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The Construction of a Faroese Identity: Nordic, Norwegian, Danish – or Faroese?

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Nú er tann stundin komin til handa... (Now is the time to act)

A little over hundred years ago, the Faroese newspaper *Dimmalætting* informed its readers that on the afternoon of December 26, 1888 a public meeting would be held in the Parliament House (Tinghuset) in Tórshavn, the tiny capital of a far away North Atlantic periphery of the anyway very small Danish state. Topic of the meeting was to discuss ways “to defend Faroes’ language and the Faroes’ customs” (*Dimmalætting* December 22, 1888). An overflow crowd attended, despite weather so wet and windy that people from outside Tórshavn could not participate. Another meeting was accordingly held in January 1889, in the more spacious quarters of the Temperance Union Hall. The immediate offspring of these meetings was the formation of an association called *Føringafelag*. (January 27, 1889) Its goals were:

First and foremost ...: to bring the Faroese language into honour; The second is: to get Faroese to stick together and advance in all areas so they can become self-reliant [in Faroese: verda sjálvbjargnir] (quoted from the translation in Wylie 1989, 5).

This program proved successful in shaping an independent Faroese intellectual, political and economic life. After a protracted and somewhat tumultuous political and cultural struggle the Faroe Islands in 1948 acquired Home Rule within a loosely organized Danish federation (in Danish called *Rigsfællesskab*, in English best translated as realm but literally it means empire). The extent of Faroese autonomy today is best demonstrated by the fact that Faroe opted not to join the European Community together with the rest of Denmark in 1973 and still today does not belong to the European Union.

The so-called Christmas Meeting in 1888 today has acquired an almost mythological stance in Faroese political culture symbolising the rebirth of supposedly age old, but long since lost, national identity of medieval (i.e. Viking) origins. In other words a colonial uprising that only lacked determined repression by the colonial power, Denmark to qualify as a real war of national liberation. There is this much truth to the legend that the program of cultural independence efficiently advocated by the national organisation, *Føringafelag* laid the foundations for an economic independence that for a long time served the tiny community of peasants and fishermen very well. In the 1980’s their model of independent cultural and economic development with a loosely defined home rule has run into difficulties. But for a long time the model of cultural independence combined with political dependence served the Faroese very well indeed.

This becomes obvious when their fate is compared with that of the English speaking dependencies in the North Atlantic area with a similar social and economic

structure. The Orkney and Shetland Islands and Newfoundland lost their former independence at the time when Faroe prospered. Orkney and Shetland lost the last remnants of the independence that had survived Scottish expansion over the centuries and gave up long distance fishing in the Atlantic Ocean. In 1934 Newfoundland was forced to give up its independence as a dominion under the British Crown won in 1855 after a bankruptcy. This had provoked by an intense power struggle between merchant capitalists and fishermen fought. Because of a complete stall mate Westminster had to take over and administer the province directly. In 1948 the majority of the population voted in favour of joining the Canadian Confederation. This means that Newfoundland represents one of the very few cases of a state voluntarily sacrificing its independence (cf. Sider 1986).

What happened in Faroe, however, was not the rebirth of a medieval language and culture of Scandinavian settlers in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, but a deliberate invention of a new national culture and a new national language, different from the various dialects spoken in the islands. According to the nationalist mythology of the Faroese convened in Tórshavn their culture had been suppressed by an evil absolutist state, Denmark. But this unified culture never had existed. On the contrary, the meeting indicated the beginning of a process of suppression of local cultural and linguistic differences in favour of new abstract or imagined national community. Until the 1880's neither *one* Faroese culture nor *one* Faroese language had ever existed even though this assumed by most historians (Debes 1982, Hansen 1984, Rasmussen 1987, West 1972, 1985 and Young 1979). As my colleague Vagn Wåhlin has convincingly demonstrated, in a situation of rapid economic modernization, the answer of the Faroese nationalist movement was to claim that "we are all Faroese" with one common history, language and future (Wåhlin 1989, 30-31).

The existence of one united national community with common interests was not at all obvious to ordinary Faroese men and women whose primary loyalties were firmly rooted in the values of the family and the bygd, not in an abstract entity called "Faroe". In order to establish this imagined community the new elites had to produce a whole new curriculum for the schools, propagate the notion of one Faroese language without local differences and, preferably, organize all Faroese in one political party. The latter endeavour was never successful as the Faroese political system in 1903 split along to axes, one right-left according to economic interests and one depending on the degree of independence wanted. This latter confrontation was primarily a confrontation among Faroese themselves, not as one would believe from the polemics, a clash between suppressed Faroese and a Danish colonial administration and dominant literary culture. As in national liberations, the national question mainly served as a proxy for other conflicts, whether of regional or economic and social character. A good example is Norway in the same period where nationalism in the words of the Norwegian historian J.A. Seip served as a vicariating motive (Seip 1963). In the two former endeavours, though, the Faroese were utterly successful.

It all began in the metropolis of the still multinational Danish state. In this case in the reading room of the Royal Library and the lecture halls of the University of Copenhagen. In the 1840's historicising philologists established the norms for what later were to become standard written Faroese. Provoked by linguistic and political conflicts between Danes and Germans in the southern borderlands of the Danish state, Sleswig and Holstein they claimed the same rights for the Faroese language versus

Danish in Faroe as Danish speakers demanded in the predominantly German administrated but Danish speaking parts of Sleswig (Bekker-Nielsen 1978).

A forceful criticism of the linguistic policies of the still absolute monarchy was put forward in a series of articles in the newspapers of the nationalist and liberal opposition late 1844 and early 1845 (Hammershaib 1844, Grundtvig 1845). Here the parallel with the situation in Sleswig was explicitly drawn. This debate broke the ground for a native independence movement backed by members of the Faroese elite studying in Copenhagen. Another vehicle for political mobilization with some repercussions in the Faroese themselves were the debates over regional versus central representation in the gradually diminishing Danish monarchy (Thorsteinsson 1990 and Frandsen 1994).

The real beginning of the construction of one separate Faroese identity, though, was February 26, 1876. On this day a small group of Faroese students got together at the dormitory *Regensen* in Copenhagen where some of them lived when studying at the university. Very much like more recent African and Asian intelligentsias in Paris and London they felt at a loss when studying far away from home. As a reaction they invented an “original” identity which could legitimize their otherness and demand for “freedom”. With help and inspiration from Romanticist historians and linguists and helped by the example of Iceland which established a kind of home rule in the 1850’s they soon succeeded in constructing a potent myth of a separate Norse culture in Faroe. According to the myth this early national culture was transported over sea in the 9th and 10th centuries as a packet and set up in Iceland, Greenland, Orkney, Shetland, Faroe, the Hebrides, Isle of Man etc. etc. by colonists from what later came to constitute the kingdom of Norway.

The Viking myth

The myth of a direct link to the early Viking settlements was in accordance with the general 19th century European romanticization of the Viking Age. The age of the Vikings was depicted against a background of antique stereotypes such as weapons, drinking horns, rune-stones, burial mounds, ships, temples, harps and sagas by Scandinavian stage-designers and funeral directors. They were quickly followed by poets and playwrights celebrating a mystic Nordic or Viking national identity that had never existed. They furnished libraries and drawing rooms, public as well as private, with mysterious landscapes culled from Saxo Grammaticus, Snorri Sturluson and the Icelandic sagas. No national festival or historical play was complete without its drinking-horns full of mead gulped down by the hero as he set out to right his country’s wrongs or celebrated a great king. Still today, such horns are displayed in Uppsala, Sweden on festive occasions and national days, as they have been ever since the historian and poet Erik Gustaf Geijer (1783-1847) was presented by his students with a silver-mounted horn there in 1817. Poets as the influential Danish N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872, father of Svend Grundtvig) and the equally important Swedes Esaias Tegnér (1782-1846) and Geijer wrote imaginatively about gods and heroes of this supposedly “heroic age”. This was the general setting in which the Faroese (and Icelandic) national revival took place.

Somewhat unfair this linguistic and cultural national revival reminds one of the deliberate forgeries by which Scandinavian immigrants to USA and Canada tried to establish their “American” credentials inventing a Viking presence in North America

long before the arrival of Christopher Columbus. The fourth centenary of his voyage in 1892 triggered off some remarkable Scandinavian chauvinism. One of the more innocent episodes was the transatlantic voyage of a full-scale copy of the newly found Viking ship from Gokstad in Norway to the World Fair in Chicago.

Worse was the “discovery” in 1898 of the so-called Kensington stone supposedly found in Alexandria, Minnesota by a Swedish immigrant farmer, Olof Ohman. It bears a text in runic letters which records in pseudo-Old Norse a visit to this remote part of Vinland by a group of 8 Swedes and 22 Norwegians in 1362. Ohman has never admitted to forging the runic inscriptions on the stone. At first considered a good joke, it gradually came to be taken seriously; so much that not long ago it has been suggested that Congress should pass a law to declare it genuine! As late as 1949 Dr. M.W. Stirling, Director of the American Bureau of Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, described the stone as “probably the most important archaeological object yet found in North America” (Wilson and Roesdahl 1992, 57). It was exhibited at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington and at the World Fair in New York in 1964-65 and is today the chief exhibit in the Rune Stone Museum at Alexandria, Minnesota. Yet, it is a palpable fake and every professional runologist who has looked at it has agreed that it is just that (Wilson and Roesdahl 1992, 57). But too much national and local pride apparently was invested in it by Scandinavian inhabitants of the Midwest to ever let it be totally dismissed. Alexandria today proclaims itself the Birthplace of America. A vast statue of Erik the Red dominates its main street, and everything the town produces feeds on the Viking industry as, for instance, the local “Vikingland Vodka”.

Not all national myths are as blatant forgeries as the Kensington stone, but that they all to some degree or other build on deliberate inventions or constructions of mythical pasts and abstract presents has been convincingly demonstrated by the last 20 years of research into nationalism and national identities (cf. Østergård 1991 a and b, 1992).

Nations, nationalism and modernization

Recent research into the origins of nations and national identities as we know them today have put forward three more or less overlapping explanations. The Czech-British anthropologist and philosopher Ernest Gellner interpret them as direct products of modernization, i.e. the transition from agrarian to industrial societies. The political scientist Benedict Anderson has stressed the imagined character of national communities as they grew out of the interaction between capitalism, new technologies of communication (print and swift distribution of it) and human linguistic diversity. Finally, the historian Eric J. Hobsbawm has analysed nations and nationalism as a consequence of the political and social transformations following the American and French Revolutions. All these modernist images of the nation (Smith 1991, 17) do not rule out the existence of some “proto-national”, “cultural”, “linguistic” or “ethnic” ties and sentiments that facilitated the later formations of nations, but they all insist that these ties and sentiments are substantially transformed in the nation-building process and that they, if need be, invented national languages, national histories with a more or less unbroken continuity to a medieval or ancient past.

This does not mean that the formations of nations are arbitrary; no one nation is exclusively based on an imagined, constructed or invented past. But none of today's

nation-states was the only possible outcome of history. It is important to bear in mind the un-determined and open character of all nation-building processes. Modernization may dictate that nations will be built, but it cannot be told a priori exactly which. The modernist or functional perspective insists that nations are the products of propaganda and deliberate social engineering. But, who then were the agents of this process? Gellner, provokingly insists, that nationalism and not nationalists have created nations. According to his analysis there is an objective need for homogeneity in modern industrial states, a need for a free market for goods, qualified labour and political ideas. Nationalists are mere pawns in this process, led by the invisible hand of modernization (Gellner 1983, 45 ff. and 124 ff.). Successful nations come into life not through the will or aspirations of the political and ideological leaders of the movements but because of functional necessities of markets and states.

Most other theorists, however, have accredited more importance to the independent role of ideology and politics in the nation- The Faroe Islands lie roughly half-way between Shetland and Iceland. They are the summits of a submarine ridge which connects Iceland with Scotland. The capital of Faroe, Tórshavn, lies almost exactly on 62 N that is immediately south of the Arctic Circle. The islands share latitude with such sub-arctic cold spots as Yakutsk in eastern Siberia, Frederikshaab in south Greenland, and the Ungave peninsula, the northernmost tip of Labrador, yet the climate is remarkably mild because of the Golf Stream. The 18 islands and many islets and skerries of the Faroese archipelago stretch 113 km from north to south and cover 1.399km². The islands have good pasture and rich birdlife, while the at least until a few years ago the sea teemed with fish and small whales (grind). When the land was settled there was also extensive scrubland and lots of driftwood on the coast.

According to the authoritative account by the Viking specialist Else Roesdahl there is no firm evidence of when Faroe was colonized (Roesdahl 1991, 270). Given its location, though, it probably happened before the settlement of Iceland and perhaps at the same time as or shortly after the settlement of Shetland and Orkney by Scandinavian farmers from Western Norway and the Hebrides. In 825 the Irish monk and geographer Dicuil wrote that by then Irish hermits had lived for almost a century on a group of islands north of Britain, where there were innumerable sheep and many kinds of seabirds and that they now departed because of what he called "Norse pirates". All the archaeological evidence points to their having constituted a peaceful pastoral community, uninvolved in the warlike expeditions of the period. Not a single weapon has been found on Viking-age sites in the Faroe Islands. True, a hoard of 98 coins found on Sandoy in 1863 was perhaps a warrior's treasure, but since the latest coin was dated about 1070, the money was hidden long after the first settlement of the islands (West 1972, 5).building process. Most notoriously E.J. Hobsbawm has pointed to the importance of "invention of traditions" in the 19th century for the fostering of new modes of national identification and coherence (Hobsbawm 1983).

Hobsbawm distinguishes between several phases of European nationalism that need not repeated here. From 1880, he tells us, nationalism changed in three ways. Any community that called itself a nation now began to claim some right to self-determination. Furthermore, ethnicity and language, which had been peripheral to the liberal definition of nations, now became central criteria of potential nationhood. And finally, in established nation-states nationalism moved from the left of the political spectrum to the right (Hobsbawm 1990, 102 ff.). This latter did happen not in Faroe, on the contrary, nationalism spread evenly all over the political spectrum because of

the presence of the benevolent Danish administration which conveniently could be presented as a colonial “oppressor”. But his other observations are extremely relevant for the Faroese case. We have learnt from a number of situations, most potently from the well studied Czech case, that nation-building, especially when not identified with a state, inevitably involves politics (cf. Bugge 1994, 10 ff.). As the national community became a political community too, the national and the political integration of the masses were intertwined. Consciousness as citizens, social consciousness, and national consciousness were likely to interact but would not necessarily lead to the same political conclusions for all groups involved. This has been extremely hard to accept for Faroese nationalists and has lent an air of extremism to political debates in this small community where almost everybody is intimately related to everybody else, either through family ties or clientelist bonds.

The Land and the immigration

Although the name Faroe means “Sheep Islands”, it is not yet known whether these are in fact the islands described by the Dicuil. As in Iceland no archaeological evidence of pre-Viking activity has been found. Farms and graves from the Viking period 800-1000 A.D. have been excavated. But they are notoriously difficult to date precisely and many of the earliest farms have no doubt disappeared in the sea because of the rise in sea level and erosion (Roesdahl 1991, 270). Information about the early Faroes is scattered and often unreliable. Færeyinga saga, most of which is set in the decades around the year 1000, relates that Grim Kamban was the first man on the islands and that he arrived there in the days of Harald Finehair (Hårfager). It tells the story of the glittering hero Sigmund Brestisson, who brought Christianity to the islands, and his adversary Prandr of Götu, and mentions the relationship with the Norwegian king and much else. The problem with this literary source, though, is that it was only composed in the early 13th century, probably around 1220. Some place-names and some other linguistic evidence suggest that a number of the Scandinavian immigrants arrived from Celtic-speaking areas (Kamban is a Celtic name itself). The majority, however, came from Norway (Thorsteinsson 1991, 20). Later foreign connections must also have been primarily with Norway and the British isles, and many people must have stopped off at Faroe on their way to or from Iceland.

As mentioned the name Faroe (Faroese *Føroyar*, pronounced *førja*) means *Sheep Islands*. When the Norsemen arrived, they found the islands stocked with a breed of small wild sheep not unlike the Soay breed that still survives on St. Kilda. This breed, perhaps introduced by the hermits, was still common enough in the thirteenth century for special regulations to be made concerning it; but it was progressively replaced by bigger and better domesticated breeds. The last survivors of the wild sheep were exterminated on the island of Litla Dimun in 1866. Wool from Faroese sheep, either in raw or knitted form, was the chief export article until the middle of the nineteenth century, and early settlers doubtless used it to pay for the timber, corn and iron which their own land could not provide.

Like Iceland and the Scandinavian settlements in Scotland, Faroe came under Norwegian dominion some time in the 11th century (according to the tradition in 1035). It had status as a *land*, i.e. province with its own traditional jurisdiction under the Norwegian crown (Debes 1991, 87). About 1100, a bishop was installed in Faroe at Kirkjubøur, a settlement near the southern tip of Streymoy, the largest of the

islands. The names of thirty-three bishops of Faroe, from the twelfth century until the abolition of the see soon after the Reformation, have been handed down, though precious little is known of their lives. Some of them never came to the islands in person. However, in the modern village of Kirkjubøur one can still visit the remains of a medieval episcopal palace and see the walls of an unfinished late thirteenth century cathedral of large proportions. As in the rest of Europe, the Church accumulated immense landed wealth, and by the time of the Reformation, it owned about 40 per cent of the land.

Faroe under Danish rule

In 1380 the Faroe islands fell to the Danish crown together with the rest of the kingdom Norway. As in Iceland the legislative body and high court had been an *athing*, or assembly of freemen. This met in Tórshavn, on the peninsula still called Tinganes (Assembly Headland). Until the thirteenth century, this assembly may have retained much of its original authority, but when its continuous written records began, in 1615, it had long been reduced to one of the king's courts, known as the Løgting (in Danish *Lagting*), like the provincial courts of Norway. The code of law used in Faroe was the Gulathing code which operated in the western provinces of Norway.

However, Faroe also had a code of its own, the so-called *Seydabrævid*, or Sheep Letter, regulating the use of land, especially the joint use of the outfield pastures. This code was first drawn up in 1298, and was repromulgated in 1637. Apart from very minor amendments, its provisions were not superseded until the new outfield laws were passed in 1866 – and even then a good deal from the old code passed into the new legislation, which forms the basis of the present-day code for the management of the common pastures. Some of the provisions of the Sheep Letter protected the small farmers from oppression by the larger landowners; others safeguarded the labour supply of the better-off farmers by forbidding the harbouring of runaway servants, and by prohibiting any poor man from setting up an independent household without a certain minimum of resources (West 1972, 7).

In the 15th and 16th centuries Iceland and Faroe gradually came to be governed more and more as Danish provinces not Norwegian. This was an unintended result of the growing centralization and rationalization of the administration of the multinational empire, not early national oppression as claimed in Faroese political debate (Patursson 1903). In popular memory the special relations between Norway and the north Atlantic dependencies were still remembered, but the islands fell more and more under Danish jurisdiction, although mostly carried out by native Faroese. The number of Danes from the core lands of the monarchy rarely exceeded ten (Debes 1991, 86). The ties grew closer, however, especially after 1814 when Denmark lost Norway to Sweden as part of the general settlements after the Napoleonic Wars. It testifies to the character of the bonds that nobody protested when Faroe, Iceland and Greenland was separated from Norway and stayed with Denmark after the treaty in Kiel april 1814, on the contrary there were frequent expressions of satisfaction not only in Denmark proper (Nørregård 1954 and 1948).

The Reformation was introduced from the top down as in the rest of double monarchy in 1536. The extensive church lands passed into royal ownership, and henceforth the king's bailiff in Faroe exercised an immense power of patronage. Apart from this Faroe together with Iceland and the recolonized Greenland was reduced to a

very remote part of a state far to the north in Europe. As the rest of the extremely centralized double monarchy, which was seen as the very epitome of absolutism in European political debate (cf. Østergård 1994), the North Atlantic dependencies were administered directly from Copenhagen.

According to nationalist Faroese political folklore, the royal trade monopoly which was only abolished in 1856, the laws of 1777 limiting poor peoples' rights to marry, the school laws of 1845 introducing Danish as the only educational language and the abolition of the Løgthing in 1816 stand out as highlights of colonial oppression. In reality these measures have to be understood within the overall context of administrative modernization of the multinational monarchy. When abolished in 1816, the Løgthing and the lögmadur (lagmand) had lost almost all influence which explains why nobody protested against their abolition at the time. It merely marked the last step in a process that began in Norway in the 1790's abolishing similar lögthings, continued in Iceland with the closing of the medieval *Althing* in 1800, and continued with the abolition of the *landstings* in Denmark proper. The last of these to be done away with was the *Landsting* in the island of Bornholm in the Baltic in 1814. Bornholm, the easternmost extension of Denmark, is situated almost in the center of the Baltic sea. It is similar in size and population with Faroe and offers the best unit of comparison within the Danish realm (cf. Wåhlin 1991, 26). The modernization of the legal system was intended to bring down the number of cases brought to the higher courts while the majority of minor offenses were taken care of at local levels. Thus only more serious cases were taken to the court in Tórshavn. The language of this court had been Danish ever since the introduction of written justice. It was necessary to proceed in Danish since Faroese did not exist as a written language. Unfortunately no serious research into the decisions of this and similar courts has so far been undertaken.

As for the schools, Denmark and Sleswig proper in 1814 received a new school law establishing the first system of comprehensive schooling for all children in Europe. The law had been prepared by many local experiments and serious work in a committee that had worked more than 25 years (its deliberations were documented in a massive report, cf. Feldbæk 1991). Faroe only was given an equivalent of that law in 1845 and by then times had changed. What in 1814 could be conceived of as neutral teaching in 1845 was attacked as national oppression. Paragraph 20 of the 1845 law reads:

The teacher must try to make the children understand and speak Danish language fluently; but he is also required to use Faroese, as far as it seems necessary for the development of the children's concepts or to make sure they understand what is taught. (quoted from Wåhlin 1991, 27 with minor changes in the translation).

This law came too late and was abolished in 1854 because of the costs and its controversial nature. Only in 1872 a modern primary school system was established in Faroe – but still with Danish textbooks even though the schools were run by the local Faroese authorities. Only as late as 1938 Faroese language was proclaimed first language in the primary schools and then by a decree from Danish ministry of Education because the Faroese politicians could not agree among themselves!

Much the same goes for the other controversial cases, the marriage law of 1777, abolition of the Royal Trade Monopoly and the question of separate political

representation, but a deeper analysis will take us too far away from the question of national identity. The Faroese historian Jakúp Thorsteinsson has convincingly demonstrated that the 19th century debate on the nature of Faroese political representation was conducted in nationally neutral terms. But the debate did take part in one of the four Danish representational assemblies – the one in Roskilde represented all island of the state. This was in itself humiliating for Faroese (and Icelandic) national pride. Agreeing on an institutional set-up for Faoe was complicated because of the similar problems in Sleswig and Iceland. But it is very hard to detect any colonial or imperial issues at stake. The debate was primarily a debate among Faroese themselves over the kind of status within the diminishing Danish state they wanted (Thorsteinsson 1990).

Economic and demografic development

From around 1750 the production of *klipfisk* (dried salt codfish) gained momentum in the coastal regions of the North Atlantic, i.e. Newfoundland, Norway, Iceland, Shetland and Orkney (Joensen 1985, 34ff.). The pioneers were Basque fishermen. The Danish merchant capitalist Niels Ryberg (1725-1804) 1772 made an attempt to introduce deep-sea fishing and klipfisk-manufacturing to Faroe, but met with flat refusal at the very time when the so-called “servant-Fishery”, initiated by British merchants, flourished in Newfoundland. The agrarian social structure of Faroese society simply did not provide any openings for such a change of its basis and direction. Only after the abolition of the Royal Trade Monopoly in 1856 the production of klipfisk gained momentum. But then things changed rapidly. Already by 1859 codfish is reported caught from rowing boats stationed at shore and manufactured into klipfisk all over Faroe.

At the same time when commercial fishing from rowing boats boomed in Faroe, deep-sea fishing from so-called “smacks” flourished in Shetland. From around 1850 Shetland sailing ships exploited Faroese fishing grounds and Shetlanders were frequent guest in Faroese harbours. According to oral tradition the two peoples communicated without problems and some Faroese even signed on to Shetland vessels (Joensen 1989, 17). The resistance to deep-sea fishing vanished almost over night with the coming of the Shetlanders, the opening of profitable markets in klipfisk and a steep rise in the size of the population. In 1872 three common fishermen from Tórshavn got together and bought the little smack *Fox* in Great Britain and thus began the era of Faroese long-distance fishing.

In contrast to the cooperative dominance in Danish agriculture at the time, the majority of fishing ships in Faroe were owned by capitalist merchants. They gradually began to invest off shore contrary to the former situation where they had only bought the products from the fishermen who fished from rowing boats. Towards the end of 19th century the Ebglich fishing fleets shifted to steam powered trawlers, which meant that sailing ships could be bought cheaply. But the Shetlanders did not profit from the situation. On the contrary they were run out of business as a result of the overwhelming competition from English fleets and low technological Faroese whom they had taught all the techniques of off-shore fishing. Smack-fishing in Shetland rapidly declined in the last third of the 19th century and thus increased a demografic decline already begun. In 1801 the population of Shetland was 21.000, in 1860 40.00;

but in 1900 it fell to 27.000. In the 20th century it has kept falling to a 1971 low of 17.500 (Debes 1991, 90).

Where the Shetlanders failed because of their proximity to the political and economic center, the Faroese prospered precisely because of their peripheral position far away from the attractive centers of the day. Shetland fishing ships were bought by the Faroese whose fishing economy thrived because of the islands' backward nature and sturdiness of the poorly paid fishers who had no alternatives. This enabled the Faroese fleets to use an outdated technology and expand all over the North Atlantic even though they were not competitive on technological terms. This development came to a symbolic end when in 1906 a Faroese merchant bought the last Shetland smack.

North Atlantic fishing grounds (map from Joensen 1985, 64)

In Faroe the smacks came to be known under the name of "slup", though they were not really of the sloop type. In about ten years from 1888, the year of the Christmas meeting, to 1898 the Faroese capacity increased from 12 to 63 ships, and in 1908 there were 142 ships involving employing about 2000 men. The growth of the fishing fleet was partly financed by individual merchants and partly by the fishers themselves through a variety of the so-called truck-system. The merchants paid the fishers and the workers in kind rather than in cash and slowly too. Thus the merchants were provided with sufficient finances to enable them continuously to expand their enterprises (Joensen 1982, 452).

In 1830 a new village, Tvøroyri was founded on the southernmost of the islands Suduroya. From the 1880's it grew rapidly as a center of commercial fisheries. Its population consisted of a few dominating merchants and a majority of poor wage earners. This class structure which resembles the situation in Newfoundland (Sider 1986), however, was not characteristic of the overall picture in the Faroese islands. The majority of Faroese still perceived themselves as traditional peasants even though in reality they gained most of their income from fishing and other market oriented activities. This predominance of the traditional agrarian values explains the remarkable success of the movement for cultural and political independence.

Demographic Development in the North Atlantic

	1801	1860	1901	1971
Faroe Islands		5.265	15.530	44.000
Iceland		47.000	78.000	340.000
Shetland	21.000	40.000	27.000	17.500

Emigration from the North Atlantic

Faroe Islands	1840-1870	600
	1870-1910:	570
Iceland	1871-1881	20.000
Shetland		4.500

The literary heritage

Faroese was only a spoken language until late into the 19th century which explains why the official language of the administration and church from the Reformation in 1536 was Danish. The first attempt to put the oral traditions into writing date back to 1639, when the royal antiquarian in Copenhagen, Ole Worm (1588-1654) received transcripts of twelve dance songs (*kvæði*) from the Faroe Islands. Unfortunately the manuscript vanished in the great fire of Copenhagen in 1728 and only a few verses have survived in copy. The earliest study of Faroese language and the oral literature of the islands was undertaken by the philologist and naturalist Jens Christian Svabo (1746-1824). Svabo was son of the parish priest of Vágur, and until he was thirteen, his father taught him at home in Midvagur. He was then sent for six years to the Latin school in Tórshavn where he befriended another gifted young Faroeman, Nicolai Mohr (1742-90), who had more luck in the mundane affairs of life. Mohr undertook a number of investigations for the Danish government as a naturalist, and for the last few years of his life managed the royal porcelain factory in Copenhagen (Bekker-Nielsen 1978, 101ff.)

Svabo and Mohr were the first Faroese to pursue studies at the university other than theology. Both went to Copenhagen in 1765, and studied political economy and natural history. Back in the Faroes he among many other things wrote a monumental Faroese-Danish-Latin dictionary which remained in manuscript until 1966. He was helped initially by Mohr, who had the advantage of a thorough command of Icelandic. Svabo wrote down the words in the way they were pronounced on his native island of Vágur. His intention was, as he says, to give posterity an account of the Faroese language as it existed in his time. As the majority of his Enlightenment contemporaries he thought it likely to be replaced by Danish. Ironically the ultimate effect of Svabo's and his followers' work was to make the reverse happen: Faroese a hundred years later was to replace Danish in fields where the latter had been used for centuries (Bekker-Nielsen 1978, 101-105 and West 1972, 107-108).

Svabo had a number of followers. The parish priest Johan Henrik Schrøter (1771-1851) collected folk tales and poems and thus bridged the gap between Svabo and the first professional Faroese philologist, Venceslaus Ulricus Hammershaimb (1819-1909). It is significant for the tiny size of the Faroese community that all three had close family ties. Two Danish ethnologists, Svend Grundtvig (1824-83) and Jørgen Bloch (1839-1910) collected traditional songs and tales in 18 massive volumes entitled

Føroyja Kvædi: Corpus carminum Færoensium, containing the complete body of Faroese oral poetry. In all 234 ballads with a total of about 70,000 stanzas.

Faroese prose was collected much later than the recording of the poetry. The pioneers were Hammershaimb and Schrøter, but the work of the latter was largely vitiated by his not leaving the material as he had heard it. Instead he assembled different accounts and amplified them on his own, often translating the result into Danish. Hammershaimb's collections appeared in the periodical *Antiqvarisk Tidsskrift* (1849-51) and in his *Færøsk Anthologi* (1886-91). The greatest collector of Faroese prose stories, however, was the philologist Jakob Jakobsen (1864-1918). His major collections of historical tales were published as *Færøske folkesagn og æventyr* between 1898 and 1901. A few of the historical tales date back to pre-Reformation times, with accounts of the Black Death, for example. The fictitious tales are mostly variants of the common Northeuropean stories of witches, giants, trolls and the farm lad who wins the princess.

The recording of this wealth of oral literature demanded an orthography. The first man to devise a convention for writing the Faroese language was Svabo, who wrote down his texts, and the words in his dictionary, in a manner closely related to Danish orthography. Faced with a diversity of dialects, Svabo selected that of his native island of Vágur. Related systems were used by Jóannes í Króki for the *Sandoyarbók*, by Lyngbye for *Sigurd Fofnersbane* and by Schrøter for his translations, but these were adapted to the dialects of Sandoy and south Streymoy. V.U. Hammershaib, though, was the first to establish a more generally accepted orthographic standard.

To overcome the diversity of Faroese dialects and establish an orthography that could be used for all of them was a problem of great scholarly importance for the philologists working on the Faroese language in the first half of the 19th century. One way was to base the spelling on the etymology of the words. The first to work along these lines was Jacob Nolsøe (1775-1869). Even though he only left Faroe once he was a typical representative of the Enlightenment, manager in the royal trading company, poet and lover of the Icelandic sagas. He is told to have read the sagas aloud to the boatcrews when they waited in the warehouses of the Monopoly. In 1830 he wrote a grammar with a more etymological orthography than Svabo's. The orthography that finally gained general acceptance was devised as a result of the deliberations at the Roskilde Assembly that led to the ill-fated Faroese school law of 1845. The Assembly delegates took it for granted that the medium of instruction in the new schools would be Danish. Many of them, indeed, believed that Faroese was not a true language at all, but a corrupted dialect of Danish and Icelandic. To refute this view and lay the foundations of a written Faroese literature was the major achievement of V. U. Hammershaimb crowned in the publication of his *Færøisk Sproglære* in 1854.

In Hammershaib's own opinion his norms for the written language had been designed explicitly to satisfy the difficult requirements of respecting the diversity of dialects in the Faroese islands while at the same time provide a uniform spelling of all the dialects without straight-jacketing them. This of course is impossible. Instead he succeeded in choosing a spelling which would help set Faroese as much apart from Danish and as close to Icelandic as possible. In his own words Hammershaib had "avoided choosing the sound system of any particular dialect in order not to commit injustice to perhaps rightful claims of other dialects for their characteristic sound systems" (Hammershaib 1891, lv).

In an article in the newspaper *Kjøbenhavnsposten* December 19, 1844, under the signature “A Faroeman”, Hammershaimb, then a student of theology at the university of Copenhagen, pointed out that Faroese had all the characteristics of an independent language, however much it might have been influenced by Danish during the centuries where the latter had been the medium of religion and public business. A few months later, Hammershaimb’s close friend the aforementioned folklorist Svend Grundtvig, under the pseudonym S. Frederiksen, wrote a pamphlet entitled *Dansken paa Færøerne: Sidestykke til Tysken i Slesvig* (Danish in the Faroe Islands, a parallel with German in Slesvig).

Grundtvig’s point was that just as Danish was under pressure from the German language in the elementary schools in the Danish-speaking parts of Slesvig, so the proposed school law would oppress the Faroese language. Danes who objected to the former could not in all fairness support the latter. This is the background for Hammershaimb’s new orthography. With the help of the Icelandic scholar and patriot Jón Sigurdsson (1811-79, cf. Olason 1940), he devised the system of rendering Faroese that in essentials is the one used today. The irony of this is, that his chosen principles distanced written Faroese more from Danish than spoken Faroese is. The reverse side of this was to bring Faroese closer to Icelandic. Whether this was his intention is not clear, but the implications for the character of Faroese national identity have been important (cf. Nauerby).

Faroese language and national identity

One of the best sources for the growth of a Faroese national and linguistic identity and the importance of dictionaries and orthography is a correspondence between a bright young Faroese boy Christian Bærentsen and his father Enok Bærentsen. In the 1870’s the boy went to school in Denmark, at the famous Herlufsholm. On November 5, 1879 he wrote in the last letter that would reach Tórshavn before the onslaught of the raging winter storms in the Atlantic Ocean the following lines:

In the library I got hold of Hammershaimb’s Faroese Grammar; it interests me very much, especially now that I have made fair progress in Old Norse; it is truly fascinating to see how the language has developed and how little difference there is in reality between the older and the newer language. I wonder whether it would not be possible for Faroese to become once again a written language, to supersede Danish as the official language? It does seem to me a rather remarkable thing that even so small a people as the Faroese should use one language in speech and another language, as remote as Danish really is, in writing, in church and in the law-courts. I would like to learn to write Faroese; I have several times tried it, and really it is not difficult. Even by writing the words in Old Norse one comes fairly close to the correct form. (5/11 1879, quoted from the translation in West 1972, 113).

His father later replied:

You tell me in your letter that you have got hold of Hammershaimb’s Faroese Grammar, in which connection you advance the question whether it is not an unnatural linguistic situation that is to be found here, in that the population speaks one language in the home and a quite different one in the church and the law-courts,

and whether it might be possible to get this position altered so that one might elevate Faroese into a written language and as the official language, and that of the church and courts. It is after all an old idea that is coming up here once again, and as I learn from Finsen (Niels R. Finsen, 1860-1904, doctor) that this is something which haunts the minds of most of the Faroese who study in Denmark and has even been discussed in Morgenposten, I should rather like to give you my detailed opinion about the matter, since I would very much wish to discourage you from engaging yourself deeply in this chimera, since even though for a short period it should work itself through to a reality, yet instead of bringing the Faroese population a new vitality, by isolation it would so weaken it that it would soon go down before the powerful English nationality, which geographically lies so very close to us ... The Faroe Islands have a population of only about 10.000 people, the same as a medium-sized market town in Denmark; how should it be conceivable that so small a population would have the power to support a literature that would content other than spiritual Lilliputians? ...

It seems to me that the spirit of the time is, moreover, working towards the union of the related into larger nationalities, instead of searching out with microscopic delicacy particularities by which to define a new people – for behind a literary language must stand a people who in any event have enough spiritual if not physical power to guard it against destruction ... Yet I once certainly did think of the possibility of the Faroese language being used up here in all public speaking, as well in church as in the Lagting and the law-court, since as the customary language of the people, it influences the emotional life more readily than the more remote Danish ... (quoted from West 1972, 113114).

The father was Enok Daniel Bærentsen (1831-1900), descendant of a long line of farmers who had leased a crown tenancy at Sund, a few miles north of Tórshavn. But he had left the land, obtained a commercial education in Copenhagen, and after the abolition of the Monopoly had settled in Tórshavn as a merchant. He was also an active politician. He sat briefly in the Danish parliament and was for twenty-four years an active member of the Løgting. In the 1850's he had been one of the members chiefly responsible for the removal of the Danish *amtmand* Dahlerup. The son, Christian Bærentsen (1862-1944) studied law and became the first and only native-born *amtmand* of Faroe 1897-1911. Their exchange shows very clearly the dilemma facing patriotic and intelligent Faroese. If Faroese were to be launched as a written language for all public and literary purposes, would it lead to the isolation and eventual destruction of the Faroese nation, as commercial links with Britain steadily developed? The blossoming of Icelandic literature earlier in the century gave the Faroese some hope of success, but the population of Faroe was only a fraction of that of its northerly neighbour. Yet, they succeeded against all odds.

Invention of the Modern Faroese Identity in Copenhagen February 1881

In the 1870's, Faroese students in the metropolis of Copenhagen fired by patriotic ambitions, began to write Faroese drinking and patriotic songs. They were encouraged by the political success of the Icelanders, who in 1874 attained a large measure of home rule. In Copenhagen there was lively contact between Icelandic and Faroese students. The most influential of the Faroese students was Frederik Petersen (1853-

1917), who attended school in Reykjavík before enrolling at Copenhagen University to study theology. It was Petersen, later provost of the Faroe Islands who in 1877 wrote the first Faroese national anthem *Eg oyggjar veit* (I know of islands); after returning to his native country he wrote three Faroese hymns of great beauty, which in time took their place beside the Danish hymns at church services. The old ballads were not any longer the sole Faroese poetic idiom as young intellectuals began writing modern – though often disguised as old Norse – poetry in Faroese.

The social gatherings of the Faroese students at the dormitory Regensen in Copenhagen where many of them lived led to the formation of an association, the *Føringafelag* (the Faroese Union). Present at the foundation January 26, 1881 were 23 young Faroese students and they did what all nationalist students abroad always have done at such occasions; they sang the sad and moody songs of their distant motherland, toasted to its and their own future and drafted declarations. According to Bærentsens recordings of this first meeting the association was “devoted to the advancement of Faroese culture amongst Faroemen resident in Denmark” (“at knytte færinger i Danmark sammen til åndeligt samliv og at vække lyst hos dem til færøske anliggender”). The first committee consisted of Jóhan Olsen, Jørgen Hammershaimb and Christian Bærentsen (Debes 1982, 134-38). Predictably this invented politicised national identity soon was exported back to Faroes itself.

The Christmas Meeting December 1888 – At fáa Førja mál til æru (to bring the Faroese language into honour)

The example of the students was taken up 8 years later in Faroe. A group of influential Faroese men called for a meeting in the Tinghus (parliament building) in Tórshavn on the afternoon of December 26, 1888. They were keenly interested in the building of a new national culture that could replace the traditional local cultures, now in danger of perishing together with the old peasant communities when confronted with the upcoming large-scale, long distance fishing. In their own words the aim of the meeting was “to discuss how to defend the Faroese language and Faroese customs” (Debes 1982, 149 and 155).

Amongst the convenors of the meeting was Enok Bærentsen, who over the nine years since the letter to his son had modified his views on the practicability of maintaining a national literature in the islands. There was also Rasmus Effersøe (1857-1916), agricultural adviser and poet, and the rich farmer’s son and later leader of the movement for Faroese independence Jóannes Patursson (1866-1946) who on this occasion made one of his first appearances in public. Those present at the meeting were aroused to great enthusiasm, and emotion reached its height when Effersøe recited a poem written by the young Patursson, *Nu er tann stundin komin til handa* (Now the moment is with us). It contained an impassioned appeal to all Faroemen to defend their language against foreign (i. e. Danish) influences which threatened to corrupt and overthrow it. On this occasion the poet himself was too shy to recite his own work, though in later years he became anything but a shy man when leading the radical movement for political autonomy (the fullest description of the Christmas meeting is Jóhannes av Skardi 1964).

The immediate outcome of the meeting was the formation, early in 1889, of the *Føringafelag* (Faroese Union), with the twofold aims of bringing the Faroese language into all areas of public life and of working for the unity, progress, and self-sufficiency

of the Faroese people. The society hoped that in time the language would be used for all public business, and that a strong Faroese literature would develop. The most important work of the society was the issue of a newspaper, *Føringatidindi*, written exclusively in Faroese. The only newspaper published in the islands at that time was *Dimmalætting* (first regularly printed from 1878). Although *Dimmalætting* bore a Faroese title (it means Daybreak), it only occasionally carried articles in Faroese, and the public was generally unacquainted with the conventions of writing their own language. However, *Føringatidindi*, which appeared from 1890 to 1901, effectively taught the majority of the Faroese to read and write their own language.

Learning to read and write Faroese was more than simply mastering an orthography. The new Faroese authors, like those of Tudor England, had to invent a whole range of new words for the purposes of literature, scholarship and modern life in general. Instead of borrowing foreign words as the English and Danish writers often did, the members of the Føringafelag preferred to develop the language from its own internal resources as did the Zionist Hebrew nationalists in Israel in the 1920's. And with similar difficulties when trying to render the facts of modernity in a language dating one or two thousand years back. The old ballads were ransacked for useful linguistic material, and ingenious compounds were devised to take place of Danish words in current vernacular use. Yet when Rasmus Effersøe, the first editor of *Føringatidindi*, claimed that he could not think a thought that he was unable to express in his mother tongue, it was reckoned a very bold statement. For Faroese, rich and vivid as it might be for anything tangible, say for the work of field or fjord, was poor in words for expressing abstract conceptions (West 1972, 117).

Danish influence, though abhorrent from a linguistic point of view, was a powerful cultural element in shaping the Faroese national movement. Most important as an influence were perhaps the ideals propagated by the Danish folk high schools. These schools arose in Denmark from 1844 onwards in response to the growth of democracy within the country, and the outside threat that Danish culture might be overwhelmed from the German south. The folk high schools aimed at giving the Danish peasantry a liberal education and making them aware of the cultural inheritance which was now passing into their protection. The situation in Faroe at the end of the century was obviously analogous. Several leading members of Føringafelag had attended folk high schools in Denmark, and two of them, Símun av Skardi (1872-1942) and Rasmus Rasmussen (1871-1962) founded the Faroe folk high school in 1899. For many years this was the only school in the islands in which the Faroese language was either a subject or the medium of instruction; it shared with *Føringatidindi* the task of building a literary language and bringing to life a national culture. For ten years the school remained in a remote corner of the island of Bordoy, but in 1909 it was removed to Tórshavn, the cultural centre of the new nation. (West 1972, 118).

The primary concern for the organizers of the Christmas Meeting as noted was to raise Faroese language to the status of Danish. One of the initiators Oliver Effersøe (1863-1933) from Suduroy proclaimed: "The Faroese mother tongue ... suits our special local conditions so well and ... is so entwined with our folk-character, that we could hardly give it up without at the same time ceasing to be an independent people." (*Dimmalætting* January 12, 1889). Firstly the language was seen as a means of expression open to all Faroese, through which they might express themselves most fully and directly. This reasoning implied a descriptive as well as a normative

dimension; the Faroese language not only was claimed to be used by all Faroese but, more important, it also *ought* to provide universal access to civilization and the realm of religion. Secondly the language was considered to provide an enduring connection with the past and the values of freedom, enterprise, and unity associated with a supposedly medieval past. Through a strong oral tradition the Faroese long had celebrated the past and their own distinctiveness in the so-called Ring Dances (Wylie and Margolin 1981). Another speaker at the meeting, the later Amtmand Chr. Barentsen, according to the report in *Dimmalætting* reminded his audience that the language of “the free-spirited Norsemen who settled the Faroes still lived on almost unchanged, in people’s speech and in both the oldest and the most recently composed heroic ballads”. Thirdly the language was seen as means of communication with the kinsmen in *all* the other three Scandinavian countries, not just the Danes. And finally the language was also interpreted as providing a bridge to the future. In the words of the first speaker Oliver Effersøe: “We must hold on firmly to our mother tongue and our father’s manners and customs so that we can avoid degenerating.” (*Dimmalætting* January 12, 1889).

In many respects, the linguistic situation in 1888 was much the same as it had been for centuries. On most occasions, Faroese spoke Faroese, a vernacular marked by chiefly phonological dialectal variation. Although a norm for the written language had been established by adoption of the system elaborated by V.U. Hammerhaib in 1854, Faroese still was an almost exclusively spoken language (Wylie 1989, 9). Danish served as the language of the church, the law, politics, and of contacts with the outside world. This peaceful co-existence of a high and a low culture, a formal and an informal language was – and to some degree still is – embedded in Faroese culture. In 1888 most Faroese probably still would have agreed with the observation made by Hammershaib in the aforementioned article on the linguistic situation in the Faroe islands in 1844: “Since Danish has for such a long time been the religious language of Faroese and their legal language, they have become so accustomed to this that they do not think it a complication to have a written language different from the one they speak” (*Kjøbenhavnsposten* December 19, 1844, Bekker-Nielsen 1978, 86).

But this situation gradually changed as a consequence of the cultural revolution in combination with rapid economic and demographic growth. In 1901 it led to the formulation of a policy of political and cultural autonomy aiming at raising Faroese to official language. This led to a protracted battle between two political parties. The conflict over church and school language was only resolved in 1938 and 1939 respectively at the outset of World War 2. British occupation during the war and demands for independence resulted in a tumultuous political referendum in 1946. Eventually the problem of the status of Faroe within the Danish realm was overcome in 1948 in an uneasy compromise which still exists. In reality it means independence in everything except formal terms.

The Faroese Language issue 1906-1940

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Faroese language had no official status within the islands. As the use of Faroese as a written language spread in private life, opposition to its use in public affairs weakened and, by the eve of the second world war, it had won its way by degrees into acceptability for nearly all public purposes. It was perhaps inevitable that the language struggle should become a political issue – it

was easy for the Samband to accuse the Sjálvstyri of using their language policy as a lever for advancing secret aims of political separation from Denmark; and it was equally easy for the Sjálvstyri to represent the Samband as traitors to their native language. The truth was less simple. The Samband feared the cultural impoverishment that would follow if the Faroese people ceased to be bilingual, while the Sjálvstyri saw it as an affront to Faroese nationhood that the official language should be other than the mother tongue. Danish was used in church, in school, in administration and in the law-courts. By the time party political life began in Faroe, the vernacular had made only the most limited entry into the church, was used in schools only as an aid to the understanding of Danish, and in the law-courts was treated on the same footing as English, German or any other foreign language.

The Samband wanted to see the development and literary use of the Faroese language, although at the same time they believed that constant efforts must be made to preserve the fluency of the people in written and spoken Danish. And they were determined not to allow the Sjálvstyri to introduce Faroese everywhere merely on dogmatic grounds; and the two main objects of the Samband – the preservation of the constitutional link with Denmark, and the exercise of the utmost economy in public expenditure – had to be safeguarded. Thus the Samband had a certain ambiguity of approach to the language issue.

The attitude of the Sjálvstyri was more straightforward. A clause in their party programme favoured the free use of Faroese in all circumstances and its wide use as a medium of instruction in the schools. In their 1928 campaign, the Social Democrats ignored the issue, but a brief clause in their 1932 manifesto favoured general support for the Faroese language and culture.

The bitterest struggles were waged over the place of Faroese in the schools. The campaign lasted from 1908 until 1938, by which time national aspirations had been reasonably well satisfied. In 1908, the teachers at the *realskole* (high school) in Tórshavn requested permission to use Faroese as the medium of instruction. The school board replied that this was not admissible except when the Faroese language itself was being taught. At other times it might be used only “as a supplementary means towards clearer understanding”. In 1909 a complaint was laid before the school board that one of the teaching staff, Jacob Dahl (later to become a priest), was nevertheless using Faroese for teaching. The case was referred to the Danish ministry of education, who in turn asked the opinion of the Løgting.

The Løgting was bitterly divided. The committee which had been set to consider the matter failed to agree, and in 1910 presented majority and minority reports. The Samband majority held that the position of Danish as the official language of Faroe, and as the chief cultural medium, necessitated Faroese children being enabled to acquire more than a mere facility in reading and writing it – in the oral instruction in other lessons they ought to have the opportunity of hearing and speaking Danish. According to the Sjálvstyri minority, it was a universal principle that pupils should be instructed in their mother tongue – as was the case in other parts of the Danish realm. Icelandic was employed in the schools of Iceland, Greenlandic in the schools of Greenland, and in the Danish West Indies, where English was spoken, English was the medium of instruction. However, in Faroe there existed two special difficulties. One was that Faroese circumstances demanded mastery of a second language, which must clearly be Danish. The other was that school textbooks in Faroese did not exist in quantity and would be expensive to provide. The Sjálvstyri recommended that every

teacher should be free to choose the language in which he gave his instruction. The Løgting finally supported the majority proposals, recommending Faroese for the younger children, and as a supplementary aid to comprehension for the older ones, but Danish as the principal language of instruction for the seniors. This recommendation became paragraph 7 of the regulations for Faroese schools issued by the Danish government on 16 January, 1912. The amendment of paragraph 7 became one of the battle-cries of the home rulers.

From the very beginning, however, paragraph 7 proved unworkable. The Velbastadur teacher Louis Zachariassen openly defied the regulation, and resigned his post rather than submit to it – thus providing the Sjálvstyri with a useful martyr. Jacob Dahl became another hero to the home rulers, and his appointment as provost in 1917 exacerbated the political troubles of that time. Yet it was clear to everyone that in practice a teacher could use as much Faroese as he liked if he did not advertise his action but pretended that he was using the vernacular only as a supplementary aid.

The point was raised in 1918 that written Faroese had not yet become a compulsory subject in the schools. It was maintained that the 1912 regulations had not provided for this because at that time many of the teachers were not themselves skilled in the art of writing their own language. Later, however, holiday courses had been available for teachers, so that even the older ones, who had been educated before the national movement had fully emerged, had the opportunity of deepening their knowledge of literary Faroese. A request on this point from the Løgting to the government was at once conceded, unlike the accompanying request for an amendment to paragraph 7. It proved very difficult to arrive at a formula that would at once allow the Faroese language as a medium of instruction, yet ensure that school-leavers had sufficient fluency in spoken Danish for their adult needs. A proposal from the Danish ministry of education in 1925 for Faroese to be the general language of instruction, but for Danish to be used for Danish history and geography lessons, proved to be unacceptable to the Samband, now once again the majority party in the Løgting. It was only after the 1936 election, when the Social Democrats had made their big gains at the expense of the Samband, that a convincing Løgting majority could be mustered for an amendment. The Social Democrats voted with the Sjálvstyri and Vinnuflokkurin for an amendment effectively giving the two languages equality in the schools. This was endorsed by the Danish government on 13 December, 1938.

The use of Faroese in church services was first permitted in 1903, to a limited degree and under stringent conditions: namely, at services other than the eucharist, and with the sanction of the minister, the provost, and the parochial council. In 1912, the minister was allowed to preach a certain proportion of his eucharistic sermons in the vernacular, if the parochial council and the bishop both agreed. Two factors in particular delayed the general introduction of Faroese into services: the conservatism of the Faroese, among whom the Danish language had come to be specially associated with solemn occasions, and the lack of a Faroese liturgy, hymn-book and Bible.

This question was repeatedly discussed by the Løgting between the wars. The Samband, as might be expected, took the cautious line about any change to the vernacular. They pointed out that polls in Tórshavn had shown a clear majority favouring the retention of Danish, and made the further relevant observation that the Faroese church was in part served by Danish ministers, and if each minister were allowed to choose for himself how much Faroese he used, some congregations might

become so unfamiliar with the Danish ritual and scriptures that when a Danish priest succeeded to the living, no-one would be able to understand his services.

In the long run, the determining factor was the work of translation. Pastor Schrøter had made a Faroese version of St. Matthew's Gospel as early as 1823, and in 1908 A.C. Evensen translated St. John's Gospel. But it was Jacob Dahl who was the creator of the Faroese religious idiom. In 1921 appeared his translation of the Psalms, and the following years saw the publication of the books of the New Testament, which were issued in collected form in 1937. Dahl continued with the Old Testament, and after his death in 1944 the work was completed by Kristian Osvald Viderø (born 1906). The complete Bible, translated direct from the original tongues, appeared in 1961. A version made by Victor Danielsen (1894-1961), a missionary for the Plymouth Brethren, had already appeared in 1948. Between the wars this sect won a strong following in Faroe, and regularly used the vernacular in worship. However, Danielsen's translation had been made from various modern European languages. Dahl's Bible was authorised for public worship as soon as it appeared, as had been his translations of the service book (1930) and the general prayer book (1939). He also translated the catechism, a biblical history, and two books of sermons. The last-named was important because in Faroe a single minister may have six churches in his care, and on any Sunday, the service in five of them is conducted by the local deacon. The ancient Faroese custom is for the deacon to read the sermon from a printed collection.

General authority to use Faroese in church services was given by an ordinance of 13 March, 1939. By this, the individual minister was permitted to use whichever of the two languages appeared natural to him. The sermon, moreover, did not need to be in the same language as the liturgy. The hymns might be in either Danish or Faroese, or both. A Faroese hymn-book was published and authorised in 1956, but there are still churches which employ the old Danish hymn-book, which contains many hymns, for instance the well-loved hymns of Kingo, considered part of the spiritual heritage of the Faroese. At the present time, however, Faroese church services are the rule, and opposition from congregations has completely disappeared. Moreover, the Faroese church today is staffed almost completely by native Faroemen.

Discussions about raising the status of Faroese in the lawcourts began in 1920, as a result of a proposal to extend to Faroe certain legal reforms already carried out in metropolitan Denmark. These reforms mainly concerned the much greater use of the spoken word in law-courts, in place of the traditional practice of relying largely on written submissions. The Løgting deliberations on the matter were finally embodied in a law of 11 April, 1924, which confirmed Danish as the language of the courts, but permitted a judge with a command of the Faroese language to use it in the examination of Faroese-speaking persons. Documents laid before the court that were written in Faroese had to be accompanied by a certified Danish translation if the court or the opposite party demanded it.

From 1931, there were proposals for still further extending the place of Faroese in the courts. These were opposed by the Samband on the grounds that as long as the constitutional link with Denmark subsisted, there must be a common legal language. Court records, for instance, must be kept in Danish in case of an appeal to the high court in Copenhagen. Partly because of the opposition of the Samband, which held a commanding position in the Løgting until 1936, and partly because of the technical complexities of the matter, no final decision had been reached by the outbreak of the second world war. Faroese finally came to be of equal standing with Danish in a rather

unsatisfactory way – in a law of 4 January, 1944, under the emergency wartime constitution, and hence without the sanction, at the time, of the Danish government. After communication was restored between Faroe and Denmark, the decision was left in force. At the present time, Faroese is in principle on a par with Danish for all legal purposes, but in practice Danish is still widely used.

Between the first and second world wars, the Faroese language won its way to acceptability in a number of minor official fields. From 1920, the telephone directory appeared in Faroese. From 1925, the language became acceptable for postal and telegraphic purposes. From 1927 onwards, the deliberations of the Løgting were recorded in it – and so on.

By the outbreak of the second world war, the language issue had been largely determined in accordance with the aims of the Sjólvstyri. But success was achieved less because of votes in the Løgting than as a result of the simultaneous growth of Faroese as a literary language, which took place on a scale beyond the expectations of most observers. Perhaps the most decisive of the actions of the Løgting in the language question were those which commanded the support of all parties – the sponsorship of a whole series of literary and other works in Faroese, which allowed the language to reach maturity.

The economic importance of cultural independence

In conclusion, the program of cultural independence for the Faroe islands proved successful in shaping an independent intellectual, political and economic life. This process came to a symbolic peak in 1906 when the Faroese bought the last long distance fishing boat from the Shetland Islands, the very country which 50 years earlier had taught the Faroese everything about overseas fishing. The Christmas Meeting has today acquired an almost mythological stance as the symbolic rebirth of an age old but long since lost national identity of medieval origins. There is this much truth to the legend that the program of cultural independence efficiently advocated by the *Føringafelag* laid the foundations for an economic independence that served the Faroese very well and only recently has run into difficulties. This happened at the same time when English speaking dependencies with a similar social and economic structures in the Atlantic area were reduced to dependent peripheries. Orkney and Shetland in the 19th century, Newfoundland in the 20th century.

But the meeting and the notion of reestablishing a continuous medieval culture is pure myth if taken literally. What happened was not the *rebirth* of a medieval language and culture which had been suppressed by an evil absolutist state, Denmark. It was a deliberate construction of a modern national identity which involved the suppression of local cultural and linguistic differences between the various islands that make up the Faroese archipelago. Until the 1880's neither one united Faroese culture nor one Faroese language had ever existed. When in 1881 a small number of Faroese students got together at the dormitory *Regensen* in Copenhagen they created something new in the disguise of old traditions. Very much like modern African and Asian intelligentsias in Paris and London they felt at a loss when studying away from home and as a reaction invented an "original" identity which could legitimize their otherness and demand for a modern nation of their own. With help and inspiration from a few Romantic linguists they succeeded in constructing a potent myth of a

separate Norse culture transported over sea in the 9th and 10th centuries. That is the migrant (Settler) identity of the Faroese.

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note
bygd = hamlet