

The Brother of the Snake and Fish as Kings

Bróðir ormsins og fiskar sum kongar

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Úrtak

Í gamlari fólkamentan hefur verið vanligt at bólka fiskaslög eftir samfelagsbygnaði og ættarskipan. Eftir hesi heimsáskoðan var natúrligt, at állur (*Anguilla anguilla*) hevði eina államóður, sum var tann, ið førði ættina viðari. Állurin var so nær skyldur við ormin, at hann segðist vera bróðir hansara. Állur hevur tí ikki verið etin í Føroyum, Noregi og Norðursvøríki.

Løgnir fiskar, eitt nú óvanliga stórir fiskar, fiskar, sum onkursvegna vóru vanskapir, og fiskar sum vóru uppi í veiðini av einhvørjum øðrum fiskaslag, vórðu nevndir kongar ella herleiðarar. Teir kundu eisini nevast -styrja, sum í Norðurlondum hevur verið brúkt um stóran og óvanligan fisk; teir vórðu hildnir at leiða og verja hinar fiskarnar, sum sóust í torvum við Atlantsstrendur. Dømi eru laksastyrja (*Lampris guttatus*), sildakongur og sildastyrja (*Regalecus glesne*) og makelstyrja (*Thunnus thynnus*).

Um allan heim er kent, at summi dýr hava verið nevnd kongar. Hetta er ikki bert galdandi fyri fisk, men eisini um skríðdýr, fuglar og súgdýr.

Abstract

In traditional folk taxonomy, various fish species have been categorised in accordance with the social structures and kinship systems of human beings. According to this world-view, it was natural that the eel (*Anguilla anguilla*) had an Eel-Mother, who was responsible for reproduction, and that the eel was regarded as a relative to the snakes and was, therefore, called the Brother of the Snake. In the Faroe Islands, Norway and northern Sweden, this belief legitimised local aversion to the eel as food.

Strange looking fish, either exceptionally large specimens of a certain species or those that were malformed in one way or other, or even uncommon species caught together with fish shoals, have been regarded as kings or leaders of certain fish. They have also been called -styrja in the Scandinavian languages. In Nordic countries, this term denoted certain large and rare fish species which were believed to command and protect other fish species such as herring or mackerel, which appear in large shoals along the Atlantic coast, e.g. the opah (*Lampris guttatus*), the oarfish (*Regalecus glesne*), and the tuna fish (*Thunnus thynnus*).

The tradition of regarding certain species or specimens as the king of other fish is widespread, not only in northern Europe, but also in other parts of the world. It is also known with regard to reptiles, birds and mammals.

Introduction

The famous Swedish author, August Strindberg (1987: 30), describes in his late 19th century novel, *I havsbandet* ['By the Open Sea'], how an inspector of fisheries tries to convince sceptical islanders, with the help of a water looking-glass, that there are eels (*Anguilla anguilla*) on the bottom of the sea. However, the islanders repudiate the observations, arguing that actually it must have been snakes they had seen. The inspector of fisheries was, of course, cor-

rect. They were eels, which are found not only in lakes and running water, but also in the Baltic Sea, as well as in the seas that surround all the Nordic countries. To erase prejudice has always been an important task for inspectors of fisheries. To study traditional knowledge and the conscious use of various animal and plant species, however, is the task of an ethnobiologist.

Internationally, ethnobiology is on the verge of developing into its own discipline. Ethnobiology incorporates elements of both cultural studies and science. Research aimed at saving remaining traditional animal and plant knowledge is given a high priority. The approach of contemporary ethnobiology is highly interdisciplinary. Of particular interest to the ethnobiologist are the cultural domains where human relationships operate in a creative process with other organisms. The scope of ethnobiology includes all complex relationships between human beings and other living organisms (Castetter, 1944; Olsen and Svanberg, 1998; Svanberg, 1998a: 9-43; 1998b: 81-83; Svanberg and Tunón, 1999).

The Eel – a Strange Fish

According to European folk beliefs, the eel is a strange fish. It differs in many ways from other fish species, a condition that has contributed to a hesitant attitude towards it. Strindberg's story alludes to a prejudice found throughout the Nordic countries. For instance, J.C. Svabo (1959: 71), writing in the 1780's in the Faroe Islands, noted that farmers preferred not to eat it. According to the Faroese people, it had too many similarities with the snake. The same expres-

sion is recorded in Norway in a contemporary local description. In the Norwegian Telemark, H.J. Wille (1786: 158) writes that peasants do not eat eel since it is regarded as the brother of the snake. Actually, records from Norway and the Faroe Islands already exist in Peder Claussøn Friis' (1632: 120, 153) writings from the turn of the 17th century. This information dates back to the 1590's when Friis interviewed a Faroese student in Copenhagen. According to this informant, the Faroese people, in contrast to foreigners in the archipelago, do not eat eel. He says the former call the eel 'the Brother of the Snake'. Also Thomas Tarnovius (1950: 64), probably with Friis as his source, writes in 1669 that the Faroe Islanders have a strong aversion against the eel, because it '... er i slect med ormene oc snogene' [is related to the snakes and the grass snakes]. Similar statements are to be found in contemporary oral tradition from the mid-20th century recorded in central Sweden (ULMA 26 902; ULMA 27 095).

People of the Nordic countries have always been aware of the fact that the eel differs in many ways from other fish species. This has contributed to numerous beliefs about the eel and many popular and scholarly opinions are the result of its behaviour and biology.

It was not only the behaviour of the eel that was confusing. Its reproductive biology has not only been a mystery for researchers, but also for the Nordic peasantry, which remained uncertain about this strange fish. The lack of observations of its reproductive behaviour created a hotbed for many speculations. Around 1730, clergy-

man Johan Olof Broman (1912-54: 651, 676-677) reports from Hälsingland about the belief in eel-mothers. In 1736, Johan Duræus writes from Ydre in Östergötland that some people '... claim that there are eel-mothers, which are similar to rotten timber, with many holes on them, from where this fish should generate; I have never seen it,' he adds sceptically (Norrbý, 1950: 157). According to the Swede Jacob Gabriel Gyllenborg (1770: 41), the peasantry talked about '... a strange creature, called the Eel-Mother, which is covered with holes on all sides, from where small eel juveniles emerge; and when this generation takes place, the grand Eel-Mother tumbles up on the beaches, where the sun during summertime is hottest in the water; the small eel juveniles, in large number, come out in the free water, where they as other fishes, forage and grow. When you ask them how this Eel-Mother was created, and why it never can be observed by others, the answer is that there are very few of them, and according to some people, that such a creature in the beginning was created by God to take care of the reproduction of the eels'. According to a later folk-life record from Östergötland in Sweden, an Eel-Mother reigns in an eel's nest (ULMA 91:21). The motif of an eel-mother has been used by the Danish author H.C. Andersen in his short story 'En historie fra Klitterne' (1860).

It is part of the traditional folk taxonomy to categorise fish in accordance with human social structures and kinship systems. According to this world-view, it was natural that the eel had a mother who was re-

sponsible for its reproduction, and that the strange eel was regarded as a relative to the snakes, and, therefore, was called the Brother of the Snake. In a record from Himmerland, the eel has even been regarded as the maternal uncle to the viper (*Hugormens morbroder*) in Denmark. Also in Finland, there are records that the peasantry had regarded the eel as related to the snakes. It was so similar to snakes that many fishermen preferred to throw it back into the water when caught, according to a record from Björköby parish in Österbotten (Svanberg, 1999; SLS 656a).

The notions about the eel as the brother of the snake are found in areas of the Nordic countries where the eel traditionally has been despised as food. In northern Sweden, many areas in Finland, Norway and the Faroe Islands, the eel has traditionally not been considered a fish and has not been eaten. 'The inhabitants do not eat them', Jørgen Landt (1800: 275) writes in his description of the Faroe Islands. The Norwegian Fredric Grøn (1942: 150) reports that the peasant's distrust of the eel has endured into modern times. Only towns people have learned to appreciate eel, he continues. It must, therefore, have been a question of social belonging, wherein peasants have been reluctant to eat eel and townspeople, and more socially advanced people, have been able to enjoy it. In the Faroe Islands, Danish immigrants have consumed eel, while the local population has mistrusted it into modern times. The prejudices against eel as food are also found in other parts of Europe. For instance, in Scotland the natives have dis-

trusted eel as food because of its resemblance to snakes. During World War I, a pamphlet was published in Scotland where the author regrets that the inhabitants, due to prejudices, did not eat eel (MacKenzie, 1935: 80). In southern Sweden and in the coastal areas of Denmark, where the eel has always been consumed as food, there are no stories or opinions about the 'Brother of the Snake'.

According to some informants and authors, the aversion to eating eel goes back to the Old Testament view as stated in *Leviathans* 11: 10. From the coastal area of Estonia we find the same story where the eel is considered the 'Brother of the Snake'. For instance, the Estonian and Swedish-speaking settlers of the island Wormsö did not eat it. There is a folk legend recorded from that area that tries to explain why eels should not be eaten. The legend tells how kinship between the eel and the snake began. It is said that the snake had seduced the First Parents in Paradise and thereby raised the wrath of God. Jesus then took a stick and cut the snake into two pieces. The part with the head fell on the dry land, while the tail part fell into the water. A new snake grew from the former part, while the eel emerged from the latter (Russwurm, 1855: 189).

If we look outside the Nordic countries, it is evident in many parts of the world that the eel has been regarded as a snake interbreeding with snakes, an opinion previously found in Medieval sources (Hoffman-Krayer, 1927: 1). However, neither Biblical stories, nor Medieval sources, explain why the inhabitants of northern Sweden,

Finland, Norway, Estonia, the Faroe Islands, earlier also Zealand in Denmark, by tradition have despised the eel as food. On the other hand, these traditions gave a kind of legitimacy to abstaining from eel as a food by the inhabitants in those areas where there was a prevalent distrust for the eel, despite the fact that they were aware that eel was consumed by others.

The consumption of eel is not the only example of a popular belief that reflects social structures in human society. Such categorisations, of course, exist about other fish species as well. In Sweden, the burbot (*Lota lota*), a freshwater member of the codfish family, is a species that has been distrusted in certain areas because of its strange looks and its skin that differs from other fish with scales. According to Swedish folk taxonomy stated in several records in the folk life archives, the burbot is a cousin to the snake and, therefore, it should not be eaten. It is characterised as a skin fish that must be skinned (ULMA 26 902, ULMA 27 095). Skin fish could not be eaten, says a Swedish folk life record from Uppland, which also stresses that according to the Bible, fish without scales are forbidden. Burbots should, therefore, not be eaten (ULMA 34 520). However, the burbot has always been widely utilised as food in Sweden (Svanberg, 1999).

Fish Kings

Strange looking fish, either exceptionally large specimens of a certain species, or those that are malformed in one way or another, or even uncommon species caught together with fish shoals, have, by tradition,

been regarded as kings or leaders of fish species that come in shoals, such as the herring or the mackerel (cf. Olaus Magnus, 1925, 21: 8). Beside the designation 'king', they have also been labelled with the suffix *-styrja*, a word which in the Nordic countries is used for certain large-size or rare fish, which were believed to escort or protect those species that periodically appear in large shoals along the Atlantic coast (Bernström, 1972: 404). Such views were already being recorded in the early 17th century. Friis (1881: 114) writes that the Norwegians regard the rare, but apparently well known, opah (*Lampris guttatus*) as *laksestørja* [salmon leader] or *laksekong* [salmon king]. It was said to lead the salmon (*Salmo salar*) to the Norwegian coast during springtime and back again during the autumn. The opah was thought to protect the salmon shoals from seals and fish of prey that otherwise could hurt the salmon. Along the Swedish West Coast, the sturgeon (*Acipenser sturio*) was regarded as a pilot for the salmon. Johan Oedman (1746: 33) distinguished between '... *Laxe-stör*, which was as a king or superior among the salmons, and captured in the Gullmarsfjord, and the *Macrille-Stör*, which is captured here and there in the archipelago'. The likewise strange oarfish (*Regalecus glesne*), temporarily caught in the Nordic Sea, was regarded as the leader of the herring and, therefore, a sign for a good haul if it was captured or observed (Ernby, 1985: 187). It got its Norwegian names *sildekong*, *sildtust* and *sildstørje*, Icelandic name *sildakóngur*, and Faroese names *sildakongur* and *sildasterril*, be-

cause it was also regarded as the leader of the herring in those regions (Lilljeborg, 1891: 476; Jacobsen and Matras, 1961: 358).

Friis (1881: 91) tells us the same story about the tuna fish (*Thunnus thynnus*), which was regarded as the king of mackerel (*Scomber scombrus*) shoals. By tradition, the Norwegians call the tuna fish, *makrellstørje* [mackerel leader] (Andersson, 1942: 76). Also Swedish names exist that suggest the same view. Zoologist Sven Nilsson (1855: 153) says that the tuna fish appears in the archipelago south of Gothenburg: 'It is called *Makrill-störja* or *Makrill-störje* there'. The ling (*Molva molva*) was earlier named *kungsål* or *ålkung* in Sweden, which might indicate a similar view (Schagerström, 1838: 302). Horse mackerel (*Trachurus trachurus*) is a pelagic shoal fish, which is distributed in the East Atlantic from South Africa in the south to central Norway in the north. In northern Halland and in Bohuslän, horse mackerel was called *makrillkung* [mackerel king] (Kornhall, 1968: 94; Ernby, 1985: 109). On the Swedish West Coast, large specimens or representatives of mackerel with an uncommon colour have been labelled *makrillkung* (Ernby, 1985: 31). In Norway, the tub gunnard (*Trigla lucerna*) was sometimes called *knurrkong* (Wollebæk, 1924: 201).

The same notion also exists about some fresh water fish species. For instance, a large perch (*Perca fluviatilis*) has been regarded as the leader for the perch in the lake. In Uppland, such a perch was called *abborrkung* (Ordbok över Sveriges dialek-

ter, 1991: 15). Individual large smelt (*Osmerus eperlanus*) have sometimes been called *norskungar* in Sweden (Schultze, 1778: 74).

In the Replot parish in Finland, the ruff (*Gymnocephalus cernuus*) has been called king of the fish (*fiskarnas konung*). According to a fable, its smartness surpassed even that of the large salmon in a competition for this title (SLS 215). Similar stories are known about other fish species in other parts of Europe as well. In France, the streber (*Aspro streber*) was called *roi poisson* since it was regarded as the king of the fish. In Italy, the carp (*Cyprinus carpio*) was known as *regina* (Riegler, 1936-37: 845). The salmon was known as *kongen* in the Troms area of Norway because it was regarded as the chief among the fish (Solheim, 1940: 51).

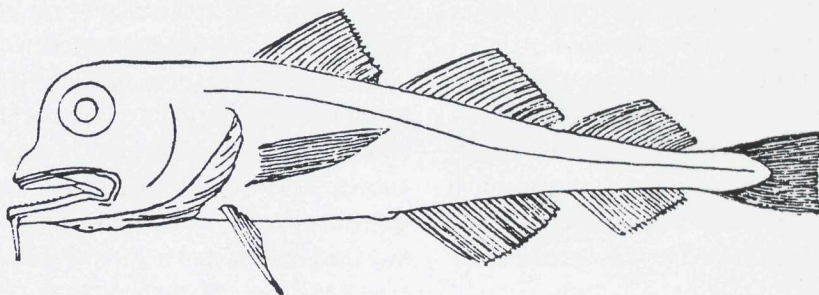
The King of Herring

From the Baltic coast of Sweden, it is said that catching in a net the so-called *strömmingskungen*, a large Baltic herring (*Clupea harengus*) with a reddish head, brought tremendous luck. However, it should be put back into the sea. One should be very careful and immediately release it again (Topelius, 1987: 106). The *strömmingskungen* rarely occurred among the Baltic herring, according to a folk life record from the island of Möja in the Uppland archipelago. Its colour was rose and violet. Its appearance was a sign of a good herring yield in the forthcoming year in the area (ULMA 28 891).

Also the herring shoals off the West Coast of Sweden were led by a *sillkung*,

which was said to be a huge, reddish herring. It was considered bad luck to kill a *sillkung*, according to a record by A.V. Ljungman (1879: 283). There is also a record from Denmark: 'The herring are said to have a king and head, like the bee, which might not be larger than the other herring, but carries on its head a red sign similar to a crown, and is decorated all over with scales filled with crowns, from the head to the tail', according to a description in Danish from 1762 (Brøndegaard, 1985: 207). The red or light red *sildekonge* was always swimming in the top position of the shoal triangle, and if the herring king was caught, the net would be filled. One should eat this individual yourself, otherwise there would be no catch at all during the next season, according to a record from Horsens in Denmark.

Ethnobiologist V.J. Brøndegaard writes that during the years of religious reformation in the 16th century, unusual herring could be interpreted in religious terms. On 21 November 1587, two unusual herring were caught in Bohuslän and they were called kings of the herring. The largest of them had on its head '... red scales, which rise as a crown'. On both specimens signs or figures were seen, which were interpreted as Latin letters. The larger of the two herring was sent to Copenhagen for examination. It was transferred to Haderslevhus where King Frederic II resided. This herring with its signs terrified the King and he was convinced that this was a prediction that the Queen would soon die. The King himself passed away a few months later in April 1588.



A Cod King (From Jensen 1919)

Toskakongur (Frá Jensen 1919).

The examined herring was drawn and described in German, Dutch and French leaflets. All the pictures show the left side of the fish with the letters VICIM (and some unclear signs), which gave room for many speculative interpretations. According to a brochure from Lübeck, the fish was a sign of the forthcoming breakdown of the Christian realm and the Doomsday. Christ would appear from the heaven and call out 'vici' ('I have gained the victory'). In 1588 in Berlin, theologist Jacob Coler distributed an illustrated pamphlet about the finding. He was of the opinion that the fish was a sign marking the end of the world, which should take place in the year 1600 (VIC = 1600, IM = 1000). Visitors from faraway places found their way to Copenhagen to see the remarkable herring. Brøndegård also gives further references from the Lutheran Orthodoxy in the Nordic countries of finds of additional herring with supposed letters, which were the subject of religious and ominous interpretations.

Cod Kings

There are also details about king cods, *kungstorskar*, in the sources. They were abnormal in shape or unusually coloured representatives of their species. If they were accidentally captured, they were to be returned to sea. In Norway, cod (*Gadus morhua*) with a ball or crown on the head were called *kongetorsk*. They were believed to be guides for the whole cod shoal. To catch a *kongetorsk* was regarded as good fortune and, according to folk belief, if you were lucky enough to get seven of them, you could count on good luck from the sea for the rest of your life (Bratrein, 1986: 10-12). In Lofoten, it was considered good luck if you first got a *fiskekonge*, a strange-looking cod, in the fishing tackle while out fishing. *Kongetorsker* from Lofoten were used as gifts to the merchants of Bergen (Trebbe, 1996: 19). Also in Denmark, deformed cods were called *torskekonge* or *fiskekonge*. If they were captured, the fisherman would receive good luck in fishing for the rest of the fishing season. Monstrous specimens of other cod fish species have,

according to biologist Henrich Krøyer (1851: 27-28; cf. Jensen, 1919), also been viewed as kings amongst their species. There are records, especially from Norway, about *sejkonger*, *hysekonger* and *brosmekonger*, that are kings of saithe (*Pol-lachius virens*), haddock (*Melanogrammus aeglefinus*) and cod (*Brosme brosme*), respectively.

In northern Norway, from Varanger in the north, in Lofoten and to Brønnøy in the south, dried cod malformed with a 'crown' have been used as "weather fish", or *vejr-fisker* as they were locally known. They were dried and hung up under the ceiling with a thin thread fastened on the dorsal fin. The "weather fish" predicted the direction of the wind and were regarded as a kind of primitive barometer. In some places, among others at Tromsø, "weather fish" were seen in the local stores. They were also brought to the sea and used in the cabin while fishing (Bratrein, 1986; Svanberg, *in press*).

According to Nordic folk belief, there are 'kings' not only among various fish species, but also among other animals, where rare species or large specimens have been regarded as kings and leaders. Both 'grass snake kings' and 'vipser kings' are known in Danish and Swedish folk tradition (Brøndegaard, 1985: 326, 337). They were characterised by being unusually large and having a 'crown' on their heads. They were kings over the other grass snakes (*Natrix natrix*) and vipers (*Vipera berus*), respectively. There also exist folk beliefs regarding birds being guided by kings. In many places in southern and cen-

tral Europe, the corncrake (*Crex crex*) has been viewed as a king and leader of flocks of quail (*Coturnix coturnix*). This folk belief has resulted in local names for the corncrake. In German-speaking areas, it is known as *Wachtelkönig*; in Denmark, *vagtelkong* and *vagtelvise*; in France, *roi des cailles*; and in Italy, *re di quigle*. The peasants believed the corncrake escorted large flocks of quail (Brehm, 1926: 338; Brøndegaard, 1985: 115; Swainson, 1888: 177). The eagle owl (*Bubo bubo*) was called *ugglekungen* in Småland (ULMA, 93:19). The wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) is regarded as king of birds in a tale recorded from various parts of Europe, hence its name, *roi des oiseaux*, in French, and *Zaunkönig*, in German. 'The knowledge that he is king of birds has made the wren [...], that proudest and most conceited of all the feathered kind,' (Swainson, 1888: 36). In Sweden (and in some other parts of Europe), the same story is attributed to the goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*), *kungsfågeln* in Swedish (Hyltén-Cavallius, 1863-64: 319).

There are also a few examples from the Faroe Islands. King eider (*Somateria spectabilis*), sometimes observed together with eiders (*Somateria mollissima*) that seem to fear it, is locally known as *æðukongur* in the Faroe Islands (Lockwood, 1961: 12), cf. one of its Danish names, *kongeedderfugl*. However, most well known is a black-browed albatross (*Diomedea melanophris*), which, from 1860, and for almost three decades, stayed in the colony of gannets (*Sula sula*) on Mykineshólmur. The inhabitants of Mykines called it *súlukongur* (Danjalsson, 1951: 70).

Anthropomorphism in traditional folk biology is very common. We name for instance the bee, which is responsible for the reproduction in a bee community, the queen bee (*bidrottning* in Swedish, *bidronning* in Danish). The same is also true for other social insects, such as termites, ants, bumblebees and wasps. European elk (*Alces alces*) is sometimes labelled King of the Forest (*skogens konung*) in Sweden. According to old Teutonic folk belief, the bear (*Ursus arctos*) was regarded as the King of the Animals, a view that is still kept in European children's literature. The lion (*Felis leo*) is also referred to as the King of the Animals in western tradition (Møller-Christensen and Jørgensen, 1952: 54). Moreover, the human being has sometimes been called the King of Animals (*Djurens konung*) (Hasselquist, 1752:126). A king of rats (*råttkung* in Swedish, *rottekonge* in Danish and Norwegian), larger than the others and leader of a rat pack, is mentioned in Swedish literature as early as 1621 (Forsius, 1621: 334). It is also found in more recent folk tradition (Wigström, 1898: 169). A rare phenomenon, although well known in Scandinavian and German folk traditions, is the so-called rat-kings (*råttkungar*), consisting of a pack of house rats (*Rattus rattus*) whose tails have become inextricably intertwined (Jarring, 1984; Linnell, 1983). Among the insects, *luskungen* ('king of lice'), sometimes called *härmask* or *silverskred* (army worms in English), must be mentioned. It consists of a long row of a kind of sciarid larvae and is believed to forecast war or famine (Harbe, 1950: 161).

Folklorist Richard Riegler (1936-37) has, in an overview, showed that the conception of certain animal species as kings over others is widespread, not only in North European folk traditions, but all over the world. There seems to be a general tendency to project human social patterns, with hierarchies and kinship systems, on the folk taxonomy of the fauna.

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