

Sealanguage: Field Notes from the Anthropocene¹

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Abstract

In the Faroe Islands, long-standing but now rapidly declining practices of tabooing have governed the language of fishermen at sea. Based on fieldwork that combines ethnography with intellectual history, this article explores the continuity of this allegedly superstitious practice within the broad framework of Western secularity. In the 1990s, local practices of naming found expression at a national level with the compilation of the first ornithological handbook written entirely in Faroese. The example of this field guide, in which local names were made to conform to scientific nomenclature, is used to interrogate tensions between orality and literacy. Contrary to the tradition that would oppose folk-taxonomy to classical systematics, it is shown that among field observers both practices of naming are used simultaneously, and, frequently, non-competitively. Through these and other examples it is argued that what is at stake in practices of naming is a habit of paying attention to the environment, premised not on lexical expertise or ideas of knowledge but on a singular hedonism of taking pleasure in the thing named. It is the cultivation of this habit that is proposed as the critical foundation and future purpose of any planetary consciousness.



Skulls of raven and fulmar. Workshop of Jens-Kjeld Jensen, Nolsóy.
All photographs by Simone Kotva.

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These notes are based on interviews given by four informants in the Faroe Islands, 1–7 February 2017. Informant 1: Poulsen, Aksal. Retired fisherman, Sumba, Suðuroy. Informant 2: Eirika. Retired housewife, Midvágur, Vágur. Informant 3: Mats á Skur. Retired fisherman, Nolsóy. Informant 4: Jensen, Jens-Kjeld. Ornithologist, Nolsóy. To protect the identity of informants 2 and 3, their names have been altered.

Sumba, Suðuroy

It is late afternoon and too warm for February, the breeze hardly tempered by the cold showers of rain that clear away almost as soon as they arrive. Slowly, I make my way up the paved street of Sumba, listening to my guide, Aksal Poulsen, who knows every bird of the region by sight and can imitate their songs and distinctive calls perfectly. As we walk, Aksal pauses occasionally, gesticulating as he speaks:

I didn't own a pair of binoculars until 1967. I just went out, every day, paid attention. Fifteen seconds is enough: just look, and you'll see something new, something astonishing. That's what it means to know a bird, to be a good knower of birds. To make observations, to take note, to look—all the time. For as long as one lives.

Aksal was born 1945 in Sumba, the southernmost settlement in the Faroese archipelago. Like most Faroese of his generation, Aksal is a fisherman, but illness eventually forced him to leave the sea and take up lighter work on shore. After a spell at the post office in Tórshavn, Aksal retired to his home town where he chose a house with large glass windows overlooking the waterfront. The view allows Aksal to trace the sun as it rises and sets below the North Atlantic, and watch as fulmars descend from basalt cliffs. His life's work is a magnificent collection of over one hundred stuffed birds. A few years back the town council bought the collection for 300,000 Danish Kroner, and it is now housed in the village museum of Sumba.

Later that afternoon Aksal walks me to the museum, to which he has his own key. Unlocking the door, he greets the birds like old friends and tells me the story of how each specimen found its way to his

workshop. The prize of his collection is a vagrant Canadian sandhill crane, a bird that died before Aksal's brother could nurse it back to health. "Look," he says, "look at the curve of its neck, see how small the bird is much smaller than an ordinary crane..." Aksal's expertise has earned him a nickname in the Faroe Islands: "The Birdman". Bird collecting became Aksal's informal profession, but he does not believe a dead bird replaces the living specimen, and he does not kill birds in order to preserve them. The birds in Aksal's collection are birds that have fallen, dead, from the sky into a neighbour's back garden; they are birds that flew too far North and perished in the cold; birds shot accidentally by trigger-happy sportsmen. These birds were sent to Aksal, who—with the aid of a taxidermist friend—preserved them in his spare time. "Before one learns how to preserve a bird," he says, leaning against the glass case behind which the sandhill crane jostles with eider and guillemot, "one must first have observed the bird in life, with one's own eyes." This is doubly true in the Faroe Islands, where bird names were only standardised in 1990 with the publication of Søren Sørensen and Dorete Bloch's *Fuglar í Norðhøvum*.² When the Faroese Museum of Natural History commissioned the book, Aksal was asked to act as advisor to the editorial committee, helping them to compile a list of bird names. So together with the fisherman Niels á Botni (with whom Aksal had studied taxidermy) and the ornithologist Christer Alstrøm, Aksal spent three years naming birds in the mid-1980s.

I ask how Aksal and his colleagues went about this formidable task. Unhesitatingly, he responds: "We had to be artists." After a pause, he continues: "We used colours a lot, and behaviour, of course, when we invented new names. And we compared our names to those in other languages." But the native names, Aksal explains, proved the most difficult. How does one decide which name should become official, which name is the most appropriate? The fulmar, for instance, is known in the Faroe Islands by two names. In the South, where Aksal grew up, the bird is sometimes called *náti*, which means "foul", on account of the evil-smelling oil that the fulmar spits at aggressors.³ But in the North, the same bird is more commonly referred to as *havhestur*, which means "horse of the sea", perhaps alluding to the way in which the bird heralds a storm. The geographical distinction is not strict, however, and both names are used in the South as well as the North.

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Bloch, Dorete and Sørensen, Søren. *Fuglar í Norðhøvum*. Tórshavn: Føroya Skúlabókagrunnur. 1990.

3
As does the Old Norse *fúlmár*, literally, "stinking mew". See Lockwood, W.B. *The Faroese Bird Names*. Hafniæ: Ejnar Munksgaard. 1961. p. 54. Lockwood, however, is silent on the exact meaning of *náti*.

The committee had to make a decision, and chose *havhestur* as the official name of *Fulmarus glacialis*. "It has nothing to do with horses, of course," says Aksal, sipping from the cup of coffee his wife has placed in front of him, "It has to do with how one understands the bird."

I wanted to know what made the committee's understanding of birds different from Aksal's. "In a handbook," he explains, "there has to be a single name, because it's useful. But no name is more appropriate than another. Birds have different names depending on when they are seen, how old they are, where they are found. There is no correct name, only many names." In his battered Danish edition of Petersen and Montfort's *Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe* a careful, spidery script records the work of naming. The entry for each bird is annotated with the corresponding name in Faroese. But most entries have multiple proposals. *Fuglar í Norðhøvum* sometimes ignores these variations, sometimes indicates them by listing a few of the alternative names after whichever local name had been selected as the official name of the bird. Aksal smiles: "Plenty of my names were disqualified, or demoted to second place." Overnight these disqualified names became guerrilla words, a lexicon of resistance:

We were amateurs, and they had PhDs, but we were the ones with the experience. The one with an eye for birds can tell if there is something different about a particular individual, even if it looks almost identical to the others around it. It might be the way a bird lifts its head more frequently than its companions, the way it thrusts its beak into the ground. The name one gives to a bird should reflect that experience.

Many of the names that Aksal recalled during our conversation, such as *náti* and *havhestur*, derive from the detailed knowledge of birds preserved in the oral culture of Faroese fishermen. If a raven, to take the most common example, was sighted from the ship's deck it was considered an omen, and the name of the bird was tabooed. The bird was then referred to not by its proper name, *ravnur*, but by a new name, such as the onomatopoeic *gorpur* and *krunkur*. These invented names eventually became lexicalised, generating the maze of alternative names that created problems for the editorial committee with which Aksal collaborated in the 1980s.



Docks, Tórshavn.

In Faroese the tabooed birds, as Aksal explained to me, were known as *feigdarfuglar*, meaning birds that were anomalous or “marked”: “birds that were in the wrong place, birds that somehow broke the pattern of things. Like seeing a puffin at Christmas, or finding a storm petrel on deck, or a swallow in doors, or a fulmar chick without its parent...” When I ask if superstition has anything to do with it, Aksal shakes his head, bemused: “It’s not about birds as such, or anything negative—it’s about how they are, what they’re doing. How they fly.” To Aksal, bird taboos record a practical wisdom, a way of knowing birds. A name such as *náti* is the result of observation, capturing some characteristic of the bird, whether it is a foul smell, a call, or a resemblance to other animals. But, as Aksal explained to me, the knowledge conveyed by word taboos is not strictly utilitarian: “Of course we needed to know about the birds to survive, but to recognise a bird as *feigdar*, and give it a new name—that was, different, that was pleasure.”

Tabooing and the invention of new names expresses what made a fisherman’s hard life at sea worth living. Aksal’s eyes light up as I ask him about the *feigdarfuglar* encountered when working on trawlers in Norway, Iceland, Greenland and Canada: “Whenever there was a snow storm, hundreds of eider ducks would crash into the boat and land, stunned, on deck, and we would have to barrel them out, throw them back into the water.” Aksal stands, throwing his arms up as if releasing a bird into the air: “And during the migration season we would be visited by thousands upon thousands of arctic redpoll, who would come to try and drink the water that gathered on deck. They were that thirsty! But of course the salt water made them sick, so we always put out buckets of fresh water—and fed them bread. Thousands of redpoll!”

Steering into a flock of arctic redpoll was a strange, beautiful experience, which Aksal and his colleagues interpreted as a *feigdar*, an omen, and when an anomaly like this occurred, the fishermen would invent a new name that described something about the special appearance of an otherwise unremarkable bird that its ordinary name did not. For this reason, Aksal sees no contradiction between the ordinary name of a bird and the names a bird receives when it is tabooed. In the same way, Aksal sees no contradiction between the single, scientific name of the fulmar in a handbook such as *Fuglar í Norðhøvum* and the many names found in oral culture: “They say the same things, but in different ways,” he reflects, lips twitching into a half-smile, “and they are all needed for different situations. Scientific names are incredibly useful when one is talking to ornithologists from other countries!”

During our conversation, while walking along the cliffs of Sumba and, later, as we sat poring over bird books in Aksal’s living room, I learnt that part of the reason Aksal finds the practice of naming more interesting than the names themselves is that he acquired his first knowledge of birds informally, without the aid of a field guide. Sumba has no library, and when Aksal was a boy the only bird book available in Faroese was Mikkjal á Ryggi’s *Fuglabókin* (1951), which was also used as a reading primer in the village school. *Fuglabókin* introduces each bird with a naive watercolour and a short prose account of the bird’s habits and characteristics. This was enough to give Aksal a basic knowledge of taxonomy, the rest he had to figure out for himself:

“Mikkjal’s pictures were terrible! No, if I wanted to learn anything I would have to go out, climb the cliffs, notice things,” he recalls, “then I would return home and write down what I had seen in a little pocket book.” Along with his first pair of binoculars, Aksal did not acquire his first field guide until he was already well into his twenties. “I learnt a lot from books,” he says, “but in a sense I already knew it, or I was learning to look in a different way, looking for different details.” As I leave, Aksal walks me to the bus stop, so that he can show me his two geese and four rams, wintering in an enclosure across the road from his house. Aksal smacks his lips at the geese, who cackle in return. “I don’t need to keep them anymore, of course, because eggs and meat are so inexpensive,” he says, “but I still do, because it would be dull not to. Imagine the hills without geese, without sheep!”

Miðvágur, Vágar

I had come to the Faroe Islands to discover what remained of the word taboos of the Faroese fishermen. Aksal had proved to me that the practice had not died out completely, but Aksal was an ideal informant, having spent much of his adult life preserving not only birds, but knowledge of their local names. Would I find similar memories among those who had not worked at sea, in particular, among the women of Aksal’s generation? And would they interpret the names as Aksal had done, appreciating them as a form of knowledge unfounded in superstition? In the village of Miðvágur on Vágar, en route from the airport, I met Eirika and her niece. Like Aksal, Eirika was born in the 1940s, and when I asked her about the bird taboos she smiles and nods, remembering that her husband, who worked as a chef on a Danish cruiser, used to refer frequently to these special names. “I know very well what you mean,” she says, “because we have a proverb in Faroese: ‘stones break before the tongue of man’ [*Steinur brestur fyri manna tungur*].”

The rules surrounding gannets are a good example of the efficacy of words in the Faroe Islands. To the West of Vágar lies Mykines, the only place in the Faroe Islands where gannets breed in the summer season. “On Mykines,” Eirika recalls, “one has to say ‘The Gannet is

4
Gaard, Guðrun. *Tilblívis-
en af en skriftlig færøsk
litteratur*. Tórshavn: MA
Dissertation. 1991.

good’. If one speaks ill of the Gannet, it will keep away from the island, and then the islanders will starve.” A similar custom was observed in Hvalba (Suðuroy). One winter when the villagers were starving, a whale beached and gave itself to them. A sacrifice. Because they could eat the whale, the villagers survived. After that they always said “the whale is good”, and so the whale would come, each year, only to that village. But one year they saw it from afar and someone said, “I think it’s a tree”. And the whale never returned.

The niece eyes her aunt sceptically and leans over to me, says, “That was in the old days, you know. In the old days they believed, they believed anything.” But Eirika disagrees. Like Aksal, she does not think that taboos were used because people held superstitious beliefs. “It’s a story, of course, but it says something about what they knew, and they knew so many things in those days.” Eirika’s greatest regret is that she did not record her mother, because her mother knew more stories like the one Eirika shared with me.

In Eirika’s neat, white kitchen overlooking the bay of Vágar, I learn what it is about a taboo that makes it worth remembering. “It’s something to do with knowing how to look, how to look with... respect? Love?” Eirika hesitates, searching for the right word. “That whale in the story,” she says, finally, “it’s not that a wrong word would send the whale away, it’s about looking at the whale in the wrong way. Not recognising it for what it is, thinking it’s a tree, not looking closely enough.” As I prepare to leave her flat, Eirika embraces me, repeats her regrets: “I wish I could remember what my mother knew, but one doesn’t think about these things, anymore.”

Nolsóy

Things have changed, I learnt, because Faroese culture has changed: from being, until very recently, a predominantly oral culture, it is now a literary culture.⁴ On Nolsóy, a small island twenty minutes by ferry from Tórshavn, I met Mats á Skur, a retired fisherman who can still remember the last time the government tried to stop Faroese being taught in schools. The Faroe Islands have been



Rubbish dump, Nólsoy.

5

The Ballad of the Birds is preserved in the *Corpus Carminum* as *Fugla kvæði* II. In Bloch, J. and Grundtvig, Sv. (eds.). *Føroya kvæði: Corpus Carminum Færoensium*. Vol. 6. Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag. 1972. pp. 282–293. Nólsoyar-Páll sang or dictated the ballad to his brother, Jacob Nolsøe, who was secretary for the Commercial Monopoly. On the *kvæðir* and Faroese oral culture, see Jones, W. Glyn. “Ballads, Songs and Snatches: The Eighteenth Century in the Faroe Islands”. In Marianne Alenius et al. (eds.). *Digternes paryk: studier i 1700-tallet*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum. 1997. pp. 87–10; and Malansdóttir, Malan. “From Oral Poetry to Rap in the Faroes”. In Lanngård and Kristen Thisted (eds.). *From Oral Tradition to Rap: Literatures of the Polar North*. Nuuk: Atuagkat. 2011. pp. 39–62. Like the *kvæði*, the *táttur* uses a simple ABCB rhyming scheme with a verse refrain, but unlike the ballad, which is anonymously composed and which borrows its themes, typically, from folklore or the Bible, the *táttur* is set in a local environment and its author is usually known.

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The best study of Faroese fishing culture is still Williamson, Kenneth. *The Atlantic Islands: A Study of the Faroese Life and Scene*. London: Collins. 1948.

self-governing since 1948, but remain part of the Kingdom of Denmark, and Danish is the *lingua franca*, though the younger generation will often prefer to use English when conversing with visitors from other Scandinavian nations, like myself.

Until the early twentieth century, when standardised Faroese was introduced into the national curriculum, the main source of Faroese literary culture was the ballad or *kvæði*, performed as part of the Faroese chain dance. When I ask Mats how he learnt about birds he recites a few lines from Nólsoyar-Páll’s *Fugla kvæði yngra*, or Ballad of the Birds (called *yngra* to distinguish this nineteenth-century song from the medieval ballad of the same name). “But you’d have to get me drunk to see me dance!” he laughs. The *Fugla kvæði yngra* is a political satire or *táttur*, and was the first text in Faroese to be distributed and sold in printed form. The ballad contains many names that derive from word taboos, and many jokes about *feigdarfuglar*. “Yes, that’s where I learnt most of the names,” says Mats. He also explains that the younger generation of fishermen no longer learn them, or not exactly. “Oh yes, they study the *kvæðir* at school,” he admits, “but they don’t know them, don’t use them.”⁵

Mats learnt the *Fugla kvæði yngra* by picking it up from informal gatherings and impromptu performances in a ship’s cabin or in someone’s kitchen. But ballads are no longer part of a fisherman’s informal tuition. Although the Faroe Islands, like Iceland, remain a traditional fishing economy, fishing itself has changed dramatically since Mats was a young man.⁶ Mats suspects that fish-farming has had something to do with it. “Who would want to work there?”, he asks me, waving at the floating pens that dot the bay of Tórshavn just visible beyond the grey mist outside the window. “They all leave. My children live in Norway and Denmark. They’re right to leave. But what about the future?” To Mats, the change from oral to literary culture is inseparable from the disfigurement to the environment caused by aquaculture exacerbated by consumerism: “When we were out at sea we didn’t earn much but we were happy. At home we kept our own sheep and didn’t need to buy anything.” In Nólsoyar-Páll’s *Fugla kvæði yngra* Danish falcons buy and sell goods with other nations while prosecuting the small birds, the Faroese, for attempting to scrape a living through trade. “We were the plucky oystercatchers, and we still are!” says Mats, “but the young

people nowadays, they don't see it that way. They stare at computers. When I look into their eyes, there is nothing there. Emptiness." He blinks at me: "So I say, thank God I am old. Soon it will all be over."

I met Mats in the kitchen of Jens-Kjeld Jensen, an ornithologist who, like Aksal Poulsen, studied taxidermy with Niels á Botni in the 1970s. Jens-Kjeld moved to Nolsóy from Denmark, and remembers a time when the men would gather every day on the bench beside the bone architrave at the entrance to the village and talk fowl, fish, whales. Today that bench is empty. Jens-Kjeld muses: "You were born too late," he says. "Maybe if you had come here as a little lassie"—he indicates my imagined height with the flat of his hand—"maybe when you were five years old, then you could have seen it too."

Jens-Kjeld has written a book on the fowling practices of Nolsóy, documenting the different spots on the island where puffins were traditionally caught with the net and pole. Like Mats, he is not optimistic about the future, but his concerns are for the birds, rather than the fishermen. "I predict," he says, cutting himself a slice of lemon cake, "that the puffins will all be gone in twenty years. And the gannets and guillemots too." Though he supports the hunting prohibitions put in place for their protection, he thinks that pollution has had a greater impact than traditional hunting on the rapidly declining number of sea birds. "The sea is dead," he says, simply, "we have killed it." He points at a photograph featuring a wet, technicoloured tangle of debris: "This is what they found in the gizzard of one fulmar—one! And Faroe has the cleanest waters in the world! Imagine what it's like in other parts!"

Sealanguage

In the 1950s William Burley Lockwood, a linguist and ornithologist, described the word taboos of the Faroese fishermen as a "sealanguage" (*sjómál*).⁷ Sealanguage, argued Lockwood, "vividly recalls ancient belief in the magic power of human speech."⁸ Lockwood's source for this interpretation was James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Frazer had suggested that, "unable to discriminate clearly between words

7
Lockwood, W. B. "Word Taboo in the Language of the Faroese Fishermen". *Transactions of the Philological Society*. Vol. 54. No. 1. 1955. pp. 1–24 (p.1).

8
Ibid., p. 24.

9
Frazer, James. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Abridged Edition. New York, NY: Macmillan. 1922. p. 244.

10
Lockwood, "Word Taboo", p. 2.

11
Svabo, J. C. *Inberetning frae en Rejse i Færøe 1781 og 82*. Quoted in Lockwood, *Ibid.*

and things, the savage commonly fancies that the link between a name and the person or thing denominated by it is not a mere arbitrary and ideal association, but a real and substantial bond which unites the two in such a way that magic may be wrought on a man just as easily through his name as through his hair, his nails, or any other material part of his person."⁹ Lockwood concluded that a similar principle was at work behind sealanguage: "the use of secret words [...] would help to confuse unfriendly spirits intent on ruining the fishermen's chances."¹⁰ Lockwood, like Frazer, believed that the hypothesis of superstition would help to explain not only the appeal of word taboos but also their eventual demise: if the mystique of word taboos required certain beliefs in the magical power of names, then the disappearance of these beliefs would coincide with the disappearance of tabooing itself. But my conversations with Eirika, Mats and Aksal had shown me a different story. On the Faroe Islands I found many who still remembered and spoke sealanguage, but among these none who believed the practice was a form of superstition; the only person who did suggest such an interpretation (Eirika's niece) was also the only one to possess no first-hand knowledge of these names.

Eirika had dismissed the hypothesis that taboos were originally superstitious, preferring to describe them as way of paying attention to the flora and fauna of the Islands. Aksal had even argued that word taboos were a form of knowledge, an opinion confirmed by Mats, for whom word taboos were part of an oral expertise, which, though inessential to survival, was essential to making survival enjoyable. This suggested that sealanguage, whatever its origins, was appreciated and practised less as a relic of a savage ontology and more for the mental dexterity required to understand, and invent, names, such as *náti* and *havhestur*. Hence the popularity of word taboos in drinking games, as recorded by Jens Christian Svabo in the 1780s (drink up if your tongue slips! meanwhile the wise stay sober inventing new rules).¹¹ Sealanguage, then, did not decline—as Lockwood supposed—because the beliefs that it presupposed had begun to erode. Sealanguage began to decline because the practices from which it is inseparable had begun to vanish.

That the key to magical practices such as word taboos might lie in their use rather than, as Lockwood argued, in their origins was an early criticism raised against the Frazerian method by Ludwig

Wittgenstein. “What we have [in the case of magic] is *not* an error”, writes Wittgenstein, since no hypothesis of development succeeds in making a magical practice “less impressive”.¹² As a practice, magic describes “the environment of a way of acting”; it becomes superstition only when mistaken for science. Thus, what one can conclude about a magical practice is not its reasons but its efficacy, the fact that it “aims at some satisfaction and it achieves it”.¹³ In the case of sealanguage, satisfaction is achieved when a familiar bird, such as the fulmar or the raven, is made strange by the gift of a new name. One famous example, recorded by Lockwood and still remembered in the Islands, was the incident of a vagrant female black-browed albatross known as the “gannet king” or *súlukongur*. This bird was seen flying with the gannets of Mykineshólmur every summer from 1860 until shot by a vandal in 1864; during this time it was known as the “gannet king”.¹⁴

Lockwood was of the opinion that tabooing emerged from a superstitious belief in the direct link between a name and the thing denominated, but *súlukongur*—being the name not of a bird but of a bird in a configuration of other birds—is a good example of what in classical semiotics is known as indirect or ordinary signification.¹⁵ In semiotic terms, what makes the name *súlukongur* similar to the female black-browed albatross is not a bird-shaped thought in the head of the viewer, but an experience (or “affection”, to use the classical term) that coincides with the sighting of the bird. The significance of this gloss becomes evident in practical terms when we consider that *súlukongur* could not signify the albatross directly, because the name would not be generally applicable to all albatrosses. Nor does the name signify directly the particular female albatross that accompanied the gannets between 1860–1864, since in order to earn its name this bird depended on a context of gannets and would not have been called *súlukongur* if sighted when flying solo. This is because *súlukongur* is not a proper name, but, like many words in sealanguage, a euphemism or “kenning”, and doubles as a riddle, the full form of which would be: who is the king of the gannets? Like many riddles in Old Norse and Old English *súlukongur* is constructed around a known answer.¹⁶ In the case of the *súlukongur* it would be impossible to solve the riddle without knowing beforehand about the event in question.¹⁷ This situation to which the name refers is what enables it signify indirectly, rather than directly, to the bird.

12 Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*. ed. Rush Rhees. trans. A.C. Miles and Rush Rhees. Bishopstone: Brynmill. 1979. p. 2e, p. 6e. Emphasis in the original.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 4e.

14 Lockwood, *Faroese Bird Names*, p. 20.

15 Manetti, Giovanni. *Theories of the Sign in Classical Antiquity*. trans. Christine Richardson. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1993. pp. 14–35, p. 72. On the classical formulation of Aristotelian semiotics, see for instance Aquinas: “words are signs for thoughts and thoughts are likenesses of things, so words refer to things indirectly through thoughts.” Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*. 1a. 13. i. [Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*. Vol. 3 (1a. 12–13): *Knowing and Naming God*. trans. Herbert McCabe. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1964.

16 Tigges, Wim. “Signs and Solutions: A Semiotic Approach to the Exeter Book Riddles”. In Erik Kooper (ed.). *This Noble Craft: Proceedings of the Xth Research Symposium of the Dutch and Belgian University of Teachers of Old and Middle English and Historical Linguistics*. Amsterdam: Rodopi. 1989. pp. 59–82.

17 Just as the Philistines discovered when Samson gave them an impossible riddle: “If ye had not ploughed with my heifer, ye had not found out my riddle.” (Judges 14:18).

18 This is quite different from a belief in the occult causality proposed by Frazer and much closer to the ordinary causality of names for which Socrates argues in the *Cratylus*: “a name is a tool for giving instruction, that is to say, for dividing being.” See Plato, *Cratylus* 388c [*Plato: Complete Works*. ed. John Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett. 1997].

19 Berlin, Brent. *Ethnobiological Categorisation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1992. pp. 3–51.

20 Aristotle. *The Parts of Animals* 643b20–30 [Aristotle: *The Complete Works*. 2 vols. ed. Jonathan Barnes. Princeton: Bollingen. 1984]: “It is impossible that a single differentia, either by itself or in combination shall express the whole of a species.”

21 Slaughter, M. M. *Universal Languages and Scientific Taxonomies in the Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1982. pp. 15–84.

22 Bloch and Sørensen, pp. 66–67.

To the speaker of sealanguage *súlukongur* would have derived its magical efficacy indirectly from the situation in which the bird appeared, rather than from its connection to the bird itself, since what *súlukongur* signifies is the way in which a female black-browed albatross was experienced and interpreted by the islanders at a particular time and place. While this does not, of course, rule out a belief in the magical power of words, it does narrow the sense in which this “magical” operates. If names reveal the nature of what they name it is not through an occult causality but because they are “natural” tools for thinking about how we know the thing named—and it is the latter analysis, rather than the memory of a superstitious belief, which the practice of sealanguage records.¹⁸

Styles of Naming

The misrepresentation of sealanguage as superstition, which we find in Lockwood’s study of Faroese oral culture, is similar to the regular misrepresentation of folk taxonomy as primitive science, which we find in modern zoology.¹⁹ In his works on natural history Aristotle had asked: what is the *logos*, the account, of an animal? And he had concluded that there was no definitive name, no single definition.²⁰ But in classical systematics, which established the style of nomenclature used by ornithologists today, a bird receives only one taxonomic label (binomial or trinomial) as its proper signification.²¹ This was the style adopted by the editorial committee of *Fuglar í Norðhøvum*, a style which, as I learnt from Aksal, would often result in unsatisfactory compromises when it clashed with sealanguage, which favoured many names for the same bird. Thus, when composing the entry for *Fulmarus glacialis* the editors chose to list *náti* after *havhestur* as a secondary name of the fulmar.²² Although this preserves *náti* as an alternative name of the fulmar, it also gives the misleading impression that *náti* and *havhestur* are synonyms used interchangeably. But although both names may refer to a fulmar, they do so in different situations: when sighted at sea and heralding a storm it is appropriate to call the fulmar *havhestur*, but when the bird is within spitting range it is more appropriate to call it *náti*. As Aristotle knew, knowledge is pleonastic, intimate knowledge in-

finitely so; by listing the two names *havhestur* and *náti* as synonyms, the handbook mistook pleonasm for inconsequence and therefore misrepresented the logic of the alternative taxonomy it sought to commemorate. Similarly, the once ubiquitous puffin is known by the handbook as *lundi*, the closest to a general name for the adult bird. Historically, however, *lundi* refers primarily to the bird when cooked and stuffed with cake batter. A migratory puffin, by contrast, was called *klædseksdrongur*, or “luggage boy” (because it announced the arrival of the larger arctic skua) and a puffin in winter plumage was a *høganevið*, while a young bird was a *vangagrái* and a young bird “fallen on the field or into a river” was an *áarpisa*—finally, an old non-breeding puffin was known as *karkarakkur*, on account of its long, curved outside claws, a danger to fowlers.²³

Thus, what to the classical systematics of the handbook looks like a division of one species into many kinds of bird, is to the fowler or fisherman a useful tool for distinguishing between different situations in which the bird, as sign, may be implicated. Historically, amateur field observers—such as Aksal—were the most vocal opponents to the taxonomical style of naming adopted by handbooks, perhaps because, unlike other branches of zoology, ornithology always enjoyed a strong amateur following.²⁴ In 1858 the Swedish ornithologist Sven Nilsson expressed the dissatisfaction which many students of birds found with classical systematics when he complained that taxonomy “is only the *means*, not the *ends*, of [...] science.” Just as it would be unreasonable to claim that only the person able to use a dictionary could appreciate the beauty of poetry, so too, Nilsson argues, “it would be even more unreasonable to believe that only the person who knew the names, from cedar tree to fungus, could for this reason grasp and understand nature or intuit its essence.”²⁵ Aksal would no doubt have agreed with this critique of taxonomania, but would perhaps have added that even folk names are not exempt from classification once they become—as they were for Lockwood—the object of study. Thus, while I had not discovered in the Faroe Islands a dead sealanguage, neither had I found a living one: what I found in the Faroe Islands were people who knew sealanguage, but none who still used it, that is, none who still invented new names with which to enjoy and experience the fauna of the archipelago. Like the creatures it named, and the practices which made the names possible, sealanguage was indeed disappearing.

23

See Ryggi, Mikkjal á. “List of Faroese Animal Names”. In S. Jensen, W. Lundbeck, Th. Mortensen and R. Spaerck (eds.). *The Zoology of the Faroe Islands*. Vol. III, Part II: *Aves, Mammalia, Faroese Animal Names*. Copenhagen: 1935–1942. p. 5 (separate pagination); and Lockwood, *Faroese Bird Names*, p. 18.

24

Streseman, Erwin. *Ornithology: From Aristotle to the Present*. trans. Cathleen and Hans Epstein. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1975. On the divergence between the eye of the amateur and the eye of the professional, and its significance for the development of modern ornithology, see the invaluable essays collected in *Ibis*. Vol. 101. 1959.

25

Nilsson, Sven. *Skandinavisk Fauna, Föglarna*. 3rd edition. Lund: Gleerups, 1858. p. xxv. My translation.

Rubbish dump, Nolsóy.



Orality

In the Faroe Islands, sealanguage was a way of taking pleasure in and thus developing an attention to the archipelago that was inseparable from an ethics of caring for its environment. Consequently, many of the speakers I met connected the neglect of sealanguage by the younger generation to the latter's neglect of the environment. In recent years Robert Macfarlane has documented oral cultures of naming in the outer Hebrides similar to those I found in the Faroe Islands, and has drawn similar conclusions to those I have suggested regarding the disorientation towards place caused by loss of names for local flora and fauna.²⁶ Because the care with which these names were given seems to correlate with the care given to the environment that the names describe, oral cultures of naming are seen as a resource not only for scholars, but also for those seeking ethical practices that might be used to resist the worst effects of the consumerist revolution. Thus, since the 1990s—and particularly since the Anthropocene was accepted as the name for our current geological epoch²⁷—writers concerned for the future of the planet have begun to recognise in oral cultures an alternative to Western paradigms of being human.²⁸

Yet, as the anthropologist Philippe Descola remarks, in the question of seeking a way out of the present crisis “no ontology is better or more true in itself than another”.²⁹ Although there is a distinction between sealanguage's naming according to situation and scientific naming according to prototype, there is no strict division between the two. On the contrary, my conversation with Aksal suggested that sealanguage and ordinary naming are not competing accounts of knowledge, but non-competitive modes of knowing, both equally important in order to communicate, know and care for birds. Descola agrees: “rather than regard those two cognitive mechanisms as mutually exclusive, it is more reasonable to suppose that we use them alternately, depending on the object to be classified and along with other classificatory schemas such as spatial contiguity, origins, and spheres of activity.”³⁰

What is at stake, then, when we as writers of the environment are attracted to oral cultures is not—or at least ought not to be—the attempt to find in their lexicon the most environmentally friendly world-view with which to replace a failed Western ontology, but

26 Macfarlane, Robert. “A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook”. In Gareth Evans Gareth and Di Robson (eds.), *Towards Re-Enchantment: Place and Its Meanings*. London: Artevents. 2010. pp. 107–130. See also Macfarlane, Sven. *Landmarks*. London: Penguin. 2016.

27 Crutzen, Paul J., McNeil, John R. and Steffen, Will. “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?” *Ambio*. Vol. 36. 2007. pp. 614–621.

28 Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. London: Vintage. 1997. pp. 131–193.

29 Descola, Philippe. *The Ecology of Others*. trans. Genevieve Godbout and Benjamin P. Luley. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press. 2013. p. 66. In this passage Descola is responding to the work of Tim Ingold.

30 Descola, Philippe. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. trans. Janet Lloyd and Marshall Sahlins. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 2013. p. 240.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 66–67.

32 Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, p. 305.

33 Aquinas, *Summa*, Ia. 12. 1. co.

34 Latour, Bruno. *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2004.

the task of resisting the spell of world-views as such.³¹ This does not mean that the attempt to emulate oral cultures of naming is misguided romance. It simply means that what one emulates in oral culture is not material or visible, but formal or invisible: not the names themselves, but the way of naming which enables the names to be invented and come into use. Although sealanguage is a fascinating case and in itself a kind of poetry, it is the style of this language, rather than its particular phonemic structure, which is significant and points to a possible shared ethic of being human: sealanguage is a list of names, but it is also a habit, a way of naming. Descola terms such a shared experience the “relative universal”: universal because determined by the organism, relative because, although always mediated by context, that universal is indifferent to socius.³² To Descola the relative universal is a pre-reflexive experience of exteriority and interiority, of being embodied or alive. Aksal offered me a less abstract definition of this universal when he explained to me that the purpose of sealanguage was not survival, but enjoyment or pleasure. If the Anthropocene is predicated on the consumerist revolution, we might be surprised to learn that I am suggesting hedonism as a way of responding to the world it describes. But unless there is delight in the thing known, there can be no knowledge of it, which is why the ancients would often repeat that reason is pleasurable and the highest happiness.³³ And, if there is no knowledge, there is also no politics, or rather, there is politics that will recognise nature in name only—as Nature—but not nature in practice, as the pleasurable naming of so many birds, so many sightings, appearances, arrivals and departures.³⁴ The point is epistemological, but epistemology, as we saw earlier, is never divided from practice. While birds do not exist to be known by humans, when unknown by humans the task of caring for them (which only humans can perform) becomes very difficult, if not impossible. Learning from oral culture, then, is less a question of listing its words in place of our own, and more the hard task of reorienting our words and speech attentively by learning to speak every language as sealanguage: as the form of naming without the formalism of names, as enjoyment without division from knowledge. Today, when names are quickly becoming relics of what they once signified, contributing to this work can be the only standard and reward of speech.