

corresponded a folk model that emphasized the contrast between land and water. Mysterious water beings mediated between the ocean and the domain of humans. According to the peasants' model, humans were almost passive recipients of fish. Even though 'fishiness' was an individual quality, no one was credited or blamed for the size of the catch. Humans were subject to forces over which they had no control. As the domestic economy gave way to capitalist production and the ceiling on production was lifted, the rationale applied to fishing changed. The relative power of fish and humans was reversed. Humans became active, their labour was said to create value, the resources were redefined as infinite, and the ocean was opened up. The old mythology became redundant and its metaphors obsolete. New ideologies developed concerning attitudes towards fish and other natural resources and the definition of social roles. The competitive nature of fishing encouraged the notion of the 'skipper effect' whereby the skipper was made responsible for fishing success. More recently, with the threat of overfishing, another ideology has emerged. Humans are seen to be collectively responsible for the maintenance of fish stocks.

The changes discussed suggest an inversion in the role of animals as mediators in human relations with the cosmic order. According to the peasants of earlier centuries, fish were responsible for the maintenance of humans. Now humans are considered responsible for the maintenance of fishing stocks. With the new ecological order that is being founded, changes in the Icelandic fisheries have come full circle. Now as in a primitive society, people are induced to cooperate because of a threat to nature; those who violate the new prohibitions are considered guilty of creating disorder in nature. But there is a difference: the fish are no longer a gift from the spirits. If the fish are seen as a 'gift' at all, they are a gift from humans to the new ecological order, which of course serves human ends.

Recent changes have rendered many of the earlier supernatural explanations for the behaviour of fish superficial. It is not just that increased capitalization has brought with it more knowledge. In Iceland, as I have demonstrated, representations of nature have changed as a result of a transformation of social relations. The relations Icelanders have entered into at different points in time, in the process of appropriating marine resources, are reflected in their cognitive appropriation of nature.

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Notes

- 1 Later Lévi-Strauss (1985, p. 104) seems to have taken the view that the choice of species for symbolic expression is entirely arbitrary:

Each culture settles on a few distinctive features of its environment, but no one can predict which these are or to what end they will be put. Furthermore, so great is the wealth and diversity of the raw material offered by the environment for observation and reflection that the mind is capable only of apprehending a fraction of it. The mind can put it to use for elaborating one system among an infinity of other, equally conceivable ones: nothing predestines any one among them for a privileged fate.

- 2 The ambiguity of the category of 'fish' (*fiskur*) continues to this day. Sometimes 'fish' refers only to cod, for instance in sentences such as 'fish follow capelin'. This ambiguity is not peculiar to Icelandic. Jernudd & Thuan (1984) argue that generally there is a lack of correspondence between three fish-naming systems: the scientific, the common, and the folk naming system. Brown (1984, p. 15) argues that the category of 'fish' represents one of the largest and most diverse discontinuities found in nearly all environments.
- 3 Davidsson's aim was to eradicate 'erroneous' beliefs in imaginary beings. The extent to which folk beliefs are intelligent or stupid is not at issue here, but clearly Davidsson's informants sometimes got things wrong. So did the 17th-century naturalist Rumphius, who accepted the native view of Ambion that leaves of the mangrove changed into small fish when hanging in the water (see Ellen 1985, p. 9).
- 4 *Mathews saga postola*, one should note, is largely a translation of a foreign text. It may therefore not be representative of Icelandic culture.
- 5 The admission of 'force' in the folk model of success may seem to qualify the basic claim that the size of catches is entirely due to the personal qualities of the skipper. Clearly material factors are also considered. But models of success may differ in their conceptions of technology and in where they draw the boundary between humans and the environment. As Geertz (1973, p. 9) has shown, a technical construction can be seen either as a feature of the physical landscape within which the individual is set and to which he must adapt, or as a cultural 'weapon' in his struggle against a harsh environment. Thus the boat can be seen either as a part of the fisherman's environment or as an instrumental extension of his person. According to the dominant Icelandic model of success, the boat is a culturally fashioned tool, a kind of material extension of the skipper's personality. Even though material factors are considered, these are more a matter of style than of constraint.

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According to modern folk accounts, the skill of the skipper is critical for fishing success. Skippers are said to differ in their ability to locate and catch fish. Catches are said to vary from one boat to another because skippers are different. The ability to catch fish is supposed to be 'in the blood'. This is the idea of the 'skipper effect'. Some skippers are said to be perceptive, to memorize detail, and be able to get into a particular state of mind – 'fishing mood' (*fiskistud*). They fish 'by cleverness' (*af lagni*) while others fish 'by force' (*af krafft*). Two skippers may be equally successful, but by different means. Those who fish by force are said to make more trips, to use more gear and fuel, and to destroy more gear in the process. Those who are said to fish by dexterity or cleverness, hampered by their limited assets, small boats or engines, are said to develop original fishing strategies to compensate for what they lack in force.⁵

The modern model of success is a model on which people draw to organize their long-term experience. When fishermen talk about their careers, they often count the number of years they have spent with particular skippers rather than the years they have been on particular boats. After each winter season the names of the 'top' skippers (*af lamm*, literally, catch-men) in the Icelandic fleet are reported in the mass media. In developing accounts for whole seasons as well as careers, people emphasize the personal characteristics and fishing tactics of the skipper. Accounts of these and speculations about such features are popular topics of discussion throughout Iceland.

With the development of fishing the old system of rewards was changed. In the present share system the skipper receives twice the share of a deck hand. During the period of peasant production there were different share systems at different times and places, but usually the foreman received the same share as an ordinary crewman. A foreman boat-and-gear owner received no more than four times as much as a fisherman-rower. The modern skipper-owner gets about 25 times as much as a deck hand. There are obvious reasons for the extra share allotted to the skipper. The operation of fishing equipment such as electronic gear and modern deck technology demands expertise and institutionalized training. Modern fishing also requires a high degree of cooperation between crewmen. Not only must the skipper be a skilful decision-maker and operator of equipment, he must also be in control of the total coordination of activities.

While changes in the nature of the process of extraction and the technology of fishing explain the increase in the share allotted to those in charge during fishing operations, they do not account for the idea that the expertise of the skipper is critical for his success, *relative* to that of others. The reasons for the notion of the 'skipper effect' must be looked for elsewhere. With the development of capitalist production the leaders of fishing operations were involved in new kinds of social relations. Labour was no longer guaranteed by law, and skippers had to recruit followers. As boat technology developed, the demand for skilled crewmen further increased. Moreover, among skipper-owners there was competition for financial support, sometimes

available from merchants and processors. Other skippers competed for access to boats. Competition became extreme. Given this competition, and the role and the economic place of the skipper as a manager of specialized means of production, the most important criterion for his success was his catch. Although all skippers seem to have been equally competent, the idea that they differ greatly in their catching potential entered the skippers' rhetoric, allowing each to enhance the demand for his expertise as a unique commodity on the labour market (Pålsson & Durrenberger 1982).

Changes in the social relations of production do not quite explain why models of fishing took the particular form they did. While differences in 'fishiness' had to be explained and new social relations limited the range of appropriate models, to account fully for the content of the models it would be necessary to refer to available cultural idioms. The explanations that emerged were consistent with the culturally plausible rhetorics available to the actors – the emphasis on individualism, and the idea of a personal fishing power. Catches are no longer seen to be allotted to humans, but differential success is still accounted for in personal terms, even more so than in the past.

When the skipper became a frontiersman, the ocean was seen to be 'opened up'. As a result the skippers' map of the fishing grounds changed. There are uncharted spaces to be explored and unknown spots to be discovered. Most fishing spots are a matter of secrecy and each skipper has his own personal naming grid. The names are usually entirely arbitrary, as they do not refer to features of the landscape. The old natural coding of the seascape has been replaced by a system of transient and euphemistic names. The names are fortuitous, they change frequently and there is no consensus. They are *in* history.

During the last decade, capitalist production in fishing has been subject to an intricate institutionalized machinery. (One of the main reasons has been the threat of overexploitation of the cod stock). This institutionalization fosters the notion of homeostatic fisheries and a 'harvesting' orientation – a scientific rationality that assumes humans are in total control of the ecological situation. The annual total catch of cod and the maximum catch of each boat is decided upon in advance. There is a new ceiling on production. Fishermen often complain that the new system is unfair because the 'best' skippers are allotted the same quota as the 'bad' ones. As competition between skippers is reduced a new model of fishing is likely to emerge. Already one hears the argument that it is the boat and its technology that catch fish and not the skipper or the crew.

Conclusions

I have tried to show how the rationale applied by peasants to fishing before it was industrialized reflected social and technical constraints. There was a ceiling on production. The main uncertainties of fishing related to the danger of fishing trips and the size of the catch. To these conditions

Íslenskar Þjóðsögur og ævintýri, I–VI). All these stories establish series of pairs of oppositions that relate to the contrast between the land and the ocean. The strange beings mediate between the polar opposites; their peculiar properties draw the relevant contrasts. Judging from the sample listed in Table 9.1, anomalous beings of category (a) (human:fish) reduce danger, while those of category (d) (nonhuman:nonfish) are dangerous. Those belonging to category (b) (human:nonfish) ensure good catches, even though some are dangerous, while most of those of category (c) (nonhuman:fish) represent poor catches. The association with human qualities is good for catches, but the association with nonhuman attributes is detrimental to both catches and safety. The popularity of category (d) indicates that safety was a major preoccupation.

The mythology establishes several other contrasts, for instance between gods and giants, gods and humans, the social and the wild, and male and female. *Löki*, the king of giants, is one of the major characters in *Snorra Edda* and he is frequently transformed. At one point he changes into a woman. On several occasions he changes into a salmon to escape the punishment of the gods (he is supposed to be responsible for most mischief both among gods and humans). His transformation into a salmon strongly emphasizes the distinction between land and sea. Salmon are not just fish, for they live both on land (in fresh water) and in the sea. This anomaly is underlined in the myth (*Snorra Edda* 1975, p. 86) where *Löki* faces 'two choices' when escaping from the gods – to head for the sea or to jump inland up the river.

In Icelandic peasant society, the world of fish and water beings provided a convenient tool for folk analysis. It offered a kind of totemic operator in terms of which Icelanders could account for events and express social realities. Big fish (*stórfiskar*) posed a threat to humans while at sea, but the same term was also applied euphemistically to refer to terrestrial danger, *valdsmenn*, or those in power. Those who are a threat to the social order are also spoken of metaphorically as anomalous water beings or *öfuguggar* (fish that have reversed fins and swim backwards). This term is used for all kinds of misfits – the eccentric, the outsider and the homosexual. The social world was represented by a natural model.

Nature was also organized culturally. Each fishing location had a permanent name, usually associated with characteristics of the sea bed or some natural feature of the landscape. The fishing grounds were seen to be a closed and stable natural domain. The natural coding of the fishing grounds, by the application of names for landmarks to individual fishing spots, reflected the idea that such spots were permanent. The peasant's cognitive map of the ocean had an immunity to history; this was a world-view of stasis in which society was mapped on to nature.

Reversal of the roles of fish and humans

Towards the end of the 19th century and during the first decades of this century, a number of the constraints associated with peasant fishing in Iceland relaxed. These brought about changes in the nature and organization of fishing. The legal obligations of landless workers to associate with landowners was lifted, markets for Icelandic fish developed, and access to the sea was increasingly made public rather than private as fishing villages formed around bays and purchased jointly the landing sites from the farmers who had controlled them in the past (Pálsson 1982, Pálsson & Durrenberger 1985).

With these constraints removed, fishing was no longer for subsistence, and productive targets became indefinite. Production was oriented to the market and, for the first time, labour power became a marketable commodity. The fishing skipper became a full-time professional, his training was institutionalized and his rights and obligations were defined by law. Motor-boats became available and new offshore fishing grounds were opened up. With the new markets, both in products and factors of production, the national economy of Iceland became focused on the extraction, processing and export of fish and derived products. The resources were redefined as 'there for the taking' rather than being given up as gifts. The prey was no longer seen to be an offering to humans who passively received what was allotted to them, rather it was seen to be actively pursued by humans and extracted from the indifferent sea.

With the growth of capitalist production the world-view of stasis disappeared. The ocean is no longer considered to have some kind of power or force, and its inhabitants are no longer seen to control the fate of humans, except as passive objects of production. The peasant mythology, and its image of the cosmic order, was replaced by the notion of infinite natural resources. The uncertainties of production have changed, the relevant contrasts are different, and the earlier metaphors and mediators have become obsolete.

The new conceptual model of fishing is secular and individualistic and the modern notions of 'luck' and 'chance' have entered the vocabulary of fishing. In the previous model, no probability could be assigned to uncertain outcomes of natural events. The present model is much more attuned to the idea that the workings of nature contain an essentially random element: the idea of (calculable) risk. The change from subsistence economy to capitalist production involved a change from dependence on nature and to dependence on commodities.

During earlier centuries, of course, someone had to coordinate the activities of the crew. He was the foreman. But it was not an honorific role or title. In contrast, the present 'skipper' (*skipstjóri*) is highly respected (Pálsson & Durrenberger 1983). As fishing became a full-time occupation, the role of skipper evolved. It became a specialized role in an autonomous branch of production.

			SEA	
			Fish	Nonfish
LAND	Human	a sea-woman	b seal	
	Nonhuman	c 'fin'	d jumper	

Figure 9.1 The logic of opposition.

described as monsters (*skrímsli*), but most beings are either described as fish or nonfish, or human or nonhuman. Logically, there are four possibilities. Table 9.1 shows four examples, which are briefly described below.

The beings that mediate between the opposition of land and sea, whether real or imaginary, are characterized by some anomalous property. They either reduce or increase the catch, ensure safety or pose a threat to human lives (see Table 9.1).

Medieval manuscripts describe 'sea-women' that 'have the nature of fish while in the sea but look like humans while ashore' (*Flóres saga konungs og sona hans* 1927, p. 167, *Saga píðríks af Bern* 1905, p. 46). Sea-women are sexually attractive and sometimes they have children with sailors. Their children become giants, 'not like humans'. Apparently, sea-women are protective but not dangerous. *Flóres saga konungs og sona hans* (1927) also describes a mermaid (*margýgur*) with the head of a giant woman and huge breasts, but a whale-like lower part. She sings beautifully but destroys ships and kills people.

Seals are said to have 'human figures, natures and qualities all complete, concealed beneath their coats of seal skin' (Davidsson 1900, p. 314). According to some stories the seal ensured good catches and delivered valuable things upon the foreshore. Fishing power was embodied in the seal: if the eye of a seal caught by a successful hunter was given to a less successful one, his luck was said to be sure to change for the better. Sometimes the seal cooperated with humans by warning of danger (Kristjánsson 1980, p. 449). According to other stories the seal could be quite dangerous. *Laxdæla saga* provides an account (1934, p. 41) of a boat that gets destroyed in a storm because the crew attempted to shoot a seal.

Table 9.1 Anomaly and uncertainty.

Water beings	Logical category	Uncertainty Catch	Safety
Wicked-whale (<i>illhvelli</i>)	d	—	—
Otter (<i>ottr</i>)	b	+	—
Seal (<i>selur</i>)	b	+	—
'fin' (<i>öfuguggi</i>)	c	—	—
Hairy trout (<i>loðsilungur</i>)	c	—	—
Horse-whale (<i>hrosshvelli</i>)	d	—	—
Jumper' (<i>stökkull</i>)	d	—	—
Sea-woman (<i>sækona</i>)	a	+	—
Mermaid (<i>margýgur</i>)	b	—	—
Flying fish (<i>flugfiskur</i>)	d	—	—
Sea-dog (<i>sæhundur</i>)	d	—	—
Sea-man (<i>hafmaður</i>)	b	—	—
Water horse (<i>vatnanykur</i>)	d	—	—
Löki (as salmon)	c	—	—

The 'fin' (*öfuguggi*) is considered to be a particular species of fish with reversed fins. When it moves about, it swims backwards. It is poisonous and has red flesh, indicating that it eats the bodies of drowned men. It is nonhuman and inedible. A particular species of trout, 'hairy-trout' (*loðsilungur*), was said to be covered with hair. It was believed to be created by giants and demons, as a punishment for some human wrongdoing. Sometimes lakes and rivers were full of fins and hairy trouts, which were considered totally useless or a kind of noncatch.

Völsunga saga (1905–8, p. 34) provides an account of a man named *Otur* (Otter) who was a great fisherman. He was like an otter during the day when he stayed in the water and caught fish, but during the night he was human and slept ashore.

Several species of whales, so-called 'wicked whales' (*illhvelli*) are said to do damage to ships and men. They know their own name and appear as soon as they hear it mentioned. Fishermen take care not to use their proper name and call them 'big fish' (*stórfiskur*) instead. One of them is the 'jumper' (*stökkull*). It has flaps of skin hanging down over the eyes. The only way it can lift the flaps and see what is going on is by leaping clear of the water. When in the air it can look from under the flaps. It attempts to sink everything that it sees floating (Davidsson 1900, pp. 318–19). The 'horse-whale' (*hrosshvelli*) was one of the wicked whales. It was said to resemble a horse, to neigh like a horse, and to have a horse's tail that sent tremendous waves across the ocean and destroyed boats and men (Davidsson 1900, p. 320).

The folklore contains numerous accounts of strange water beings that attempt to drag humans into the ocean or destroy their boats: 'sea-men' (*hafmenn*), 'water-horses' (*vatnanykur*), 'sea-dogs' (*sæhundar*), and 'flying fish' (*flugfiskur*), to name only a few (see *Íslenskar Þjóðsögur og sagnir*, IV,

fish'.² Nor was the ocean only peopled by real beings, as it also contained various imaginary monsters with peculiar characteristics. Davidsson argued at the turn of the last century that the importance of fish in Icelandic folklore was simply due to their number and availability. Iceland, he suggested (Davidsson 1900, p. 312), has very few land animals but many species of fish:

This is reflected in the folk lore . . . There are few beliefs which relate to land animals, but the inhabitants of the deep . . . have for a long time played a great part in the popular fancy, and many a strange idea concerning them has taken hold on the ordinary mind.³

But just as there was a wide variety of fish, so were there many different kinds of bird and yet the bird lore was quite limited. Birds, it seems, were rarely said to have monstrous physical characteristics (see *Íslenskar Þjóðsögur og sagnir*, IV). Stefánsson agrees with Davidsson that the beliefs connected with water beings are more numerous and 'more interesting' (Stefánsson 1906, p. 301). Apparently, birds were less 'good to think', contrary to the thesis of resemblance. Neither availability, then, nor physical resemblance account for the choice of metaphors, classes of species or types of habitats, in Icelandic folklore. Fish were important for the economy, but so were sheep, cows and horses. A functional explanation of the obsession of Icelanders with water beings does, therefore, not hold either. The choice seems to be arbitrary.

According to pre-Christian mythology (*Snorra Edda*), the oceans and the lakes were created out of the blood of a giant (*Ymir*), and governed by the god of *Njörður*, who was in charge of fishing and sailing (Hastrup 1985). In this cosmic order humans were merely tiny pawns, subject to supernatural forces and manipulated by aquatic animals. This is apparent in notions of 'fishiness' (*fiskni*, *fiskilíell*), the ability to get fish. Fishiness was a transient quality people considered to be differentially distributed among fishermen. According to an old proverb, 'no one catches another man's fish'. Most of the catch was divided by a share system, but some species were not distributed. These belonged to the individuals who caught them and were spoken of as 'fortunate draws' (*happdrættir*) (Jónsson 1945, p. 352). Some people were thought to scare fish away and were called 'fish-deterrents' (*fiskjælar*). The foreman (*formaður*) of the boat arranged his men according to their fishiness. During fishing those who lacked this quality (*ófiskirir*) were seated at the oars to keep the boat in position while the others jigged with hand lines (see Jónsson 1945, p. 347). Somehow, fishiness was pre-determined. According to a proverb, 'a poor fisherman gets poor fish' (*vesælan fisk*).

The foreman did not necessarily possess fishiness, but he demanded discipline. The major qualities attributed to a good foreman were diligence, bravery, and the ability to command the crew. These were frequently mentioned in foremen's biographies and obituaries during the 19th century.

When foremen were ranked, it was according to their effort, the number of trips they made, their bravery in difficult weather conditions and their cleverness in directing the boat and crew. One of the greatest seagoers on the south coast in the 19th century is said to have made fifty trips in one winter season of a hundred days (Jónsson 1945, p. 352). The criterion for assessment was the number of trips rather than the size of the catch.

Even though fishiness was considered an individual quality, it was part of a grand design over which humans had no control. Fishing peasants spoke of their prey as a 'gift' of God (*guðsgjöf*) and the catch was spoken of as a 'contribution' in fish (*fiskigjöf*). In the folk analysis, the catch was supplied by nature and humans were just passive recipients, observers of a mysterious system of rationing.

The fate of the producers was believed to be determined by a godly design. In order to prevent failure (bad catches and accidents), prayers were read at the beginning of each season and before each fishing trip (Kristjánsson 1942). Reciting prayers was referred to as *vani*, which means habit, the usual. The ritual associated with fishing did not imply, though, that people thought they had any control over the fish, rather it was directed at getting supernatural forces to aid the fishermen and prevent the worst eventualities.

While humans were seen to be manipulated by fish, in mythology these relations were sometimes reversed. According to some medieval accounts, in Paradise, where presumably the constraints of earthly existence did not apply, nature obeyed human authority: 'If a man asks the water for fish, it will provide various kinds at his feet' (*Matheus saga postola*, 1874, p. 828).⁴ But even though humans were subject to fish, and both were ultimately controlled by something else, their fates were highly interconnected. The major opposition encoded in myth and folklore was that between land and sea. One of the ocean-taboos (*sevití*) implied that if a boat contained some dirt belonging to the land the catches were bound to be poor (*Íslenskar Þjóðsögur og sagnir* IV, p. 311). A boat had to be pure. During fishing its terrestrial nature had to be suppressed. The contrast between land and sea is also underlined in Icelandic ways of speaking, as anything that is out of place is metaphorically represented as 'fish on dry land' (*eiús og fiskur á Þurru landi*).

Humans belonged to the land, but their fate was largely responsive to two kinds of uncertainties relating to the sea. On the one hand, there was uncertainty concerning the resource brought ashore for consumption and exchange, the size of the catch. On the other hand, expeditions at sea were always potentially dangerous, given the level of technological development and the whims of nature. One type of uncertainty was related to the other. Thus, fishing success or lack of it was thought to be an indication that a fisherman would die young. If a good fisherman caught little, or someone with very limited fishiness fished 'like crazy', he would be short-lived (Thorarensen 1945, pp. 170-1).

Numerous folktales and mythological accounts stress the mediation between the opposition of land and sea. Some water beings are simply

metaphorical role of birds.¹ On the one hand, birds are separated from humans by the element in which they move, but on the other hand they seem to engage in social relations with other members of their species and communicate by acoustic means resembling those of human language. Kleivan, however, claims not only that fish are further removed from humans than birds, as they are cold-blooded and live in the water, in addition he points out that they neither build nests nor communicate by acoustic means resembling articulated language.

This is contradictory to both ethology and some folk accounts. Long ago Darwin observed (1952, p. 444) that 'fishes ... make various noises, some of which are described as being musical' and that some groups of fishermen even catch fish by imitating the sounds they make. Darwin (1952, p. 443) also pointed out that 'certain fishes ... make nests, and some of them take care of their young when hatched'. Among Malay fishermen, one may note, the 'hearing' of fish is an acknowledged and important expertise (Firth 1946, p. 199). On the other hand, ethological evidence need not necessarily concern us here, as the evidence is in any case beyond the awareness or recognition of many fishermen. In Icelandic, a person who keeps quiet is said to be 'silent as a fish' (*Pöggull sem fiskur*).

In several cases fish do indeed serve as mediums for the metaphorical expression of social relations (Anderson 1969, Cove 1978, Firth 1981, Knipe 1984).

Firth (1981, p. 220) argues, for instance, that among the Tikopia fish have been an 'outstanding' medium for the expression of social relations. He suggests (1981, p. 221) that the Tikopia treatment of fish may be represented as a series of asymmetrical relations. On the one hand, in their natural element, the sea, fish are superior to humans. They assume an active role, and are said to be aggressive, free, evasive, and able to manipulate humans. But on the other hand, humans are superior to fish in their strength and skills. Fish are described as pets, dependent on humans; they are exposed to a one-way ritual communication, and sometimes caught by the fisherman's devices.

In the Tikopia world-view there is a balance between the asymmetrical relations of fish and humans (Firth 1981, p. 221). In Iceland changes in social relations have been accompanied by an ideological shift, an inversion of the relationship between fish and humans in which their relative power has been reversed. The mythology during the period of household production emphasized the distinction between land and sea. A series of anomalous water beings mediated between land and sea determining the fate of humans. Humans were passive recipients of what was allotted to them. With the development of markets and capitalist fishing the ocean and its inhabitants were redefined. Human labour was seen to create value and the earlier mythology became redundant. Fish are no longer seen to be superior to humans, rather they are seen to be subject to human control.

Representations and social relations

From the time of settlement, fishing was an important component of the Icelandic economy. Fishing was integrated into the local subsistence economy. There were large and small landowners or farmers, but about a quarter of the population, tenants and labourers, owned no land. Fishing was not a separate economic endeavour with an elaborate role structure of its own. The crews were small and the technology was fairly simple. Hand-lines, operated by one man, were the typical fishing gear. Open boats could only exploit well-known and nearby fishing grounds.

Fish have always been economically important in Iceland. From the time of settlement fish formed a staple of the Icelandic diet, together with the milk of cattle and sheep. Soon after the union with Norway in 1262 fish replaced woollens as the island's main export and since then fish has been the mainstay of the economy. For centuries dried fish was the most important practical monetary standard. In modern Icelandic, fish is still used metaphorically to express value standards: for instance, an object or an idea is said not to 'amount to many fish' (*uppá marga fiska*) if it is of no value. Several references to fish in the Icelandic Sagas provide evidence for their economic importance. *Snorra Edda* provides the names of various species and *Gudmundar saga* (1878) describes what must have been a typical way of fishing.

The emphasis on fishing varied from time to time during the era of domestic production. There was, for instance, a substantial increase in effort during the Middle Ages, due to more adherence to duties of Christian fasting in Europe (Gelsinger 1981, p. 181). Yet the subsistence economy always put some kind of ceiling on productive targets. Because of Iceland's status as a Danish colony, foreign markets were limited. Also, landowners controlled access to the sea. People could have invested in boats, but capital accumulation was limited by colonial relations and restricted markets for fish. Furthermore, in 1783 landowners gained increased control over landless people. Law required every landless person to make an annual contract with a landowner. These legally enforced labour-service contracts (*vistar-hand*) gave institutional form to patron-client relationships. The labour force was guaranteed by law. Finally, during the 18th and 19th centuries, the Icelandic political elite represented the interests of the larger farmers in the colonial trade and not those of fishermen. When the terms of trade were negotiated, the elite supported higher prices for agricultural products and lower prices for fish in which they had less interest, and the price of fish remained very low. Fishing effort, then, was limited by technical and social factors. This stagnant household economy brought with it particular models of fishing. They can be discerned in old Icelandic literature, the Sagas (most of which were written during the 13th and the 14th century), and published accounts of oral traditions of the last two centuries.

Fish have always been a pervasive symbol in Icelandic folklore. The world of water beings (*sæbiar*) did not only contain fish in a strict scientific sense of the term. The Sagas provide numerous references to 'whales, seals and other

corresponds to the 16 animal and geometric designs. This might suggest that each symbol (lineage) had specific and equal periods of the year to celebrate their rites on behalf of the whole society. Pictish animal symbols can, of course, only be understood in terms of all the 28 symbols that were engraved on stones in the 7th and 8th centuries AD. The symbols were not single-acting but were combined in a regular way with other symbols according to a pattern that reflected marriages and political alliances. In addition, they were homologous with the physical, temporal, and cosmological environments of the Picts.

Note

- 1 Designs 6 and 7 (Fig. 8.3) are taken to be one and the same; designs 42 and 43 (Fig. 8.3) are taken to be one and the same. Design 24 is a special symbol with a particular function, as is explained below. Only a few of the 200 symbol stones are so grossly damaged that only one symbol remains. There are 50 stones that either have a single design or a nonsymbolic design and they are excluded here.
- 2 Binary oppositions are to be read horizontally. There may or may not be associations if read vertically down the columns. In a dualistic world-view there is often a consistency between elements on each side, but one cannot read these off mechanically.

References

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9 The idea of fish: land and sea in the Icelandic world-view

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Introduction

This chapter discusses the place of aquatic animals in the Icelandic world-view. It explores the correspondence between human society and representations of water beings during the era of household production (from the time of settlement in the 9th century to the beginning of the 20th century), and examines how ideas about the fish world have changed during this century as Icelanders have entered into new kinds of social relationships. I take the theoretical position, following Douglas (1966), Leach (1976) and some others, that some animals, because of their anomalous position, are better to think with than others. Also, I suggest that symbolic expressions should be studied in a context of development over time. Anthropologists have overemphasized a synchronic and static analysis of symbolic systems. In reality, representations obey 'two kinds of determinisms' (Lévi-Strauss 1985, p. 104). They respond to the constraints of the present, the social relations of the people who produce them, but somehow they also reflect the traditions of the past.

It has been suggested (Hewes 1948, p. 238) that because of the special behaviour of objects in the water, aquatic environments represent a strange realm from the point of view of humans. Also, fishing is unique in the sense that the data available to the producer are quite limited. The inferences possible from them are of a 'different order' (Morrill 1967, p. 407) to those possible for terrestrial species. Likewise, it may be argued that fishing involves specific perceptual and cognitive skills. Since the prey moves in a different medium, the problem of orientation demands particular models (Pálsson 1982). As fishermen are physically separated from fish, they must make descriptive models of an environment about which they can only obtain information by indirect observation.

But cognitive models do not only address immediate and practical problems. Some are only models *for* action, whereas others transcend the material sphere as models *of* reality (Geertz 1973, p. 93). To what extent, one may ask, does the fish world serve as a vehicle of symbolic thought?

Some anthropologists suggest (see Kleivan 1984, p. 889) that fish are rarely used as metaphors of human society because there are relatively few 'obvious points of resemblance' with human beings. This kind of reasoning relates to a well-known statement of Lévi-Strauss (1966, p. 204) about the