

*Title:* Grindamenn of the Caribbean

*Subtitle:* From one small fishing village on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent, men set out every morning in open wooden boats to hunt for pilot whales and other small cetaceans. The tools they carry with them are the harpoon, the gaff, many meters of nylon line, and their own knowledge of the sea. Their purpose is to provide whale meat and blubber, food for their village and beyond. Like the Faroese, these grindamenn carry on an old tradition amid a rapidly changing world.

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## **Introduction**

As I descend the hill into the village of Barrouallie, on the island of St. Vincent, there is nothing to distinguish this from any other small fishing community in the Caribbean. From my vantage I can see colorful boats drawn up onto the black sand beach; galvanized aluminum roofs; trees bearing breadfruit, plum, and mango; and a few goats grazing on the cricket pitch. I turn left down a small lane between two houses and glimpse the sea. The insistent metallic beat of *soca* music blares from a stereo system that has been turned up beyond its threshold volume. It is before noon but already hot and broad-leafed almond trees cast shade for the dozen or so dark-skinned men sipping rum on benches or leaning against beached fishing boats. A few are cleaning fish and one old man sits on the sand repairing a fishing net that he holds stretched on his lap with his toes. Women sit on overturned buckets feeding babies and a few stand by bamboo racks, hanging thin sheets of dark red meat to dry in the sun.

Then my nose detects a familiar scent, carried by the sea breeze, one that stands out from the other Caribbean smells—charcoal fires, ripe fruit, the dust of volcanic soil, diesel smoke, and the sea. This new smell recalls a much different scene: the Faroes, steep and green at the opposite end of the Gulf Stream from where I now stand. The same dark meat, but cut into strips the length and thickness of my arm, hangs to dry in the salty air. The same scent is carried on a much different wind.

Whale meat smells like oil and history. It is a scent that was once common throughout the Atlantic but now is found on only a few peripheral islands: the Faroes and St. Vincent. Commercial whaling came to an end in the mid-twentieth century because its technology made it unsustainable. Only now are a few nations exploring the option of resuming. However, the Vincentians and the Faroese continue to hunt pilot whales and other small cetaceans using traditional methods and do so at what seems to be sustainable levels. Why, when whaling ceased throughout the Atlantic, did it continue in these two places? What is it about the histories, geographies, economies, and cuisines of these vastly different cultures that leads them to the pilot whale? What are the interactions among whales, humans, and the environment, in these places where traditional whaling still occurs? Answering these questions is the goal of my research.

As most of Frøði's readership is already familiar with the Faroese version of pilot whaling—indeed vastly more familiar than I am—I shall use this space to describe the hunt for pilot whales and other small cetaceans that is conducted by whalers from the

Caribbean island of St. Vincent. Some similarities and differences between the two styles of pilot whaling will become obvious.

### **The Equipment**

In an otherwise empty lot in the middle of Barrouallie, a square blue tarpaulin provides shelter for the blacksmith. A wood fire heats the steel so it can be worked on an anvil with a hammer. A small wooden table with a vice bolted to one end and tools strewn about is the only work surface. This humble lot is the center of tool manufacture for the Caribbean pilot whaling industry. Samuel Hazelwood—boat-builder, whaler, and blacksmith—is at work.

Today's task is to build three new harpoons with scraps of steel salvaged from discarded machinery. There are two types of harpoon in use by the Caribbean pilot whaling industry: hand-harpoons and gun-harpoons. These differ primarily in length and method of use. Hand-harpoons are about three meters in total length and are thrown by hand; gun-harpoons are about one meter long and are fired from a modified 12-gauge shotgun mounted at the bow of the whaleboat.

The blacksmith cuts a rough wedge shape that will become the harpoon's head. The harpoon's foreshaft is built from scrap steel rods and the main shaft of the harpoon is made from heavy, hard wood. The blacksmith pounds the foreshaft onto the main shaft and attaches a length of nylon rope so the harpoon can be retrieved after a miss, or so that the whale can be tethered to the boat after a strike.

A finished harpoon sells for EC\$200 (389DKK), so whalers like Samuel can reduce their costs by learning to make their own harpoons rather than hiring the services of someone else. Diversity of skills is essential to the Caribbean grindaman.

### **The Crew and Their Duties**

A Caribbean whaling boat is 21 feet long, locally made by hand, and carries a crew three: harpooner, sternman, and centerman. The harpooner's role is that of captain. He stands at the bow, watches for whales and dolphins, and directs the sternman where to steer. The harpooner calls for the centerman to pass harpoons to him, loads and fires the gun, and throws the hand-harpoons. The sternman steers the boat according to the harpooner's directions. The centerman assists by passing gear between the sternman and harpooner, straightening bent harpoons, hauling whales and dolphins aboard, and cutting harpoons from their flesh. On the whaling voyages in which I participated, I was the centerman. All three men watch for whales or dolphins breaking the surface to breathe but it is usually the harpooner who sights them owing to his trained eye and elevated position on the raised deck.

Caribbean pilot whalers need sunlight and a clear view to see the sprays from the whales' blowholes and the dorsal fins breaking the surface of the water. Thus, the boat sets out between 7:00 and 8:00 in the morning, a full 1-2 hours past sunrise. Once underway, the harpooner signals the sternman regarding the direction the boat should initially take. All eyes on board begin scanning the surface of the sea for signs of whales

or dolphins. Often the harpooner also watches for flocks of seabirds diving—an indicator of a school of fish, which in turn may indicate pilot whales or dolphins feeding on the fish.

The primary target of the St. Vincent whalers is the short-finned pilot whale (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*), cousin to the long-finned pilot whale hunted in the Faroes (*G. melas*). If smaller species of dolphins are sighted early in the day they will often not be hunted but will rather be pursued at a distance with the hopes that they will lead the boat to a pod of pilot whales. Later in the day, these inshore dolphins are often hunted as the boat returns to port. If more than one boat is hunting, the harpooner may communicate by cellular telephone with his colleagues in the other boats to ask whether they have sighted anything. Harpooners often direct one another to pods of whales or dolphins but rarely hunt cooperatively in any active way.

When whales or dolphins are sighted, the harpooner directs the sternman to his preferred position for harpooning. Based upon the seas and the whales' or dolphins' behaviour, the harpooner decides whether to use the hand- or gun-harpoon. He readies the chosen implement, waits until the target animal rises to breathe, and fires or throws the harpoon. If it is a miss, he quickly reels in the line and readies the harpoon for another try, keeping an eye on the target. If it is a hit, the crew pulls the animal in on the harpoon line and either hauls it aboard the boat if it is small enough, or ties it alongside. After a catch, the whalers continue hunting until either the boat is full, the whales or dolphins escape, or the sun sets.

### **After the Hunt**

When the hunt is complete, the harpooner signals the sternman to return to port. The harpooner usually remains at his post, standing upright in the bow of the boat, a harpoon loaded in the gun, until the boat is very near the dock. The purpose of this continued vigilance, noted by Melville in *Moby Dick*, is to be ready if any whales or dolphins are sighted on the journey home. The fictional harpooners onboard the *Pequod* were said to be ready to strike a whale even if it were sighted in the harbour of New Bedford. As the boat approaches the shore, the sternman cuts the engine, the harpooner unloads the gun, and the crowd gathered on the dock peers anxiously to see what was caught. The boat owner has usually made arrangements with one or more of Barrouallie's local vendors for the wholesale of the catch. Vendors are often already sharpening their knives on the dock's concrete pilings as the sternman ties the boat.

When the boat owner and vendor have agreed upon a wholesale price for the catch, the vendor pays in cash and assumes ownership of the whale or dolphin. The boat owner must pay expenses and divide the income among the crew. First the cost of fuel is taken from the total. If the fuel cost is more than the total value of the catch, the boat owner absorbs the difference; a crewmember will not lose money on a day of whaling. If there is a positive remainder, it is then divided in two. Half is paid to the "boat," that is, the physical equipment and supplies for whaling. This portion of the money funds replacement harpoons and lines and repairs to the boat, engine, and gear. The other half is divided among the three crewmembers.

The vendor now owns one more whales or dolphins, a potential source of a large income. She (90% of the vendors are women) enlists the help of her family and friends to butcher the carcasses and prepare the meat. Some is sold fresh but most is hung to dry on bamboo racks, built on the beach to absorb as much sunshine and sea breeze as possible. The meat is dry in two or three days depending on the weather, and ready to be bundled and sold. Blubber is chopped into small cubes and cooked in its own oil to make "crisps," a popular food for which people line up on the beach in order to be given a free share. The blubber that remains after this free distribution will be packaged and sold in Kingstown, the capital, or throughout the other villages.

## **Conclusion**

On a successful whaling day, the meat, blubber, and excitement spread throughout the island. Crowds gather on the pier to watch the whalers unload their catch. Volunteers hurry to help the vendors process the meat and blubber. Villagers throughout the island get the opportunity to enjoy their favorite meal. In total, the St. Vincent whalers take fewer than 200 pilot whales and about 400 dolphins of a variety of species each year. For a population of about 100,000 people on the island of St. Vincent, these few hundred whales and dolphins provide a special meal, a dish to be enjoyed when it is available, and to some, a way of making a living from the sea. "Everything I own is from seawater," says Samuel, the harpooner.

I spent two months in St. Vincent this year, whaling with Samuel and his crew as often as possible. Nearly every day as we returned to port, Samuel would ask me questions about the Faroe Islands: the people, the language, the land, the politics, and, of course, the grindadráp. To him, the existence of another country across the ocean where men hunted pilot whales was fascinating. I told him that he would probably fit in very well on a grindafóremann's boat during a whale drive. "As long as I have a warm jacket," he agreed, laughing under the hot Caribbean sun. Maybe one day Samuel will have an opportunity to visit the Faroes as part of some kind of whaling-related cultural exchange with St. Vincent. These last pilot-whaling nations could certainly learn much from an open dialogue with one another.