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Prof. Fallon

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## **The Role of Music in the Revitalization of Faroese in the Faroe Islands**

### **Introduction**

Far too often, marginalized language communities find themselves losing their native language as its perceived usefulness decreases in favor of the dominant language (Sallabank 2011: 286). Due to this external pressure caused by an unequal power situation, communities and their members gradually switch to speaking the dominant language so that they and their children may take advantage of the economic and social opportunities that come with being a native speaker of a dominant language (286). Faroese, the native language of the Faroe Islands, was gradually pushed aside by Danish as the Danes exerted more and more political and linguistic power over the Faroe Islands. However, the Faroese people have always had a deeply oral and musical culture, which has helped keep Faroese alive even through periods when the language was unwritten and forbidden in schools and administration (Hagström 1984: 174). In part through music and musical tradition, the Faroese people have crafted a uniquely Faroese identity that has helped maintain a respect for their mother tongue and culture, which in turn spurred a call to action for the people to fight for greater legal recognition in Denmark. Even today, when Faroese

is no longer in danger of extinction and has become legally equal to Danish, music still has a significant role in shaping and maintaining a distinctly Faroese identity and language that the Faroese people hold dearly.

In this paper, we will first explore the linguistic background and history that provide context to the endangerment of Faroese. Next, we will delve into the revitalization measures, starting with non-musical efforts, and moving on to musical efforts. While discussing the musical revitalization measures, three influential traditional song types and modern music will be described. Finally, we will examine the future of Faroese in relation to its history and focus on purism.

## **1. Linguistic Background**

Today, there are 50,000 inhabitants on the Faroe Islands, at least 48,000 of whom speak Faroese (Simons & Fennig 2018). There are two major dialects of Faroese: the primary one used by three-fourths of the total speakers and spoken on the northern and central islands, and the secondary one spoken mainly on the southernmost island of Suðuroy (Campbell 2000: 557). It is unclear exactly how Faroese is related to other Germanic languages, but historians suggest that “Faroese is Old or Middle Norwegian as modulated by Danish” (557). However, Faroese has developed to become very distinct from the other Norse languages, and “[n]ew words and forms have been coined in Faroese that do not exist elsewhere, words have changed their meaning and new special local forms have been added” (*Scandinavian Press* 2001: 18). Regardless of the genetic classification of Faroese, what is clear is that the most modern version of the language has had the most contact and mixture with Danish, and “[l]anguage contact in the Faroes is mainly a question of the impact of the Danish language on Faroese, which has led to bilingualism, linguistic borrowing, and interference” (Hagström 1984: 171). Linguistic

interference from Danish has influenced Faroese so much, that, even today, “some Faroe Islanders have problems using [standard Faroese] correctly, many of them using Danish syntax in Faroese” instead of sticking to the purest version of their language (*Scandinavian Press* 2001: 18). For a long time, “[t]he primary trend in Faroese language cultivation has been to ‘purify’ the language” from Danish influence, which has had a significant impact on Faroese’s success (Holm 2002: 264).

Faroese-Danish bilingualism is widespread in the Faroe Islands, as centuries of Danish rule have made the political, cultural, and linguistic presence of Danish a fact of life. Bilingualism is common in situations where one language is more powerful than the other, and “[i]ndividuals’ everyday language choices tend to be based on perceptions and received attitudes” (Sallabank 2011: 285). Thus, it is a good thing for this minority language that, in a bilingual power situation like the Faroe Islands, it has as much recognition and favor as it does, because this allows its speakers to feel free to use their mother tongue. Much of this recognition and favor is closely tied to musical and oral tradition, as both are crucial to the Faroese language and culture. “Music is first and foremost a cultural product” and the Faroese people “have their own musical traditions, with many of the songs telling of folklore and oral history,” all of which are distinct from Danish influence (Moriarty 2011: 456). Thus, while the Faroese language may have been heavily influenced by Danish, the Faroese culture is more independent.

## **2. History of the Faroe Islands**

The Faroe Islands are located in the volcanic region of the North Atlantic, and consist of an archipelago of eighteen islands; seventeen of these islands are inhabited and one, the southernmost island of Lítla Dímun, is uninhabited. The Faroes were one of the last places in the world to be discovered- possibly due to their non-strategic location between Shetland and

Iceland, which is a “two days sail in a direction where no reasonable early sailor would want to go,” causing them to finally be settled only a thousand years ago (Boulter 2006: 27). The first known discoverer of the Faroes is an anonymous Irish priest who stumbled upon the islands in the 8<sup>th</sup> century (Boulter 2006: 133). However, archeological evidence suggests that Irish monks may have inhabited the islands since the 7<sup>th</sup> century or even earlier, but evidence is inconclusive, as they “did not make any permanent settlements or [leave] artefacts of any significance behind” (133). Between 800 C.E. and 900 C.E., Norse Viking migrants came and settled in the Faroes. The Irish settlers, who left shortly after the arrival of the Norse Vikings, had been prolific shepherds, and so “the first Viking settlers called the islands Faroe Islands, or Sheep Islands,” after the many flocks that still resided there (Boulter 2006: 135). The language of the Norse Vikings, specifically those from south-central Norway, is one of the closest relatives to modern Faroese “which is linguistic evidence that the islands were populated [by people] mainly from that area” (Hagström 1984: 171).

Little is known about early Faroese society and government, but it is believed that they avoided the conflicts of their neighboring states, choosing instead to keep to themselves and handle their own affairs (Boulter 2006: 134). What historians do know is that before the 900s, “the Faroese formed a political unit with a parliament or high court (or *þing* in old Norse) which was called the *Løgting* and met in Tórshavn on the rocky headland called the *Tinganes*, or ‘Parliament Headland’” (Boulter 2006: 135). Unfortunately, the Faroes could not enjoy this independence for long, as they became a tributary country under Norway in 1035. The Faroese did not have a say in becoming subjects of the Norwegian crown and could not take part in Norwegian politics (Hagström 1984: 171). However, “the Faroe Islands code of law called *Seyðabræið*, or Sheep Letter, which regulated the use of land, was allowed to stand” (Boulter

2006: 138). In 1273, Norway also took control of Faroese commercial sailing and set up a trade monopoly. Since they no longer had outgoing vessels, the Faroes were completely dependent on foreign ships for provisions that their treeless, mountainous environment could not provide, such as wood, salt, iron, and corn (Jackson 1976: 52). This began “a period of nearly 600 years of isolation and stagnation,” during which the Faroes had no opportunities to direct their own economy (Hagström 1984: 172). Despite the negatives, this trade monopoly also “acted as a form of a buffer on the effect of international trade fluctuations on the inner economic structure of the Faroes,” which in a sense protected the tiny economy of the islands (Nauerby 1996: 31-32). Thus, while there were positives to this Norwegian trade monopoly, it nonetheless left the Faroes governed and controlled by a distant outsider- a trend that would continue for many centuries (Boulter 2006: 136).

During this era, Faroese began to distinguish itself as a truly separate language, rather than merely a dialect.

For quite some time after the [settlement], the language spoken on the Faroes remained closely tied to the dialects of Western Norway, but with the increasing isolation from Bergen [caused by the trade monopoly], Faroese gradually began to separate itself with an independent linguistic construction (Nauerby 1996: 30).

This caused it to become mutually unintelligible from Norwegian or Danish. However, due to the formation of the Nordic Union and the relocation of the capital to Copenhagen in 1380, Danish gradually became more prevalent in administration until the abolishment of the Norwegian State Council in 1536, after which it was decided that the language of administration would be Danish (Hagström 1984: 172-173). This, coupled with the Protestant Reformation, “resulted in a linguistic catastrophe for [. . .] the Faroes” since “Reformation Bibles supported the development

of a national standard language and gave [languages like Danish and Swedish] national prestige” (173). Danish soon became the only written language in the Faroes, and both ecclesiastical and legal documents had to be in Danish.

It was during this period that the trend of Faroese/Danish bilingualism began; since Faroese had become very distinct from its neighboring languages, the Faroese people had to learn Danish in order to communicate with clergymen and government officials (173). The church’s use of Danish was one of the most significant factors in shaping the position Faroese would hold in the islands for centuries to come, not only because it helped establish Danish as the language of administration, but also because the church has nearly always been an important institution in Faroese community and social life. This completely and rapidly changed the domains in which Faroese was likely to be used, essentially restricting it to home use only and greatly shaping people’s language use in the long term (Holm 2002: 260). This enormous and sudden restriction of the use of the Faroese language was one of the major factors endangering it, and it would take centuries for Faroese to return to the domains from which it had just been barred.

Since Faroese was hardly used outside of the home, “a Faroese vocabulary did not develop in lexical fields that lay outside the interests of the old agrarian community” and “as time passed, the Danish influence grew so strong that it threatened to ruin the Faroese language” (Hagström 1984: 173-174). The Faroese linguist J.C. Svabo, writing in the 1780s, was very disturbed by the mixture of Faroese and Danish, and thought it best to allow Faroese to go extinct so it would not suffer any further influence from Danish (Hagström 1984: 173). This was one of the earliest sentiments of linguistic purism coloring the Faroese consciousness, and this mindset would survive to have a significant impact on the revitalization of the language. “[T]he

aim of ‘purifying’ Faroese from Danisms is manifested in many ways in everyday language use on the islands” and, even today, people “are very preoccupied with assessing the quality of their own as well as other people’s Faroese,” judging each other and themselves on whether the words they pick are Faroese enough. (Knudsen 2010: 132). As many of the words that “lay outside the interests of the old agrarian community” are borrowings from Danish, many find it difficult to find a purely Faroese word that fits their context.

Regardless of sentiments of purism, however, the fact that Faroese was not a written language at this point was a significant factor in its struggle to keep up with (and keep pure from) Danish. Despite this, Danish “never threatened to replace Faroese as the home language” because Faroese “was kept alive and developed through a rich oral tradition,” the most important part of which were (and perhaps still are) the Faroese epic ballads, called *kvæði* (Holm 2002: 260). Despite this, Faroese was still “endangered in the sense that any language without a written norm and in an unequal power situation would be,” and even though it was consistently used in the home at this time, home use was by no means enough to secure a future for Faroese in the long term (Holm 2002: 261). However, “[t]he arts in the Faroe Islands [namely music and dance], have had a close relationship with the drive for self-determination and sovereignty—” a trend that started even before Faroese nationalism was a visible phenomenon (Cannady 2014: 149). Oral tradition and musicality set a precedent for these political movements by building the esteem of Faroese language and identity.

While musical traditions certainly had a special role in the revitalization of Faroese, they were by no means the only component to Faroese’s success. Before delving into how these musical traditions helped enhance the status of Faroese and establish a unique Faroese identity, it is important to touch upon the other measures that helped give the Faroese people the tools they

needed to keep their language alive and well. In this time especially, “the strongest resource of the Faroese language was the unique treasure-house of oral tradition, [which was] the most precious cultural heritage of the Faroese people” (Hagström 1984: 174). These possibly could have kept Faroese alive for a some time, but the fact that Faroese revitalization expanded during this period demonstrates extraordinary resilience, as “Danish influence was actually intensified during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both as a result of increasing governmental bureaucracy and of the introduction of compulsory schooling in the 1840s, with Danish as the language of instruction” (174). These efforts by the Faroese people during this period were the results of their language planning, as opposed to language policy, as “[p]olicy typically indicates official, top-down decision-making processes, while planning is usually used with reference to grassroots efforts on behalf of languages” (Sallabank 2011: 278). The Danish had little interest in language planning for Faroese, and so the Faroese people initiated any positive changes; even when Denmark would try to ignore the Faroes’ desire for greater political and linguistic recognition, efforts done by ordinary Faroese folk raised the prestige of Faroese and helped keep the language alive and the culture distinct.

### **3. Non-Musical Revitalization Measures**

Faroese once had no written form, and remained as such well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century. V.U. Hammershiamb, a young Faroese theologian, understood that “the only way the Faroese language could gain general acceptance was if it had a standard orthography, and the only suitable system would be one that did not favor any particular dialect” (Holm 2002: 261). So, in 1846, Hammershiamb created an orthography that was based, not on pronunciation, but on etymology, thus favoring all dialects equally. This first Faroese orthography, though spelled much like Icelandic, “was the basis for any further revitalization measures” (261). Between 1846

and 1855, Hammershiamb documented and published many traditional ballads, riddles and tales in the new orthography, and in 1856 he published *Færoisk Sproglære*, “the first grammatical description of Faroese to appear in print” (Hagström 1984: 175). These advancements were critical because, “[u]p to that point, a fairly rich folk literature had been transmitted orally,” and was thus preserved and taught by word of mouth alone (Campbell 2000: 557).

One major incentive for Hammershiamb to do all this was “the introduction of compulsory schooling in Danish, whereby the Danish Government sought to make Danish the national language and the sole medium of education” (Knudsen 2010: 129). Because of Denmark’s recent move to restrict the use of Faroese, Hammershiamb’s orthography reflected “a desire to change the status of Faroese from a dialect to an independent language” (Knudsen 2010: 130). Part of doing this meant including intentional “breaches with Danish orthographic conventions [such as] the introduction of the dental fricative *ð/Ð* from Icelandic, which is not pronounced in spoken Faroese” (130). This seemingly simple gesture indicated a desire for a separate Faroese identity, as “[t]he letter nevertheless ha[d] a symbolic function, in that it highlights the difference between Danish and Faroese” (130). This was an enormous step for Faroese, and “[t]he first newspaper appeared in 1890, the first novel in 1909” (Campbell 2000: 557). For years, Hammershiamb’s orthography was generally accepted, but, in the late 19th century, Faroese linguist Jakob Jakobsen argued that Hammershiamb’s orthography was not phonetic enough, and was thus too difficult for children to learn. He also argued that Hammershiamb’s orthography was not really a step forward for Faroese; it merely stepped farther from Danish, but closer to Icelandic— neither of which was any more Faroese than the other. Nonetheless, Hammershiamb’s orthography remained relatively unchanged, and he and

Jakobsen worked together on the first Faroese-Danish dictionary, which was released in 1891 (Knudsen 2010: 130).

Even though a standard orthography had recently been developed, there were no schools that would teach it to children. The “ban on the children’s spoken language in school, the enforcement of Danish instruction, and its use in all spoken communication in school aroused vehement opposition from the Faroese people,” but there was little they could do about it as they had hardly any political authority to control their children’s curriculum (Holm 2002: 262). However, their displeasure was very evident to the Danish, and the school system was discontinued in 1856, only to be reinstated more strongly in 1872. The situation worsened for Faroese, and, several decades later, per paragraph 7 of the Education Act of 1912, which was “one of the most controversial issues in Faroese political life for almost a quarter of a century,” schools were to emphasize the Danish language and ensure that children could speak it in all subjects” (Knudsen 2010: 130). However, the act allowed Faroese to be used with younger children in order to facilitate learning, as few of them spoke Danish fluently upon entering school. Once students became proficient enough in Danish, instruction in Faroese stopped completely, since “the underlying educational goal was [to] transition to the politically dominant language rather than Faroese maintenance” partly due to the fact that “[i]n spite of the fact that Danish and Faroese are not mutually intelligible, Faroese was never regarded as a language by the Danes” and so was not thought to be worth preserving (Holm 2002: 262).

This attitude of the Danes affected the Faroese’s attitude toward their own language until 1938 when paragraph 7 of the Education Act of 1912 was abolished. “Thus, in legal terms, or rather in theory, Faroese was given equal status to Danish in schools,” but this was not the case in reality, as some schools prevented students from speaking Faroese on their final exams for

many decades afterward (Holm 2002: 262-263). However, “an official reversal of attitudes can cause a shift in the ‘linguistic market’ and revaluation of a previously low-status language,” which was clearly the case for Faroese (Sallabank 2011: 280). Since the Danes had officially given greater recognition to Faroese, people felt freer to speak and love their language. The increased prestige this and other political and linguistic victories won for Faroese were made even more significant by the fact that, often, the Faroese people won them for themselves.

The Faroese people still struggled to keep their language in schools until the 1948 passing of the Home Rule Act, which officially made Faroese the principal language of the Faroe Islands; this soon led Faroese to be the principal language used in schools on the Faroe Islands, and it could be used to teach any subject at any level (Boulter 2006: 182). When students are required to use a national or non-local language in school, the use of the local language nearly always declines (Sallabank 2011: 281). This made the Home Rule act especially beneficial, as it brought Faroese into a realm from which it had previously been barred. However, this did not put Faroese above Danish, as the Home Rule Act “also states that ‘Danish has to be learned thoroughly’, and that both languages may be used in public affairs” (Knudsen 2010: 131). While it may sound great that both languages could now be used in public affairs, all the Danish government officials spoke Danish, and so all affairs were normally conducted in Danish only anyway (Hagström 1984: 178). Also, the fact that Faroese children still had to become proficient in Danish meant that Danish was still very present in the school setting. This permanence of Danish at all levels of education and administration has helped to make the Faroe Islands into a deeply bilingual society. Thus, despite all the victories Faroese has accomplished, the presence of Danish remains.

On the topic of politics, another important event for the Faroe Islands was the abolition of the (now Danish) trade monopoly in 1856, which opened up the islands to international commerce and allowed them to trade directly with outside nations for the first time (Boulter 2006: 156). This in turn led to great economic changes for the Faroes and “[p]eople began to be more mobile; farm-hands without property became professional fisherman, and the old agrarian society, which had been practically self-supporting, began to disintegrate” (Hagström 1984: 175). When “cultural and economic values come into conflict, it is generally economic ones which win out,” but this was perhaps the first time in these citizens’ memory that being Faroese and having economic success were directly compatible (Sallabank 2011: 286). This was important for the literarily or poetically inclined; students became more able to move out of the Faroes, whether temporarily or permanently, and could go to universities in Denmark or elsewhere. These students learned about the Danish Folk High Schools, the Icelandic independence movement, and the Norwegian folk language movement, which inspired them to document their own experiences, and “the lyrical songs about the mother tongue and far-away homeland, which were the result of their literary activities, marked the birth of modern Faroese poetry” (Hagström 1984: 176). In some cases, “promoting literacy [in an endangered language] may result in the loss of oracy and oral traditions,” but this was clearly not the case for Faroese; literacy merely increased the prevalence and popularity of written art forms without infringing on the position oral traditions held (Sallabank 2011: 278). In fact, these literary art forms may have even legitimized the traditional oral culture, as the people writing many of these new songs were university-educated students, who could thus give Faroese an intellectual legitimacy that it had not enjoyed before.

Some of the literature written by Faroese students abroad became popular in the Faroes, and helped ignite a growing nationalist movement. Since having their own unique language was a crucial aspect of Faroese identity, enthusiasm for linguistic revitalization contributed to feelings of nationalism and self-determination (Hagström 1984: 176). The sentiments of nationalism grew, bringing with it the Faroes' first political parties. Until World War I, the Unionist Party, or *Sambandsflokkurin*, was dominant. Opposing the Unionist Party was the Home Rule Party, or *Sjálvstýringsflokkurin* (176). As a result of growing nationalistic sentiments, the Faroes held an independence referendum in 1946, which revealed a slight, albeit inconclusive favoring of succession (Boulter 2006: 181). This caused much confusion between the Faroes and Denmark, and “[a] Danish warship was sent to [the Faroese capital of] Tórshavn, not as a threat, but to offer better communications between the two countries with the ship’s radiotelegraphic equipment” (Boulter 2006: 182). The confusion continued, so, instead of granting the Faroes independence, “Denmark dissolved the Faroese legislature and immediately started negotiations that [would eventually result in] the Faroese Home Rule Act in 1948” (Boulter 2006: 20). While not the ideal situation for many Faroes, the Act nonetheless dramatically changed the political position of the islands by giving them more control over all their affairs, save for defense and foreign relations. Nationalistic support grew throughout this period of poetical, lyrical, and linguistic advancement, and after the five-year separation from Denmark due to World War II, the Danes finished their political negotiations with the Faroes and the Home Rule Act was finally passed (20).

#### **4. Musical Influence on Revitalization**

Balladry and song tradition have long been very important to the Faroes, in part because Faroese did not have a written form until the 17<sup>th</sup> century; the language and heritage had to be passed

down orally, instead. While speakers of languages like Icelandic, which had long ago been put to writing, focused on literature and the written form, the Faroese were dwelling on and defining their oral culture. Even after Hammershiamb created his orthography, Faroese songs and ballads continued to be passed down orally, as per tradition (Cannady 2014: 146). Whether or not they are written or told aloud, “songs and singing in the Faroe Islands are symbols of cultural continuity and longevity in the face of subordination and Danification” (146). However, as proud as the Faroes are of their unique and rich musical tradition, outside influence was, and is, inevitable.

For example, the earliest Faroese settlers probably did not use musical instruments in the songs they wrote. Many of the oldest songs make no mention of musical accompaniment. Also, “there have not been found any traces or remains of musical instruments in the Faroes so far, that support the idea of playing on musical instruments having been a common practice in the Faroes through the ages since [Norse] settlement” (Petersen 2017: 14). There are some records of the Danish-born upper classes, who resided in the Faroes only temporarily, using musical instruments, but these practices had little influence on Faroese musical tradition (14). This lack of musical instrument use remained until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Faroese fisherman started bringing musical instruments to the islands after their voyages (Petersen 2017: 15). One of the major influencers of Faroese musical instrument use was Dane Georg Caspar Hansen, who, “though baker by trade, came to the Faroes from Denmark and began teaching students various instruments” (Green 2012: 51). The Faroese embraced musical instrument use, and even honored Georg Caspar Hansen years later by establishing the Faroese symphonic concert band, GHM (*Georg Hansen minni*) in his name (51).

Regardless of who or what influenced traditional Faroese music and language before the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, this period was characterized by sentiments of individuality and independence. The variant of Faroese that was used during this period was “marked by an increasing purity, richness, and stylistic refinement, thanks to a large number of inspired and patriotic writers” (Hagström 1984: 176). To combat the imposing presence and influence of Danish, Faroese-language writers— especially songwriters— wrote in a way that was as purely Faroese as possible, rejecting words and grammatical structures of Danish origin in order to craft, maintain, and solidify a uniquely Faroese identity. This symbolic rejecting of Danish influences emphasized the Faroes’ desire to be free from the Danes politically as well as linguistically, which helped them to cultivate the prestigious image they desired for their emerging nation and flowering culture. These efforts eventually contributed to political victories for the Faroes.

In order to understand the image of Faroese-ness that these modern writers were trying to resurrect, it is helpful to first describe the musical traditions to which they were referring. Three of the most important song types in the Faroes are the *kvæði* (ballads of ancient heroes), the *sagnir* (semi-historical accounts of local Faroese family lines), and the *tættir* (sarcastic or humorous accounts of local events). These each hold a separate function in Faroese oral tradition, and thus have left their mark on Faroese consciousness and culture in different ways. These and other traditions were passed down through the institution of the *kvoldseta*, a Faroese story-telling custom, which unfortunately became obsolete in the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the fact that, during the aforementioned period of economic advancement, “[t]he importance of farming declined and the *kvoldseta* [were] abandoned as large farm households dwindled in size” leading

to a decrease in occasions when people would sit around the fire and pass down stories. (Jackson 1976: 59).

#### **4.1 The *Kvoldseta***

The *kvoldseta* is a cultural institution that came out of a time when most Faroese spent the long winter evenings at home. In the winter, the climate of the islands is too cold and too dark to allow for much productive farmwork, so early Faroese would spend much of their winter days doing indoor chores, such as spinning wool, and exchanging tales, such as those about mythical or historical Faroese heroes (Jackson 1976: 54). *Kvoldseta* itself means ‘evening seat’ or “[t]he time in the evening when one sits working at home by lamp or candlelight. The extended meaning includes gatherings of villagers at one home” (Galvin 1989: 344). These nights were crucial for the passing down of Faroese tradition, namely, folk tales and ballads. “[I]n Faroese cultural life, including especially the realm of oral literature [. . .] the role of the *kvoldsetur* can not be overstated,” and, if not for the practice of them, the oral culture and songs would likely have died out long ago (Green 2012: 48). It was during these nights that histories and myths were passed down, which helped transmit the culture and consciousness of a people whose history was hardly, if at all, taught in schools. A significant part of this culture was passed down in the form of *kvæði*, the most famous of Faroese song types.

#### **4.2 The *Kvæði***

Perhaps the most treasured of Faroese musical traditions are the *kvæði*, which are long, heroic ballads that tell of ancient heroes and warriors. One of the oldest documented *kvæði* is “*Sigmundar kvæði*,” which was first mentioned in the 17th century, but is thought to be much older. “*Sigmundar kvæði*” tells of the adventures of Norse immigrant Sigmundur Brestisson, who Christianized the Faroese in the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Green 2012: 45). The *kvæði* have been a

Faroese tradition since at least the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but some scholars trace them, or Icelandic precursors to them, as far back as ancient times— even connecting them to Old Norse traditions. (Green 2012: 43-44). Even though *kvæði* are very likely the “oldest and most famous Faroese song form,” and thus remind listeners of times long gone, they are still a significant part of Faroese community life (Green 2012: 43). The signing of these ballads is usually accompanied by large group chain or ring dances. Today, these dances are most widely performed during “*Ólavsøka*, the Faroese national holiday, and people from all over the country [join] together for an evening of song and dance” (Cannady 2014: 156). A typical *kvæði* “can be anywhere from several dozen to several hundred stanzas long” and thus a few *kvæði* can fill up a night’s entertainment (Galvin 1989: 16). During each song, “people linked hands and started taking two steps to the left and one step to the right in rhythmic unison,” allowing the lead singer, or *skipari*, to sing each verse, then joining him or her in the singing of the chorus— which most attendees would already know (156).

If an attendee does not know the chorus, whether because he is a visitor or because he is not typically interested in more traditional art forms, “[*k*]*væði* are almost always in repetitive verse-chorus format, enabling the group to pick up the chorus with ease” (Cannady 2014: 159). These dances are “a highly participatory performance practice, meaning that nearly everybody in the near vicinity of the dance joins in-” even if they are non-Faroese; any person can link arms with his fellow partygoers and join the dance, thus fostering a very welcoming atmosphere (Cannady 2014: 159). Such chain-dancing was popular in all Nordic countries in the Middle Ages, but only in the Faroes has it survived to the present day. “Loyalty to tradition is an essential trait in reproducing the tales and ballads” and, even though there are many village-local versions of each *kvæði*, whichever version tonight’s *skipari* chooses should ideally be sung as

traditionally as possible (Hagström 1984: 174). This emphasis on traditionalism “has preserved the linguistic form and excluded Danish influence” and so led the *kvæði* to be crucial in forming an attachment to past and people in the Faroe Islands (174).

### 4.3 The *Sagnir*

*Sangir* are different from *kvæði* in that they concern the adventures of regular (though heavily mythologized) Faroese folk, as opposed to heroic characters of famous and legendary origins. The tradition can be traced back to the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, but some individual sagas are thought to be much older (Jackson 1976: 51). While *sagnir* are not always songs, there is overlap between them and the *kvæði*, especially as local personages became more heroized, and thus more worth singing about. However, even the *sagnir* that were not sung would have been said in a chant-like manner, but the “actual recitation with its pauses, repetitions, and stressed phrases” has been lost to the written form, since scholars “only wrote down the main plots in longhand and reconstructed the stories [. . .] by piecing together different versions” (Jackson 1976: 55). While the *kvæði* show signs of influence from Icelandic ballads, the *sangir* “are totally Faroese in invention, not showing any borrowing of content from elsewhere” and are thus important for establishing local identity (Jackson 1976: 51).

In general, local history is very important to Faroese people, and it is referenced in everything from casual conversation to place names (Green 2012: 127). In such a small country, most people know each other in some, albeit distant, way, and thus, whenever *sangir* are referenced, they can get very personal. “[S]tories about anyone, anywhere in the Faroes, were tales about somebody's kin with whom one had some sort of relation” and many people could proudly claim distant kinship to the characters in these classic tales (Jackson 1976: 54). Due to these personal connections with such mythologized figures “the distant past remains ‘present’

and salient in contemporary discourse” and “family grudges can easily be held for a few centuries and brought up in contemporary conversation as if the offending incident had occurred the other day” (Green 2012: 127). This is not mere pettiness, however, as these tales run deeply in the particular villages and families from whence they come, and so “a meritorious story about your own kin enabled you to [. . .] increase your own prestige” (Jackson 1976: 55). Just as a good story about one’s ancestors could bring pride to one’s family in the modern day, the good Faroese of a *sangir* could bring pride to the islands as a whole, as all Faroese could claim some sort of relation, even if only a shared homeland, to the everyday heroes featured in the *sangir*.

#### **4.4 The *Tættir***

The song type that has had the most direct effect on the Faroese nationalist movement is the *tættir*. *Tættir* are sarcastic songs used for social commentary and entertainment that can both critique the behavior of community members and comment on the policies of outside administrations. Some scholars posit that the *tættir* descend from the *kvæði* due to the fact that both have similar subject matter, form, and rhythm, and have been used in the chain dance (Galvin 1989: 43). However, they are still considered distinct genres due to their different length, character types, and role in community life. “*Tættir* were most often used as a respite from the *kvæði*. *Tættir* were not only lighter, shorter, and more humorous, but they featured familiar incidents and personages as well” and so offered a welcome change in tone between long, tragic *kvæði* (Galvin 1989: 49). While the *tættir* have not had quite as much staying-power as the *kvæði*, a few of the most famous *tættir* “nevertheless entered the oral channels of inner-village or intra-village transmission long enough to gain acceptance” even though their authors and characters had died long ago (Galvin 1989: 47).

Before the nationalist movement really got its start, *tættir* were mainly used to tease members of individual communities and oust them for their social faux pas. The mindset behind this is that

[b]y "going public" with a humorous event, say, a man who gets so drunk that he passes out in a manure heap [like in the *táttur*] "*Jakup a Mon*," the community acknowledges the fact that people do get inebriated, laugh about that event, but also point out that such behavior is not socially acceptable (Galvin 1989: 60).

This mentality helped the focus of *tættir* easily shift to be about unfair treatment by the Danes, and "emergence of a strong interest in the preservation of *tættir* and *kvæði* in the late nineteenth century reflects a growing sense of nationalism, stressing in particular the local over foreign" (Galvin 1989: 53). As the local performance of certain *tættir* shed light on the poor behavior of local individuals, more public performances shed light on the poor behaviors of more widely-known individuals and entities. An example of this includes political songs such as Poul Poulsen's "*Fugl kvæði*," or "The Bird Ballad," which is about the Danish monopoly, which was abolished in the mid-19th century. This *tættir*, according to Faroese scholar Malan Marnersdóttir, is an allegoric ballad describing as birds of prey the Danish public servants who managed the trade monopoly and all the import-export business. On the other hand, the ordinary Faroese who wanted to trade and have ships are depicted as small birds like oyster catchers (quoted in Green 2012: 56 from Marnersdóttir's discontinued website, "Provincial Creativity").

This shows the humorous yet poignant way 19<sup>th</sup> century Faroese songwriters would contextualize their experiences under Danish control. Since the nationalistic era, old *tættir* are occasionally performed by village dance societies, but "the use of *tættir* as a form of local social

humiliation (and the accompanying motivation of hoping to influence or change "inappropriate" behaviour) has almost certainly fallen entirely out of practice in contemporary Faroese society" (Green 2012: 55). Many of the *tættir* that are still performed are the ones that helped secure social change, like "*Fuglakvæði*," as they remain favorites of a triumphant people.

#### **4.5 Summary of Traditional Song Forms**

Traditional music had a great role in shaping Faroese's identity going forward; the *kvæði* helped to tie the Faroes to a magnificent past, the *sagnir* helped to tie the people to strong, local personages of whom they could be proud, and the *tættir* helped to gain power in the face of unfair political treatment. The fact that these traditional song forms had such influence on linguistic revitalization proves that they were a source of great cultural pride. However, as important as these traditional art forms were to the revitalization process, they have lost some cultural weight in the face of modern music and globalization.

#### **4.6 Modern Music**

Traditional music types have struggled to retain relevance among younger Faroes. It is mainly the older generations who take part in dances (other than the once-yearly *Ólavsøka*) and other such traditional music events. However, these songs, particularly the *kvæði*, have managed to hold on to some "coolness" due in part to influence of modern musicians. Today, *kvæði*

are part of the national school curriculum, they are regularly enacted by members of a nation-wide network of dance societies, they are self-consciously "passed on" to younger generations by village dance societies, they are performed and embodied in dance en masse at the national holiday (*Ólavsøka*), and they are even depicted in Faroese visual art (Green 2012: 138).

But all of this does little to make traditional music appeal to young people, as many of them still see these songs as too long, too complicated, too boring, or from too long ago to be of any bearing to themselves (Green 2012: 132). However, artists like Eivør and Týr, who are among the “foremost ambassadors of [modern Faroese] musical legacy,” are helping to change that (Petersen 2017: 5). Artists who mix traditional and popular music, are “bringing [traditional Faroese music] into public discussion, making the traditional music ‘cool again’” for those who might not otherwise care for it (Green 2012: 133). This helps keep the tradition alive, but not everyone likes the consequences of that. For example, “the popularity of Týr’s reinterpretations of Faroese traditional songs has meant that many young people, being more familiar with Týr’s metal versions” will sing incorrectly at *Ólavsøka*, thus frustrating the *skipari* and other traditionalists (Green 2012: 117). These Faroese musicians are also bringing more positive international attention to the Faroe Islands. For example, folk singer Eivør was the first receiver of the Faroese ‘Person of the Year’ award in 2004 for bringing positive attention to the islands with her music (Pálsdóttir 2018), showing the power of music and talent to bring attention to a culture. However, some Faroese are not thrilled about this attention either, as sometimes the existence of these musicians is the only thing foreigners know about the Faroe Islands (Green 2012: 133).

Faroese officials, however, seem to be very willing to take great efforts to help Faroese musicians get heard. About a decade ago, the national radio station *Kringvarp Føroya* changed its policy in order to “have at least a minimum percentage of its broadcasted time filled with Faroese music. This has ensured that almost every new Faroese musical publication at least has one opportunity of being presented” (Petersen 2017: 15). Furthermore, “musicians regularly receive funding from a number of government sources [e.g. the *Mentanargrunnur Landsins* or

Faroese cultural fund] for the purpose of producing recordings and going on tour abroad,” which helps considerably in broadening the reach of an artist’s music (Green 2012: 169). Even despite the aforementioned negativity, Faroese seem generally interested in assisting each other in musical endeavors. As Joshua John Green observes,

there appears to be a pronounced grass-roots tendency in many musicians' approach to getting funding for albums and tours. From metal bands to solo pianists, it seems to have been common practice in the Faroes at least over the last decade or so for aspiring musicians to travel around their communities asking local businesses for donations to help produce their albums (Green 2012: 170).

This type of community support is hugely helpful to new musicians, and demonstrates a certain interest in music that is typical of Faroese culture.

Another thing that has really helped Faroese musicians expand their audience is the internet. In 2012, the Faroes were the fifth most Facebook-saturated country in the world (Green 2012: 213). The use of this and other sites has not only helped Faroese-speaking people in the Faroes and beyond connect to each other, but has provided a previously unprecedented opportunity for Faroese musicians to get heard worldwide, since many Faroese musicians and venues use Facebook to spread the word about themselves and their shows (213). If a Faroese musician can broaden his or her audience to the point that they sign with a foreign record label, it “can lead to wider promotion and distribution, and success for one Faroese band that, in turn, can use their success to pull other similar Faroese bands along with them on tours,” thus bringing more positive attention and prestige to the country and culture (Green 2012: 172). Just as the internet “can bring together [minority language] speakers and learners who are scattered across great distances,” it can draw public interest for a minority language from across great cultural

and geographical distances, so as to give artists opportunities that are unavailable to them in the language community (Holton 2011: 371). Before sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Spotify, one of the few ways most Faroese musicians would get discovered by non-Faroes would be if someone walked into a Faroese music shop while on a trip (Green 2012: 173). Now, however, “physical distribution in shops is becoming less and less important in the face of digital distribution, [so] it perhaps only makes sense that business is increasingly conducted through the internet for Faroese artists” (173).

As music is deeply embedded in Faroese culture, there is great support— both official and grassroots— for Faroese musicians. Perhaps unsurprisingly, “music seems to be considerably more commonplace as an essential part of many types of social occasions in the Faroes” than in other countries (Green 2012: 250). Furthermore, there is a lot of musical publishing in the Faroes, considering the small population, and “one album released every two weeks for a population of 50,000 is quite impressive,” especially in a minority language community that cannot rely on revenue and sales from abroad (Green 2012: 251). According to John Áki Egholm of the Faroese doom metal band Hamferð, the prevalence of music in the Faroes has to do with how

there's just something that is inside of people, I believe that they have to get it out. And you know, it becomes art . . . probably has something to do with the isolation as well, and, you know, you're just out there on this rock and you have to figure out something to do. And because of the culture and, you know, because of the past, the Faroese people, you know, music has been a very important part of it (Green 2012: 252).

This sentiment, which many Faroes share, harkens back to the *kvoldseta* days when families would winter together at home, telling stories and singing songs to pass the time. The echoes of

this past also reference a personal feeling of distinctness- a feeling that there's something uniquely Faroese that comes out creatively in the form of music.

## **5. Linguistic Purity and the Way Forward**

As has been previously emphasized, linguistic purity is a pervasive trend in Faroese, and has been since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Corpus planning is popular now, and involves questions such as “how will new terms be decided, and by whom? Should they be influenced by the majority language, or emphasize differences?” (Sallabank 2011: 279). For Faroese, new terms are decided by the Faroese Language Committee and are absolutely meant to emphasize difference. “Due to a number of conscious revitalisation efforts [ . . . ], Faroese has survived the worst obstacles,” but “language maintenance work will have to be a continuous process in order to retain the viability of the language-” and the current focus on purism, even though it secured the survival of Faroese in the past, may not be helping as much in the modern era (Holm 2002: 264).

Studies show that the significance and use of Faroese is rising as the language makes itself at home in the realms it has earned. A questionnaire used in a study by Knudsen (2010) asked 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students for their attitudes about Faroese. After asking the students about the importance of knowing Faroese for various life tasks, Knudsen discovered that that items like “make money” and “get a job” ranked similarly in importance compared to items like “bring up children” and “make friends,” which shows that, in the modern era, Faroese is nearly as important and useful in career life as it is in the home (134). On a slightly different note, the fact that many students placed school-related items, like “getting good grades,” at the top of the list was noteworthy- especially considering the growing gap between written and spoken Faroese caused in part by the focus on purism. It is difficult to find high-level school materials in Faroese, as most upper-level textbooks are in Danish (Holm 2002: 279). However, a growing

number of Faroese textbooks have been published lately, but the “contents of the materials [are] too old-fashioned, boring, and distant from [students’] daily realities” for them to be able to enjoy or appreciate (Holm 2002: 270). Knudsen anticipates that this gap between spoken and written Faroese “will remain or can become even wider as English attains stronger influence on the vernacular” and as the purism continues to have such a significant hold on the written form (Knudsen 2010: 137).

While the school, home, and career settings see significant support for Faroese, in the realm of entertainment there is far less support, as “little value appears to be given to Faroese in some of the major domains of pop and youth culture- playing sports, singing (music), watching video/TV, surfing/communicating on the Internet and sending cell phone text messages” (Knudsen 2010: 138). Despite the other advancements, this lack of support in media is certainly concerning, as “lack of attention to young people’s interests is one of the negative aspects to more traditional language revitalization and maintenance” (Moriarty 2011: 458). Furthermore, when using technology in revitalizing or maintaining a minority language, “technological solutions must be tailored to the needs and constraints of a particular audience,” but this does not mean that technology should in any way be limited due to the isolation of certain speakers or smallness of the language community, as “[w]atering down technology to the lowest common denominator deprives those with better access from taking advantage of these solutions” (Moriarty 2011: 373). Therefore, Faroese should ideally expand as much as possible into the digital and entertainment realm and gain legitimacy there so that young speakers, who will be directing the future of the language, can take advantage of those outlets.

While Faroese is certainly not in danger of losing ground in the school, work, or administration spheres, it has been slipping out of entertainment, as most entertainment that

young Faroese are exposed to is either in English or Danish (Knudsen 2010: 138). Furthermore, much of the entertainment that is in Faroese is far from the vernacular these youngsters speak, as purism still greatly colors the written and sung forms of the language. Many poets and lyricists struggle with writing in Faroese, feeling that they must, or should, stick to only the purist form. According to singer/lyricist Jón Aldará of Hamferð,

Faroese is such a limited language in the way that if you want to write real Faroese, you have mostly, you know, you have to dig up some old word or something, it's [. . .] hard to write a neutral type of Faroese which is both poetic and tries to exclude more modern, you know, conversational words (Green 2012: 148-149).

Many of these “more modern [. . .] controversial words” have gained little to no favor among regular Faroese people, and “[p]eople tend to think of coinages in Danish as ‘natural’ whereas in Faroese they are sometimes perceived as ‘artificial’” (Holm 2002: 265). Worse, some coinages made by the Faroese Language Committee “have only served as the butts of jokes” (265). While there have been some attempts at going against the focus on purity, these are often met with backlash. When a revised Danish-Faroese dictionary was released in 1995, it “triggered heated debates in the newspapers and on the radio due to the fact that the editors had dismissed the strictly puristic norm that had characterized previous dictionaries” (Holm 2002: 268). However, the fact that such a dictionary exists at all demonstrates that there is some support for the pushback to purism, and “signals support and legitimacy of contemporary language varieties in contrast to an idealised norm” (268).

This idealized norm is “unrealistic and impossible in an age of mass media and globalization,” and purism will likely continue to hold Faroese back in the entertainment and internet realms previously mentioned (Holm 2002: 275). The fact that the “major objective of the

Faroese Language Committee is to halt borrowings and to maintain the ‘purity’ of Faroese” is certainly not helping support the language in 21<sup>st</sup> century (Knudsen 2010: 141). Purism was certainly important, even essential, to Faroese’s revitalization, and “[w]ithout the patriotism and linguistic conscience of its users, the Faroese language would certainly have been submerged” under the tide and influence of Danish long ago (Hagström 1984: 188). However, Knudsen’s study indicates that there is “a conflict between a purist movement that endeavours to control the Faroese language and the actual language practice” which will only cause the gap between spoken and written forms of Faroese to widen. Such a gap, while certainly not deadly for Faroese due to all the ground it has gained, could deter its use and expansion in the long term.

## **Conclusion**

Through the majority of Faroese history, the native people were at a disadvantage due to being politically and economically controlled by more powerful nations. While geographic and economic isolation allowed their culture to flourish with minimal outside influence, this had serious consequences for their language, as the usefulness and prestige of Faroese declined each time the influence of other nations grew. However, despite these barriers, the Faroese people maintained a great pride for their identity, much of which focused on songs and oral tradition passed down through the generations. As nationalistic sentiments grew, they became committed to maintaining and revitalizing their language through crafting a writing system, gaining political influence and control of Faroese education, and asserting a strict linguistic purism. These measures, supported by a pride and loyalty to the musical and oral tradition that made up much of their culture, allowed the Faroese people to secure prestige and permanence for their native tongue.

While the Faroese people have demonstrated extraordinary resilience and determination in revitalizing their language, and great intelligence and foresight in using their deep oral and musical tradition to do so, it is crucial that they be equally focused on maintenance. Much like in music, if one sticks with old-fashioned genres for the sake of image and pride, one may lose audience and favor as other artists move on to more current music types; languages— especially minority languages like Faroese— must similarly advance in order to keep up with their speakers and the global environment in which their language is developing.

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