

The Tabu Language of the Fishermen of Orkney and Shetland

FISHERMEN EVERYWHERE HAVE THEIR SUPERSTITIONS, and amongst the most interesting of these is the sea-language, whereby everyday things are referred to by different names at sea. Round the coasts of Britain the salmon, pig, rabbit, hare, and minister are the chief subjects named by fishermen in oblique terms, but nowhere is there such a well developed sea-language, much of it still surviving in the memory, as in Orkney, and above all in Shetland, where upwards of 450 words have been recorded. Of these, fewer than 20 come from Orkney, as follows:

Geographical features: *bairn*, a little hill (figurative use of the word for a child), *hog*, a larger hill.

Atmospheric conditions: *fairweather*, *guidsweather*, thunder.

Religion: *burly hoose*, *munger-hoose*, a church.

Human beings: *pirrens*, children.

Sea creatures: *hide*, a seal, *himsel*, *kleppy* the halibut or turbot.

Fishing tools and equipment: *biter*, *ragger*, a knife, *damp*, the end of a longline, *horse-leg-been* and *keel-root*, the right hand and left hand oars in a boat, *klaran*, an anchor.

Fishing: *kan*, a superstitious term implying magic art or skill, used in trying for fish — to fish "on so-and-so's kan" might bring a good catch.

The majority are Norse, except *fairweather*, *hide* (= skin), *himsel* (the personal pronoun), and *kan*, probably all of Scots origin. *Guidsweather*, though compared by Marwick to the Danish *guds-vejr* is just as likely to be Scots. It does not occur in Shetland. The frequent difficulty of deciding whether a particular word is Norse or Scots is a mark of the intimate blend of the two cultures in Orkney.

Of peculiar interest are the words *horse-leg-been* and *keel-root*. Solheim has tried to show that these terms are Scots translations of the Norwegian place-names *Fola-foten*, in *Hisøy*, and *Kjølrota*, an off-lying skerry in the *Sognefjord* area, rationalising the transference of place names to the names of oars or rowing positions by suggesting their derivation from navigational directions by Vikings sailing these waters. If accepted, the coincidence is remarkable, and establishes a direct link between the two areas. However, Marwick has also heard the terms *owse-room* and *backber* for men rowing on the starboard and port sides, using the names for the parts of the boat in which they sat. It is possible that *horse-leg-been* and *keel-root* are corruptions of names of parts of the boat, or jocular terms of purely local significance, and not place-names whose sense-transference in the manner suggested by Solheim is unparalleled.

The Shetland material is too bulky for detailed treatment now, and the following does no more than provide broad groupings with selected examples.

Geographical features: Included here are place-names applied at sea to prominent landmarks, used as guides in reaching fishing grounds. The name may be altered only a little by a plural or diminutive ending, or by using a simple instead of a compound form. Sometimes the sea-names belong to an earlier culture, or are in some way descriptive. Examples from North Yell include *Gord* or *Midgord* for Midbrake, *Leegord* for Houlland, *Reegord* for Brakon, *Laygord* for Toft, *Husebigd* for Torfhouse, *Seatersby* for Westafirth, and *Glippaby* for Gloup. These appear to reflect the earlier settlement pattern of a tightly knit Norse community, whilst the land names suggest changes due largely to scotticisation of language and forms of land holding and land

use. Thus, there still remains at Westafirth the farm of Setter, from which *Seatersby* came, and above the Voe of Gloup lies Glippapund, no doubt the original pund (sheep enclosure) of the Gloup people, so that *Glippaby* was properly Gloup. The *-gord* (Old Norse *gardr*) names too suggest an outward spread from an original nucleus, in relation to which later farms were named. The fundamental nature of the group is further emphasized by terms like *bigg*, *bigd*, a farm or village, *bø* a farm, homefield, *fell*, a mountain or height, *glab*, a cleft, small valley, etc., all roots from which place-names have been formed in considerable numbers.

Living creatures (excluding fish):

(a) birds: the cormorant, eagle, and puffin, and the homely farmyard cock and hen which rejoice in twelve names between them. This is a more limited range than in the Faroe Islands, where bird fowling was, and is, of high economic importance.

(b) farmyard animals: the sheep, ram, horse, mare, pig, and cow. The names *hokken*, *-ni*, *-ner*, a horse and *pertek*, a mare, deserve special attention since the former may be related to Dutch *hakkeneie*, a small horse, and the latter to Low German *perd*. The Dutchmen who visited Shetland in quantity during the great days of the herring fishing before its local development in the eighteenth century were fond of hiring Shetland ponies to run races for sport. Their language was well known, and the borrowing of words was easy.

(c) pets and pests: the dog, for one of whose names, *bjenek*, Jakobsen suggests a Lappish origin, the cat, with twenty one names mainly indicating scraping, mewing, or wailing, the mouse with sixteen names, including the ironically jocular *bohomin*, from Old Norse *búhundr*, a watch dog, and the rat (rarely).

(d) sea creatures: the otter, and seal.

(e) human beings: father, mother, brother, father-in-law, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, sister-in-law, implying that the social organisation underlying the fishing teams was based on the extended family; a girl, a man, men or people in general (*foleks*), children, and a woman or wife. The latter was a *fru*, *fron*, *halihwiffer*, *hema*, *hemelt*, *hosper*, *hospra*, *hostan(i) kuna*, *søski* and *yemelt*, all Norse with a possibility here and there of Dutch or Low German influence, except for the Scots *hemelt*, *yemelt*, borrowed early to judge by the alternation *h/y* (from palatalisation of the initial *h* — i.e. *h > hj > j*).

Household and outdoor terms: The fireside is particularly prominent, the fire itself having thirteen names and the tongs eight. From the *fasta* or *festin* (crook) over the fire hung the *grødek*, *grøta*, or *honger* (kettle, pot). To *vair de hunger* was to turn the pot over the fire or to move fish and potatoes from one side of it to another when boiling. These things were very familiar to the men, who carried them to their fishing lodges as part of the essential equipment. There were also names for the water bucket, churn, butter, sewing needle, scissors, spinning wheel, and box bed.

Outside, bere and oats, the mill, and peat for fuel were all tabu. The name for a potato, *knubbi*, cannot antedate about 1750, when the crop began to appear in these islands.

Religion: One of the most widespread of fishermen's dislikes when at sea is the minister, whose noa names are *beniman*, *hoidin*, *loder*, *predikanter*, *prestengolva*, *singnar*, and *upstander*, or, in its older form, *upstaar*. The church was the *bønhus*, *bunek*, *byorg*, *kloster*, or *munger-hoose*, and preaching was *mulsin*! The Scots *black coat*, or some variant, is known but not used.

The sky and the weather: There are names for wind, rain, thunder, the stars, the moon, *globeren*, *glom*, *glunta*, *monen*, and the sun, *feger*, *foger*, *fogin*, *glid (a)*, *shiner*, *sulin*.

Fishing: (a) Boats. The emphasis is on the primary functional features: the boat itself, *basek*, *far (lek)*, *shar*, the oars, the thole, the mast, the sail, *duk*, *klut*, *skega*, *skye*, the baling scoop, the compass, *daikel*, *kokkel*, *legvise(r)*, *righter*, *vigvise*, and the fog-horn, *honnek*, made of a cow's horn.

(b) The fishing grounds, including the sea itself, *dyup*, *hallost*, *halltott*, *l(y)og*, usually with the implication of deep-sea fishing grounds, surf and the noise it makes, and the sea-floor.

(c) Fishing equipment: baskets, buoys, some of which were made of dog-skins, bait or *nebert*, gathered *shusamillabakka*, between the sea and the shore, the fishing line whose end had to be called the *arm*, *arvi*, or *damp*, sinkers of pebbles or stones, fish hooks, the wooden V-shaped reel on which the line was wound, the reel or *bunki* on the gunwale for hauling in the line, the gaff, *huggiestaff*, *hudek*, *hun*, *hwadi*, *klepp*, *pikki*, the forked implement of wood or bone for getting hooks out of the fish's throat, the *gap-* or *gum-stick*, and the knife and whetstone.

In this connection there are a great many idiomatic expressions relating to fish nibbling at the bait, exhorting them to bite, the appearance of fish on a line being hauled, clearing a line stuck on the bottom, giving evasive answers about the numbers of fish caught, and so on. These may be almost pure Norse, or translations of Norse idioms, and though they cannot be discussed in detail here, it is worth emphasizing that it is in relation to the central act of the fisherman's life, the act of fishing itself, that the old sea-language is syntactically most complete.

(d) The fish. The generic term is *fisk* or *fusk*, and the names refer primarily to fish caught on the handline, not in nets. Herring fishing has left no mark on the sea-language. Most prominent are the cod, *drolti*, *golti*, *kabbi*, *knabi*, *knavi*, *shukkollo*, the ling, *hersel'*, *hulefer*, *hwida*, *longa-fish*, *mamsa*, *skudra*, and the halibut, *baldi(n)*, *drengi*, *gloff*, *himsel* (compare the feminine pronoun for the ling), *leger*, *pigvar*, and *plousi*. In addition the coal fish, cusk, dogfish, eel, grommet, mackerel, ray fish, shark, and whale, *fyedin*, *krekin* have sea names.

(e) Fishermen's lodging and dress. At some of the remoter fishing stations on the coast of Shetland, the men occupied special dwelling in the fishing season, a boat's crew to each. These were called *lodges* ashore, but *hoids* or *høseleks* at sea.

Clothes in general are *claedin*, and individual items with sea names were stock-ings, breeches, mittens, *dags*, *handibodeks*, *muliaks*, a hat, an outer coat, *furtail*, a skin coat, *skinfell* or *fūbester*, and a flannel shirt or similar covering, *wily coat*. Shoes

are *ifareks*, and waterproof sea-boots, to which the Shetlanders seem to have been partial, were *derteks*, *lers*, *stenglins*, *stenkels*, *stivalirs*, or *stavalirs*.

A higher proportion of these words are of Dutch or Low German origin than in any of the other groups, no doubt because of trade contacts with the Dutch fishing fleet, which was an element of great importance in the economy of the Low Countries from at least the twelfth century. No doubt sea-boots figured in the trading booths known to have clustered round the Shetland coasts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A FULL ANALYSIS OF THIS WORD HOARD OF TABU NAMES can tell us a good deal about the culture contacts, material culture, social and work organisation, and even the forms of land holding in the Northern Isles. Statistically, the considerable difference between Orkney and Shetland is emphasized, for Orkney, essentially a farming area, and heavily influenced from Scotland from at least the fourteenth century, retains a mere 4% of the whole number.

Only a few of the names are Scots, Dutch, or Low German. The majority are Norse, and relate to the pre-industrial practical realities and everyday functioning and surroundings of a fisherman's world, with particular implications of magic and mystery in the terms used at that imponderable moment when the fish may or may not bite. They give the impression that they are in great measure survivals of the old Norn language, maintained by tightly knit work groups of native Shetlanders in defiance of the incoming Scots speech (from which the majority of the land names come), just as the fishing communities of the Isle of Man for long retained their Gaelic at sea. As such, they provide invaluable clues to the material culture, work, and attitudes of earlier generations.

But this is by no means all the story. They are also in the direct line of tradition out of which came the intricate system of kennings or circumlocutions that characterized Skaldic verse, and the alternative names that the dwarf Alvis attributed to men, gods, dwarfs, giants, etc. Indeed some of the Alvismal names resemble Shetland tabu names, e.g. *fagrahvél*, "fair wheel", *foger*, sun, *djúpan mar/dyup*, *mar*, *sea*, *forbrennir/brenner*, fire. The sea language of the Northern Isles of Scotland leads directly back to the mythology and habits of thought of the primitive culture of the Northern world, which, though forming part of an aspect of superstition of world wide prevalence, could on occasion become sophisticated enough to form the stuff of poetry.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- DREVER, J.
1916. "Taboo" Words among Shetland fishermen. *Old-Lore Miscellany of Orkney, Shetland, Caithness and Sutherland* (London), 10, pp. 235-240.
- IRVINE, T.
1814. Manuscript notes in: *The Midbrake Papers*, Bundle 388, in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, Edinburgh.
- JAKOBSEN, J.
1897. *The Dialect and Place Names of Shetland. Two popular lectures.* Lerwick.
1928. *An Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland.* London-Copenhagen.
1936. *The Place Names of Shetland.* London-Copenhagen.
- JÓNSSON, F.
1926. *Sæmundar-Edda.* København. (Alvissmál, pp. 154-161.)
- LAURENSEN, A.
1874. On certain Beliefs and Phrases of Shetland Fisherman. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* (Edinburgh), 10, pp. 711-716.
- LOCKWOOD, W. B.
1955. Word Taboo in the Language of the Faroese Fisherman. *Transactions of the Philological Society* (London), 102, pp. 1-24.
1961. *The Faroese Bird Names.* Færoensia. Textus et investigationes auspiciis Societatis Litterarum Faeroensium Hafniensis. Vol. 5. København. pp. 60-71.
- LUNDBERG, O.
1954. On the Shetland Sea Language as a Source of Old Norse Literature. in: W. D. Simpson (ed.), *The Viking Congress* [Lerwick 1950]. Aberdeen University Studies, 132. Aberdeen.
- MARWICK, H.
1929. *The Orkney Norn.* London.
- ROEDER, C.
1904. *Manx Notes and Queries.*
- SOLHEIM, S.
1947. Folafofen-Kjølrøta. *Maal og Minne* (Oslo), pp. 1-14.