

# World Oral Literature Project

voices of vanishing worlds

## Occasional Paper 1



*Faroese skjaldur*  
An endangered oral tradition of the North Atlantic

Stephen Pax Leonard

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World Oral Literature Project  
University of Cambridge  
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology  
Downing Street  
Cambridge  
CB2 3DZ  
United Kingdom

email: [oralliteratureproject@gmail.com](mailto:oralliteratureproject@gmail.com)  
office phone: +44 (0)1223 333508

[www.oralliterature.org](http://www.oralliterature.org)

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Cover design by Dora Kemp and Mark Turin.

The cover photo was taken by Svein-Ole Mikalsen on 30 April 2010. The photo is of Sandvík on the island of Suðuroy, Faroe Islands. Sandvík is the northern-most settlement on Suðuroy which in turn is the southern-most island of the archipelago which make up the Faroe Islands.

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# Preface

The World Oral Literature Project is an urgent global initiative to document and make accessible endangered oral literatures before they disappear without record. The project was established in early 2009 to support scholars and community researchers engaged in the collection and preservation of all forms of oral literature by funding original fieldwork, and by providing training in digital collection and archiving methods.

Through this series of Occasional Papers, the World Oral Literature Project is supporting the publication of research findings and methodological considerations that relate to scholarship on oral literature. Hosted for free on our website for immediate distribution, the series allows

researchers to disseminate fieldwork findings and analyses through a streamlined, peer-review process. We welcome expressions of interest from any scholar seeking to publish original and timely work.

It is with great pleasure that we open our series of Occasional Papers with Stephen Leonard's study of Faroese *skjaldur*. Dr Leonard is an ethnolinguist with a strong commitment to the documentation of the cultures and languages of the North Atlantic, as demonstrated by his careful review of the rhymes, lullabies and short tales that have bound together the people of the Faroe Islands for generations.

*Dr Mark Turin  
World Oral Literature Project  
University of Cambridge  
May 2010*



# Faroese *skjaldur*

## An endangered oral tradition of the North Atlantic

Stephen Pax Leonard

### 1. Introduction

Situated in the North Atlantic, roughly equidistant between Iceland and Shetland, the Faroe Islands comprise eighteen small islands — seventeen of which are inhabited. The Faroe Islands were mainly settled by immigrants from western Norway in the ninth century. Today, their North Germanic language, Faroese, is spoken by approximately forty-five thousand people who inhabit these wind-swept islands. This small population developed a rich oral literature that thrived for centuries and included ballads, tales, songs and poetry.

The Danish linguist, Hammershaimb, who established the modern orthography of Faroese, appears to have been one of the first individuals to commit one of these spoken traditions to writing (1849–51, 3: 310–15). He is also credited with starting the systematic collection of *skjaldur*, but there is every reason to believe that this spoken tradition existed in non-textual form for centuries prior to this. There is no one single edited collection of *skjaldur*, as they have been collected piecemeal since about the beginning of the nineteenth century, but it is thought that they number several hundred.<sup>1</sup> The term *skjaldur*

does not translate easily into English, but the verb *at skjaldra* implies the telling of tales (real or imagined). While in English, such songs are most commonly referred to as ‘nursery rhymes’, both the style and content of *skjaldur* are very different from that of English nursery rhymes.

Tales, nursery rhymes and lullabies, all of which are told to children, are known throughout the world. A nursery rhyme is a traditional song or poem taught to young children, originally in the nursery. Such verses assist in vocabulary development and also help with learning basic counting skills. These rhymes, which are passed down the generations, have a pedagogic function, introducing the child to music and comprising a fundamental part of folklore, and as such are important constituents of culture, accessible to all. Songs, rhymes, counting melodies and lullabies, all of which come under the Faroese heading *skjaldur*, were a particularly important component of Faroese oral literature as the recital of such rhymes lay at the heart of cultural practice.

Faroese was not written down in its present standardised orthography until the 1840s. This fact likely added to the value of the Faroese oral heritage, as there was no Faroese written norm to diminish the significance of the spoken language or to compete with it. The Faroese language survived for centuries as a spoken form with only a tiny population in the face of the

<sup>1</sup> Hylin (1971) collected 400 *skjaldur* during seven months of fieldwork in the Faroe Islands. On a fieldwork trip in the summer of 2009, I collected twenty-six *skjaldur* from eight of the seventeen inhabited islands. My informants were mostly people over the age of sixty who remembered *skjaldur* from their childhood.

colonial superstrate, Danish. Faroese identity was inextricably linked to this oral literature that constituted indigenous narratives and collective memories of Faroese rural life, particularly in regions away from the capital, Tórshavn. The first half of the nineteenth century, when these rhymes were written down and when the focus of Faroese culture shifted from being spoken to written, is probably when the tradition of telling *skjaldur* began to wane.<sup>2</sup>

Although much has been written on the similarities between Icelandic *pulur* 'short tales', mainland Scandinavian tales and Faroese *skjaldur* (Helgadóttir, 2007: 175–199), as we will come to see, the content of these *skjaldur* suggest that the origin of such songs is at least in part autochthonous. *Skjaldur* are home to numerous explicit references to local cultural practices that are unlikely to be anything but Faroese. However, these oral traditions are now being replaced by a variety of modern media and entertainment channels such as film, television, computer games and the internet — all of which are transmitted in Danish and English. As the practice of telling these rhymes to children rapidly recedes throughout the Faroe Islands, we stand to lose an indigenous oral tradition that has characterised and been fundamental to the maintenance of a distinct Faroese identity. In this paper, I show both the value of this oral literature as a stand-alone spoken tradition, but also as an expression of cultural norms that promoted group solidarity among a population scattered over the seventeen inhabited islands, and I demonstrate its importance as a vehicle that helped to foster a sense of place and a means of identifying with it.

For centuries, *skjaldur* have been recited to children of different ages at home and on the farm. Such rhymes would typically have been told to children after a hard day's work and

in the long, dark winter evenings when small groups would gather in a household to listen to music and stories. The setting for the telling of these rhymes is known as *kvøldsetur* 'evening sittings' in Faroese and helps provide us with an image of traditional rural Faroese life where cultural transmission was based on story telling and music.<sup>3</sup> People would gather in somebody's home (often the kitchen) to knit, sew and hear stories and rhymes. The *kvøldsetur* were the locus of cultural life where a sense of community was established and maintained, founded on the exchange of oral literature. *Kvøldsetur* were thus 'a primary institution of remembrance and remained an established feature of Faroese life until the late nineteenth century when economic change rendered them obsolete' (Wylie, 1987: 41).

Subsequently, the transmission of *skjaldur* has continued (albeit ever in decline), but the disassociation of this kind of ethnic music and story telling from traditional rural Faroese life has meant that *skjaldur* have come to index a more ambiguous Faroese identity. During fieldwork completed in the summer of 2009, I found that informants who were born in the 1920's and 1930's were able to remember and reproduce *skjaldur*, whereas younger people had a much more fragmentary knowledge of these rhymes. It was apparent that *skjaldur* were located in peoples' subconscious memories and that their recollection of such rhymes could be teased out by providing an initial line or two.

In recent years, there have been some attempts to revive this form of oral literature. A number of the more well-known *skjaldur* have been included in Faroese school textbooks with the result that the rhymes are now more likely to be heard in the school playground or on children's television programmes than at home. Furthermore, it has become fashionable for Faroese rock bands to incorporate some traditional lyrics into their songs. The practice of oral traditions such as *skjaldur* is shifting from the private to the public domain.

2 At the time of the Faroese separatist movement in the nineteenth century, it was thought to be imperative to have a corpus of Faroese (written) literature to bolster their call for independence. The development of this written literature led (inevitably perhaps) to the erosion of the traditional oral literature that identified the Faroese as Faroese.

3 See Wylie (1982: 456) for a discussion of the activities of the *kvøldsetur*.

Although *skjaldur* have evidently and perhaps inevitably become detached from their original context, there is some hope that this important form of oral literature may survive in a different form and environment. As Wylie (1982: 457) notes, however, the Faroese have to some extent at least ‘lost immediate ritual access to their past.’

## 2. The culture of Faroese oral historiography

*Skjaldur* developed in the context of a rich Faroese oral literature that thrived throughout the centuries on these windswept North Atlantic islands. The Faroe Islands are well known for their ballads, which were an important part of traditional Faroese life up until the second half of the twentieth century. Today, ballads continue to be performed, but normally in a more organised and institutional manner than before. A rich heritage of *kvæði* (heroic ballads), *vísur* (folk ballads, poems and melodies used for dance), legends, fairy tales, riddles, proverbs and indigenous *tættir* (satirical ballads, often written about a particular situation, but that may also relate to something very personal) are alive and well.<sup>4</sup>

During my fieldwork, a number of informants told me that they knew of *tættir*, but that they would prefer not to reproduce them as they were so insulting. These *tættir* mocked and ridiculed specific local people, and informants were clearly worried that I might meet the individuals in this small, tightly networked society during the course of my fieldwork, and inadvertently convey what I had heard. Such a genre of oral literature demonstrates the dynamics of a bounded community characterised by gossip, widespread use of nicknames and jocular insults. Unlike *skjaldur*, such *tættir* continue to be

4 Most folklorists are familiar with the Faroese ballad dance, a medieval ring dance performed without accompanying musical instruments. According to Gaffin (1996: 190), it is a unique phenomenon within Europe, now maintained only in the Faroe Islands. A broad discussion of Faroese ballads can be found in Wylie (1982). The ballads were recorded during the course of the nineteenth century and published in *Føroya kvæði, Corpus Carminum Færoensis* (1951–1972).

composed today (albeit to a lesser extent than before) and function as a form of entertainment when small groups of local people meet.<sup>5</sup> Their subject matter is often a politician or political group, and great use has been made of these satirical ballads in times of political change. In periods when the question of national identity and the relationship between Denmark and the Faeroe Islands were at the fore, for example, the composition of these satirical ballads flourished.

It is worth considering briefly why such a rich oral heritage arose in the Faroe Islands and subsequently remained in place for so long. The phenomenon may in part be explained by social structures: the settlement pattern suggests that the Faroese rapidly formed small scale, close-knit nucleated settlements where there would have been a premium on communication within small, multiplex social networks.<sup>6</sup> Gaffin has shown the value of story telling in a small, isolated, rural community where specific stories were important for survival and insular self-sufficiency in an environment of climatic unpredictability and natural hazards,<sup>7</sup> and also discusses the role of jokes and gossip in communicating social order among a bounded social group (1995, 1996: 147–83). In this regard, one *skjaldur* entitled *Rambi og Sárakona* ‘Rambi and Sára’s wife’ (Sverrisson, 2000: 43) tells of how Rambi is tired of his wife going all over the farm, gossiping and criticising.<sup>8</sup> For children, such rhymes may even serve as an instructive reflection on cultural values and norms: the Faroese value emotional control (in the face of malicious gossip, jokes and insults), level-headedness, self-restraint, amiability and joviality.

5 Gaffin (1996: 174) notes that such *tættir* are particularly aimed at individuals who lack self-control.

6 Arge (2005: 22–38) discusses the settlement archaeology of the Faroe Islands. Milroy (1980 and 2002) explores the issue of language and social networks.

7 Until relatively recently, fishing in this part of the Atlantic was a dangerous exercise and Faroese oral literature is full of stories of people (often children) falling off cliff edges.

8 Another *skjaldur* is entitled *Søgusmetta kúsa* ‘The gossipmonger cow’ (Sverrisson, 2000: 43). The anthology of *skjaldur* from which I quote throughout was produced by Kári Sverrisson and is entitled *Nina, nina, nái*.

Oral historiography provides a link between the past and the present. Using the past to make sense of the present requires the constant reaffirmation of historical knowledge. Stories and tales act as the vehicle for the recycling of this knowledge. This is of particular importance with regard to *skjaldur*, as children are the listeners and hearers but also the ones who reproduce them by rote from a very young age. Thus, *skjaldur* become embedded in the child's mind long before they even understand their meanings or reference points. The telling of stories and rhymes to children is a means of transmitting cultural concerns, but also of ensuring that an awareness of the intimate social cohesion required of a small society was effectively passed on to the next generation. The *skjaldur* were also an indigenous exposition of how people identify with local places as the events in these songs are often based on a particular place that is named and linked by kin-terms through genealogy.

Within Faroese oral literature and oral historiography, *skjaldur* occupy an ambiguous position. The only features of *skjaldur* that appear to be fixed are that they were recited in Faroese, that the end-hearer was usually a child and that they were normally pentatonic, i.e. that there were only five different notes in the entire rhyme. Otherwise, the genre resists definition for the reason that the length, style and thematic complexity of the rhymes vary significantly. There is nothing unusual about pentatonic music itself: it appears throughout the world with similar melodies in Bali, Scotland and Sioux, i.e. cultures with have no obvious connection to one another. While the basic *skjaldur* rhythm is regular, the pattern of beats is irregular. The oddity is that while such a rhythm is used, it does not lend itself to a preconceived notion of what a nursery rhyme should sound like. In terms of transmission, it was normally parents and grandparents who told *skjaldur* to children, but this was not always the case. Elderly informants told me that older children would on occasion tell *skjaldur* to the

younger children when the parents were busy with the seasonal outdoor work.

While nursery rhymes are well attested in many parts of Europe, the *skjaldur* do not appear to belong to any musical tradition that had its origins in European centres of culture. Unlike English nursery rhymes, the style of *skjaldur* tends to be solemn and mournful even when the content is playful. The apparent mismatch between style and content is at times therefore striking.

### 3. Content and style of *skjaldur*

One of the most salient features of *skjaldur* is that many of the quintessential features of traditional Faroese life, such as rowing, fowling, hunting, shepherding, whaling, fishing and the preparation of traditional food, are included as their subject matter. In terms of content, many of these rhymes look to be autochthonous as they appeal to aspects of rural life that could only really be Faroese. There are relatively few themes, even if there are many variations on this limited subject material, with some *skjaldur* appearing to be reconfigurations of pre-existing *skjaldur*. The imagery evoked varies from the humorous, comforting, supernatural and mystical to the fantastic, tragic, spiritual and disturbing. *Skjaldur* were meant to entertain, to educate, to transmit local knowledge and hearsay, and in some cases, simply to shock, or in the case of lullabies, to soothe. Some of the rhymes even speculate on the future of the Faroese economy and provide realist social commentary on matters such as difficult farming conditions or the state of the fish stocks.<sup>9</sup> The transmitted knowledge is thus not ahistorical or simply metaphorical, but has relevance to daily life and implications for practice.

Certain rhymes mark particular occasions in traditional, rural Faroese life and were sung dur-

<sup>9</sup> The rhyme *Øskudólgur og Sóparkona* 'The layabout and the woman who mucks out' (Sverrisson, 2000: 26) offers a rather depressing image of rural decline and emphasises the (over)dependence of the Faroese on fishing and agriculture.

ing the catching of Manx Shearwaters, *skrápur*, the hunting of pilot whales, *grindadráp*, the rounding up of sheep or the threshing of corn.<sup>10</sup> Such rhymes were tightly interwoven into the fabric of Faroese life and formed an integral part of certain ceremonies that marked the Faroese calendar and identified the Faroese as Faroese. A *skjaldur* may make explicit reference to animals and birds (most typically puffins, crows, sheep, starlings, Manx Shearwaters or pipits), indicating the detailed knowledge of flora, fauna and the natural environment that children were expected to have, as well as how much they could learn through listening to such rhymes. The association between such rhymes and the immediacy of Faroese nature is clear, with the latter perhaps acting as a motivation for the composition of the former.

As is so often the case with children's literature, birds and animals are often given amusing human qualities through which they are brought alive for the listener. This anthropomorphisation of animals, plants, inanimate objects and forces of nature is at times rather Aesopian, even though it is not typical for a moral lesson to be expressed in a pithy maxim in Faroese *skjaldur*. In one instance of a rhyme that appears in different guises (*Oman kemur lundi av bakka* 'Down comes the puffin from the cliff') (Sverrisson, 2000: 17), a puffin marches around the islands complaining about the Norwegians and providing the listener with an interesting and comic political commentary. Elsewhere, seals are seen talking to one another and birds carry wood (*Ég fór mær niðan á gil* 'I went up to the stream') (Sverrisson, 2000: 16). As with English nursery rhymes, a number of *skjaldur* have onomatopoeic references to a variety of farmyard animals and the noises that they make, all of which can be rather comical. Not only are animals endowed with human qualities and features, but human body parts are also occasion-

ally anthropomorphised. In the *skjaldur* about the *Rukkulakki* (*Rukkulakkin fór sær oman eftir á* 'Rukkulakki went down the stream') (Sverrisson, 2000: 38), the 'stomach' wanders down to a stream during the preparation of dinner and complains that he has not been washed as well as the rest of the offal.

Other rhymes are in more narrative form, such as *Rakkur og Jógvan Káti*, 'Rakkur and Jógvan the merry one' (Sverrisson, 2000: 30) which relates the story of sheep thieves who went out one night in the *skor* of Dalur to steal some sheep.<sup>11</sup> While the thieves were busy stealing sheep, the sea became so rough that they only just made it back to the boat. They prayed to God to save them from the *skor* of Dalur, promising to give alms to charity if their lives were spared. Such a rhyme alerts the listener to what may have been a serious social problem in the community at the time, but also reminds us of the power of the sea and the unforgiving side of nature which any visitor to the Faroe Islands is frequently reminded of.

Some of the rhymes feed off inventories of local superstition, such as the *skjaldur* that is recommended to be sung when walking past a bull. The Faroese remain superstitious to this day, and while my informants were often non-committal and even embarrassed to talk about the subject, many believe that spirits called *huldufólk* 'the hidden people' still inhabit the land. As in Iceland, many older people claim to have had experiences with supernatural beings, and *huldufólk* are the subject of numerous local and national stories, both written and oral.<sup>12</sup> There is thus a very clear sense of the fantastic and supernatural in such rhymes, which reflects (for some Faroese) the

10 There has been much discussion of the *grindadráp* and how it acts as a historical Faroese identity-marker (Wylie & Margolin, 1981: 95-133).

11 This rhyme is a good example of how local linguistic knowledge was transmitted to young children via *skjaldur*. A *skor* is a specific site where sheep are put out to graze that is inaccessible except by boat or by climbing ropes.

12 Gaffin (1996: 88) notes that the people of Sumbøur on Suðuroy informed him that the *huldufólk* left the area following the introduction of electricity in the 1950s. For some Faroese, *huldufólk* inhabit the countryside, making themselves invisible by disappearing into their living quarters inside mountain boulders.

nature of life itself: references to women who have beards, witches who like to dance, and so on. The introduction to one *skjaldur* (*Hulda, mulda, tulda*) (Sverrisson, 2000: 29), informs the listener that this verse was used when looking for something that was lost. Interestingly, the verse is a plea to the *huldufólk* not to hide the lost object. The listener may be surprised to discover that references to supernatural non-human characters are sometimes juxtaposed with Christian religious figures such as the Virgin Mary and even Jesus Christ.

With the exception of lullabies and counting rhymes, Faroese *skjaldur* are generally more complex, sophisticated and elaborate than English nursery rhymes. Sometimes they appear to be obscure or border on the nonsensical, while on other occasions they appeal to specific Christian imagery. Religious themes are often present, not unexpected given the important role of religion in Faroese life, in both the past and the present. Some rhymes seem to presuppose a level of religious education and one may assume that they were told to somewhat older children. Here again they differ from English nursery rhymes which are narrated exclusively to very young children. A small number of *skjaldur* appear to be prayer-like or at least involve some degree of invocation to a higher religious authority.

Although a large number of the rhymes are known or at least recognised at a national level, others are rather specific to certain locations. My research and Helgadóttir's (2008) indicate that *skjaldur* knowledge-centres lie outside the capital, Tórshavn, and that one is most likely to encounter people who know *skjaldur* on the islands of Suðuroy and Sandoy.<sup>13</sup> Suðuroy, the southern-most island of the archipelago, is regarded as the Faroese cultural stronghold. Its distance from the other islands, and from Tórshavn in particular, permits its inhabitants to forge a partially separate identity, while its

proximity to Denmark and its attitudes to linguistic purism have at times earned it the label 'Little Denmark'.<sup>14</sup> The culture of oral literature is more of a feature in the remoter, outlying and peripheral islands, where a strong cultural identity might have had an appeal for residents living close to the sea or on isolated rocky promontories, confronted at every turn with life's vulnerability. On the outlying islands, we might think of a sense of solidarity and social cohesion as being more valued, which would then be reflected in the oral heritage.

Knowledge of other *skjaldur* appears to be very local indeed. During my fieldwork, I was told of a counting rhyme used on the island of Nolsoy during hide-and-seek games. Nolsoy is a small island across the water from Tórshavn with about 150 inhabitants. As a whole, the Faroese appear to have been very innovative and to have created an indigenous and largely independent corpus of rhymes. In this example, for instance, it is unlikely that a counting rhyme specific to a small island would have been borrowed or imported.

As for the style and music of *skjaldur*, the rhymes were sung to children with the child typically sitting on the parent or grandparent's knee. There is no musical accompaniment and, as previously noted, there is very little variation in tone, based on the first five notes of the Aeolian scale. The melody usually ascends from the tonic to the mediant, to the subdominant and then to the dominant. As the melody descends it moves from the dominant to the subdominant and then either a tone or semitone downwards.

As with English nursery rhymes, there is quite a marked use of nonce words in Faroese *skjaldur*.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, Faroese *skjaldur* can be stylistically sophisticated making use of dif-

<sup>13</sup> Helgadóttir's research indicates that people living on the island of Eysturoy, the seat of the capital Tórshavn, are least likely to know and/or be able to recite *skjaldur*.

<sup>14</sup> Unlike elsewhere in the Faroe Islands, on the island of Suðuroy there is a resistance to adopting Faroese neologisms created by the Language Committee based in Tórshavn, with a preference for using Danish words instead. The island has its own dialect(s) and syntactic idiosyncrasies which further distinguish it from the other islands.

<sup>15</sup> Examples of rhymes that make use of nonce words include *Heyapaleyja*; *Aika, banka, bunka* and *Pelja, nalja*.

ficult and even specialised vocabulary. Examples include the term *tangi* which is a long, narrow strip of land, *lunnar* which refer to timbers on which boats run when they are launched or hauled up from water, and *jólaskakil*, the name given to a child who behaved badly and had been ‘spanked’ just before Christmas. Some words, such as *jalla* and *lussi*, are quite obscure, even to the Faroese themselves (they are presumably nonce words of some kind). Such rhymes may have acted as means of transmitting Faroese vocabulary to children, a topic that is explored in Section 5.

While the brief commentaries that occasionally accompany *skjaldur* suggest that the rhymes were made as monotonous as possible to ensure that the child fell asleep, their content is anything but soporific. The style can be blunt and at times a rhyme ends very suddenly with a final line such as: *Og nú gekk søgan út* ‘And now the story has run out’ (Sverrisson, 2000: 21). In terms of the authorship of such rhymes, we know very little. Helgadóttir (2006) notes the Danish influence on the language of *skjaldur* and further reference is made to this below. Although Danish phrases are found interspersed throughout *skjaldur*, the majority of the rhymes were written by the Faroese for the Faroese. The few exceptions to this relate primarily to *skjaldur* whose subject matter is religion, which appear to have been brought to the Faroe Islands from Denmark at a later date.

#### 4. Categories of *skjaldur*

From the *skjaldur* that I have collected myself and from those recorded by Kári Sverrisson referred to above, one may divide the corpus into a number of categories on the basis of theme and style. While not all of these rhymes are amenable to neat pigeonholing or simple classification, most of the verses would fit into six distinct categories. Furthermore, there are what one might refer to as six primary *skjaldur*.<sup>16</sup> These

are the most commonly heard *skjaldur* on which subsequent oral literature was likely built, and many variations of each one are in circulation. The first such form, *Oman kemur lundi av bakka* (Sverrisson, 2000: 17), with its intriguing political commentary, is not a typical *skjaldur* in terms of content but is cited for its form:

*Oman kemur lundi av bakka,  
titandi fóti, reisir upp nakka.  
Hvør ræður her fyri londum?  
Valdimenn og norðmenn.  
Titlingur, lítil,  
læna mær skip títt.  
lítið er skip mitt,  
lág eru bein míni,  
stíga borð á bátinum.  
Árar leikar í tolli.*

Down comes the puffin from the cliff,  
walking quickly, stretches his neck.  
Who is governing the country?  
Assailants and Norwegians.<sup>17</sup>  
Little bird,  
lend me your ship.  
My ship is small,  
my legs hang low,  
step on the boat.  
Oars play in the tholepin.<sup>18</sup>

Political allusions aside, the disorganised subject matter of this rhyme with its references to birds (puffins in particular), boats and rowing are quite typical themes. Such is the subject matter of many a *skjaldur*. There are a number of variations on this rhyme, but with very minimal differences. One of the variants has the title *Oman kemur lundapísan av bakka* ‘Down from the cliff comes the puffin chick’, for instance.

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these were the original or the oldest rhymes, merely that they served as the basis for many other permutations.

17 The reference to Norwegians is interesting as the Faroe Islands were strictly speaking only part of Norway until 1380, after which they became part of the Denmark-Norway dual monarchy.

18 The translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

16 By using the term ‘primary’, I am not suggesting that

Another primary *skjaldur* describes, in the first person, an individual sitting at or on his way to the slope at Gøta, a small settlement on the island of Eysturoy. This *skjaldur* is normally between six and ten lines long and has a number of different variants. The events that take place in the *skjaldur* are more or less the same in each variant: the individual is shepherding at Gøta when he is struck over the head by a small boy called Mortan. The struck individual then runs off to find the bishop and inexplicably the bishop gives the boy an ox. Some versions of this *skjaldur* speak of lamb thieves, but otherwise the introduction and nature of the violence is the same. The meaning of this rhyme, *Ég fór mæR í Gøtulíð* (Sverrisson, 2000: 49), if there is one, will be lost on the modern listener. It reads rather more like a collection of leitmotifs: the reference to ‘human bones in my stomach’ (*mannabein í maga*) occurs in a number of different *skjaldur*, and still its meaning remains opaque:

*Eg fór mæR í Gøtulíð,  
goymdi mæR at seyði.  
Har kom ein so lítil drongur,  
líkur var hann Mortani í haga.  
Tók hann stavin sín,  
smelti hann um skalla mín.  
Eg honum annan aftur ímóti,  
báðar mínar nevar fullar av gróti.  
So fór eg haðani, vestur um land,  
at biðja mæR ein biskop í tanga.  
Biskop gav honum oksan,  
lærði hann at hoppa og skroppa,  
mannabein í maga.*

I went to the slope of Gøta,  
caring for my sheep.  
Then a small boy came forth,  
looked like Mortan from the mountains.  
He took his rod,  
hit me on my head.  
I back against him,  
with both my hands,  
full of pebbles.

Then I went away from there,  
west of the land,  
to ask for a bishop in the tongue of the land.  
The bishop gave him the ox,  
taught him to hop and be noisy,  
human bones in my stomach.

The next primary *skjaldur* is a short verse of six lines called *Pápi eigur ein lítlan bát* ‘Daddy owns a little boat’ (Sverrisson, 2000: 13) and it tells of one family member who owns a small boat. An image of traditional Faroese life is conjured up for the listener, with the father or grandfather rowing a small keelboat from the island where they live to the capital, Tórshavn. This image of Faroese life has all but disappeared now that tunnels and roads connect most of the islands. In the nineteenth century, however, rowboats were still an important mode of transport:

*Pápi eigur en lítlan bát,  
ein fittan bát, ein kjølbát,  
at rógva suður til Havnar,  
eftir einum áraskeyta.  
Liggur fyri Torvgarðstanga  
út suður av lúni.*

Daddy owns a little boat,  
a pretty boat, a keelboat,  
to row south to Tórshavn,  
to get an oar.  
Lying at Torvgarðstangi  
south of Lúni.

One of the other primary *skjaldur* that appears in different forms has a clear religious theme (*Maria situr á sandi*, ‘Mary sits on the sand’) (Sverrisson, 2000: 16). This *skjaldur* is noted for its intermittent Danish phraseology, which is the subject of Helgadóttir’s article (2006). With its explicit religious subject matter, this *skjaldur* is quite different in content and style from other rhymes that we know. One wonders whether this *skjaldur* originated in Denmark:<sup>19</sup>

19 Danish phrases are indicated without italics.

*Maria situr á sandi,  
 heldur bók í hendi.  
 Har komu tveir Guds einglar:  
 "Hví situr tú her og leitar?"  
 "Eg leiti eftir Kristus."  
 "Kristus er paa bjerget,  
 vogter hele verden."  
 Rættir hann út sína høggu hond,  
 signe os Gud, den helligaand.  
 Markus, Lukas, Sankta Poul,  
 eigur at vera í englarhús.  
 Maria Magdalena satte sig paa stena,  
 den ene med den anden bad,  
 de bade Gud, at regent maatte lette.  
 Der letted regn, der skinnede sol,  
 over bjerg, over dal, over alle lunde.  
 Gud give os gode stunde,  
 gode stunder og længe,  
 til himmeriki at gange.  
 Klar upp, klar upp,  
 alle gode Guds engle.*

Mary sits on the sand,  
 holding a book in her hand.  
 There came two of God's angels:  
 "Why are you sitting here and looking?"  
 "I am looking for Christ."  
 "Christ is on the mountain,  
 guarding the whole world."  
 He stretches out his right hand,  
 God bless us, the Holy Ghost.  
 Mark, Luke, Saint Paul,  
 ought to be in the angel's house.  
 Mary Magdalene sat on a rock,  
 the one with the other prayed,  
 they prayed for God to stop the rain.  
 The rain stopped, the sun shone,  
 over mountains, over valleys, over all the land.  
 God gives us good moments,  
 good moments and long,  
 to heaven to walk.  
 Brighten up, brighten up,  
 All good God's angels.

While the religious and biblical references that occur throughout the rhyme make for a very different style, the Faroese do not hesitate in labelling it as a *skjaldur* and there are a number of variations of it in circulation. The final *skjaldur* that consistently reappears in the corpus in various forms is entitled *Rógvið út á krabbasker* 'Row out to crab rock':

*Rógvið út á krabbasker.  
 Hví man kelling húka her?  
 Misti burtur ongul og stein,  
 einki fingi vit fiskabein.  
 Nú er tíð at rógva  
 aftur til papa og mammu,  
 abba og ommu,  
 systur og beiggja.  
 Allir okkara góðu vinir  
 sita heima við hús  
 og turka sær snús  
 upp í nøsina.*

Row out to crab rock.  
 Why is the hag squatting there?  
 Lost the hook and stone,  
 we did not get a fishbone.  
 Now is the time to row  
 back to father and mother,  
 grandfather and grandmother,  
 sister and brother.  
 All our good friends  
 sit at home  
 with snuff  
 up their noses.

The above *skjaldur*, which is one of the most well known, has many variations, each of which involves rowing out to a rock or island of some kind and fishing. There is always reference to a hag and a series of kin terms are invariably listed. Other variants suggest that, as with many of the rhymes, this would have been sung at Christmas time (although it is not clear why). These six rhymes are in my opinion the key *skjaldur* that lay the foundations for the whole collection of

verses. This does not mean that they are necessarily the most frequently cited, but rather that these are the rhymes that have led to the most subsequent renditions. The remaining rhymes can be roughly divided into the following categories: Faroese life *skjaldur*, event *skjaldur*, religious *skjaldur*, fantastic/supernatural *skjaldur*, nonsense *skjaldur*, lullabies and counting rhymes. Faroese life *skjaldur* is an unsatisfactory term, but by this I refer to rhymes whose content is in some sense typical of rural life on the Faroe Islands.

With the religious *skjaldur*, we are concerned sometimes with saintly figures that bestow gifts on local people, typically in the form of birds or cattle. One example of this is the *skjaldur*, *Sankta Mortan gav mær ein stara* 'Saint Martin gave me a starling' (Sverrisson, 2000: 14), in which St. Martin gives an individual who is presumably a farmer a variety of birds and animals only to see them all come to a sudden and unhappy end. The rhyme ends with the Saint conceding that instead of giving away animals it might be better to offer the farmer some wine instead, and so they go off to the cellar together. Other rhymes belonging to this category refer to fishing trips where references are made to God or the Lord, and the deity determines the catch. *Leggið undir klettin til* 'Lay it on the rock' (Sverrisson, 2000: 19) is a rhyme about something (we are not informed about the object) that is left on a rock to dry. Exhortations are then made to Jesus and Mary, Jesus allows the sun to shine and thus the object dries. In other rhymes we are told that a bull will never harm the listener as long as Jesus is with you, among other similar references.

The categories with the most rhymes belong to what I have termed Faroese life *skjaldur* and nonsense *skjaldur*. The former category comprises rhymes that are devoted to typically Faroese activities projecting a simple rural life. Here we have references to fishing, fowling and snaring, collecting wood and peat, lighting fires, the summoning to a whale hunt, the slaughter of sheep, a farmer's diet (cold cabbage, mutton, skate wings, coalfish and the backside of a bull's

neck), taking snuff, sewing and threshing corn.

We are also told that one nonsense rhyme was sung while building a house of cards. The rhyme tells of a ramshackle church whose congregation consists only of people who are blind and deaf and who normally suffer from some other additional disability. It is difficult to know whether this is a nonsense rhyme or is rather making a serious statement about the fragility and ephemeral nature of life, of which the house of cards is simply a metaphor. A better example of a nonsense rhyme might be the *skjaldur*, *Eg setti meg á mín hirpin, tirpin, teia* 'I sat on my hirpin, tirpin, teia' (Sverrisson, 2000: 13). Some nonce words are introduced in the title and it is difficult to make any sense of this dancing rhyme that appears to be a celebration of death, or, so far as we are told, little children on the moor dance when they hear of the grandmother's death. Nonsense rhymes are typically quite short, often no more than about six lines, and tend to switch subject matter abruptly. The last line is usually concerned with death or some imminent disaster. The rhyme concerning the Faroese author, nationalist and poet, Jóannes Patursson, is particularly morbid and shocking (*Tað var Jóannes Patursson*) (Sverrisson, 2000: 22). The reader is introduced to the author sitting on the skerry (a small rocky island), and the next thing we learn is that crows are tearing his body apart. Somewhat bizarrely, we are told in the final line to expect better weather tomorrow. Another nonsense rhyme is little more than a statement about children eating a sheep's gut that is hung on a nail, but we are told that the children are eating the flesh 'peacefully, peacefully'.<sup>20</sup> One is left with the impression that with this category of *skjaldur*, inappropriate words are intentionally selected just to conjure up implausible images. A further nonsense rhyme shows more recent origins with a reference to Kraft orange juice.

There are relatively few 'event *skjaldur*' which have been so named because through them lis-

<sup>20</sup> The rhyme is called *Sperðilin hongdu tey upp á nagla* 'They hung the sheep's gut on a nail' (Sverrisson, 2000: 29).

teners are informed that they were sung only on particular occasions to mark certain events that were often significant to traditional Faroese life. One example of this category is the rhyme *Inni liggur tú, líri* 'Inside you lie, Manx Shearwater chick' (Sverrisson, 2000: 15) which was recited when catching young Manx Shearwaters in their holes. Another example of such a rhyme is the *Rangvørga vísa* or 'The inside out rhyme' (Sverrisson, 2000: 27). This is less an event that characterises Faroese life and rather more an historical moment. The story of this rhyme is of a man who had committed some crime and was condemned to death. Before he ascended the stairs to the gallows, he was told that if he were able to compose a contradictory nonsense verse for each step up to the gallows, he would be pardoned. This he accomplished and thus escaped death by hanging.

*At nana uppi yvir seyði* 'Dandling up over the sheep' is a rhyme of particular interest. It was apparently sung on the island of Suðuroy at the time of rounding up the sheep from the mountains and taking them down into the fold. As with some other 'event *skjaldur*', the context in which it was sung suggests that the listener was most probably not a child (unlike the other rhymes). Unusually with this rhyme, we are also able to pinpoint small local variants – the wording of the *skjaldur* is slightly different when sung in Famjin rather than Sumba (both are small villages on the island of Suðuroy). Other rhymes that fall into this category include verses that should be sung when walking past a bull and a rhyme that was sung in the autumn at the time of corn threshing. The children would make *látípípur* 'little pipes' at this time of the year and the verse was sung if the pipe did not make a sound. If it still didn't work after the verse was sung, the pipe was then thrown away.

A number of rhymes are based on supernatural or fantastic events. The content of some of these suggests that this category of rhyme may not be as autochthonous as others. As well as the Icelandic monster and ogress from Icelandic

mythology, Grýla, the character Askeladden appears in a few of these rhymes, seeming to suggest an influence from mainland Scandinavia, and from Norway in particular. The image of Grýla coming down from the mountains to rip out the tongues of children in the Faroese rhyme, *Oman kemur grýla av gørðum* 'Down from the dykes comes the Grýla' (Sverrisson, 2000: 51) must have been terrifying for young listeners. Another rhyme, *Kelling liggur í durum deyð* 'The witch lies dead at the door' (Sverrisson, 2000: 17) is the story of a witch lying apparently dead in a doorway who springs to life when asked to dance. Other rhymes in this category refer to giants, trolls and all manner of beings known in Scandinavian folklore.

The final category, lullabies and counting rhymes, offer fewer surprises. Judging by the content of many of the lullabies, some might have been sung by older children to infants while parents were out working in the fields. While many are rather conventional, other rhymes ostensibly begin as lullabies but then cascade into recrimination and violence, with one of them advocating hitting a baby against a wall in order to silence it (*Rura, rura barnið*, 'Lull, lull the baby') (Sverrisson, 2000: 29). A similar cocktail of drama, tragedy and violence is often intertwined in the simplest of counting rhymes. Unlike English nursery rhymes in which the sense of disaster and tragedy is normally implicit, Faroese counterparts are explicit and overt about such matters.<sup>21</sup>

## 5. Lexical information in the *skjaldur*

*Skjaldur* are full of terms relating to everyday rural life in the Faroe Islands and one can be certain that the recital of these rhymes by parents to children, and by child to child, would have constituted an important means of transmitting culturally significant lexical information and

21 There does not appear to have been any nursery rhyme revisionism in the Faroe Islands, unlike in other places.

local knowledge. More than anything else, the *skjaldur* offer young children a large number of new words relevant to life in the countryside of the Faroe Islands. While it would be tedious to list *ad infinitum* all these words and terms, it is worth considering the categories of words with which children would become familiar by this means.

For a culture so steeped in traditional practices and ecological awareness, it is to be expected that *skjaldur* rhymes provide the listener with information about animal and bird behaviour. The Faroe Islands are well known for their rich and abundant bird life, so it is not surprising to come across a great many references to wild birds in these rhymes.<sup>22</sup> Typical Faroese birds such as the Common Starling, *stari*, Puffin, *lundi*, Merlin, *smyril*, Kittiwake, *rita*, Meadow Pipit, *titlingur*, Manx Shearwater, *skrápur* and Common Snipe, *mýrisnípa*, appear throughout the rhymes. Certain bird names such as *líni* ‘young Manx Shearwater’ are introduced in the context of references to the *fleyg*, or the ‘period in which birds are caught’, whereas others such as the Shag, *skarvur*, are given obscure folk names or etymologies.<sup>23</sup> There are so many *skjaldur* with the Carrion Crow, *kráka*, as their subject matter that they almost warrant a separate category of their own.

The other lexical domain to which these rhymes make a significant contribution is in the vocabulary of animal husbandry. *Skjaldur* provide basic cattle terminology for children to learn, such as *gimbri* ‘ewe’, *kvígu* ‘heifer’, *døll* ‘ass’, *stútt* ‘stud’ etc., as well as more specific terms such as *kloddafyl* ‘foal shedding its coat’, *sperðilin* ‘sheep’s gut’ or *kveikamagin* ‘the stomach of a calf that has not yet been weaned.’ With reference to the latter, there is even a rhyme devoted to the

22 Even the symbol of the Faroe Islands is a bird – the Oystercatcher (*tjaldur*). Visits by ornithologists are common, mainly on account of the numerous seabird colonies. The Faroe Islands lie on the flight path of migrating birds, and millions of seabirds nest around the islands.

23 In the rhyme *Skarvur eitur tangaskræpa* ‘The shag is called *tangaskræpa*’ (Sverrisson, 2000: 22), *tangaskræpa* would appear to refer to ‘guano on the tongue of land.’

preparation of *dralvi* or ‘the thick and coagulated milk which has been run through a calf’s stomach’ (*Dralvi er tann besta mjólk* ‘Dralvi is the best of milk’) (Sverrisson, 2000: 46), and there are many references to curdling, *at ysta. Rukkulakki* ‘third stomach’ (the third compartment of the stomach of various cud-chewing hoofed mammals) – a term widely understood by my informants – is the subject of another rhyme. It should be emphasised that these are all Faroese words, and not calques of Danish.

Beyond this, reference is also made to rowing terminology such as *tolli* ‘thole-pin’ and *áraskeyta* ‘oar’, as well as to a whole host of words which belong to a more poetic or archaic register, but that are usually still understood by speakers of Faroese. For example, a man is referred to as a *steggja*, an uncommon word for a ‘husband’, and this *steggja* wears a *tóvararøð* ‘leather apron.’ Predictably, a number of the rhymes are peppered with children’s language in the form of widespread diminutives.<sup>24</sup> As well as nonce words, a large number of obscure words no longer understood by the Faroese can also be found in some *skjaldur*.<sup>25</sup>

The *skjaldur* and other closely related forms of oral literature very likely contributed to the linguistic development of Faroese children. By hearing and memorising Faroese nursery rhymes, they would have gained access to a richness of vocabulary and syntax that they might not have mastered in any other way. Some of the vocabulary contained within such *skjaldur* would have been beyond the normal conversational level of young children. By hearing these rhymes, they would become familiar with a range of new terminology.

24 Derived from the phrase *Lingur mín* ‘my child’, *lingur* has come to be used as a diminutive as in *bóklíngur* ‘booklet’ (literally, ‘little book.’)

25 Examples of this might include: *hási* (possibly a ‘tree top’), *krýta*, *stætt*, *trumpil*, *tella*, *hór* and *rustanbolda*.

## 6. *Skjaldur* and their role in the development of the language

It might not be obvious how nursery rhymes would contribute to the development of a language, but Faroese may indeed be peculiar in this regard. There are a number of reasons to believe that *skjaldur* rhymes may have played some role in the development and survival of the Faroese language. The reason for this is that Faroese survived for centuries as the 'Low' variety in a bilingual, diglossic community in which Danish was the language of the Church and of administration, and the use of Faroese was more or less restricted to the home.<sup>26</sup> Most importantly, the context in which Faroese was used was not frustrated or affected by Danish; instead, the language was left to flourish in its limited capacity as the language and vehicle of Faroese oral heritage. The existence of a rich oral tradition of reciting *skjaldur* in the one context in which Faroese was not threatened, i.e. at home, must in part explain why Faroese is still spoken today, whereas Norn, the dialect of Norse spoken on Shetland, died out some centuries ago.

As a result of Faroese being written down in its present orthography at the end of the eighteenth century, the language developed without a spoken/written distinction so that the Faroese language and its associated oral tradition enjoyed a special bond. In fact, the competing language — Danish — was a written norm without the same kind of associated oral tradition. While the *skjaldur* were just one element in this oral tradition, they were an important component on account of being sung almost exclusively to young children, i.e. the language acquirers. Although nursery rhymes are by no means a Faroese creation, their content was invariably specific to the Faroe Islands, and thus such rhymes were usually only of relevance to a Faroese listener. While not wanting to overstate

the case, I believe *skjaldur* to have been a vehicle for the transmission of quite a large body of cultural and ethnographic knowledge, and that the language employed in these rhymes reflects this culture and identity.

While the rhymes were linguistically experimental, the words used were on the whole not specific to a separate register, with the result that the majority of the *skjaldur* lexicon appears to be readily understood to this day. This might even indicate that some words introduced by *skjaldur* may have filtered into wider usage. The Faroese continue to be fascinated by their language, as radio programmes have shown over the years, and they relish the opportunity to use the forms of word play found in *skjaldur*.<sup>27</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Until the second half of the twentieth century, Faroese identity centred around oral traditions such as the ballads and *skjaldur* that have been discussed here. Over the last fifty years, the focus of Faroese linguistic identity has changed dramatically with the Faroese wholeheartedly embracing the written tradition, and publishing a wide range of prose and poetry in their own language.

With social change, urbanisation and the choice of multiple media channels, the practice and contexts in which *skjaldur* are sung (if at all) have changed irrevocably. While these oral traditions have been in decline for decades, recently some members of the community have come to appreciate the value of *skjaldur* and recognise that such forms of oral literature mark the Faroe Islands out as unique and remain central to fostering a sense of Faroese identity.

Through *skjaldur*, we also gain an insight into Faroese folklore. Faroese history is a congeries of experiences related orally from one genera-

<sup>26</sup> See Ferguson (1959) for a discussion of the concept of diglossia.

<sup>27</sup> The radio programme, *Orðbókin*, brought listeners together from across the islands to discuss the history and etymology of Faroese words. This immensely successful radio programme was on air for over twenty-five years.

tion to another through tales, proverbs, rhymes and gossip. Some of the *skjaldur* identify with a local place and, through the use of personal and place names, create a social narrative and a sense of territorial embeddedness. This body of literature is therefore very valuable to Faroese oral heritage and identity.

While some attempts have been made to revitalise this endangered tradition by reproducing *skjaldur* in school textbooks and singing them on children's television programmes, on the whole, however, the practice of reciting *skjaldur* remains in decline. Hylin (1971) collected many of these rhymes and thus the documentation of this vanishing tradition is largely complete. If *skjaldur* are no longer transmitted to children, however, the Faroese will lose the immediacy of this cultural link to their oral past.

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Faroese *skjaldur* are a genre of oral literature and music comprising rhymes, lullabies and short tales that have existed for centuries and played a part in the transmission — and survival — of the Faroese language. Rich in content, *skjaldur* illustrate how folklore, language and local knowledge were passed down the generations. While the origins of the genre remain opaque, they were part of a wider tradition of oral literature that included ballads, *kvæðir* (poems, tales) and *tættir* (satirical ballads, often rude and insulting).

The nineteenth century, when the Faroese language was most threatened by the colonial language, Danish, saw the flourishing of verbal arts, ethnic music and ballads. The influence of *skjaldur* and other forms of oral literature on the vernacular language has been disproportionately significant, as Faroese did not develop a written tradition until the 1800s. Faroese was never a minority language as such and survived the onslaught of Danish through its position as an oral form in a bilingual environment, with its use restricted to the homestead where oral literature continued to thrive.

The contribution of *skjaldur* to the development of the Faroese language is thus beyond doubt. At present, however, in the increasingly urbanised society of the Faroe Isles, the custom of parents narrating nursery rhymes, counting games, lullabies and folktales to their children is rapidly giving way to more mainstream entertainment media, transmitted in either English and Danish.

*Dr Leonard is a Research Fellow at Trinity Hall, the Department of Linguistics and the Scott Polar Research Institute, all at the University of Cambridge. He is an anthropological linguist with research interests in the role of language in the establishment of social and linguistic identities in small speech communities, the ethnography of speaking, endangered languages and cultures, linguistic diversity and language revitalisation. His doctoral research at the University of Oxford focused on the construction of social and linguistic identity in early Iceland, and he has conducted sociolinguistic and ethnographic research in Iceland and the Faroe Islands. In 2010, Dr Leonard embarked on a new project to document the endangered oral traditions and communicative practices of the Inughuit people in northwest Greenland.*



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