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journal or publication title	Senri Ethnological Studies
volume	104
page range	147-166
year	2021-03-01
URL	<a href="http://doi.org/10.15021/00009660">http://doi.org/10.15021/00009660</a>

# **The Pilot Whale Hunt and Indigenous Culture of the Faroe Islands: A Comparison with Taiji, Japan**

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## **1. Introduction**

Like Taiji, a small town in Wakayama Prefecture, Japan, the Faroe Islands are well-known for their coastal whale hunts; indeed, the Faroes are sometimes called the “Taiji of the North” by environmentalists. The Faroe Islands are a self-governing protectorate of Denmark, situated at 62°N, 6°W in the North Atlantic, midway between Iceland, Scotland, and Norway. Their latitude is almost the same as that of Anchorage, Alaska. The Faroe Islands comprise 18 major islands with a total land area of 1,399 square kilometers. The islands’ mountainous terrain, volcanic soil, and cold climate make them unsuitable for agriculture. In the capital city of Tórshavn, trees have been planted, but in the mountains, there are only short grasses and moss, no indigenous trees. The land is rich in water resources, with numerous waterfalls running down the mountains, but because of the poor soil and sheep grazing, trees do not grow without intensive nurturing. Because of this, the Faroese depend on the fishing industry, sheep husbandry, and tourism. What has made these small islands—which have a population of just over 50,000—well-known worldwide is the drive fishing of pilot whales. Because whaling is conducted onshore, in full view of the public, it has been targeted by international anti-whaling organizations for decades. The Sea Shepherd Conservation Society (SSCS), which is known for its direct action, has been especially active in the protests against the Faroese whale hunt.

This paper begins with a brief look at the history, culture, and industry of the Faroe Islands, followed by an examination of whaling culture (i.e., hunting methods, the distribution of whale meat and blubber, and food culture), with a partial comparison with Taiji. The sections that follow explore how the Faroese have responded to critics of whaling by improving their hunting methods and discusses the newly recognized dangers associated with the Faroese tradition of whaling owing to the high levels of toxic contaminations in the whale meat and blubber.

## **2. History, Culture, and Industry of the Faroe Islands**

The name “Faroe Islands” derives from old Norse words for “sheep islands.” The first

settlers to the islands are believed to have been monks who came from Ireland in the 6th century CE (Nauerby 1996; Proctor 2013; Fielding, Davis, and Singleton 2015; Government of Faroese Islands 2018a). In the 9th century, Vikings from Norway settled on the islands. Norway had annexed the islands by the 12th century, and they became a part of the dual monarchy of Denmark and Norway in 1380. Ever since the union between Denmark and Norway dissolved and Norway fell under the control of Sweden in 1814, the islands have been governed by Denmark, except for a short period during World War II when British troops occupied the islands. In 1948, the Faroe Islands acquired self-governing status (home rule), except in the areas of defence, foreign policy, the judiciary, and monetary policy. The Faroes have autonomy in such areas as the conservation and management of living marine resources, environmental protection, trade, taxation and customs, energy, transport, communication, social security, and education. They have their own prime minister, currency, and flag, and they have one of the world's oldest parliaments, along with two seats in the Danish Parliament. Unlike Denmark, the Faroe Islands are not part of the European Union, which permits them greater autonomy in policymaking in some areas.

The climate is cool owing to the high latitude; even in summer, the temperature is around 11°C (52°F). In winter, the temperature is relatively mild thanks to the Mexican Gulf Stream, with an average temperature around 3°C (37°F), which is higher than that of Sendai City, Japan. Throughout the year, the hours of sunlight are short and dominated by clouds, rain, mist, and strong winds. The weather is highly changeable and unpredictable, even during a single day. The soil is infertile, and given that and the cold weather, agriculture has not developed as an industry; only potatoes and rhubarb are grown, and those only by households for private use. The primary industry of the Faroe Islands is the fishing of cod, mackerel, and halibut; the cultivation of Atlantic salmon; and seafood processing. Fishing and its related industries account for around 20% of the gross national product (GNP) and 80% of the total export of goods and services. Among them, Atlantic salmon, which is famous for its high quality, is the biggest export; it is even exported to Japan. For domestic consumption, the Faroese keep approximately 70,000 sheep for meat and wool, and they keep cows for dairy farming. Traditional local cuisine includes seabirds (e.g., puffins, northern fulmars) and whales, especially long-finned pilot whales. Seabird eggs are a precious source of protein for the Faroese. Recently there has been a notable upswing in tourism, which now accounts for approximately 6% of the Faroes' GNP and is the second-most important industry, after fishing. The subsidies received from Denmark, which in 2013 totalled 630 million Danish kroner (approximately US\$94million), also contribute a great deal to the economy (Fielding, Davis, and Singleton 2015: 42).

The Faroes have nurtured their own distinct culture. The core of their culture is the Faroese language, which descended from Old Norse and is said to be one of the closest relatives of the original language of the Vikings. Because it has been isolated from other Nordic languages for centuries, the Faroese language has not been greatly influenced by other languages. Once the islands came under the control of Denmark, the official language became Danish, and Faroese was spoken mainly by local farmers and fishermen

as a dialect with no written form. Nonetheless, the oral tradition was passed down for centuries through folklore and ballads. The national chain dance, a circle dance accompanied by a cappella ballads, is a living heritage as well as a tourist attraction. Faroese became the national language after the islands acquired self-governing status in 1948, and the first Faroese-language dictionary was published in 1998.

One of the best-known local cuisines is wind-dried sheep's meat. The locals also eat wind-dried whale meat and cod regularly. But traditional dishes are not the only ones available: there are several pizza and hamburger places in Tórshavn. Locals buy food in superstores that offer almost the same selection as other European stores. The life of the Faroese has been highly modernized, especially in urban areas.

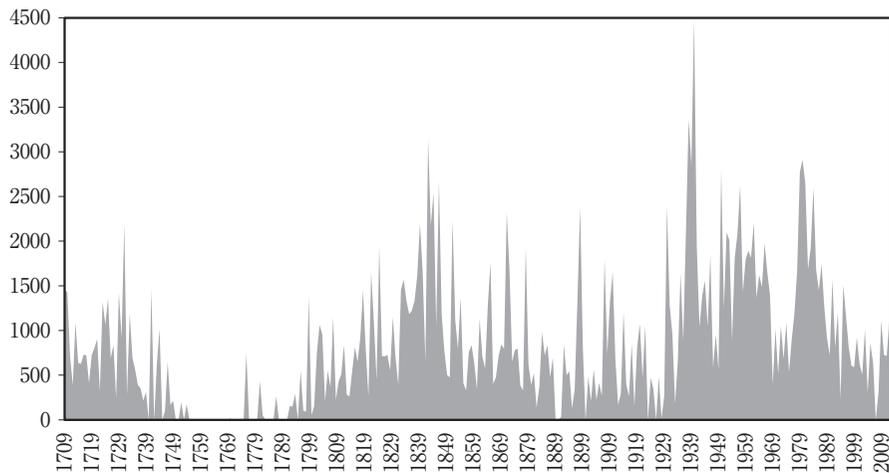
### 3. Whaling Culture

#### 3.1 History of Whaling and Outline of the Pilot Whale Hunt

The following sections discuss the pilot whale hunt in the Faroes. The main quarry of the Faroese is long-finned pilot whales, a family of toothed whales. Mature males can grow to 7 meters and 2.5 tons.<sup>1)</sup> The history of the pilot whale hunt, which is called *grindadráp* in Faroese (and “grind” in English), dates back to the Viking Age, according to archaeological evidence. The first public document that referred to the Faroese pilot whale hunt is known as the Sheep Letter—a royal decree enacted in 1298 by a duke who later became king of Norway. The Sheep Letter mainly dealt with the regulations of sheep husbandry, but it also mentioned rules for the use of whales. In the Faroe Islands, statistics for whale catches (dates, places, and numbers) have been kept since 1584 (Government of Faroe Islands 2018b). Although no records are available for the period between 1641 and 1708, the statistics are accurate, and the Faroese boast that they “probably the longest continuous statistics for the use of wildlife anywhere in the world” (Government of Faroe Islands 2018b). The catch numbers have fluctuated over the years, but the average catch is about 800 a year (Figure 1). In 1941, the yearly catch reached its highest at 4,480, while only 2,459 whales were caught in total for the 45 years between 1750 and 1795. This suggests that the catch depended on natural forces beyond human control. The average catch in the 21st century was roughly 600 a year. In any case, for the Faroese, who live in a harsh environment, whales have been a historically important natural resource. The meat and blubber are used for human consumption, and in the past, the blubber was used for making lamp oil, the skin for rope, and the stomach for fishing buoys (Joensen 2009). Pilot whale meat and blubber currently account for roughly 20–30% of Faroese meat production (Joensen 2009: 15).

In modern times, legal systems were developed in the Faroe Islands, and in 1832, the first pilot whaling regulation came into force. The 1832 regulation prescribed the details regarding the hunt: the division of whaling districts, the distribution methods of whale meat and blubber, the penalties for violating the rules, and so on—all of which were previously regulated by local rules and customs—and all local people were required to obey the new regulation. With the introduction of the codified regulation, the grind had become “a part of general Faroese public life and not simply a local matter” (Joensen

2009: 69). The written regulation was useful because it transmitted knowledge and expertise of the hunt and distribution methods to the next generation, especially when the hunt was infrequently conducted during years when the catch rates were poor (Kerins 2010). The regulation has been revised as necessary to keep up with the times; the last revision was in 2015.



**Figure 1** The number of catches of pilot whales between 1709 and 2015.  
(Source: Bjarni Mikkelsen, Faroese Natural History Museum)

The pilot whale drive hunt is generally conducted as follows (Ministry of Fisheries 2013; Fielding, Davis, and Singleton 2015). The Faroe Islands are administratively divided into six districts, and 23 shores and inlets are designated as whaling bays. Whaling is not allowed in other places. Each of the six districts has an administrator (*sýslumaður*, or sheriff) who supervises the hunt, but the person responsible for organizing and overseeing the hunt is the *grindaformaður* (whaling foreman) stationed at each whaling bay. In every whaling bay, four men are appointed as whaling foremen on the basis of their experience and knowledge of the hunt. The foremen's term of service is five years, and they must be over 15 years old to be eligible (Joensen 2009; Kerins 2010; Fielding, Davis, and Singleton 2015).

Unlike the hunt in Taiji, where the whaling season is limited from autumn to spring, the Faroese pilot whale hunt is open throughout the year. Nevertheless, summer is the peak season for pilot whales to approach the coast of the Faroe Islands in pursuit of squid. Local people or fishermen at sea or on land who sight a school of whales report this to the district administrator. The administrator immediately transmits the message to the whaling foremen in the nearest bay. The whaling foremen, in consultation with the administrator, decide whether and where a drive should take place, based on weather and sea conditions as well as the distance of the whales from shore. The local people are

immediately notified of the decision, and they suspend their work and everyday activities and set sail straight toward the whales. Then, under the direction of whaling foremen on the sea, they arrange the ships and boats in a semicircle behind the whales to herd them toward the shore. In the formation, the larger ships position themselves on the edge of the circle, and the small boats, since they can turn around more easily, take the front position. In recent years, gasoline-powered boats have replaced traditional wooden rowboats.



**Photo 1** Pilot whale drive hunt (Source: Bjarni Mikkelsen, Faroese Natural History Museum)

When the Faroese drive whales, they use special tools, such as a stone tied to a rope to be cast and pulled back again. They throw it from the boat into the water behind the whales to stop the whales from escaping. Unlike whalers in Taiji, they do not use fishing nets. Threatened by the boats and the submerged tools, the whales swim straight to the shore and beach themselves or get mired in shallow water. Even if the whales manage to stay in the water, they cannot return to the open sea because the circle of boats blocks the escape routes. People waiting ashore put a blunt hook (gaff) attached to a rope into the whale's blowhole and then pull the rope to drag the whale up on the beach. They then kill the whale by cutting its spinal cord with a special spinal lance. The beach turns red as blood spouts from the whales, and the Faroese are soaked in the red water, the sight of which is shocking to viewers who are not familiar with the hunt (Photo 1). The mood of the scene is best expressed by Joensen (2009: 29), who describes the whale hunt as providing “not only food, but also excitement, drama and the opportunity for people to gather in an otherwise humdrum existence.”

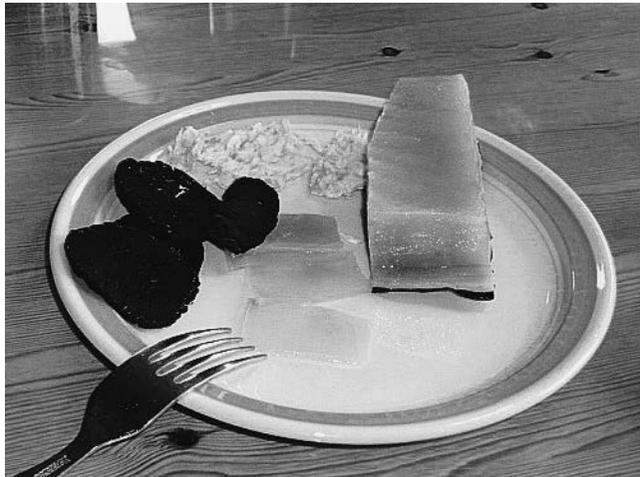
### 3.2 Distribution of Whale Meat/Blubber and Food Culture

In the Faroes, the carcasses of whales are put in a row on the beach or brought to nearby flatlands by trucks and cranes. On the sea, the whaling foremen are in charge of the hunt, but on land the district administrator takes control. The administrator appoints two or more reliable and independent locals to assess the number, length, and value of whales; the administrator then decides how to distribute the meat and blubber (Ministry of Fisheries 2013). The assessors carve each whale's head with an Arabic numeral (in consecutive order) identifying the whale to expedite distribution. The value of the whale is represented by a traditional measurement called *skinn*; one *skinn* is roughly equivalent to 38 kilograms of meat and 34 kilograms of blubber (Kerins 2010: 132). The value of a whale 3.15 meters long from the eye to the anus is about 20 *skinn* (Joensen 2009: 125). The whale's length is measured using a traditional assessment pole or a tape measure, and the *skinn* value is carved in Roman numerals into the flipper of the carcass.<sup>2)</sup> In parallel with the measurement, the belly of the whale is cut open with a knife and the entrails removed to retard spoilage

The distribution method of the meat and blubber is stipulated in the regulation, but it can vary according to the traditions and customs of the district and the on-the-spot judgment of the district administrator. Thus, the process can be difficult to interpret from the outside.<sup>3)</sup> The 2013 revision of the regulation on how to share the catch of the hunt is summarized as follows (Ministry of Fisheries 2013):<sup>4)</sup>

1. Finder's whale: The *finder's whale* goes to the boat that first sights a school of whales, sends the message, and follows the school until other boats arrive. When a school is sighted and reported from land or from a boat that does not follow the school until other boats arrive, the finder's whale is divided between those who sent the message and the first boat to arrive at the school. Those entitled to the finder's whale may pick out the largest whale or smaller whales that add up to the same value in *skinn* as the largest. If several people sight the school at the same time, the finder's whale is divided among them.
2. Watch: For sightings during the day watch, 1/2 *skinn* goes to each boat used, and 1/2 *skinn* goes to each person; at night, this is 1 *skinn* each.
3. Assessors: The assessors receive 2 *skinn* for every 100 whales, or at the discretion of the district administrator.
4. The district administrator: This person receives 2% of the total number of *skinn*.
5. Foremen: The foremen each receive 1% of the total number of *skinn*.
6. Catch share: Every person 14 years of age or over who has taken part in the drive and/or the kill, in a boat or on land, is entitled to a share of the catch, the maximum allocation of which is stipulated according to the size of boats. The district administrator determines the size of the share.
7. Home share: Shares are allocated to municipalities or local communities, which arrange their own distribution in the district among people who register for the catch. The district administrator has authority over the allocation, should difficulties arise.

If the catch is too small to allocate some to local residents, half of the catch is divided among those who participated in the hunt, and the other half is sold to local food stores and the money deposited in the Faroese public treasury (Joensen 2009: 136–137). If the catch is big enough, the district administrator calculates the shares and distributes tickets stating how much meat and blubber each person will receive.<sup>5)</sup> Those with tickets start flensing their assigned carcasses. Blubber is first flensed with knives and spread out on the ground like a mattress, skin side down. Then the meat is cut away and placed on the blubber mattress to keep it off the ground. Each person flenses their allotted share and puts it in a bucket or a plastic bag to take it home.



**Photo 2** Wind-dried pilot whale meat (black), dried fish (above), and salted blubber (bottom center and right) (Photo by Motohiro Kawashima, September, 2015)

Meat and blubber are processed in a traditional manner (Joensen 2009). When it is fresh, the meat is grilled as a steak seasoned with gravy and served with potatoes and blubber. It is also popular to boil the meat and blubber together with potatoes. The meat is often preserved by cutting it into strips and hanging them outside to wind dry for two months. This is a traditional way of processing sheep and fish meat in the Faroes. After aging and fermenting, the dried black meat tastes like beef jerky, with a gamy flavor. The locals eat it in slices. The blubber is usually preserved in a bucket of saltwater. The locals slice the salted blubber and eat it raw. Its taste slightly resembles *onomi*, or the base of the whale's tail, prized by the Japanese as a delicacy. The blubber is gooey and contains more fat than *onomi*, with a pungent smell, so beginners may find eating blubber challenging. However, for the locals in the Faroe Islands, where the soil is not suitable for agriculture, whale meat and blubber have long been important sources of vitamins A and B, iron, protein, and unsaturated fatty acids. Nowadays, most homes have refrigerators to keep meat and blubber, yet the tradition of wind-dried meat and salted

blubber is maintained (Photo 2). Given the fluctuations in the catches of pilot whales, it is difficult to provide an accurate number, but estimates are that pilot whale meat accounts for approximately 25% of Faroese domestic meat production (Singleton 2016: 38).

The features distinct to the Faroese pilot whale hunt are these: (1) Unlike other whale hunts in many parts of the world, it is carried out not by professionals but by local amateur residents; (2) It is a passive form of whaling in that it is conducted only when a school of whales passes by the shore; (3) It is not hidden from public view; and (4) It is a noncommercial activity, and most of the meat and blubber is shared among participants and local residents.<sup>6)</sup>

In contrast, in Taiji, professional whalers who are members of a local fishermen's cooperative search for whales off the coast with a fleet of boats (Endo 2011; Ohsumi 2017). When they spot a school of whales, they herd the whales into a designated bay and its inlet by making noises with steel pipes lowered into the water to disrupt and scare the whales. Then they block the whales' escape routes with nets. The fishermen use the spinal lances introduced from the Faroes to slaughter the whales, although some whales are kept alive and sold to aquariums. When the fishermen kill the whales, they put up plastic sheets to shield the slaughter from public view. Some of the whale meat and blubber is shared among the fishermen and their friends and relatives as gifts, but most of it is put up for auction in the market and sold at stores or distributed to restaurants. Some of the meat and blubber is sent to supermarkets as far away as Kitakyushu City. Table 1 compares the characteristics of the Faroese and Taiji whale

**Table 1** Comparison of whale drive hunts in the Faroe Islands and Taiji

	Faroe Islands	Taiji
First hunt	Viking Age (9th century)	1606
Participants	Local amateur residents	Fishing professionals
Targets	Mainly long-finned pilot whales, but also bottlenose dolphins, white-sided dolphins, and others	Short-finned pilot whales, Risso's dolphins, bottlenose dolphins, striped dolphins, and others
Season	All year, but mainly in summer	September to April
Spotting	Passive and opportunistic	Active searching by boat
Drive method	Ships and boats arranged in a semicircle herd the whales toward designated bays	Ships arranged in a semicircle herd the whales toward designated bays, blocking escape routes with nets
Kill method	Live whales dragged to beach with ropes attached to blunt hooks jammed into the whales' blowholes; beached whales killed with spinal lances	Beached and netted whales killed with spinal lances for slaughter; some kept alive and sold to aquariums
Processing	Carcasses flensed with knives, first cutting away blubber and then meat	Carcasses taken to the fish market and flensed with large dismantling knives
Distribution	Meat and blubber shared among participants of the hunt and locals, as stipulated in the regulation	Some meat and blubber shared among fishermen and their friends and relatives; most auctioned and sold in stores or distributed to restaurants
Cooking	Fresh meat grilled as a steak or boiled; meat wind-dried to jerky form; blubber salted in water and eaten raw	Most common as slices of raw meat; also stewed or grilled

(Source: Endo 2011; Ohsumi 2017; Wakayama-ken 2018)

drive hunts.

## 4. The Anti-Whaling Movement and Its Consequences

### 4.1 Development of the Anti-Whaling Movement

Traditional acceptance of the pastoral pilot whale hunt in the Faroe Islands has been shaken by the rise of the international anti-whaling movement. It was not until the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (known as the Stockholm Conference) that efforts to stop all whaling became part of the international agenda. The conference called for a 10-year moratorium on commercial whaling, and the anti-whaling movement was launched.<sup>7)</sup> Whales became symbols of environmental protection on a global scale. The call for a moratorium was rejected by the International Whaling Commission (IWC), the executive body that formulates and implements regulatory measures to conserve whale stocks and make possible the orderly development of the whaling industry. However, anti-whaling nations (notably, the United States and the United Kingdom), with the help of some environmental organizations (e.g., Greenpeace and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)), gained a majority to adopt the moratorium in the 1982 IWC meeting. Because the IWC is concerned only with large whale species, the pilot whale falls outside its jurisdiction.

The Faroese pilot whale drive hunt attracted international attention through sheer coincidence (Nauerby 1996: 156). In 1981, just before the adoption of the whaling moratorium, several Greenpeace activists visited the Faroes to inspect the Faroese hunting of fin whales.<sup>8)</sup> During the stay, they happened to witness the pilot whale hunt and wrote a critical report. In 1984, subsequent investigations led to the establishment of a British Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), whose reports and publications on the “cruel” hunt attracted the attention of other environmental organizations such as Greenpeace and the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). Meanwhile, the national Danish television station broadcast footage of the Faroese pilot whale hunt. Before long, the bloody images had been transmitted to numerous organizations, and they were presented at the 1984 IWC meeting in Bournemouth, England. A press campaign against the Faroese whale hunt started. The *Daily Express*, a right-wing British tabloid, carried a front-page article on 17 April 1985 with the headline “Blood on the Beaches” (Nauerby 1996: 156). The negative image of the hunt thus became well established, and international condemnation has been directed against the Faroese ever since. Environmental and animal protection organizations such as the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCS) and Humane Society International (HSI) joined the anti-whaling coalition, and some environmental organizations started a boycott against imports from the Faroes. They still occasionally issue joint statements against the Faroese pilot whale hunt or address the subject on their websites.

Currently, the bitterest critic of the Faroese pilot whale hunt is the nonprofit environmental organization, the SSCS. Paul Watson founded the SSCS in 1977 after he was ousted from Greenpeace over disagreements over campaign tactics and organizational structure. Watson started his anti-whaling campaigns in 1974, when he was still a

member of Greenpeace. For Watson, who says he is “prepared to die to defend the whales” (Watson 1994: 164), the whaling issue has become one of the most important environmental concerns. Although Captain Watson is careful not to harm people, he shows no hesitation in destroying property that he believes is used in illegal fishing activities. SSCS activists have so far rammed several whaling ships, cut the nets used to catch whales, and used ropes to entangle the propellers of whaling ships.

The SSCS waged its anti-whaling campaign against the Faroese in 1985 and 1986, then resumed its campaign in 2000 and again in 2011. From 2014 to 2016, the NGO waged its campaign for three consecutive years (SSCS 2015; 2016). Among these campaigns, the biggest was Operation Grindstop 2014, held from mid-June to early October 2014; about 500 people from 27 countries joined as volunteers (Singleton 2016). On land, volunteers in black clothing bearing the Sea Shepherd logo were deployed along several whaling shores to watch for whale hunts and raise the alarm. At sea, volunteers on two large boats and several small, fast boats were on patrol to disrupt the hunt and drive the whales away from the land. The SSCS also engaged in a media campaign; they videotaped their activities and disseminated the images worldwide on their website. This shocked the residents of the islands, whose population is only about 50,000. The SSCS’s campaign ended with the Danish authorities arresting some members and seizing one of their boats for “illegal” activities. The SSCS is held in low regard by the Faroese, who accuse the organization of ignoring Faroese tradition and culture and disseminating false information about whale population sizes and the realities of the hunt. Some Faroese disparage SSCS as a “money machine” because the group receives donations to fund its operations.<sup>9)</sup>

Pilot whales are not an endangered species. The IWC estimates are that the whale population in the Central and Eastern North Atlantic in 1989 was approximately 780,000 (IWC 2016). A more recent survey conducted in 2007 estimated the number of long-finned pilot whales in the Iceland–Faroese area at about 128,000 (ASCOBANS 2012). Why, then, is the Faroese pilot whale hunt criticized by environmental organizations? First, the Faroese are not regarded as “indigenous” people but Danish citizens who live in a market economy. Second, the hunt is conducted outside the jurisdiction of the IWC. Third, there is no catch quota, and the Faroese do not distinguish among the whales; they hunt lactating females and their calves without hesitation. Fourth, the hunt is conducted in full public view and involves shocking scenes of slaughter, bloodshed, and evisceration (Kerins 2010: 19). To elaborate on the first point, whaling by indigenous people such as the Inuit in the Arctic region has been targeted by environmental organizations in the past. Yet partly because of activists’ qualms of conscience and empathic concern for those in a weak position both economically and culturally, indigenous people are often excluded from criticism; bullying the weak is never an admirable quality, and doing so is likely to damage the reputation of environmental organizations that rely heavily on donations from citizens. In contrast, well-off societies like the Japanese and the Faroese make ideal targets for environmental activists precisely because they are not weak and they do not need to hunt whales to survive. Regarding the fourth point, the uniqueness of the Faroese pilot whale hunt is perhaps best expressed by the late Faroese writer Jørgen-

Frantz Jacobsen:

It is remarkable that the Faroese, who do not know war or murder, love the *grindadráp*. They simply cannot resist this drama. It must be a sort of atavism. The Viking spirit suddenly comes to life again.... What will you think about this steady people, when you see a peaceable man in light summer clothes with a cane and a straw hat suddenly seize a knife between his teeth and leap out into the bloody sea, swim around, and stab right and left? (as quoted in Joensen 2009: 220)

This is a phenomenon that even the Faroese cannot explain. It is not difficult to imagine the shock of citizens from elsewhere when they see the bloody hunt for the first time. Most people are taught since childhood to respect the lives of animals, and although most people are omnivorous than vegetarian, many people have never seen animals slaughtered before and prefer not to think about the source of their meat. Many outraged people, especially in the West, have written letters to the Faroese government to denounce the cruelty of the hunt. Between the autumn of 1985 and early 1986, about 1,000 letters were reportedly received every week (Nauerby 1996: 157). In recent years, instead of letters and postcards, the protest has been communicated through emails and social media. This anger offends many Faroese, who feel that these protests attack their traditional way of life. They often point out the hypocrisy of those who protest the hunts yet “go out in the restaurant later in the evening and eat meat or steak from other animals. That is a double standard. It is up to us to decide how to live” (Sjúrðaberg 2015).

#### **4.2 Reactions to the Anti-Whaling Movement**

The Faroese have not been untouched by the anti-whaling movement. While defending their hunts, they have nevertheless made some changes to make the methods more humane. They also set up a whalers' association. Interestingly, the anti-whaling movement has unleashed a backlash; seething against the imposition of outsiders' values, more Faroese, especially the young, have come to consider the whale hunt a vital tradition.

Repeated revisions of the whaling regulations have made the distribution of whale meat and blubber well organized. However, mainly because the whale hunt is conducted by amateurs rather than not by professional whalers, the whale-hunting methods had been left to locals, which led to criticism that the hunts were disorganized and cruel. In response, the Faroese government enacted an animal welfare law requiring that whale kills be conducted as quickly and efficiently as possible. Since 1986, they have prohibited the use of the spears and harpoons in the pilot whale hunt. Rifles and explosives, which were once used, are now forbidden because they are dangerous to hunters and cause ongoing pain to the whales (Joensen 2009: 117–121). The equipment used in the pilot whale hunt has been refined to minimize the whales' pain (Photo 3). For instance, the tip of the hook (gaff) used to drag the whale up onto the beach was traditionally sharp and pointed, but now it is rounded. Jústines Olsen, a veterinarian who has been working to improve the hook, said that the whale is not hurt when the blunt hook is inserted into its

blowhole, and the whalers do not have to use undue force to maneuver the whales (Olsen 2015). Another improved piece of equipment is the spinal lance, which is used to cut the whale's spinal cord; it is a 74-centimeter rod with two handles and a double-edged blade (NAMMCO 2014). According to Olsen, the spinal lance has three merits: (1) The handles make it a safe tool for the whalers; (2) It causes the near-instant death of the whale; and (3) Its use means that whalers no longer have to stab the whales repeatedly with traditional knives, which both minimizes the whales' suffering and preserves the condition of the whale meat (Olsen 2015). The spinal lance has been officially required in the whale hunt since May 2015 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2015). Impressed by its efficiency, the whalers in Taiji have adopted the spinal lance as well.



**Photo 3** Equipment used in the Faroe Island pilot whale hunts, past and present (Photo by Motohiro Kawashima, September, 2015)

Pilot whale hunters in the Faroe Islands must possess a hunting certificate. Since May 2015, the Faroese have not been allowed to kill whales without this certificate, which they receive after attending a two-hour lecture on the anatomical structure of pilot whales and the use of the spinal lance.<sup>10</sup> This certification measure was introduced in response to outside criticism that the hunts were not properly regulated. Some Faroese have complained that the procedure has become too complicated, but there is general agreement on the wisdom of systematizing the hunts (Olsen 2015).

The establishment of the Faroese Pilot Whalers' Association (*Grindamannafelagið* in Faroese) in 1993 could also be seen as a reaction to the criticism. Before then, whalers gathered on a community basis as necessary. The association provides an opportunity for all concerned Faroese to get together for discussion. Its purpose is as follows: (1) maintenance and development of the hunt; (2) international cooperation with other organizations; (3) provision of information nationally and internationally; and (4) support for scientific projects (Kerins 2010: 152). According to Ólavur Sjørðaberg, chairman of

the association, there are about 1,200 members, which is roughly 2% of the Islands' population (Sjúrðaberg 2015). At district meetings, the Faroese whalers interact with each other, and government officials inform all parties about such matters as whaling issues in other parts of the world, revised regulations and hunting methods, and the contamination of meat and blubber. The association holds a general meeting in Tórshavn every spring to report the past year's activities and finances (Kerins 2010: 153). In 2005, the association produced a DVD entitled *Whaling in the Faroese* that explains many aspects of the Faroese pilot whale drive hunt, including instructions on how to preserve and cook the meat and blubber. The objective of the DVD was to pass on the techniques and knowledge of the hunt to fellow residents. The DVD has also been used as a PR tool to share facts concerning the hunt with the outside world. To counter some of the environmental NGOs' media tactics, which emphasize the cruelty and competitive aspects of the hunt and allegedly disseminate false information (e.g. that much of the whale meat and blubber is discarded by the Faroese), the association often consents to interviews by foreign journalists and researchers to explain the Faroe Islands and correct disinformation (Sjúrðaberg 2015). In this respect, the activities of the Faroese Pilot Whalers' Association could serve as a model for the whalers in Taiji, who likewise face sustained criticism from environmental organizations for whaling.<sup>11)</sup>

The anti-whaling movement has fostered a greater awareness among the Faroese, especially the young, of pilot whale hunting and its food culture as symbols of Faroese cultural tradition. Hans Andrias Sølvará, associate professor at the University of the Faroe Islands, points out that there have been many internet posts by young Faroese who strongly oppose to the SSCS. Sølvará called this "an example of unintended consequences of intended actions" (Sølvará 2015); that is, the anti-whaling campaigns incited nationalist sentiment among the young Faroese, who before the activists' campaigns had largely lost interest in the whale hunt. Young Faroese are especially likely to regard the campaigns as threats to their cultural distinctiveness and national sovereignty (Nauerby 1996: 164). In recent years, more young people have come to see the whale hunt as a symbol of Faroese identity.

It is not easy to determine the precise level of support for (or opposition to) the pilot whale drive hunt among the Faroese. However, according to a Gallup survey of 528 respondents conducted in 2014—just before the SSCS waged a large-scale anti-whaling campaign against the Faroese—77% supported the continuation of the whale hunt, and only 12% opposed it (Singleton 2016: 30). Another survey of 225 young Faroese (the average age of the respondents was 18.3 years) found that about half of the males said they would actively participate in the driving, hauling, and killing of whales (Fielding 2013: 12).<sup>12)</sup>

## **5. Contamination of Whale Meat/Blubber and the Future of Whaling**

So far, evidences have shown that many Faroese remain strongly opposed to the anti-whaling campaigns by environmental organizations and regard the pilot whale hunt as a cultural tradition that should continue. However, the harsh reality is that many Faroese

are pessimistic about the future of the pilot drive hunt and the accompanying food culture for reasons that have nothing to do with the anti-whaling NGOs. The reason for their concern about the future of the whale drives is that high levels of toxins have been found in the meat and blubber of pilot whales. This discovery of toxins casts a dark shadow on the future of the hunt. Recently, environmental organizations have identified the health risk of eating whale meat and blubber as one of the main reasons why they oppose the whale hunt.

The first survey on contamination in pilot whales was conducted in the Faroes in 1977, a time when concerns had arisen worldwide about marine pollutants and human health. Unlike baleen whales, which sift plankton from seawater using their brush-shaped baleen, pilot whales are toothed whales that eat fish and squid. In other words, pilot whales are higher up in the ocean food chain. Researchers expected to find that predators like pilot whales would accumulate pollutants in their bodies, but until they began their studies, they had not realized just how high those levels were. The first survey found that pilot whales contained high levels of mercury. The mercury concentration was especially high in the liver and kidneys—about 100 times higher than that in the meat (Weihe and Joensen 2012). In response, the Faroese government advised the Islanders to limit their consumption of whale meat to no more than once a week and to avoid eating the liver or kidneys.<sup>13</sup> In 1980, pregnant women were advised to limit the consumption of whale meat and blubber. Later surveys indicated that pilot whales also accumulated high levels of organochlorines such as PCB and DDT in their blubber. Because of this finding, the recommendation against high consumption was strengthened in 1998: (1) the consumption of blubber should be no more than twice a month; (2) pregnant women, those who planned to become pregnant within three months, and nursing women should avoid eating whale meat; and (3) the liver and kidneys should not be eaten at all (Weihe and Joensen 2012). The latest recommendation, issued in June 2011, advised adults to eat no more than one meal of meat and blubber per month and told women who might have children to refrain entirely from eating blubber (Faroese Food and Veterinary Authority 2011).

According to Pál Weihe, chief physician at the Department of Occupational Medicine and Public Health in the Faroese Hospital System, who has been involved in a health study of about 2,300 Faroese children and mothers since 1984, the contaminants may harm the immune and central nervous systems of those who eat pilot whale products, increasing the risk of hypertension, arteriosclerosis, and Parkinson's disease (Chief Medical Officer 2008; Weihe 2015). To Faroese objections that losing the tradition of the whale hunt would be detrimental to Faroese culture and identity, Weihe said that while he understood that, as a physician, his primary considerations had to be science and public health (Weihe 2015). However, the recommendations have no legal force; they are just warnings. The local Faroese, especially middle-aged and older people in rural areas, still seem to consume a relatively large amount of pilot whale meat and blubber.

The future of the pilot whale hunt is unclear. Ólavur Sjørðaberg, chairman of the Faroese Pilot Whalers' Association, has expressed optimism about the future of the hunt, saying that "it seemed young people come to participate in the hunt after the protesters

such as Sea Shepherd came to these islands.” However, he added that “the only thing that stops the whale hunt here is pollution” (Sjúrðaberg 2015). Meanwhile, Weihe, while admitting that it was impossible to predict the future accurately, has said, “In 30 years’ time, the hunt will be over” (Weihe 2015).

The Faroese pilot whale hunt, which was once a means of gaining a livelihood in a harsh environment, has been transformed into a tradition to be preserved, in the context of the rise of nationalism since the 19th century and in response to anti-whaling campaigns by international environmental organizations, as some young Faroese are raising awareness of the hunt. Nevertheless, it is quite unlikely that many of the hunts’ young supporters eat whale meat and blubber now that they know that it might harm their immune and nervous systems. The likely scenario is that pilot whale meat and blubber will change from being a common everyday meal to a delicacy consumed on special occasions such as national holidays. However, as mentioned before, pilot whale meat and blubber are an acquired taste, especially for those who have not grown up eating them. As Jóan Pauli Joensen, an ethnologist and recognized authority of the Faroese pilot whale hunt, pointed out, “you have to be accustomed to its taste” (Joensen 2015). No one knows how long the pilot whale hunt will continue, but the power of “the silent bomb”—the contamination of whale meat and blubber—is strong enough. Unlike environmental organizations, it does not attract the attention of the media. But it is gradually undermining the future of the hunt as a tradition and a source of identity of the Faroese Islands.

## 6. Conclusion

The previous sections have presented a brief look at the history, culture, and industry of the Faroe Islands, the history of the Faroese pilot whale hunt since the Viking Age and the system surrounding it, the distribution methods of whale meat and blubber, and a comparison of the pilot whale hunts of the Faroe Islands and Taiji, Japan. They have included discussions of the impact of international anti-whaling campaigns on the Faroese, the influence of the discovery of high levels of contamination in the whale meat and blubber, and the future of the hunt. The Faroese whale hunt is unique for several reasons: (1) it targets whales and dolphins, which are beloved by many citizens of Western countries; (2) the hunt is carried out by affluent Europeans, not subsistence hunters; and (3) the bloody hunt and flensing are conducted on the shore in full view of the public, which has attracted the attention and scorn of international environmental organizations and the foreign media, making the far-flung European islands (population about 50,000) infamous.

The Faroese are well aware of how their whale hunt is seen by the outside world. But the Faroese are critical of what they see as the double standard of any anti-whaling people who turn a blind eye to the agonies experienced by the livestock (e.g., cows, pigs, and chickens) that they pluck as meat from their supermarkets’ shelves. Large commercial farms force animals to spend their lives confined in a small cages or pens, unable to stretch their limbs or move freely. The animals are slaughtered out of public view. Many

people opposed to whaling have no qualms about eating livestock. Even nowadays, many Faroese go out to sea on their boats to fish on weekends or slaughter sheep with their own hands at home. When I visited Tórshavn in September 2017, I came across a scene in which local farmers were demonstrating the slaughter of sheep to promote livestock farming. The place was covered in blood and the stench of death, but the locals did not seem to mind, and children were eating ice cream while enjoying the show. According to the locals, demonstrations of livestock slaughtering are done in kindergartens for educational purposes. The Faroese consider themselves to be close to nature and see no incongruity in the scenes of bloody slaughter that are a part of everyday life in the Faroes. Such slaughter is not seen as something shameful to be hidden. I end with the words of Kate Sanderson, a former researcher of the Faroese pilot whale hunt and now head of the Faroese mission to the European Union:

Pilot whaling represents a meeting and merging of the boundaries between land and sea, between the social and the wild, between culture and nature, between the pre-modern and the post-modern, between the historical continuity and modern function of a traditional form of food production and prevailing perceptions of modern society. As a result it also challenges us to rethink our all too rigid definition of what it is to be modern and civilised, and our increasingly artificial relationship with nature. Pilot whaling in the Faroes provides Faroe Islanders with food; for others, it may also provide some food for thought (Sanderson 1994: 199).

## Notes

- 1) The Faroese also hunt bottlenose dolphins, white-sided dolphins, and harbor porpoises, but their main target is long-finned pilot whales.
- 2) According to the regulations, within three days of the kill, the district administrator must report information (e.g. the time and place the whales were caught, the species, the total number caught, and the number of *skinn*) to the Faroese Government and the Faroese Natural History Museum (Ministry of Fisheries 2013).
- 3) For instance, on two islands, the catch is distributed only among the local residents, and there is no share allotted for those participating in the hunt (Government of Faroe Islands 2018b).
- 4) In addition to this, the meat and blubber are customarily distributed to schools, hospitals, and nursing homes. For further details of the distribution methods for whale meat and blubber and the historical changes in whaling, see Tsukada (1999) and Miyawaki (2009).
- 5) In Tórshavn, where 40% of the Faroes' population lives, when a grind is conducted, there is not enough meat and blubber for each resident. Those who want meat and blubber must sign up on a list; even then, not everyone on the list receives a share.
- 6) For a discussion comparing whaling methods around the world, see Savelle and Kishigami (2013).
- 7) In a discussion of how the whale came to be regarded as a special creature, Norwegian anthropologist Arne Kalland broached the concept of the "super-whale." He argued that when

the ecological arguments against whaling began to lose ground given that many species can replenish their stocks if whaling is practiced sustainably, they created totem “super whale” that embodies in it all the traits that attract people to whales, including hugeness, a large brain, friendliness, purity, and endangered status (Kalland 1993). Of course, no such whale exists in the real world, but it has a strong hold on people’s imagination. For a further discussion of the historical process by which whales have become a symbol of nature in the West, and the roles that environmental organizations and the media have played in elevating the status of whales, see Kawashima (2011).

- 8) Between 1894 and 1986, the Faroese engaged in the commercial hunting of large whales such as fin whales and minke whales, a practice started by the Norwegians.
- 9) For more about environmental organizations as “protest business,” see Kawashima (2013).
- 10) As of September 2015, the number of Faroese who received this hunting certificate was 2,230 (Olsen 2015).
- 11) In January 2018, Taiji, Japan, and Klasksvik, the second-largest town in the Faroe Islands, became sister cities. Although geographically distant, they share much in common; both communities consider whaling an important part of their identity and both are targeted by anti-whaling organizations.
- 12) Unfortunately, the year the survey was conducted is unknown, but based on the year the paper was published, we can surmise that the survey was carried out between 2010 and 2011.
- 13) One serving of meat is calculated as 250 grams of meat and 50 grams of blubber for an average person weighing 70 kilograms (Faroese Food and Veterinary Authority 2011).

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