
This is a study of identity in an island community, a popular theme amongst anthropologists, especially in the peripheral communities of Scotland including the Northern Isles. Its starting point is a theoretical position which combines semiotic anthropology – the study of signs and their meaning in everyday culture – with ‘folkloric performance theory’, or the understanding that performance is a means of communication. In short, Lange is interested in how Orcadians construct their identity by means of ‘cultural competence’, the transmission of information that draws the boundaries of that identity. By means of interviews and participant observation the author identifies some of the key elements of the cultural identity of Orcadians: an egalitarian sensibility coupled with a sense of independence from ‘the outside’ and a belief in Orkney’s importance; the distinctive accent and dialect; a romanticised past; and a sense of differentness. All this is communicated through stories or narratives, or what Lange describes as communicative events between people.

Lange suggests that identity in Orkney is negotiated and mediated by means of the stories that people tell each other and to outsiders which are continually reinforcing. The most striking instance of this is his description of how Orcadians strive not to be ‘bigsy’, not to permit themselves or anyone else to regard themselves as better. Self-importance, or setting oneself apart, is regarded as a threat to the belief in an egalitarian social structure. However, this maintenance of an apparent egalitarian society is not entirely what it
seems. In order to maintain a sense of equalness, those who are perceived as bigsy must be isolated or sidelined until they understand how Orkney society operates. And it is incomers, relatively recent residents from outside, who are most likely to fall prey to these tactics when their misguided attempts to get involved in community life are interpreted as being pushy. Lange recognises that in order for Orcadians to represent themselves as humble and dismissive of hierarchical structures they have to police individuals and individuals have to police themselves. The line between being bigsy and being accepted is a hard one to negotiate.

This is a very personal study. Lange has a long association with Orkney and he writes in a personal style. While he states that Orkney offers a balancing perspective to the series of studies of Highland and Gaelic cultures in Scotland such as those by Macdonald on Skye, Nadel-Klein on Ferryden and Cohen on Whalsay, he is, in the final analysis, unable to achieve this because Orcadians themselves so persistently portray themselves as other. Is there something different about island communities? Or does Orkney display, writ large, the preoccupations and obsessions of many rural communities which perceive themselves threatened by change? A stretch of water separating Orkney from mainland Scotland is perhaps symbolically significant – to both Orkney residents and those who regard it from afar – but in material terms there is little to differentiate Orkney from many rural communities in Scotland and possibly further afield. Emphasis on the importance of heritage as a signifier of difference has been observed elsewhere, for instance in the Borders and South West of Scotland and in Orkney’s near neighbour, Shetland. Likewise, language and dialect as a signifier of difference has equal salience in Aberdeenshire.

Ultimately the story a community tells about itself has meaning only in so far as it makes sense to the members of that community and to those beyond its borders. Orcadians have successfully constructed an identity based on differentness in part because non-Orcadians have conspired in this
process (the idea of Orkney as a magical place is the creation of outsiders including anthropologists, archaeologists, historians and tourists as much as it is of Orcadians themselves). At present it serves a purpose – to articulate an identity that works for individuals within larger frameworks – Scotland, Britain, Europe, the global community. The elements that Lange identifies as being markers of identity in Orkney – heritage, dialect, importance, and belonging – shape a dialogue that Orcadians have with themselves about what it is to be Orcadian in the modern world. The title of this study, *The Norwegian Scots*, is ultimately misleading. Notwithstanding the close relationship between the Orkney dialect and Norse and Orcadians’ identification with Norse history and culture, Orkney identity is based on its self-definition from within and its otherness, its differentness from Highland, Gaelic and Lowland Scots identities, indeed all Scots identities. The function of this identity is open to question but to address that issue was not the purpose of this book.

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