad. In almost all of the narratives, the shoveller is nonetheless considered to have roots in alien shores and thus to be a stranger to the Faroes. On the other hand, his other name, 'the man on board', invites speculation on an affinity with North-Western European house spirits. These ambivalent spirits will help or hinder depending on how they are treated, but it is unusual to trace this family of spirits on a vehicle, and I have not tracked down information supporting this thesis. Rather than treating the shoveller as a foreign agent, an unwelcome bonus in a newly acquired (yet well-used) vessel paving the way for pioneering deep-sea fishing adventures, he could be interpreted as a kind of avatar of the fisherman's hope and

fear. The shoveller is accompanying the sailor in spaces bereft of the ancient supernatural creatures, and serves as a ship-dweller 'good to think with' in relation to navigation in "liminal terrestrial-aquatic locales" (Hayward, 2018, p. 8).

Media and water dwellers

The introduction of advanced technological equipment transforming the fishing experience and social interaction on the sea, and also the emotional sense of oceanic isolation and precariousness among fishers, has marginalised the anthropomorphic shoveller (since salt is no longer shovelled in vessels) as we know him from the novellas and first-hand accounts. However, the shoveller has re-emerged in doppelgangers in the form of various fantastic figures from new audio-visual media productions drawing on a reinvention and Disneyfication of popular belief from different parts of the world (for instance, in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* film series [2003–]). Curiously, he continues to exist in the mind of some Faroese fishers, despite having been pushed aside by high-tech inventions providing the crew with information that he, as precious presager, used to offer. Some of the stories described in the hugely popular three-volume collection *Hin Heimurin* ('The Other World') – about mystic and supernatural events narrated by Faroese people from all walks of life today – are about boat spirits (Sigvardsen, 2008, 2009, 2011). Television, and later Internet, killed many of the ancient water-beings, uprooting them from people's everyday lives and nightly story-telling sessions. Yet, digital communication technology has introduced novel fantastic beings and worlds for children and parents eager to dig into the strange sounds, images, movements, and sombre incidences ingrained in modern life as well as in the life of our great-grandparents and their ancestors (Joensen, 2020, pp. 52–54). It is also important to remember that the shoveller is not like other water-dwellers, because he is more of a vessel-resident than a water-dweller and, therefore, directly linked to the history of sailing, fishing, and marine wayfaring in the North. Like some of the ancient supernatural water-dwellers, the boat spirit seems to have amphibious qualities, but there is a lack of answers about his destiny in stories about shovellers jumping off troubled or sinking ships.

In the novella *The Twentieth Man on Board* (S. Joensen, 1987) – in which the shoveller joins a crew of 19 men – a crewmember glimpses the shoveller's image in a pond before embarking the vessel at the port (S. Joensen, 1987). It seems as if he is closer to the *huldufólk* ('hidden people') of the Faroes than he is to the well-known dominant water-dwellers. The *huldufólk* are (human skinned) humanoid elves in grey apparel acting like humans but living in a parallel world. They have the reputation of being excellent fishers, and humans should never set themselves up against them. The fabulous water-dwellers in Faroese folklore include the fresh-water *nýkur* (nix), the *marmennil* (merman), the *sjódregil* (sea monster), and the *kópakona* (seal woman/selkie). The shoveller is a kind of impure outcast amongst the named and canonical supernatural beings of the Faroes. He is the result of a mythical and ritual bricolage benefitting the imagination of the fisher in a special precarious spatiotemporal context. He represents a hybrid quick-tempered *kobold* assisting, entertaining and frightening fishermen far from home. This is the reason why the shoveller is interesting to reviews of contemporary coastal communities' "engagements with their aquapelagic locales" (Hayward, 2018, p. 1), and of the role of deep-sea fishing ships in spatial and spiritual navigation across the boundaries of the land and the sea.

The littoral chimera

Early studies of the symbolic opposition between land and sea in folklore in the North Atlantic have discussed systems of taboo forbidding people to employ a large range of common words from terrestrial language while at sea, requiring an alternative code (so-called 'noa-names') to be used in a ritualised style in communication in aquatic spaces (Nolsøe, 1997). The secret code language shielded the naval wayfarer against unpredictable danger. It is also important to delve into the social and cultural practices mirroring people's negotiation of frontiers and connections between the land and the sea in island settings (Grydehøj, cited in Nimfuhr & Otto, 2020, p. 189). The spirits of the sea were, as mentioned earlier, in many cases amphibious beings, occasionally moving up to the edge of the land, or higher up through rivers, to remind the humans of their presence in and co-ownership of the landscape, and in this way, they also demonstrated a land-water continuum in the aquapelagic assemblage of the Faroes. An aquapelago is defined as "an assemblage of marine and land spaces of a group of islands and their adjacent waters" (Hayward, 2012, p. 5).

The shoreline serves as meeting place between supernatural and human beings, between aquatic and terrestrial dwellers, and, in the case of small islands, as the edge between land and sea. Among the many curious supernatural animals portrayed in Faroese narratives about legendary anthropomorphous sea-dwellers, we have the *fjørutrøll* (shore troll), a big and ugly troll overgrown with seaweed, now and then letting out "frightening cries that were like loud snuffling" (Joensen, 1996, pp. 103-104); a giant living on the beach, but occasionally creating havoc in adjacent villages. The shore is a liminal and transformative space; "nothing is ever completely still here" (Boon et al., 2018, p. 9), and eternal material movements at the beach – sand, shells, stones, water, flotsam, etc. – foster images of the island "as always becoming" (Kothari & Arnall, 2019, p. 313). But who believes in the shore troll and the rest of the gang of demons today? Didn't all these creatures vanish with the introduction of electric light, television, and mobile phones? Some of the old legends, for instance, the story about the seal woman, are reinterpreted and reimagined in new discussions about identity, sexuality, migration, and the emotional connection to the sea. The arena of the drama of the seal woman, a legend based on the littoral chimera of people living by and with the sea, the "more than human sea" (Aitken, 2022, forthcoming), is also set at the seashore and in the caves by the shore.

The seal woman

The Faroese legend of *kópakonan* (the seal woman) is the story of a beautiful female selkie forced to marry a young man from the village of Mikladalur stealing and hiding her sealskin, hence preventing her from returning home to the sea. It is an example of the animal-bride legends, where supernatural women marry mortal humans, found in many cultures and languages globally. This migratory legend about the zoomorphic seal woman is almost identical to stories about selkies from Ireland and Scotland, but also corresponds to the key scheme of seal people legends from other parts of the world (Christiansen, 1958). The seal women come up to the shore once a year, according to the Faroese legend, and "they shed their sealskins whereupon they look like ordinary folks" (Hammershaimb, 1969, p. 345). They dance and play at the beach or on the breeding grounds through the whole night, just like partying young people, before retreating to their realm in the depth of the

sea ahead of sunrise. But, on one occasion, one of the seal women couldn't find her skin when the annual escapade to the land above water was ending, so she "started to wail in her misery" (Hammershaimb, 1969, p. 345) before she caught sight of the man and her skin. The crofter flatly refused to give the stolen skin back to the desperate maid. They married and had a peaceful life together, but he did not stop worrying that the seal woman one day would snatch the sealskin and escape to the land below water, a mysterious place beyond his control – which was exactly what was going to happen. One morning, he forgot to bring the key to the chest containing the sealskin when he went fishing with other men from the village. "Today I will lose my wife!" he cried out when he realised that the key was not in his necklace (Hammershaimb, 1969, p. 345). His wife found the key, opened the chest, put her skin on, and jumped into the sea, alone, leaving their children behind – children who later would observe a seal watching them when they walked by the shore. According to the migratory legend, the men of Mikladalur decided to go seal hunting many years later. They killed many seals, of which three of the selkies were the husband and sons of the seal woman, who had begged her former human husband to spare the lives of her beloved ones, a bull-seal and two seal-pups, through a dream. But the bitter crofter ignored the alerting dream. When the man was preparing a sickening supper that same night, which contained parts of his former wife's slaughtered selkie family, the *kópakonan* entered the house and cried:

> *Here lies my mate with his turned-up nose, the hand of Hárekur* [son] *and the foot of Fríðrikur* [son]. *You have had your revenge – and now revenge shall be visited upon the men of Mikladalur. Some will drawn at sea, others fall from cliffs and precipices, and so it shall continue until so many have perished that they will be able to link arms around the whole island of Kalsoy!* (Hammershaimb, 1969, p. 345)

In other versions of the legend, from other parts of the Faroes, the narration on vengeance is missing, and the villagers express a sense of respect of and even kinship with the seals (Joensen, 1996, p. 101). Today, the statue of the naked Aphrodite-like seal woman, standing by herself on a rocky outcrop (Figure 2), expressing strength and resilience, is a major national tourist attraction drawing large groups of visitors to the village of Mikladalur. New books and plays have been written about the seal woman; a Faroese stamp (Figure 3) is also dedicated to the seal woman, demonstrating her central position in national Faroese culture; and people without booklore concerning the legend seem to be eager to find inspiration and answers to dilemmas in contemporary culture through the legend collecting "a great variety of meanings and significances today, just as it likely has done for people in the nineteenth century when the legend was put into writing" (Mikkelsen, 2015, p. 5). Mermaids and sirens are much more popular than selkies in contemporary cultural representations of digital media, something that the many new films and songs about mermaids for children, adolescents, and adults demonstrate. Mermaids are normally portrayed as 'half-half', half animal and half human, but the selkie is 'total-total', total seal and total human, a distinction clarifying the multifaceted land-sea symbiosis in present-day Faroese society.

Liminality and seashores

There might not be many obvious links between the shoveller and the seal woman, except for their aquatic surroundings and contradictory relationship with humans, as well as their special function as guardians of seafarers in the North. The shoveller lives aboard the vessel

in faraway waters (offshore) and the selkie deep in the sea close to the coastline (onshore). But they also have a melancholic human ancestry in common, giving them the character of a kind of fugitive between different worlds. They are destined to be identified by a symbolic inbetweenness. The 'man on board' (who was usually male, but in rare cases also has been observed as female) was a person who had lost his life under tragic circumstances on board, while the selkies, according to the dominant Faroese legend, are originally "descended from people who drowned themselves by leaping into the sea from precipices" (Hammershaimb, 1969, p. 8). The man on board is at home on the ship, trapped and unable to return to his pre-death territorial home, while the seal woman is at home in the belly of the sea, but also on the coast that she happily (re)visits every now and then.

Figure 2 – *Kópakonan* statue (bronze and stainless steel) by Hans Pauli Olsen, located in Mikladalur Harbor on Kalsoy island (photograph by Jastrid Gullaksen, 2014).

Figure 3 – Faroese 5.50 krone stamp (issued 2007).

The shoveller is alone yet among the crew, while the seal woman is a member of a family group and a tight-knit seal community. The shoveller communicates with a crew of men from different villages and islands, a very diverse group of workers united in the fishing collective on board, though engaged in fierce individual competition for the best catch (during the 'sloop era' more than in later modern fisheries), without much attention to their lives on land (Joensen, 1975b). The zoomorphic seal woman observes and meets people intimately, very close to their homes and private lives. She is among peasant farmers and traditional coastal fishers, while the shoveller is among long-distance fishers of the industrial age. She is 'one of us' while he is a stranger, but both of them belong to the culture of the islanders of the North. She represents a thalassic culture relying on the boat, he belongs to an oceanic culture sustained by deep-sea fishing vessels. The shoveller has probably been well known among Faroese seafarers for a much longer time, even if we don't have information about the invisible man on board in the Faroese lore of the sea concerning coastal fishing in traditional rowing boats (Nolsøe, 1997). The seafarers knew the invisible man aboard from service overseas, but the shoveller could also walk an unexplored and overgrown trail leading back to the ancient Nordic house spirits.

Hybridity, as in the outlined nature of the shoveller and the seal woman, was, says John Gillis (2012, p. 61), "most easily imagined" on coasts. From this viewpoint, it is necessary to investigate and focus on the seashore and the aquapelagic assemblage to better understand the nature of the extraterritorial spaces and the role of the supernatural beings in the mind of the islanders. Seashores, as liminal thresholds, symbolise "precarious but seductive places… associated with both arrivals and departures," (Gillis, 2012, pp. 60-62) and, for this reason, they also serve as breeding ground for images of fantastic shape-changing creatures and for exploration of the mysteries of life and death. The borderline, the edge of the water, is a liminal zone of exchange and interaction unlocking "island and watery relationalities" (Pugh, 2018, p. 95). Water unites while mountains divide, says Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1993, p. 135), pointing out coastal and insular places' function as cultural crossroads, but also as breeding ground for ideas on "the condition of nature, humankind or simply for ideas for their own sake" (Baldacchino, 2007, p. 16–17). The whale and the seal, says Rachel

Carson (1951), lived on land before they decided to return back to the sea. Seals are also very humanoid in their movements, sounds and organisation, making it easy for people to imagine "what it is like to be a seal with seal-like abilities and preferences" (Turner, 2004. p. 90). The littoral and liminal space is, so to speak, where transformative magic materialises. While many people live *on* coasts, some groups of people from small island communities live *on* and *with* coasts, like the coaster – *Homo littoralis* – organising his life in relation to the coastline and the inshore (Gillis, 2012, p. 2). Small islands have also been depicted as "places 'away' where anything can happen" (Boon et al, 2018, p. 2).

'The best half'

In ancient Europe, says Gillis (2012, p. 54), the notion of archipelago "embraced both land and water", just like the notion of aquapelago does, a concept which was introduced in opposition to the later understanding of archipelago as, exclusively, island territory surrounded by water. The Faroese term *fjørður* (fjord) refers to a narrow inlet of the sea between cliffs or steep slopes as well as a strait between two islands, clearly indicating the aquapelagicity of the society.

In the Faroes, a society with a littoral culture and global oceanic ambitions, knowledge of the sea surrounding the islands has a 'magical' touch, even if it is very much the outcome of practice and experience, transmitted from generation to generation, as in the case of the savvy and wisdom of the *miðamaður*. The *miðamaður* is a man who is skilful at positioning himself on fishing grounds, using his eyes and no technology. His knowledge about *mið* (small fishing grounds whose positions are fixed by certain bearings ashore, for instance a cliff or a crag) is converted to fishing fortune and wealth. His knowledge, you could say, threatens to make aquatic supernatural beings (the shoveller and others) redundant. The fishing ground might one day be emptied as a consequence of unsustainable fisheries, and then people will again search for an explanation and solution beyond rational reasoning.

The *miðamaður* lost his powerful status in the littoral community when new fishing technologies, for instance the innovative echo sounder, were introduced. Aquapelagicity, Philip Hayward (2012, p. 5) says, is not only about the sea-surface 'scapes', because it "also encompasses the spatial depths of its waters." The immersed land below the sea level is termed the "best half of the Faroe Land" in a poem by Sigurð Joensen (1987; my translation) honouring the *miðamaður*:

> *But what is never lifted to the surface,*
> *is the best half of Faroe Land*
> *And to explore land that the ocean covered*
> *became the life and science of the miðamaður*
> *...*
> *So, every spot where fish is swimming*
> *was attached to Faroe Land by bearings.*
> *And the Faroes expanded in scope and glory*
> *With the work and science of the miðamaður.*

Fishers of the past generations needed skills and science, "but also art and omen" (Gaffin, 1996, p. 30). While the sea continues to inspire and shape the lives of the islanders, its meaning has changed, and the sea monsters and spirits seem to have moved away from the Faroese inshore at the same time as small-scale coastal fisheries have disappeared. There

are 22 tunnels in the Faroes today, of which three are state of the art subsea tunnels, and more under construction. These tunnels and bridges are linking up the archipelago. Before, the islands were divided by water, and a visit to neighbours on another island meant a boat ride. Now, many islands are just a car ride away. The generative aquapelagic imagination is therefore remoulding the old images of the mythic sea-dwellers. The inshore is being demystified while the offshore is being re-mystified. The sea–land relationship can be illustrated in two ways: as "an intrinsic part of the environment people live in, or it is something unknown which lies far beyond the horizon" (Christensen, 2018, p. 123). For the fisher, working on ships navigating 'far beyond the horizon', the seacoast continues to represent a liminal mythic 'no man's land' between aquatic and territorial spaces. The seashore, says Rebecca Solnit (cited in Gillis, 2012, p. 7), "defies the usual idea of borders by being unfixed, fluctuant, and infinitely permeable." The coastline, and maybe especially pronounced in small island settings, as "one of the most recognised forms of the Anthropocene" (Aitken, forthcoming 2022), is also the edge of and main scene of many global crises creating images of a precarious societal future. This leads us back to the water spirits and their role in aquapelagic imagination in contemporary society.

The global shore

The shoveller, the seal woman, and the others on the 'other side', protagonists of the polyvalent legends shaping the folklore of the Faroes, continue to guide islanders and to help them envisage what is hidden under the surface, the ocean, and the landscape above the sea. The emergent images are puzzling, "and the mind of man is repelled by mystery, and he must solve it through either religion, folklore or science" (Beck cited in Christensen, 2018, p. 129). Today, global problems receiving much media attention are part of the local conversation about the meaning of the sea, for instance, climate change, pollution of the marine environment, overfishing, rising sea levels, and tsunamis and cyclones. These discussions encourage new interpretations of the lore of the seas as well as new assignments for the water spirits traditionally associated with the fishers. They also invite new initiatives aiming to sustain a sense of belonging in aquapelagic societies in transition based on stories drawing on magic and supernatural water beings. The hard-working shoveller was there to bolster the crewmembers' fishing luck, to protect their ship and to help them get safely back to their families with a tolerable catch. He was an icon of the 'best man' among the fishers (the best fisher that the others envy and admire), but today he is wanted as a protector of coastal communities facing new waterborne dangers. While many people in the Faroes search for answers to new problems and hidden threats in religion, via the message of the Bible, we also know that many people seek additional supernatural explanations from the 'other side', as the previously mentioned popular books about 'the other world' (Sigvardsen, 2008, 2009, 2011) clearly demonstrate.

The littoral shore continues to symbolise the contact zone of the unknown and the known world. In the Faroes, heavily dependent on the seascape through its large-scale fishing and fish farming industries, the water symbolises life and vitality at the same time as it represents death and untamed and uncontrollable nature. The shoveller, contrary to the old canonical water beings, is there to create growth, to increase the catch of the fishers without any upper limit, and from this angle he does thereby not offer the solution to many present-day "problems associated with the Anthropocene" (Aitken, 2022, forthcoming). The *marmennil* (merman), who lives at the seabed of the littoral zone, bites the bait of the fishhook before attaching the hook to the bottom of the ocean so that the fisher breaks the fishing line and returns home empty-handed. The *marmennil* limits the catch and warns

about overfishing. He belongs to the era of small-scale subsistence fisheries, while the shoveller is in a masculine partnership with fishers as wage earners in need of fast and large amounts of fish. The shoveller on the vessel, floating on the water of metamorphic power, navigating above the spirits of the sea, is a companion of the offshore fishers together in their oceanic isolation. He comes and goes. He reflects the fisher's inner space (Mikkelsen, 2015, p. 69). He also reflects the people of the Faroe Islands' long-lasting and unbroken relation to their sea.

People need to rethink the relationship between humanity and nature, says John Gillis (2004). Today, fantastic stories from films and books are mixed with the Faroese lore of the seas, giving the fisher returning home the opportunity to create new amalgamated narratives and legends to tell his children and friends. The shoveller is also a metaphor for the risk and danger in life beyond the fishing vessel today – he is a figure fooling, entertaining, frightening and confusing the islander in the age of globalisation, but also a *kobold* instructing and guiding the precarious islander in everyday struggle at home and away. The shoveller represents coastal people weathering the tempests of late modern society through re-adaptation and reinvention of littoral lifestyles and values. As long as he does not jump off the ship, leaving the men alone, there is hope for a safe return to the littoral haven. He is not very easy to figure out, to anticipate, or to locate, but he is a denizen of the sea incorporated into the contemporary legends of the fishers and their small island communities. It is therefore possible to conclude that the narratives about the spirits of the sea tie together stories about fear and hope, luck and unluck, people and spirits, change and continuity in a littoral society in shift.

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