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*Finding Agency in Nonhumans*

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# Is Skrei a Historical Norwegian Figure?

## The Nomadic Symbiosis of Fish and Humans in the Lofoten Islands

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper draws from short ethnographic fieldwork and collected oral histories in the Lofoten Islands in Northern Norway in 2019. In this paper I follow “skrei”, the Norwegian codfish (Gadus morhua). I explore what I call the “nomadic symbiosis” of islanders and skrei via their diachronic entanglements, as these appear in historical and present narratives, in changing ideas around economic development and progress, but also in the changes in the physical and political landscapes. These moments of connection, all challenge human-centric views arguing for skrei’s agency in cuisine-making, but also vis-à-vis identity-making, as skrei became recognized conjuring a newfound sense of belonging and becoming part of an imagined community within the Lofoten islands and beyond. I argue that these meaningful interactions create worlds that decenter human agency and revisit the notion of cuisine and nation-building processes as truly multispecies entanglements.*

*Keywords:* fish; fishing; human-animal relations; identity; multi-species ethnography; nationalism; nomadic symbiosis; non-human agency; Norway; oral histories.

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### 1. SEARCHING FOR SKREI

The name “skrei”, given to fish belonging in the Norwegian Atlantic cod family<sup>1</sup> comes from the Old Norse word for “the wanderer”. It is a very symbolic name, as skrei spends most of its life – and death for that matter – travelling. Skrei lives in the Barents sea, until the age of 6 or 7

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<sup>1</sup> The scientific name is *Gadus morhua*. Skrei differs from the Atlantic cod as it is longer in size and more pointed, has whiter, crisper flesh, with firm flakes. See more on Skrei.Net, Kurlansky 1998 and Greenberg 2011.

when it reaches sexual maturity. Every year in November-December it swims about 1000 km to the south, in the Lofoten islands (to its place of birth), to spawn. The Vestfjord, the area between the Lofoten archipelago and the mainland, is known as the world's biggest maternity ward and fills with millions of fish that reach the Lofoten islands from January to early spring. And with them, come of course the fishermen, to hunt for skrei. The vehement relationships between skrei and fishermen in the Lofoten archipelago and beyond, go back to the Viking times. But skrei is not only part of Norway's history, but also becomes part of the world. As a wanderer, even after its death, it travels to southern Europe, west Africa and other parts of the world, air-dried, salted, or otherwise processed: a Norwegian migrant that becomes part of the lives of southern Europeans, west Africans, and many more.

Arriving in the Lofoten islands in October 2019 I was eager for my encounter with skrei. As I crossed the sea from the mainland to the Lofoten islands, I imagined millions of fish swimming right below me, millions of fish on the mainland, caught in nets, hanging from wooden racks to be dried. But the wanderer was nowhere to be found. I was very late in the season. Skrei had returned to the Barents Sea and as the fishing and processing were well over, there was no sign of it anywhere. It felt as if I was chasing an imaginary ghost. But it only took a few hours to realize that skrei was everywhere. I felt its presence, not as a passive commodity, to be fished, processed and sold. Skrei imposed on the landscape, in people's narratives, it was part of the lives of the islanders, giving shape to something I was about to discover. The wanderer was there, omnipresent, even if it was away, cutting across time and space, affecting and changing everything. It felt like an important member of the community who was simply away traveling, and the village waited for its return. And it is its invisible presence that captivated me and which I seek to reveal and analyze in this paper.

This paper draws from short ethnographic fieldwork and collected oral histories from islanders in the Lofoten Islands in October 2019. In this paper I ask how, despite its name as a wanderer, skrei stays in the Lofoten islands all year-round, having a meaningful life in the Lofoten islands. I seek to understand its importance, agency and its embedded role in the Lofoten world. To do so, I explore the relationships between skrei and the islanders vis-à-vis feelings of belonging and identity-making, focusing on cultural imaginaries, histories and revival of traditions of fishing, processing and cooking skrei. By doing so, I ask what these meaningful entanglements can reveal around the nature of the agency nonhumans carry. I begin by sketching the methodological and theo-

retical framework of this paper. I then present the notion of “nomadic symbiosis” and analyse the historical moments and connections of skrei with fishermen and the islanders, and their interconnection with identity. I then hone into the nature of this “nomadic symbiosis” in present-day Lofoten and proceed to illustrate how skrei shapes new ways of coexisting, creating a new sense of belonging for the islanders.

## 2. ANIMALS AS “GOOD TO LIVE WITH”

To explore these meaningful entanglements, I draw from theoretical understandings in the context of the post-anthropocentric turn in anthropology and beyond. Multispecies ethnography (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010) has cast animals as “good to live with”, as active participants in human social life, in what is called “Becomings” – new kinds of relations emerging from non-hierarchical alliances, symbiotic attachments, and the mingling of creative agents (*ibid*, 454). Multispecies ethnographies may move beyond animals and focus on the dynamic relationships between non-human organisms and humans, such as plants, insects, fungi, bacteria, and viruses (Paxson 2008; Tsing 2015), rendering human nature “an interspecies relationship” (Tsing 2012).

This shift which began from Donna Haraway’s seminal work *When Species Meet* (2008) explores the dynamic relationships formed between species and how they define and are defined by grander societal narratives. Humans are no longer the center of the universe; it is “a network with no center to dictate order”, a more balanced system where threads of relations across species create equally interesting narratives and ideas to reflect on (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, 454). Many scholars have focused on human-animal relationships, and in their works we see how these relationships shape and are shaped from animals and humans together<sup>2</sup>. For instance, Beach and Stammler (2006) describe a “symbiotic domestication” between reindeer in Siberia and their herders, a relationship that is more than a relation of production between humans and animals. Reindeers internalize the patterns of movements that their herders dictate and in turn the herders follow the reindeers into the landscape. In this worldview, humans and animals are considered equals and in a symbiotic relationship, that goes beyond their movements into the landscape and towards their reproduction, life and death (see also Cassidy 2012).

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Vitebsky 2005; Franklin 2006; Cassidy and Mullin 2007; Candea 2010; Francis 2015; Lien 2015.

In this paper, I draw from this methodological and theoretical framework, diverging from classic ethnographies and interpretations. I see skrei not only as a foodstuff for human consumption, but also carrying cultural and symbolic value, and embedded in history and in the lives of the islanders. By following skrei and the feelings of belonging it conjures, I seek to explore understandings of agency for skrei and by extension for nonhuman animals.

To this end, I situate the notion of agency as embedded in and deriving from these relationships that I describe above. More specifically, in defining agency, in this paper I diverge from Kohn's (2013) ideas around agency as intentionality and as a force that utilizes past learnings to create futures. Instead, I ask if humans attribute agency to skrei in the sense of linguistic agency, of how humans talk about the fish. This is still meaningful, despite being human-centric and depended on humans. But I also ask if skrei has a deeper form of agency, not only promoting change in humans, as per Bruno Latour's (2005) theory, but more, I see agency as the *creation of a relationship of equals*, between humans and skrei. But can skrei, a foodstuff, ever be really equal to humans? How does food/cuisine and agency intersect? It is this "relationship" and "entanglements of human and nonhuman lives" that I search for in this paper in these instances in which skrei and human actions intertwine or diverge. Within this framework, I problematize the meaningful categories of fish as "wild", especially linking to the notions of animal as "wild" vs. "alien", as they relate to ideas of inclusion and exclusion, particularly vis-à-vis the creation of relationships and entanglements<sup>3</sup>. As such, in this paper, I engage with skrei and navigate these issues by decentering my human perspective to an all-encompassing view of the world<sup>4</sup>. More specifically, I search for these moments where skrei and the human worlds merge, in their material or symbolic forms and the interconnections that become visible.

### 3. ANIMALS AND IDENTITY-MAKING

But how does one actually go about researching the interconnections between skrei and the islanders? To explore this conundrum, I focus on identity-making and nation-building processes and ask how these can

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<sup>3</sup> See also Govindrajana 2018, and especially chapter four on animals vis-à-vis the politics of exclusion and belonging.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Kohn 2013; Despret 2016; Mueller 2017.

be reframed using not only the human gaze, but also bringing skrei into the discourse. Classic scholarship in this realm usually reduces animals to “foods” and “cuisine”, the latter often defined as an assemblage of foodways, a reflection of communities with shared social roots, of people that come together, interact and collectively remember (Mintz 1996; Counihan 1999; Sutton 2001; Watson 2007). In this paper I see cuisine as embedded in social relations, but seek to rethink of such relations as something more than human, situating skrei in multispecies entanglements in the Lofoten islands.

I draw from ideas on terroir, in which the natural environment, the notion of time, the human element come together and create diverse cultural, political and economic networks of social relationships (Trubek 2009; Paxson 2010; West 2013), and the global processes of reinvention of tradition and revalorizing of rural foods on multiple local, regional and national levels (see Markowitz 2012; Grasseni 2012; Wilk 2002 respectively; see also Grasseni and Paxson 2014). Following these political processes of creation and consumption of food and place in the Lofoten islands, I ask about and search for the absence of engagement with skrei in these definitions. More specifically, in what follows I discuss how skrei, even though has been part of the Lofoten islands for centuries, it was until recently invisible and neglected, *vis-à-vis* the creation of local or even national cuisine, but also *vis-à-vis* the social relations that the notion of cuisine presupposes. To this end, using the lenses of cuisine I seek to understand the construction and negotiation of the Norwegian identity, as local and national idioms coexist and sometimes clash, and the role of skrei in this process.

Norway is a particularly fascinating case for that matter. As the anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen notes, it is often portrayed as a relatively small country, with “simplicity, homogeneity, and cohesiveness as virtues that go with smallness” (2017, 71). Implicit in Eriksen’s words in the idea of a relatively homogenous national identity which envelops the internal diversity and external influences (for instance the national language dispute, the Sami ethnic minority, or the North-South tension that I discuss later on in this paper). Indeed, the notion of “equality as sameness” has been the foundation for the creation and maintenance of social relations in Norway, as Marianna Gullestad notes (1992, 162). However, during my time in the Lofoten islands, complexities come to the fore when discussing the construction of the Norwegian identity, and the interplay of local, regional and national idioms becomes a site of symbolic struggle, especially when seen from the prism of skrei.

Building on these works and using the theoretical framework presented above, I follow the Norwegian codfish, and reveal its economic, political, and symbolic life and agency, suggesting skrei and the islanders can be involved in meaningful interactions that decenter human agency and make the notion of cuisine and identity-making a “truly multispecies entanglement”. As I will explore in what follows, the various powerful ways of relating to the nonhuman other reveal not only new perspectives on agency, but also how this becomes constitutive of identity and a trope for nationalism.

#### 4. NOMADIC SYMBIOSIS

Every year from January to early spring, skrei begins its journey from the Barents Sea toward the Vestfjord basin, the area between the Lofoten archipelago and mainland Norway. There, it confronts the fishermen who come from various parts of Norway to fish. But it also comes to the land, becoming part of the islanders’ worlds. The relationship between fishermen, the islanders and skrei that I explore in what follows, is what I call a “nomadic symbiosis”, drawing from Beach and Stammer’s (2006) “symbiotic domestication” between reindeer in Siberia and their herders. Symbiosis, defined as the living together of unlike organisms<sup>5</sup> (which does not necessarily mean that all organisms mutually benefit), takes in this case a nomadic character from the very nature of skrei as a wanderer. Skrei, like various other nomads, travels and comes in contact with various spaces and people, and these brief encounters in and around the Lofoten islands, as I will narrate shortly, create entanglements and multi-species connections. These journeys and relationships of fish and humans date back centuries.

Notably, in 1890 skrei went particularly deep into the fjords and reached the narrow Trollfjord fjord which is surrounded by steep-sided mountains. Following skrei, fishing steamboats blocked the fjord mouth with nets and caught skrei. The small traditional open boats with oars and sail loudly protested, as they were not allowed in. Their protests reached the government, and as a result closing nets were not allowed in the Lofoten fishery from 1893. This was one of the many historical interactions between skrei and fishermen, which led to one of the most well-known conflicts related to the cod fisheries in Norway. The battle of

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<sup>5</sup> In Heinrich Anton de Bary’s 1878 speech, “Die Erscheinung der Symbiose” (“De la symbiose”) (Oulhen *et al.* 2016).



the Trollfjord, as it is known, was not so much about traditional ways of fishing vs. technological advancements, but a call against private capitalism and a future wage system which would turn fishermen into employees and wage laborers<sup>6</sup>. This entanglement between skrei and humans, suggests not only the historical depth of these multispecies interactions, but also their political importance.

Analyzing the Trollfjord battle, the signs of the “nomadic symbiosis” between skrei and the human world become visible: the unusual and unexpected movements of skrei stirred up political unrest and became the force for political change. As a result, skrei, the Lofoten islands and the fisheries, became important elements of the Norwegian political life. Having always been a distinct part of the Norwegian nation, they were now intertwined with important historical and political events. And skrei was at the epicenter of all this.

In present-day Lofoten, the lives of the islanders are still entangled with skrei, as communities of fishermen congregate in the area. The historical fishing past is embedded in their narratives. “Our first boat was built in 1925”, narrates a third-generation fisherman. “As early as I could I was joining my father, from when I was 8 or 10 years old, so it was very natural for me to become a fisherman”. Children and teenagers in Lofoten would wait for the boats to come, as they took part in the – now traditional – seasonal activity of cutting the tongues from the cod heads. “You did it as a child so you could earn money”, everyone in Lofoten explains. “My uncle had a fishing boat that was delivering to this one place”, narrates another islander, who grew up on a farm. “He was a very good fisherman, tough on the ocean, he didn’t give up. He called up my dad in the farm and if he had a lot of fish he would say ‘get the kids down’; the children would then wear an overall and were dropped into the full fish tanks of the boat to pull out the fish”. Reflecting on the inclusion of skrei in the local world, it becomes clear that skrei has always been part of the Lofoten society; it was a society of humans, and skrei.

Over the centuries, the fishing industry went through various changes with strict quotas being imposed in the 1980s and 1990s due to overfishing practices that depleted the sea life, leading to the shrinking of the small boats and the near break-down of the industry. Today, there are fewer fishing boats, which however make better profits, as fishing techniques have evolved, perhaps working towards more efficient ways to interact with skrei, which as a fisherman mentioned, is “smarter” than other fish. Especially from the 1990s onwards, cost became a determin-

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<sup>6</sup> See also Holm 2020 and Skrei.Net.

ing factor, and many local children were replaced by foreign workers. Financially, it made more sense for boats to go to Lithuania to get the bait, while seasonal migrants from Poland and other places of Europe that had no association to fishing offered cheaper labor, and they were used instead of local children in cod tongue-cutting. Linking back to the discussion on Norwegian identity, it becomes apparent how these movements of populations within the fishing industry are reflective of a more diverse amalgamation of populations in the Lofoten islands.

These economic-driven changes and the influx of foreign migrant laborers who had no cultural association to skrei created a rupture between the local communities and skrei. The traditional practice of removing the tongues from fish heads, which as one of my interlocutors explained, made the entire community entangled with the fishing boats has now disappeared. “Children used to know all the boats”, he explains, “their names, when they come and when they go. Today there is no incentive to do so”. The social relations between the islanders and skrei have broken down. However, the narratives and stories of times past still remain very much alive, creating an “imagined community”, as per Anderson’s (1991) notion<sup>7</sup>. Building on the islander’s narratives, an imagined community emerges, one which maintains social connections with skrei. The locals talked vividly about the past, and even though many past practices did not continue into the present, the imagination and narratives of connections with skrei and of a community around skrei which existed in the past became part of collective memories and penetrate the present. This imagined community of fishermen, islanders and skrei becomes, as I will explore in what follows, the foundation for nation-building and identity-making.

Coming to the shore, and with the head and tongues removed, skrei continues its journey in Lofoten, by becoming what is widely known as stockfish. This is the air-dried cod, an old preservation method. The fish is cut in half, the two halves are tied together and then hanged carefully one next to the other in wooden racks by the sea. Walking in the Lofoten islands, skrei dominates the landscape (*Fig. 1*), as the imposing racks rise all year-long, covering wide patches of land and creating a distinct imaginary that is also depicted in postcards and in various other souvenirs offered to the many tourists that visit the area. But as opposed to other tourist monuments which can only be found in specific areas, skrei’s

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<sup>7</sup> Anderson’s seminal work on nationalism defines the nation as a political community, imagined by its members as limited and sovereign, even though its members may not be in direct contact with each other.

wooden racks are scattered around in various places, resulting in blending with the landscape so much so, that tourists themselves sometimes ignore them and camp under them, as one of my interlocutors mentioned. Skrei, even though is a species that lives underwater becomes part of the land and of the human world, changing the landscape even during its absence.



*Figure 1. – Skrei drying racks  
in the Lofoten islands (© Nafsika Papacharalampous).*

By observing the landscape in the Lofoten islands, skrei's force to alter the human physical world becomes apparent. Reminding us of Anna Tsing's (2015) matsutake mushrooms emerging in Hiroshima's blasted landscape in 1945 that challenged man's power to destroy nature, skrei's domination of the physical landscape in the Lofoten islands reflects a unique sense of agency: skrei becomes a force, of and from nature, that imposes on human desire to have power over nature and sketch "their" landscape. Skrei's ability to affect the "human" landscape becomes even more powerful if one considers that skrei, as a wanderer, stays around the Lofoten islands only for a few months in a year.

When it comes to stockfish itself, no one talks about terroir yet and about the link between taste and place (cf. Trubek 2009). But the way

stockfish is made, carries within it valuable local knowledge: “It has to mature. Just like a good cheese and wine it has to mature even more”, they say. “Even within Lofoten, not every place is suited for making stockfish”, says one of the islanders. “The temperature in the winter is ideal for the drying of the fish”, Anne Karine, the secretary of Tørrfisk fra Lofoten explains, “You need the temperature to be above zero and a little bit of rain, a little bit of sunshine. It has to be cold enough but not freezing. If it gets warm late in the hanging season the flies are awakening and put their eggs in the fish. If it hangs for a few days then it closes down and the flies can’t get in. If you get late in the season you hang smaller and smaller fish because if you hang big fish they won’t dry”. “The open side should hang towards the west”, says one of the islanders, whose family, like many islanders have been hanging codfish at home from early on, usually in ladders, taking the cod out in the sun in the mornings and placing it in boxes in the evening to avoid moisture. This deep and elaborate local knowledge embedded in stockfish becomes the trope for affirmation of identity, as this knowledge becomes the foundation that gives a sense of belonging. But is it only the local knowledge vis-à-vis skrei as a foodstuff that conjures a sense of belonging?

Even though the islanders eat fish a few times a week, until 20 years ago you could not find stockfish at the supermarket, and until recently, it was not even prepared at restaurants. “Stockfish is money”, many told me, echoing the “golden age” of cod fishing from the 1830s to the 1880s when fishing evolved and merchants would send dried codfish to continue its journey to markets in Southern Europe<sup>8</sup>. Peter Dass, a Norwegian priest, poet and tradesman in the seventeenth century has called stockfish “the crown of Lofoten” (Amilien *et al.* 2019, 508). At the time (and today) skrei was not only an invaluable (historical) commodity with an undebatable monetary value. It was an active agent of progress. This agency is attributed in the way locals speak about it: “The fish is what built the big church in Trondheim, it has built Bergen as a city because that was a trading station for stockfish”, Anne Karine says. But implicit in her words is not only a linguistic agency attributed to the fish, as that which “builds”. The profound historical connection between skrei and Norwegian progress, especially in smaller cities such as Trondheim and Bergen illustrates not only that “the fish builds”, but also that the fish is actually intertwined in the development of these peripheral cities of Norway, which would perhaps have evolved very differently had it not been for their entanglements with skrei.

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<sup>8</sup> See Holm 2020.

But despite skrei being embedded in history, the landscape, local knowledge, and becoming an active agent of the local economy, the symbolic figure of skrei and the social and cultural capital of the fishermen were not always a source of pride for the islanders. Bad pay, hard working conditions contributed to the low status of the fishing profession, not only in Lofoten, but across Norway as well. Islanders share how they felt unwelcomed in Oslo when they moved there as labor migrants or as students in the 60s and 70s. “They wouldn’t rent you a room if they heard you were from the Lofoten”, one of my interlocutors mentioned. Skrei and the fishing culture were invisible in the construction of Norwegian national identity, not recognized in the national narratives. “Oslo forgot about us on the 17th of May”<sup>9</sup>, a cod exporter in Lofoten shared with me, “as it didn’t fit the European story”, one of my interlocutors shared. Implicit in their words in the tension which also exists in other peripheries of Europe, where several figures of rurality are more often than not a source of embarrassment in the desire to fit cultural imaginaries of the “modern European”. For instance, as I have explored in my previous research in Greece, rural foods and symbols had been an intimate and embarrassing universe for Greeks, not displayed in official narratives of identity-making, and only after the financial crisis in the mid-2010s, the profound nostalgia for the previously rejected rurality, became a source of comfort and ultimately a foundation for identity (Papacharalampous 2019).

Returning to Norway, even though figures of rurality and coastal identities were part of the 19th century romantic nationalism, as the locals’ words suggest skrei and the fishing industry did not form part of these narratives. Norwegian identity was based on ideas around nature, but within nature no one mentioned skrei. It was invisible when seen under the prism of the Norwegian nationalism. Homing into nation-building processes in Norway, skrei therefore, even though an outsider as a fish, a nomad, living in the “wild”, it was an insider for the locals, part of the Lofoten islands, and as such, an outsider vis-à-vis Norway. This complexity in the relationship between skrei and the Norwegian identity is illuminating of the symbiosis of the nomadic skrei and those who inhabit the Lofoten islands. Digging deeper into these connections, in the next part of this paper I ask what is the role of skrei in the creation of this imagined community, not only in the Lofoten islands, but vis-à-vis the Norwegian nation. In what follows, I return to the notion of identity, as I hone into the nature of this “nomadic symbiosis” in present-day Lofoten.

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<sup>9</sup> The 17th of May is the day of the signing of the Norwegian Constitution in Eidsvoll, in 1814, declaring Norway to be an independent kingdom.

## 5. RECOGNIZING ONE ANOTHER

In her book *What Would Animals Say If We Asked the Right Questions?* Vinciane Despret (2016) discusses the possibility of becoming “with” animals, “not in the sense of feeling what the other is thinking or of feeling for the other like a burdensome empathizer but rather of receiving and creating the possibility to inscribe oneself in a relation of exchange and proximity that has nothing to do with identification” (*ibid.*, 17). I draw from this idea and having discussed these historical moments and connections of skrei with fishermen and the islanders, and the interconnection of the “nomadic symbiosis” with identity, in what follows I focus on the recent past and present in Lofoten, and illustrate how skrei is becoming “good to live with”, shaping new ways of coexisting and creating a new sense of belonging for the islanders.

In the last couple of decades, skrei gained national visibility. In 2007, stockfish from Lofoten received a Geographical Protected Designation in Norway and in 2014 it also gained the status of Protected Geographical Indication in the EU (*Stockfish from Lofoten* N.D.). The Skrei quality label is now a protected trademark registered and managed by the Norwegian Seafood Council (2019). These public moments of recognition for skrei were accompanied by its appearance in restaurant spaces and in markets, creating various ways of proximity, as the following examples illustrate.

Angelita, in her 40s, grew up in Lofoten also cutting fish tongue as a child. Like many others, in the summer, she would accompany her fisherman father on trips. With her partner Tamara they have revived the stockfish tradition by creating a stockfish-spice mix with Japanese influences. They wanted “to make something new based on tradition”, as she explains. For that, they hang the codfish, but coated with sugar and salt, turning it into a unique type of dried fish, which is then blended with seaweeds and sesame, and place it in beautiful minimalist tins with a sea-blue packaging.

Two other producers, Helge and his wife, both in their late 40s, have been for years in the food industry and also come from Lofoten. They create a dish, which is sold ready to eat, as they wanted to have “something that would be around throughout the year”, a way to keep skrei with them. For their product they use the salted and dried cod called *klippfish*<sup>10</sup>. Their dish is called *bacalao*, the name coming from the classic

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<sup>10</sup> The name comes from the Norwegian word *klippe*, meaning cliff, because these fish are dried on rocks as opposed to wooden racks (the stocks in stockfish) (Kristoffersen 2020).

Basque codfish stew. In their *bacalao*, the salted and dried cod is slowly cooked with crushed tomatoes, onions, and other ingredients. They sell their *bacalao* dish to supermarkets and local restaurants.

Local and national supermarket chains carry these foods, along with many other local artisanal foods and produce placed at special sections, creating “pride for the local producers” as Anna Karine says. All of my interlocutors shared how such foods are getting more and more popular, a combination of an increased interest in the revival of traditional foods and old ways of doing things and of course, convenience. During my time in the Lofoten islands, a local food festival took place in Leknes, one of the islands, showcasing traditional dishes and ingredients, bringing together producers, the locals, and of course, skrei. Chefs also started incorporating stockfish in their menus, after locals started travelling and tasted stockfish in Italy or other places. So they are now taking recipes from Italy or Portugal and develop them differently. Skrei travels in high cuisine and also in the capital city, as it also appears in the menus of upscale restaurants, for example in the form of “salted cod stuffed olives” at “Imperial restaurant” in Oslo.

This “awakening for local food” as Anne Karine names it is part of the European-wide phenomenon of returning to the roots and revalorizing locality and rurality. These foods have also come to be associated with Europe or the world, elements that conjure to their popularity. Nonetheless, as Angelita says, it makes her feel “closer to home and to my roots”. This movement often becomes the foundation for the recreation of regional or national cuisines. To this end, skrei is no longer only transformed into stockfish or klippfisk and by extension into money. Today, it is still highly commercialized, but its cultural and symbolic value shifts, making it not only a primary produce to sell, but a celebrated revival of tradition, associated with ideas of modernity, and luxury, recognized by locals and outsiders alike, as its visibility in the capital city and around Norway rises.

This metamorphosis of cuisine which I encountered in Lofoten, is the result of the entanglements and nomadic symbiosis of locals and skrei, illuminating the interrelation between agency and cuisine. And it is the unique way of relating between humans and skrei that gives birth to this metamorphosis: Angelita’s need to feel closer to home and to her roots makes her forge a (new) relationship with skrei, by transforming it to something new. Helge and his wife’s need to keep skrei with them all year round, gives birth to their bacalao dish. The old relationships of proximity between the islanders, skrei and the world are now renegotiated, and the foundation for these multispecies connections now becomes the pride for skrei. As I have discussed, skrei has always been

an insider, but now it is an insider at the center of change and an insider which represents Lofoten to the world.

The fishing industry as well is now getting more and more popular, shifting the imaginaries of the lives of fishermen. As a fisherman tells me, popular television series showcasing skrei and the lives of fishermen added glamour and appeal to an otherwise challenging profession and, as I suggest, to the ideas of living “with” skrei. But also, better working conditions with fewer work-hours and a good income make fishing an appealing profession for the locals, who are now returning to it. This shift illuminates the desire to create new deeper relationships with skrei and the sea, building on the diachronic relationships between fish and fisheries.

Concluding this last part of the paper, and following skrei in realms that are traditionally viewed via the lenses of cuisine and “fish as food”, I suggest that the notion of cuisine, whose foundation lays in the ways people relate to one another, can be re-examined. By searching for those connections between fish, foods, and people, a new approach towards understanding cuisine and identity-making is revealed. The desire of the islanders to reconnect with skrei, as it manifests in the artisanal producers’ re-engagement with skrei, or in the locals’ desire to become fishermen, renders skrei not only a foodstuff that is part of cuisine: Skrei conjures an imagined community rooted in the present, and a sense of belonging. In the case of skrei in the Lofoten islands, cuisine and identity-making is not only the fish-as-food shared amongst humans who collectively come together. It is the creation of a community of those with shared roots and histories, both humans and fish.

## 6. IS SKREI A HISTORICAL NORWEGIAN FIGURE?

The new 200 NOK Norwegian banknote has a picture of a codfish, as part of a new series of banknotes featuring various abstract maritime motifs, and replacing portraits of famous Norwegian figures of the previous series. The series notes how “No other fish species is as adorable and mythical as cod [...] we see it in the literature, sculptures, municipal coats of arms – and now in the new banknotes” (Norges Bank 2017). Has cod become a historical Norwegian figure, so famous as to be depicted in banknotes?

In this paper, I have followed the relationships and multispecies entanglements forged between skrei and the islanders in the Lofoten islands in search of what these meaningful entanglements can reveal around the nature of the agency nonhumans carry.



Skrei has been historically part of the Lofoten worlds in a “nomadic symbiosis” between fish and humans, as illustrated in the narratives of the islanders, and if one observes diachronically the entanglements between skrei and the fishing industry, the physical landscape, the political events as the famous battle of Trollfjord, the economic development and progress. Skrei was indeed an insider. As an insider it was entangled in webs of meaning that did not allow for it to conjure a sense of pride, as these relationships were not fused with cultural and symbolic local value and clashed with the national identity-making processes. But as I have analyzed in this paper, this shifted in the last couple of decades, as skrei becomes more and more visible in the eyes of locals and others alike. Skrei is now recognized, and creates new possibilities of relating and of proximity, as it conjures a newfound sense of belonging. As such, skrei becomes part of an imagined community, becoming a symbolic representation of the entire Norway, also changing how we understand Lofoten within and outside of Norway.

Returning to the notion of agency, what the case of skrei illustrates is that when discussing agency for the nonhumans, it is by observing the subtle entanglements, relationships and tension between humans and the nonhumans that create moments of connection and friction that we may reach a better understanding for the nonhuman mind. Is the relationship of skrei and humans a relationship of equals? No, but as I have argued in this paper, skrei’s role in fueling the Trollfjord battle and causing unrest in the human world, in “being smart” as the fishermen say and playing a role in the evolution of fishing methods, in altering the human landscape, as an agent of economic progress, and ultimately in its role in giving a sense of belonging and a home to those who live with it, and in the process of (re) presentation and reevaluation of Lofoten to Norway and to the world, all challenge the human-centric view of human “domination” over “submissive” fish. These moments of connection suggest skrei and the islanders can be involved in meaningful interactions and create worlds that decentre human agency. What the case of skrei and this paper proposes therefore is that agency derives from these powerful ways of relating to the nonhuman other, revealing the importance of non-human species in cuisine-making, as constitutive of identity and as a trope for nationalism in Europe.

As I left the Lofoten islands on a cold Sunday morning, on my train journey to the south I realized that my initial disappointment for my inability to encounter skrei had disappeared. It had given its place to what felt like a connection with this fish and the people around it. As anthropologists we may never be able to fully understand the nonhuman mind, especially when our quest involves a nomadic fish, a wanderer. But

doesn't this hold true for any other, human, mind? What matters is that in the process of defining who we are and the worlds we inhabit, we are open to relating "with" the other, in this case, skrei, the wanderer.

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