

Selkies in Orkney: Storytelling and the Literary Imagination

MASAYA SHIMOKUSU

Introduction

The Orkneys are a group of islands located in the north of the Scottish mainland. The islands are covered with various attractions: beautiful scenery, peculiar wildlife, historical sites and ruins. They are rich in legends and folklore, and many artists and writers are resident there. Several world-famous writers have come from Orkney, and Orcadian folkloric elements are conspicuous in the works of such writers. One of the purposes of this paper is to report on field research to collect folkloric materials in Orkney, focusing on stories of the “Selkie.” On the Orkney coast, seals are common. They can be divided into two groups: grey seals and common seals. Orcadians have believed that the former can take human forms, and called them “Selkies” (Dennison 77-9). The Selkies have been popular motifs among Orcadian writers, and they have also caught the eyes of foreign writers.

This paper has an interdisciplinary aspect and consists of three sections. In the first part, stories and their plots based on Selkies, actually told in Orkney and collected in my field research, will be shown. Among them, one story will be reproduced on a word-for-word basis to represent a typical Orcadian folk story with the Selkie motif. This may be categorized as folkloric research. The summaries of other stories of Selkies told by the same storyteller will also be shown, and contemporary storytelling situations in Scotland will be considered. Next, several literary works inspired by Orcadian Selkie stories will be discussed. While these works

are based on traditional folk tales, they are also contributing to the survival of oral folk stories. Contemporary storytellers often pick up the materials of their stories from various kinds of documents including books. In the present folkloric climate, storytellers and literary writers are influencing each other; and even some storytellers themselves are writers. The last section will briefly treat several Japanese artistic works with sea creatures often seen in Western literature, because the further goal of this research is to investigate how a folk tale transforms, sometimes taking different art forms, transfers beyond spatial and cultural borders, and globally transplants itself.

1. Selkies in Orkney

Orkney consists of many islands and rocks; among them, 16 islands are comparatively larger than the others and form the main part of the district. The biggest one is called the Mainland of Orkney, and the port town of Mainland, Kirkwall, is the capital of Orkney. Its weather is changeable, and even in summer, the highest temperature is around 15 degrees Celsius there, but thanks to the warm sea current from the Gulf of Mexico, it does not drop below zero degree even in winter. The population of the Orkney Islands is slightly less than 20,000. Agriculture, fishery and tourism are the main industries. Before the 15th century, the islands were part of territories of the united realms of Norway, Denmark and Sweden. Many Neolithic monuments, Viking remains, and ruins of diverse ages are preserved. Archaeological excavations are being done in various places. While folklore is made use of for tourist attractions, sincere efforts to preserve it are also being made. In this small archipelagic district, artistic activities are conspicuous. Various silver accessories are produced and globally exported. Many small galleries support artists and frequently hold exhibitions. In the field of literature, there are approximately 15

full-time or part-time professional writers in the islands.¹

In the history of Scotland, storytelling has played a crucial role in perpetuating ancient mythical or cultural memories, preserving history and forming the national consciousness. Even nowadays, it is being exploited for education, job-training, and community services. Following the re-evaluations of traditional music and songs, storytelling revived in the 1980s. After several large storytelling events, both international and domestic, were held in the early 1990s, it became effectively institutionalized, and in 1997 the George Mackay Brown Scottish Storytelling Centre was established in Edinburgh. At present, the Scottish Storytelling Centre with the George Mackay Brown Library promotes storytelling and networking storytelling activities all over Scotland. Seventy full- and part-time-storytellers were in the directory published by the Scottish Storytelling Centre in 2000 (Smith 3 and 167-8). Now, via the website of the Centre, one can discover what type of storytellers there are and where they live in Scotland. Books in which storytellers retell folk stories, in some cases making clear references to their originals, are also popular.²

The following is a story collected from a 46-year-old storyteller working and living in the Mainland of Orkney, beside the fire of a private residence at Kirkwall on 20 August 2009. The parish appearing in the following story, Deerness Parish, is situated at the eastern end of Mainland. (As for the method and principle of the collection and reproduction of this story, see note no. 3.)

It was said in Orkney that the Selkies were the souls of people who were drowned. Some said that they were actually suicides, and that they were condemned to take the forms of seals living in the sea. The references to that are listed in one story. The most common story I can give you, one example which you find other examples of Orkney and

find other examples all over Scotland. The Parish of Deerness lies on the east mainland, and it's held onto the rest of Orkney by just a thin strip of sand.

One night, there was a young man who walked home late at night. And he heard music playing, and he did not know where it was coming from and why was the music at night. So, he carefully walked along the beach. And he came to a rocky headland, and he peered around the corner to see where the music's coming from. And there, in the moonlight, there was a group of people. All naked and all dancing in the moonlight. The pale light of the moon reflected on their white bodies. And there were two men there, sitting on a flat rock playing fiddles. Those not playing the music were dancing in a great circle to the music, and all around them, there were shapes, dark shapes like animals lying asleep. So, he very carefully, very quietly, crept along the beach on his belly until he got to where these animals were lying asleep. And then, he saw that these were actually seal skins. And he knew then, this must be the Selkie folks who can take human forms at certain times of the tide. Some say the seventh stream which is the high tide at the midsummer. So, one of these skins was much more beautiful than the other skins. It was soft and silky and silvery in color. And so, he rolled it up and hid it in his jacket. And he went back to a hiding place and watched as they carried on dancing through the night and music was played and they danced. But as soon as the first rays of the sun appeared over the horizon, the music stopped, and they all ran to the skins, pulled on their skins and dived back into the sea as seals again. All but except a young woman who frantically searched for her own skin which she couldn't find. And in her distress, she ran all over the place and way around the corner of the rock and right into the young man's arms. And he threw his arms around her, and he looked down into her scared

eyes, beautiful big brown eyes. And he thought she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life before. And he would never be happy unless he had her as his wife. She, on the other hand, had other ideas. She kicked him, punched him, scratched him, screamed out in the Selkie tongue, because Selkie folks have their own language as well. But he was stronger than her, so he carried her up to the house where he lived with his mother. And what his mother said when he came in carrying a naked girl under one arm and a seal skin under the other was I do not know. But the old woman was kindly, so she looked after the young woman. She was sorry for her. Poor girl, she did nothing but sit beside the fire, crying and sobbing all the time, but the old woman was kind to her, and soon she got used to wearing clothes like they did, and the old woman taught her how to bake, brew ale, spin the card wool and sew and do knitting and how to do all these things. And it was obvious that the Selkie woman liked the young man very well. She never let him out of her sight; she always followed him about.

And after a time, they were married. And then with the passing years, there was a new baby in the cradle. They had a family and they were very happy together. And one day, she said to him, "Now, you know that I'm a creature of the sea. And I know that you've got my skin. I know where you keep it. It's in a big kist in the ben end of the house." (The kist is a chest. And the ben end is a room of the house for the special guest and for entertaining.) So she said, "I know that you keep my skin in the kist in the ben end of the house. But if you love me, if you really love me, then never ever let me get the key of the kist. Because I cannot promise you that I won't take back that skin and go back to the sea." And she insisted that he should promise.

Now time passed. It was in August; it was the time for the Lammas

fair. The Lammas fair is a market in Kirkwall. It was a great event, people came from all over Orkney, often from Scotland and Shetland, just to sell goods and they sold everything there: clothes, horses, and cattle, and everything you can imagine was on sale there. And there's entertainment that was, you know, a great event. And the man decided one day that he would take his children to go and see this. That would be a great treat for them. So, they got all dressed-up, Sunday best clothes, and they got the horse and cart ready and headed off to Kirkwall. Now, his Selkie wife stayed at home. She said it would be a good opportunity to give the house a good clean when you were away. So, they had a great time; at the market, the fair, and they enjoyed themselves. At night when they headed back, they were sleepy or sleeping on the back of the cart. When they turned down the road towards their house, the man knew that there was something wrong because the door of the house was standing wide open. He thought it was strange and went in and shouted for his wife. But there was no reply. So then, he had a terrible thought, and he ran through to the ben end of the house where must be the kist standing, and the lid was wide open. And no skin inside. And he realized what must have happened. She wouldn't have searched for the key, he was sure of that. But in his haste to get ready and go to the market, he had taken his jacket off and he forgot to take the key out of the jacket's pocket. When she tidied up, she picked up the jacket and she could feel the key inside the pocket. When she took the key out, she knew what the key unlocked and what was inside waiting for her. She ran through to the ben end of the house, and clicked the lock and turned the key, and opened the lid, and there was her seal skin. And once she saw it again, the urge just, just to touch it once more was too strong. And when she touched it and just picked it up, feeling it next to her skin was too great, and when she

smelt it, she smelt the saltiness on it as well. She knew she had to go back to the sea. She ran down to the shore with a cry of anguish and anger, and she pulled on the skin and dived into the sea as a seal again.

Well, the man searched the shore for many years after that, but he never again saw his Selkie wife. But it was said that when they were out to the shore to play, a seal used to swim backward and forward in front of them, sobbing like its heart was breaking.³

The collector requested the informant to tell stories of Selkies, and among various stories told by the informant, this was the story told first. The informant himself stated that he recognized the story as one of the most typical stories of Selkies. From the academic point of view, this story is typical of one of the classified groups of folk tales. According to the most authorized categorization of the types of folklore by Hans-Jörg Uther, this story can be placed in the group of folk tales of version three of "The Man on a Quest for His Lost Wife" (ATU 400),⁴ though the part concerned with the husband's quest does not make a major part of the informant's story. Among British folk tales, Katharine Briggs classified this type of folk tale into a group of stories of "The Seal Woman" among the stories of mermaids.⁵

The stories which seem to be the original of the tale above may be found in some books on Scottish folk tales,⁶ but because the story above was told by a genuine storyteller and collected in the field, it is different from the stories already existing in written forms. The informant knew that the listener was a non-native speaker of English and had some knowledge of British and Irish folk tales including Orcadian ones. The effects of these factors can easily be seen in the informant's narrative, especially the addition of the explanations about the "kist" and "ben end." Here, it is

worth citing Donald Smith's description of the transformative nature of storytelling: "[T]o be effective, the transformative nature of the ballad or tale must be reflected in its performance. The teller's commitment to the story and to the audience must be psychologically and emotionally wholehearted if he or she is to be true to the nature of their art" (165).

The outlines of the informant's stories on Selkies told on the same occasion are as follows. The informant told all the stories without consulting any sources:

1. The fisherman of Westness married a Selkie woman. The plot of the story is similar to that of the story of Deerness, though in this story the seal woman secretly keeps meeting seals on the shore even after marrying a man of the land. Getting back her seal skin and diving into the sea she said to her human husband, "I liked you, but I love better my man of the sea!" ⁷
2. In a story from the northern district of the Mainland, Caithness, a seal hunter stubbed a seal with a knife, but it got away. In the evening, the hunter was lured out by a strange man, and the hunter was pushed off a cliff beside the seashore. He sank through sea water and arrived at a palace at the bottom of the sea. He was surrounded by seals, and found himself also a seal. He was brought to a huge seal with a heavy wound. As he pushed the torn flesh together, it immediately healed. When he came back to the land, he was given a leather bag full of gold coins and asked to stop seal hunting. (In another version, the hunter did not transform into a seal when he was under the sea. He healed a beautiful human lady in that version of the story.)
3. In a story of one of the islands of Orkney, Sanday, a fisherman found a pup with beautiful white skin, and thought to make a handsome waistcoat out of it. However, when he was taking it away, its mother's

cry was really heartbreaking, and he took it back to the mother. A few decades later, the fisherman was trapped on a rock sticking out of the sea during fishing. However much he cried out, nobody came to help him. But just as he was about to be drowned, an old female seal saved him and carried him to the seashore.

4. In a story of another island of Orkney, Stromsay, a human lady seduced a seal man. Ursilla Balfour, daughter of a landlord, liked a servant in her house. After her father passed away, and she inherited his fortune, she married the servant. But her husband did not love her, and she came to the seashore and wept. As soon as her seventh tear fell on the water, a very handsome man in a seal skin appeared and asked why she cried. They became lovers though the seal man could take human form only on midsummer's day. After that, Ursilla bore children, and all of them had some fins between their fingers. However many times they were taken away, they grew back between fingers or toes. Her descendants still have hard skin on their hands and feet.⁸
5. In another story, a fisherman left on a rock in the middle of the ocean was saved by a seal. The seal tried to bring him back to the shore, but its skin was very slippery. The fisherman asked the seal to let him cut the skin on its shoulders in order to grab it well, and was allowed to do that. This is a story found mainly in the Shetland Islands, not in Orkney.⁹

The informant is not a stereotypical storyteller: an old man with a clay pipe orally inheriting folklore. His broad knowledge of the stories of Selkies implies that contemporary storytellers do not superstitiously believe in folkloric characters nor belong to a specific native place any more. They can get much information on folklore via various media and are much more mobile than in the past. The informant also has abundant

knowledge of history and archaeology; he even tells of an episode in which an antiquarian aristocrat dug up a mound which locals feared as a residence of “fairies” in the 19th century. Also, he knows many folk stories in their written forms. His story reproduced above starts as follows:

It was said in Orkney that the Selkies were the souls of people who were drowned. Some said that they were actually suicides, and that they were condemned to take the forms of seals living in the sea. The references to that are listed in one story. . . .

This remark clearly implies that the episode of Selkies’ origins is in a book. His knowledge originated with both oral sources and written materials, and is continually being improved or transformed by the influence of various modern media. The informant may be regarded as a living “database” of folklore.

On the other hand, however, the informant still shares traditional ways of storytelling. First of all, the informant tells stories to an audience. By telling tales, he orally preserves folk tales as they were in the old days. Though he tells stories of various districts besides his living or birth places, unlike old storytellers, it is important to remember that one can drive from the north to the south, or from the east to the west ends of the Mainland of Orkney in about one hour, and the informant often visits various islands of Orkney on business, too. His ordinary activities involve nearly the whole of Orkney. Donald Smith points out that “[t]raditional storytelling is a form of cultural ecology in which human memory encodes and passes on landscape forms, flora, fauna and the nature-culture interface through visual imagery, language and narrative structures” (169). When the informant tells some story related to Orkney, he has nearly always visited its setting. In his stories, the landscape, natural things and culture of

Orkney are preserved in narrative.

2. Orcadian Selkies in Literary Stories

Selkies are important in published literature, too. Grey seals are often seen around Orkney. For seal watching, the coast close to the Broch of Birsay situated at the north-western coast of the Mainland is recommended by locals, and I actually saw wild grey seals there during my stay at Orkney. The Broch of Birsay is a small island to which people can walk only when the tide is low; there are remains of churches and ecclesiastical constructions there. The history of the remains is still enigmatic ("Birsay Historical Trust"). George Mackay Brown (1921-1996), one of the most prominent poets, novelists and writers from Orkney, supposed that there have been an ecclesiastical school on the island where St. Magnus (d. c.1116), the Earl of Orkney, studied in his youth. In Mackay Brown's novel, *Magnus*, the young Magnus tries to save a seal wounded by seal hunters (36-8).

In another novel of his, *Beside the Ocean of Time* (1994), Mackey Brown exploits a Selkie legend much more directly. The 20th-century boy Thorfinn Ragnarson is a dreamer, and his dreams or daydreams are intertwined with Orcadian legends and historical facts, and sometimes overlap with Mackay Brown's own experiences. In his dream, Thorfinn is a man of the age of the reign of George III (1738-1820, reigned; 1760-1820) when press-gangs came to recruit young men in Orkney. He comes across men and women dancing on the seashore:

The young man was back again, at twilight, among the dunes.

And there, on the sand, glimmering, were men and women—strangers—dancing! And the rocks were strewn with sealskins.

The seal people danced to music unheard. (137)

Thorfinn steals the seal skin of a beautiful girl, and brings her to his house on the land. They get married and have children. They become recognized as good citizens in the community. Nevertheless, while Thorfinn and the children go to the Lammas Fair, the Selkie wife finds her skin and returns to the sea. The plot of this episode of the novel is identical to the story which I collected; even details such as the seal people's dance or the protagonist's visit to the Lammas Fair. However, many dark episodes, which are not included in the above prototypical Selkie stories, are interlaced with the plot; Thorfinn's mother leaves her husband and son's family because of the son's wife from the sea; the Selkie wife attacks Thorfinn when she sees seals killed; after losing his Selkie wife, Thorfinn decides to let himself be taken away by the press-gangs.

Eric Linklater (1899-1974), born in Wales, spent much time in Orkney and is buried there. He was internationally active in writing novels and other literature before and after World War II. His short story, "Sealskin Trousers," collected in a book with the same title (1947), is based on another typical Selkie folk tale, but includes some twists. The backdrop of the story is modern. A human lady is seduced by a seal man who has lived on the land for a long time. (The seal man even studied at university.) Linklater suggests that the human lady turns into a seal. After they disappear, the lady's clothes and sealskin trousers are left on a ledge on the seashore. In the story, the seal skin is left on the land; it is not an essential item to allow Selkies to get back to the sea.

Both of them can be regarded as the authors representing 20th-century Scottish literature in spite of Linklater's origin. Donald Smith argues that many 20th-century Scottish writers revived Norse sagas or legends while 19th-century literary figures mainly drew attention to their Gaelic traditions of Scotland. He lists both Mackay Brown and Linklater among the Norse revivalists (134).

In 1998, there was an important and pioneering publication of Orcadian folk tales in book form. The book, *The Mermaid Bride and other Orkney Folk Tales*, was compiled and retold by Tom Muir, the Exhibition Officer of the Orkney Museum, Kirkwall. This publication led to an international expansion of the Orcadian imagination. A New Zealand writer, Cathie Dunsford, visited the Orkney Museum to interview Muir. The results of their meeting appear in her popular novel, *Song of the Selkies* (2001).¹⁰ In the story, multinational storytellers, who joined an event at the Edinburgh Festival, visit Orkney, led by a Selkie in human form. Another international development from Muir's book was the publication of its Japanese translation in 2004. It was done by Yoshio Higashiura and Michiko Mimura and published from Alba Shobo, a publisher established to introduce George Mackay Brown's works (Yamada).

3. Western Sea Creatures in Japan

The further goal of my research is to examine how a folk tale is developed into various art forms, is disseminated in other areas, and is globalized; thus it is worth discussing here several works of Japanese artists inspired by sea creatures in Western literature. Since Japan has an archipelagic geography, many have lived in coastal or insular areas. Thus various districts of Japan have had many folk tales of sea creatures visiting humans. When many Western literary works flowed into modernizing Japan in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many Japanese writers showed strong interest in European folk tales set in the sea or on the coasts.¹¹ Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" is a good example. Many Japanese translators variously translated its German, English or French versions into Japanese, and Japanese writers and artists have produced their own works modeled on the story by Andersen.¹² Even the animation movie, *Gake no Ue no Ponyo* (2008; Ponyo on the cliff

by the sea), directed by globally-famous animation creator Hayao Miyazaki is modeled on “The Little Mermaid” as Miyazaki himself states in the accompanying brochure (1).

Seals also became a popular motif of Japanese writers in the early 20th century. In 1925, *tanka* poet Hiroko Katayama published a translation of Fiona Macleod’s folkloric short stories under the pseudonym Mineko Matumura. (Fiona Macleod is the disguised persona of Scottish writer William Sharp (1855-1905).) Katayama picked up several stories from the Heinemann edition of the collected works of William Sharp, and the first story in Katayama’s translation is “Moon-Child,” in which a Selkie man seduces a human lady and is crucified by St. Colum. Katayama changed its title into “*Azarashi*” meaning a “seal” in Japanese. Also, children’s writer Mimei Ogawa (1882-1961) wrote a short story entitled “*Tsuki to Azarashi*” (The Moon and A Mother Seal) and it was published in book form with a mermaid story with a Japanese setting in 1921. The leading poet Hakushu Kitahara (1885-1942) impressively describes an island in which many seals gathered in his travelogue, *Fleppu Torippu* (1928), and it ends with a scenario for an imaginative movie filming a harem of seals. These works demonstrate the popularity of the seal motif among Japanese writers in those days. Even nowadays, Japanese readers can read all the works mentioned above in inexpensive paperback editions.¹³

Conclusion

In this paper, the folk tale of the Selkie wife collected in the Mainland of Orkney is reproduced. The informant is a professional storyteller working both domestically and internationally. Among his ample knowledge of Selkie folk tales, he picked up the story of the Parish of Deerness which can academically be regarded as the typical story of Selkies, or of the Seal Woman. The Selkie folk stories collected in Orkney have had a strong

impact on both Orcadian and foreign writers. The tales of the Selkie are not the remains of the past. They are still being told and textualized in Orcadian communities, and influencing foreign literary works. They are a genuine “live” part of contemporary discursive and representational formations of the folk legends of seals both in the Orkney islands and in the world.

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Notes

- 1 For further details of Orkney, see Orkney Islands Council, *Orkney Economic Review 2008*. The information on the literary situation in Orkney is from my interview with Ms. Pam Beasant, Cultural Coordinator of the Orkney Island Council.
- 2 *The Folk Tales of Scotland* and *The Mermaid Bride and Other Orkney Folk Tales* in the Works Cited are good examples.
- 3 Following the model of Seán Ó Súilleabhán's *The Handbook of Irish Folk Tale*, the name, age and address of the informant are recorded though they do not

appear in the text. The story was recorded with an IC recorder, and the collector made the typescript. After that, the typescript made by the collector was checked by the informant himself. The collector finalized the corrected script, listening to the recorded story.

- 4 ATU400 is a reference number for the classification of folk tales in Hans-Jörg Uther's *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography Based on the System of Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson*. "ATU" is an abbreviation for Aarne, Thompson and Uther.
- 5 See ML4080 in "Index of Tale-Types and Migratory Legends," Briggs.
- 6 See "The Selkie Wife," *The Mermaid Bride* 21-22, for example. The story is based on the tale published in 1908.
- 7 The place name for the setting of this story is sometimes spelled "Wastness." Katharine Briggs regards the story entitled "The Goodman of Wastness" as a representative tale of "The Seal Woman" folk tale group (Part A, vol. 1, 284-6). Water Traill Dennison collected the story at the end of the 19th century. See Dennison 81-84 or *County Folklore* 173-6. Norah and William Montgomerie and Tom Muir retell the story. See *The Folk Tales of Scotland* 135-7 and *The Mermaid Bride* 142-5.
- 8 See Dennison 84-87 or *County Folklore* 176-9.
- 9 See *County Folklore* 182 or the stories of Shetland grouped as "The Wounded Seal" by Briggs: "Gioga and Ollavitus" (Part B, vol.1, 255-6) or "The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry" (Part B, vol.1, 261).
- 10 I am indebted to Mr. Tom Muir for this information.
- 11 The course of the Japanese acceptance of Western literature in the early days was as follows. For nearly 200 years, the Japanese Tokugawa Shogunate had isolated themselves from foreign countries. However, they were forced to open their ports to the Western powers in the middle of the 19th century, and the new Meiji government, which took over the Tokugawa Shogunate and was established in 1868, was eager to catch up with Western advanced countries and struggled to avoid being colonized. The Meiji government devoured any kind of knowledge on Western countries including cultural matters. Consequently, many Japanese literary artists began to read Western literature. Some translated it; others arranged it and created their own stories.

- 12 For the history of the Japanese acceptance of Hans Christian Andersen, see Fukuda and Ishikawa.
- 13 The argument of this part is based on the paper read by the author at 09 IASIL Conference at the University of Glasgow on 29 July 2009: ““Selkies” in Mineko Matsumura’s Translation of Fiona Macleod: Connecting Ireland, Scotland and Japan.”

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