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## *The Most Exciting Word in Faroese*

*Grindaboð*. Pronounced “GRIN-da-boa.” Try saying it a few times: *GRIN-da-boa. GRIN-da-boa. GRIN-da-boa.* The first time I was on Faroese radio, the interviewer asked me to repeat this word just after he started recording. I first thought that the audio engineer needed to check the sound levels and that maybe he was using this word as the Faroese equivalent of “check one two.” Or that maybe he figured it would be funny to hear such a pure, iconic Faroese word pronounced with my American accent. Like an American hearing a British person say, “Howdy, partner.” When the interview played later, though, during the twelve o’clock news hour—one of two times per day (the other being six in the evening) when every Faroese conversation pauses, radios are turned up, and listeners look askance at anyone who dares interrupt—I knew the actual reason: it was an attention-grabber. Like “Fire!” in a crowded theater. The American anthropologist Jonathan Wylie has called *grindaboð* “the most exciting word in Faroese.”<sup>1</sup> If you want to command the attention of any Faroese person within earshot, say—no, shout—“Grindaboð!”

The word is composed of two parts: *grind*, meaning “a pod of pilot whales,” and *boð*, meaning “message.” *Grindaboð* literally means “pilot whale message” and is used to announce the message that pilot whales have been sighted and there is going to be a whale drive. The radio interview began with a looped recording of my voice saying—chanting, rather—“Grindaboð! Grindaboð! Grindaboð!” People listened.

In Faroese, *hvalur* means “whale.” Because there are many different kinds of whale, the term *grindabhvalur* is used to specify the long-finned pilot whale, known to scientists as *Globicephala melas* since first being identified as a unique species by the Scottish physician Thomas Stewart Traill in 1809.<sup>2</sup> The long-finned pilot whale is a small, toothed cetacean, not a large baleen whale. It would more accurately be described as a large species of dolphin; after all, its taxonomic family is *Delphinidae*. The genus *Globicephala* comprises two species: *G. melas* and *G. macrorhynchus*, the long-finned and short-finned pilot whales, respectively. There are morphological differences between the two species, the most obvious of which is the eponymous fin length—up to 30 percent of the body length in *G. melas*, but maxing out at 19 percent in *G. macrorhynchus*.<sup>3</sup> While individual whales of the two species may be difficult to distinguish at sea, the need rarely arises because they inhabit nearly separate ranges. The only pilot whales in Faroese waters are long-finned. In the Caribbean, the only pilot whales are short-finned. Both kinds of pilot whales travel in pods, which are made up of a few dozen to several hundred individuals. Pilot whales of both species are recognized by their jet-black skin and bulbous foreheads. The former characteristic led to one of their common names, blackfish, used throughout the Caribbean and along the eastern coast of North America. The latter feature is the reason Newfoundlanders refer to pilot whales as “pot-heads.” The most common English name, pilot whale, is likely a reference to the whale’s behavior: congregating together in large pods and traveling together behind a leader, or pilot.

Pilot whale behavior also likely influenced the development of the Faroese word *grindabvalur*. Kate Sanderson, a literary scholar and expert on the textual history of the Faroe Islands, identified a seventeenth-century geography text that describes a type of whale, of which “many hundreds congregate in a large group and chase each other and that is known as a *Hvalsgrind*,” or whale-*grind*.<sup>4</sup> Used in this way, *grind* describes the clustered movement of a pod of whales in a tight formation, based on a related word, *grindast*, used to describe the actions of a group of excited or agitated people. This behavior of congregating in large, dense groups makes the Faroese method of whaling possible. Pilot whales instinctively herd together even to the point of collective endangerment—the whole pod can be driven ashore by a flotilla of boats, the whales then killed on the beach.

## Grinning and Grinding

*Grind* is pronounced with a short-*i* vowel sound, and sounds almost exactly like the English word *grinned* (the past tense of *to grin*). I have heard *grind* pronounced—never by Faroese people—with a long-*i* vowel sound, like the English verb *to grind*. This pronunciation is used mainly by those who don’t know better or who wish to connote the harshness or violence associated with the English word *grind*, usually when they are discussing whaling in the context of their opposition to the practice. In English, to grind something is a violent act. One grinds coffee beans, teeth, or tree stumps. The purpose of grinding is to break something down or to destroy it. By intentionally pronouncing the Faroese word *grind* (short *i*) incorrectly, like the English word *grind* (long *i*), the speaker subtly—and often intentionally—imparts the harshness of the English meaning of the word to the Faroese meaning.

The Faroese term for the act of killing pilot whales, *grindadráp*, is not without its own harshness. *Dráp* means “slaughter.” *Manndráp* is

the Faroese word for “manslaughter.” A *grindadráp*, then, is a slaughter of a pod of pilot whales. The acute accent diphthongs the *a* in Faroese to resemble a softened version of the vowel sound in *cow*. The final syllable of the word is between “drop” and “drowp.” Therefore, the pronunciation of *grindadráp* can be sounded out as “GRINNED-a-drowp.” Perhaps confusingly, the term *grind* itself can be used for either a pod of pilot whales or a meal of pilot whale meat (which is usually served with *spik*, pilot whale blubber). Considering these two, related meanings of the word *grind*, Jonathan Wylie, the anthropologist, points out that the whole *grindadráp* can be seen as representing “a progression from one meaning (a school of whales) to the other (meat).”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, a *grindadráp* begins when a pod of whales is sighted and ends only when they have been driven ashore, slaughtered, and turned into food for human consumption.

## The Finder’s Fish

For a *grindadráp* to happen, whales must be sighted. Unlike other hunting situations, it is not customary in the Faroe Islands to go out in search of whales; rather, the whales must come in toward the islands on their own. When the whales approach the islands, unaware of what awaits them, Faroese boats surround them and drive them to the beach, where a great slaughter commences. But to gather enough hands to slaughter a pod of whales the message must go out. The *grindaboð* has been calling Faroese to their boats and beaches for nearly a thousand years.

*Grindadráp* are opportunistic events that can be announced at any time, during any part of the year, and are in no way predictable. This hasn’t stopped people from trying to predict them. Paging through a Faroese-English dictionary provides a linguistic clue to the supposed signs, or predictors, that a *grindadráp* is imminent.<sup>6</sup> For example: *grindalokkur*, a type of fly that is said to appear shortly before a pod of pilot whales arrives; *grindamjørki*, a type of dense fog (of

which there are many in Faroese meteorology) that supposedly results in pilot whales losing their way and swimming into a fjord; *grindaregn*, a heavy rain that precedes and predicts the coming of a pod of whales; and *grindaprestur*, literally “pilot whale priest,” a churchman whose tenure in a particular parish is thought to coincide with frequent whale sightings there. Incidentally, the opposite of *grindaprestur* is *grindatroll*, not a troll, but an official—in this case, a priest or a politician—whose term sees a lack of whales.<sup>7</sup> In other countries, elected officials worry about events beyond their control such as natural disasters or economic downturns affecting their reelection prospects. In the Faroes, one’s approval rating can also be connected to the abundance—or lack—of pilot whales. Despite all these alleged predictors, there isn’t much statistical correlation between flies, fog, priests, or rain and the appearance of pilot whales in the fjords of the Faroe Islands.<sup>8</sup> Instead, these superstitions can probably be attributed mostly to *grindabugur*—defined as “the feeling of intense desire to take part in a grindadráp.”

Despite the lack of predictors, there is a basic statistical correlation that does show when whale drives are more likely: they happen mainly during the summer. An analysis of more than 400 years of whaling records by Faroese scientists showed a clear increase in the incidence of grindadráp from June to October, peaking in August.<sup>9</sup> More than 64 percent of all recorded grindadráp have occurred in July, August, or September. One reason for this increase in grindadráp occurrence is simply that the weather is more agreeable for marine activity in the Faroe Islands during the summer and early autumn than at other times of the year. The presence of more people on the water increases the chances of sighting a pod of whales. Could the whales themselves also be more common in Faroese waters during the warmer months? It’s hard to say because not much is known about the whales’ movements throughout the year. While they don’t migrate in the truest sense of the word—moving from a winter home to a summer home—the whales do travel long distances, most likely in pursuit of their main prey: several species of squid. The routes they

take and the influences on these routes are the subject of much ongoing study.

Whatever the cause, pods of whales do frequently swim into the fjords and channels of the Faroe Islands. When a sailor or fisherman—or anyone, for that matter—sees a pod of whales, they contact the district *sýslumaður* (SHOOSH-la-maw-er), a police authority whose title is most often translated “sheriff.” (When I mentioned this comparison to the *sýslumaður* of the district that includes Tórshavn, he laughed and asked how he would look wearing a “gold star and a big white cowboy hat.”) Upon hearing of the sighting, the *sýslumaður* contacts one or more of the district *grindaformenn*—whaling foremen (sing. *grindaformann*)—to discuss whether or not to pursue the whales, and if so, into which bay they should be driven. The Tórshavn *sýslumaður* called the district foremen his “prolonged arm” in the regulation of the *grindadráp*. Faroese law states that each whaling bay must have four *grindaformenn*. Given their whaling experience and nautical knowledge, these foremen are the most qualified to decide how to best handle a particular pod of whales given particular oceanic, weather, and economic conditions. Any of a number of variables could lead to a *grindadráp* being aborted. Uncooperative ocean currents, difficult whales, darkness, or the abundance of meat and blubber already in storage throughout the district have all been reasons that whale drives were called off. If conditions are right, though, and the meat is needed, the *sýslumaður*, in consultation with the *grindaformenn*, declares that the *grindadráp* will be attempted and states which bay will be the target of the drive. The *grindaboð*, the pilot whale message, is quickly sent out.

A recently controversial Faroese law *required* everyone—making no distinction between Faroese citizens and foreigners, including tourists—to report all pilot whale sightings to the authorities. While this law was basically unenforceable (How would the authorities know if someone had actually seen pilot whales and identified them as such?), it exemplified the seriousness with which the Faroese approach the possibility of a *grindadráp*. Although the law had long

been part of the pilot whaling regulations, it recently made the news in conjunction with anti-grindadráp protests conducted by the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. In some international media it was branded “the Sea Shepherd law,” as it was seen as being used to prosecute members of that organization for their opposition to the grindadráp. The law, in fact, covered a range of uncooperative activities with regard to the grindadráp, from merely failing to report the sighting of pilot whales to actively interrupting or interfering with the drive or the slaughter. The Faroese government has since revised the law to clarify its intent, stating that it is “highly unlikely that an ordinary tourist who has sighted pilot whales will be punished for not reporting this.”<sup>10</sup> This clarification refers to the general principle that grindadráp are regulated events, over which the Faroese government is sovereign, and indicates that the primary targets of the law are those who would take “the law into their own hands or . . . interfere illegally in a whale drive” and not those who merely opted out—either by conviction or through ignorance—of the grindaboð process.<sup>11</sup>

In the old days, boat crews who sighted pilot whales would raise a sweater or some other piece of clothing up the mast—the accepted sign that whales were in the area. Today, of course, mobile phones or marine radios are the standard means to communicate the sighting. Compliance with “the Sea Shepherd law” comes with an incentive: after a successful grindadráp, the person who was recorded as having first reported sighting the pod of whales is given the largest whale of the pod in its entirety. This whale, known as the *finningarfiskur*, literally the “finder’s fish,” is much too large for any one person or even a family to use. The finder, then, is able to give gifts of meat and blubber or to trade for other needed things.

Whales are most often sighted from sea. Captains, sailors, and passengers aboard fishing boats, ferries, container vessels, and pleasure craft have all been awarded finder’s fish. One does not have to be Faroese to qualify. For this reason, I feel compelled to remain on the deck during all ferry travel in the Faroes, no matter the weather, in hopes that I’ll be the finder. There are so many people in the Faroe

Islands to whom I owe debts of gratitude for the help they've offered me in my work there and the most culturally appropriate gift I can think of would be a share from the finningarfiskur, should I ever receive it. This hasn't happened yet, but I'll keep up my watch.

Pods of whales have also been spotted from shore and from the air. The Faroese government subsidizes a helicopter service to better connect its citizens living on the more remote islands—those not connected by bridge or undersea tunnel to the rest of the archipelago. People flying and being flown in this helicopter occasionally benefit from their elevated vantage by being the first to see a pod of whales below. Joen Remmer, a pilot for the Faroese national airline, Atlantic Airways, told me that he once radioed in a sighting as he was flying passengers to Denmark on a commercial flight—only to be told that someone on a boat had already seen and reported that pod.

Historically, the possibility of a grindadráp has taken priority over any other activity. While this shows signs of changing, especially in modern and affluent Tórshavn, historical anecdotes abound of churches being emptied mid-sermon, barbers and their clients running—one aproned and the other half-shaven—from the shop to the whaling beach, and even of a surgeon leaving his patient open on the table when word of the impending grindadráp arrived. (Lawrence Millman, in his travelogue *Last Places*, recounts a more extreme version of the last tale, which has the patient rising from the table and joining the doctor at the beach!)<sup>12</sup> Today the grindaboð is usually delivered electronically via text message or social media, though in the past elaborate systems of runners, rowers, shouters, and smoke signals were used to carry the news from village to village and island to island.<sup>13</sup>

Things are slowly changing in the Faroe Islands with regard to the urgency of the grindaboð. I recall sitting with friends in a Tórshavn sushi restaurant one Friday evening in 2009 when the call came in. I stood up in this crowded eatery and repeated loudly into my phone, “Grindaboð? Where?” “Where?” (*hvar* in Faroese) is usually the first question asked after the announcement arrives. A few diners looked

up at me. Most barely paused as they slurped their miso soup. I noticed one middle-aged man who, wiping the corners of his mouth, appeared ready to stand up, until he caught the disapproving look on his dining companion's face. "Stay put" may sound different but it looks the same in any language. I apologized to my friends for the premature departure, grabbed a handful of edamame for the road, and ran out to catch a ride to the whaling beach.

When I arrived at Gøta the whales had already been killed—it was a small pod, only twenty-three whales. But you wouldn't have known it from the scene by the waterside. The quay was abuzz with activity: children tentatively poking the rubbery flesh of the steaming whale carcasses, the *sýslumaður's* assistants measuring and numbering the whales, people milling about in this impromptu cause for socializing. For centuries in the Faroe Islands, *grindadráp* were the most exciting thing going. The monotony of village life could be broken at a moment's notice with the arrival of a *grindaboð*. Your evening's plans could suddenly change from watching the peat fire and knitting to meeting a couple hundred friends and neighbors to procure meat for the next four months. It was a chance to fulfill both social and nutritional obligations. On many occasions the *grindaboð* came just in time, announcing the arrival of food during a period of extreme need.

In the past, *grindadráp* began with anticipation, followed by intensely hard work, and ended with singing, dancing, drinking, and feasting—often until the next morning. Things could sometimes get rowdy. One *sýslumaður*, or sheriff, told me that in recent years the aftermath of a *grindadráp*, when the meat was being divided and emotions were lubricated with adrenaline (and often alcohol), was the only time he carried his service revolver. Even amid the post-*grindadráp* chaos, however, he never wore a white hat and gold star.

The revelry is largely absent from modern *grindadráp*. The scene I witnessed in Gøta is typical for the Faroes today: enthusiasm, community participation and interest, and excitement at the prospect of obtaining the free food that the activity produces, but not the



A crowd gathered around whales killed in Gøta

instant doubling of a village's population with the influx of grindadráp participants, observers, and beneficiaries. There is rarely any dancing or singing. With transportation made considerably easier by the modern Faroese road system, there's no need to stay all night in the village where the grindadráp took place. You can go home, warm up and clean off, and still be back in time to get your share of meat and blubber. This is a change in style more than in substance. Where the real substantial change is happening is in the sushi restaurants—and karaoke bars and coffee shops and theaters—frequented by the more urbanized Tórshavn residents. A grindadráp now has competition. Instead of the only question being "Hvar?" the recipient of a grindaboð in Tórshavn now asks, "Is the football match still on? How far away is the whaling beach? What time am I likely to get home if I go?" and, in some cases, "Who's going to eat all that whale meat and blubber anyway?"

The urban-rural divide is increasing in the Faroes. People from the villages shorten the name Tórshavn to Havn. (The word sounds like the English *bound* without the *d*. It just means “harbor.”) *Havn* is often accompanied by a subtle rolling of the eyes or preceded by a quick, dismissive burst of air from the nostrils. The dismissiveness goes both ways. The Faroese word *bygdasligt*, pronounced “BIG-dis-lair” and based on the word for “village,” *bygd*, is used in something of an affectionately derogatory manner to denote anything rustic, traditional, or backward. I first heard this word when David Geyti, a Faroese friend, and I were waiting in his car on a two-lane country road, which was being blocked by two vehicles facing opposite directions, stopped so the drivers could chat. The driver facing us looked, smiled, and went right back to his conversation. “This is so *bygdasligt*!” complained David, who is from Tórshavn. During the impromptu linguistic discussion that then took place, as we had nothing else to do but wait, David and I decided that the closest English equivalent was the non-word *redneckish*. It’s redneckish to block traffic. People from Havn [eye roll] have places to be.

There is a small but growing view in the Faroe Islands that the grindadráp is somewhat *bygdasligt*. Most Faroese would certainly not like to see the practice end, but they don’t necessarily prioritize it the way they used to. This feeling is stronger in Tórshavn than in the rural villages. Today the patient Millman wrote of would likely stay on the operating table and might even avoid strenuous activities like the grindadráp until completely recovered from his surgery. Additionally, since meat and blubber are usually divided freely among the residents of the community where a grindadráp has occurred, there is almost always more to go around in the villages than in Tórshavn, owing to the comparatively large population in the capital: Tórshavn’s metropolitan area is home to more than 40 percent of the Faroese population. For all but the largest grindadráp in Tórshavn, only a portion of residents are able to get a share, the rest being content to know that their names have moved up on the alphabetized priority list for next time.

## A Dreadful Sight

My earliest exposure to the idea of the grindadráp came during my first solo overseas trip: a month-long backpacking adventure through Iceland in 2001. I made a slow circuit of the country using a hop-on, hop-off ticket with the national bus line, carrying a tent, a sleeping bag, and a copy of *The Sagas of the Icelanders* in my pack.<sup>14</sup> Near the end of the trip, I passed through a small town, Ólafsvík, on Iceland's Snæfellsnes peninsula, just in time for a cultural festival called Færeyskir Dagar, or Faroese Days. It was here that I first heard stories of the Faroe Islands in general and the grindadráp in particular. The Faroe Islands sounded like Iceland before tourists arrived. I began to wonder if future travels in the north might eventually lead me there.

After returning from Iceland, I began reading everything I could find about the grindadráp. I learned that across the ocean, Vincentian whalers were hunting pilot whales too. I wondered how their operation might compare with that of the Faroese. With this, my research topic fell into place. I would make a comparison: the cultures and ecologies of Faroese and Vincentian pilot whaling. All I lacked was the money to make it happen.

Finding funding for academic research is a complicated matter. The British explorer Douglas Botting wrote, regarding his time conducting overseas fieldwork as a student at Oxford, that researchers are “like the tramps who wander the countryside and offer to dig gardens or chop wood in return for a loaf of bread or a cup of tea.”<sup>15</sup> Botting added that these exchanges, ideally arrangements by which “interested scientific bodies will contribute towards their expenses in return for the scientific data and specimens they aim to collect,” are “of mutual advantage and not at all unethical.”<sup>16</sup> I agree with Botting's researcher-as-tramp metaphor but would add the caveat that actual tramps need only survive and get from place to place; researchers must also find enough meaningful data to justify their rambling in

terms of academic output. Because of this we often stretch the funds we receive to maximize time in the field, even if that comes at the expense of comfort, nutrition, and occasionally safety.

I was—and continue to be—fortunate in that grants from funding organizations usually come in when needed. But not always. When the funding isn't there, the researcher has to be both creative and frugal.

In 2009, midway through my longest research trip to the Faroe Islands, I found myself running out of kroner. It seemed likely to be my last time in the field for this portion of the study. Because of this, I resorted to doing everything I could to stretch the money I had. Bjarki Dalsgarð, a Faroese friend who worked at a Tórshavn grocery store, had been leaving crates of vegetables, bread, and sometimes meat outside by the store's garbage container for me every Saturday at closing time. Supermarkets in the Faroe Islands import nearly all their inventory by ship from Denmark and have to place an order every week. They don't know what they'll need very far in advance, so there is often the problem of what to do with last week's leftover stock when the new shipment arrives on Sunday. Hungry foreign researcher? Problem solved. This provided my food, but there was still the problem of a restricted cash flow. I needed money to pay for bus fares, tunnel tolls, and supplies.

At graduate school in Louisiana I had taught capoeira, the Brazilian martial art / dance, for a few years. Why not give it a try in Tórshavn? Although I lacked a Faroese work visa, I was able to convince the owner of a local fitness center to give me the space to offer a class. He generously split the course fees one-third for the gym, two-thirds for me. I only had a few students, but the commission I drew allowed me to stay in the country long enough to finish the year's research. To this day I think it's still the only time capoeira has been taught in the Faroe Islands.

In 2010, I became a professor, first at the University of Denver and then at my current institution, the University of the South, in Sewanee, Tennessee. In addition to conducting research abroad I'm

now able to bring students to my field sites for classes. This allows me to see familiar places through new eyes, to guide students through the same adventures of discovery that I've had, and to revisit my field sites without all the uncertainties of food, lodging, and transportation.

A memorable grindaboð, for me, came during a 2012 field course on environmental geography that I taught in the Faroes for the University of Denver. The events unfolded as I sat in a small café on the remote island of Mykines with my teaching assistant and ten American students, warming up after a long, windy hike to the lighthouse at the western end of the island. Our ferry back to Vágur would depart in about an hour, and from there we would drive back to our guesthouse in Tórshavn. Vágur is the westernmost island with road connections to the rest of the archipelago. Mykines is further west.

My phone vibrated with a text message from Høgni Arnbjarnarson, a biologist in Tórshavn. Whales had been sighted about ten kilometers north of the Faroes and there was a chance that they could be driven in. "*Takk*. Keep me posted," I wrote back, not yet expecting the sighting to lead to anything. About fifteen minutes later, another text from Høgni arrived, sounding more certain. Boats were beginning to gather in a northern harbor. Five minutes after that, texts and phone calls began pouring in from friends and colleagues across the Faroes and even from one Faroese friend living in Norway. Rumors of a grindaboð can travel far and fast in the era of cellular networks and the internet. All I knew so far was that the whales had been sighted offshore and that boats had left the harbors to meet them. If wind and ocean conditions stayed favorable, the boat captains would steer their flotilla to the seaward side of the pod of whales and attempt to herd the animals together in preparation for driving. The drive would aim toward one of the approved whaling beaches on the Faroes' northern shores. Høgni thought Tjørnuvík seemed most likely. I told my students to gather their things and move down to the dock.

We had to wait for about an hour. The anthropologist Jonathan Wylie accurately described the feeling my students and I shared as we stood at the shore, watching for a ferry and thinking of a pod of whales: “Awaiting a *grind* today, one feels as never otherwise—except in winter storms, and then for different reasons—how isolated the Faroes are, how immense is the sea, and how broad the fjords between one island and the next. It is easy to appreciate how hopefully a *grind* must have been awaited in the days when a *grindadráp* meant a better chance of surviving the winter.”<sup>17</sup>

The ferry arrived on schedule—by no means a given in this weather-dependent place. Windblown and wave-tossed Mykines is no Switzerland, the land of on-time public transport; ferries and helicopters here are sometimes delayed for days. Wylie’s winter isolation is felt on Mykines more than nearly anywhere else in the Faroes. Our day, though, was fine. We arrived at Vágur without delay. Tracing our driving route on the road map, from the parking lot of the ferry terminal to our guesthouse in Tórshavn, I found a roundabout with one exit heading north toward Tjørnuvík and the other south toward the capital. This would be our decision point. If the grindaboð was issued by the time we reached the roundabout, we would go north. If not, home. As we loaded into the van I handed my phone to the student riding in the front seat and started the long drive back with the instruction to read me any text message that came in. The roundabout was within sight when the grindaboð arrived: “get 2 tjørnuvík!” We passed up the Tórshavn exit and headed north.

Tjørnuvík stands behind a beach at the base of a long and deep fjord facing north-northeast. If you were to sail straight out of Tjørnuvík’s fjord, you wouldn’t hit land until Svalbard, a Norwegian archipelago far above the Arctic Circle. If you missed Svalbard, you would come ashore in northern Alaska after crossing the Arctic Ocean. Like most of the landscapes in the Faroe Islands, the area surrounding Tjørnuvík is intensely beautiful, described in some travel literature as resembling a layer cake—presumably more appetizing

under the vanilla icing of winter's snowcap unless you prefer your cake green.<sup>18</sup> And green dominates the Faroes. While the archipelago is nearly devoid of trees, fields of grasses, both wild and cultivated, carpet the tops of the islands, right up to the very cliff edges, which drop precipitously into the sea. Unlike their neighbor Iceland, which, volcanically speaking, is still very much active, the structure of the Faroe Islands is old basalt, built up during periods of volcanism that predate human history, later dissected and smoothed by glaciers, resulting in a land of rolling hills, long fjords, narrow inter-island straits, and steep sea cliffs. The road to Tjørnuvík perches like a sure-footed sheep, of which the Faroes have many, on the edge of one of these long, cliff-fringed fjords.

After driving over mountains and rounding bays, the road bent around a final headland and the village came into view. Until this point the grindadráp had been, to us, merely hypothetical. The final turn put our van parallel to the flotilla of boats, which had just entered the fjord. We got our first visual proof that the grindadráp was happening. The students were bouncing in their seats, leaning toward the passenger-side windows to watch the event. We drove toward the village as the boats drove the pilot whales toward the beach. Dozens of jet-black dorsal fins broke the surface in a froth just ahead of the boats, which followed in the wake of the whales, steadily but at a fixed distance. The whale drive seemed achingly slow. Traffic was slow too, as drivers craned to see the whales while attempting to stay on the road. As the improbable race toward Tjørnuvík continued we realized we would make it in time. Our van reached the base of the fjord and the village. We quickly abandoned the vehicle and set out on foot for the beach, where a line of anxious men, and a few women, stood shoulder to shoulder behind the most seaward berm. Some of these shore-based whalers wore jeans and traditional densely woven brown sweaters with buttons on the left shoulder. Others wore work clothes, sports clothes, or wetsuits. The attire seemed to indicate how much time each participant had taken to prepare for the event.

Some apparently had rushed over immediately from whatever they had been doing before.

The boats, holding a semicircle formation just behind the whales, were perhaps a hundred meters offshore and approaching steadily. Anticipation filled the village. Five or six men in yellow safety vests marked GRINDAMAÐUR (pilot whale man) marched back and forth in front of those gathered on the beach, repeating orders. A few photographers jockeyed for perches on high points or village balconies. Students dispersed. Some sought good positions to observe; others joined the cadre of whalers standing on the beach. A few hung back near the village, where they would be able to turn away and avoid the sight if necessary.

As the boats approached we heard hands slapping hulls, wrenches and other tools tapping rails, and low, staccato shouts in Faroese. We watched passengers riding forward in boats toss stones into the water, aiming just behind the whales' flukes. All of this was intended to keep the whales moving straight ahead. At about forty meters offshore the boats began to speed up. The whales sped up in response, fleeing from the boats, and soon began to strand in the shallow water. Now in addition to dorsal fins we saw flukes rising above water. Some whales tried to turn back but the boats were there. The whales were trapped. A few turned their bodies vertically and raised their heads above the surface, spyhopping. The pod dispersed as much as possible within the confined area in which it found itself. Tjørnuvík's beach is framed by rocky cliffs on both sides. Some whales turned sharply to the left or the right, in an effort to avoid beaching, and raked their bellies against the sharp undersea rocks.

A vested man gave a signal and, with a shout, the whalers on the beach ran into the surf. Most were part of two-person teams carrying large metal hooks tied to long, thick ropes. When the first man reached the first stranded whale, he raised the hook and drove it down into the blowhole. Immediately, six or seven others, chest-deep in the cold sea, took hold of his rope and began hauling the

whale—still very much alive and fighting the whole way—toward the beach. When the whale’s head rested on the sand a man withdrew a knife from a wooden sheath tied around his waist and sawed into its flesh. The blood came immediately. Great spurts, truly thicker than water, erupted as the whale went into its final spasm—the knife having just severed its spinal cord. The process was both quick and complex. The whale thrashed its fluke and arched its back high above the man’s head, revealing its massive size. Its blood soon mingled with the blood of other whales simultaneously being killed. The seawater turned red. As each whale died, men hauled its carcass farther onto the beach, then turned, dispersed, and joined other teams hauling or killing other whales. The process was methodical and, after the whalers’ initial shouts as they entered the water, quieter than I would have expected.

Throughout the killing, I found my attention constantly drawn to the waves as they crashed thigh-high, one after another, onto the beach. At this very beach a few years earlier, I had ridden these waves together with a few members of the budding Faroese surfing community. Owing to Tjørnuvík’s exposure, the waves here can get massive. On that day, I had noticed that the large amount of kelp fragments in the water gave the waves a green hue. Today the waves were red. Seeing these color-wheel opposites in the same water brought to mind the indifference of the ocean. Whether surfing or whaling, waving or drowning, the activities of human beings in the vast sea play out at a scale much finer than that of the waves themselves. The green kelp was replaced with red blood, which itself would be diluted some hours after the grindadráp had ended. We would not witness the aftermath of this grindadráp, but I knew what the next several hours would entail. The authorities would assign portions of the whales to each person on the list of recipients. Villagers would strip the whale carcasses of their meat and blubber, and a few volunteers would haul the unusable remains out to deeper water. Then Tjørnuvík would return to its quiet existence. Waves would keep crashing onto

this beach, methodical and determined, indifferent to whatever they wash over.

I paused to locate each of my students. Most were milling about the shoreline taking photos. Two had joined rope teams and were standing knee-deep in bloody water, hauling whales as though they were Faroese. Another pair had disappeared into the streets of Tjørnuvík, seeking diversion from the events at the beach. When I noticed that these students had gone off to avoid watching the whales being killed I was reminded of the words of the eighteenth-century Faroese poet Venceslaus U. Hammershaimb, who remarked in reference to the grindadráp, “Yes, this is a slaughter, which is a dreadful sight for whomever stands on the shore peacefully watching.”<sup>19</sup> I thought of the incongruity of *peacefully* watching a slaughter, of the rarity in today’s world of this sort of activity happening in public.

The world is consuming more meat than ever before and, at the same time, becoming less connected to the origin of its food supply. We have reached an era that historian Richard Bulliet calls “postdomesticity.” In *Hunters, Herders, and Hamburgers*, Bulliet’s long-view account of the changing relationships between humans and the animals upon which we depend for meat and other needs, he defines this era as a time in which, first, “people live far away, both physically and psychologically, from the animals that produce the food, fiber, and hides they depend on, and they never witness the births, sexual congress, and slaughter of these animals. . . . Second, a postdomestic society emerging from domestic antecedents continues to consume animal products in abundance, but psychologically, its members experience feelings of guilt, shame, and disgust when they think (as seldom as possible) about the industrial processes by which animals are rendered into products and about how those products come to market.”<sup>20</sup>

The Faroe Islands are as connected to the world market as any remote island country can be. In Faroese supermarkets one finds animal- and vegetable-based food products both produced locally and

sourced from around the world. Restaurants in Tórshavn tend toward Scandinavian cuisine, but pizza, hamburgers, and sushi can all be found. The capital features, as international travelers have come to expect, both an Irish pub and a Chinese restaurant. Despite these conveniences of globalization, the Faroese remain staunchly unpostdomestic through practices such as fishing, sheep rearing, fowling, and of course the grindadráp. In October, when sheep are slaughtered, blood literally runs in the streets, draining through pipes leading from household abattoirs into the gutters of some small Faroese towns and out to sea—making one wonder whether the infrastructure was originally built to handle rain or blood. The continued practice of such visceral and ancient food production methods in an otherwise modern, wealthy, and developed European nation stands out as incongruous.

Grindadráp records date back to the sixteenth century. Most researchers believe that the practice itself is much older.<sup>21</sup> For most of its history, foreigners have observed the grindadráp and commented on it in their writings without judging its morality. Beginning in the mid-1980s, however, animal welfare organizations in Europe and North America began to initiate anti-whaling protests that sometimes threatened boycotts against Faroese products—mainly seafood. Since that time, the level of international attention to the grindadráp has risen and fallen. The advent of social media and reality television seems to have fostered an increase during the current decade, with examples ranging from chain emails and viral social media posts to direct interventionist campaigns by environmental action organizations.

About an hour after the grindadráp began in Tjørnuvík, the fiftieth and final whale lay dead on the beach. There was nothing special about the number fifty; it was simply the last whale of the pod. A grindadráp ideally takes the entire pod of whales, letting none escape. This standard is based on pilot whale behavior, not human greed. Sometimes when the Faroese have tried to split a pod of whales, driving some ashore and letting the others go, those not

driven ashore have stranded on another beach. The herding instinct of pilot whales is strong. If the entire pod is likely to end up on shore anyway, Faroese reasoning goes, it's best to have them all in one place so nothing goes to waste.

Compared to other grindadráp, this was by no means a large slaughter. But my students were tired and hungry. Those who had participated in the hauling of whales were wet with seawater and blood. Those who had taken to Tjørnuvík's back alleys and deserted streets were glad that the whole event was over. We spent the drive to Tórshavn in silent meditation, each of us individually processing the experience. Back at the guesthouse, after a quickly prepared pasta dinner, we left the dishes on the table and engaged in a fruitful discussion about the events of the afternoon. Impressions varied among the twelve of us, but all agreed that we had witnessed something ancient, intensely cultural, and multilayered to the point that a quick summary or description would risk oversimplification.

I think one reason the grindadráp inspires such dread among those who, like my students, stand on the shore peacefully watching is that it forces postdomestic people to confront the reality of their own subsistence. The foreignness of whales as the food source—as opposed to cattle, swine, or fowl—surely plays a part in the discomfort of this confrontation, but I doubt many American university students, or most other people from developed nations for that matter, have witnessed the killing and butchering of any animal. As we sat around the table, discussing and reflecting upon what we had seen, the details of species, culture, and geographic setting faded into the foreground and the basic truth remained: this is what humans do to make food.



The islands of St. Vincent and Bequia. Cartography by Alison de Graff Ollivierre, Tombolo Maps & Design. *Data sources:* St. Vincent & the Grenadines Physical Planning Unit and The Nature Conservancy.