

# **Fuel for the Fire: tradition and the gender controversy in Lerwick's *Up Helly Aa***

**Karl Johnson & *Up Helly Aa For Aa***

## **Abstract**

Shetland's world-famous Viking-themed Up Helly Aa fire festival is a distinctive celebration of community and heritage. Recently media attention and local debate has begun to focus on an ongoing controversy surrounding the exclusion of women and girls from participating in certain roles in the town of Lerwick's Up Helly Aa event. This paper provides some insight into the developing situation and critically examines the claims of heritage and tradition in the face of accusations of locally sanctioned discrimination. With input from members of the grassroots organisation *Up Helly Aa for Aa*, who campaign for gender equality in the festival (and which the lead author is a member of), the opportunity is taken to provide the perspective of those challenging the status quo.

**Keywords:** Gender equality; Public sociology; Shetland; Tradition; Up Helly Aa; Vikings

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# Fuel for the Fire: tradition and the gender controversy in Lerwick's *Up Helly Aa*

## Introduction

In 2018, four schoolgirls had their application to participate in a cultural event rejected by a group of adult men, re-igniting long-held tensions in a rural island community.

Shetland's annual Up Helly Aa (UHA) fire festival is known worldwide for its evocative Viking imagery, eccentric ritual and enviable community spirit. In recent years however, there has been considerable dispute regarding the exclusion of women and girls from roles associated with the public celebrations of Lerwick UHA. The isles are not alone in having their supposedly intrinsic culture and values challenged in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Hawick Common Riding (Wylie 2018), Highland Games (Ross 2019) and even English Morris Dancing (Macer 2019) are notable examples of traditional, and traditionally exclusively male, local events which have struggled to catch up with the more progressive world around them. Welcoming women into their practices – however begrudgingly – has been seen as a positive and necessary step to secure their longevity and avoid causing (further) harm to their communities.

This paper explores the symbolic power of the UHA festival in Lerwick and gender exclusion. Discussion refers to the activist efforts and participatory action research of members of the local *Up Helly Aa for Aa* campaign group (for gender equality in the festival), of which the lead author is also a member. It has been written with input from members of *Up Helly Aa for Aa* in the practice of public sociology. Taking its cue from Burawoy's (2005) address and underpinned by Gramsci (1971), Freire (1972), and Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) among others, public sociology is understood here as the practice of seeking to understand and address social inequalities in collaboration with those groups and/or individuals directly affected. There is no single means of achieving this – public sociology may be understood as an ethos rather than a discipline – and the lead author must tread a line between academic and activist (Becker 1967). As a Shetlander himself, the lead author is personally invested, and this requires an ongoing process of reflexively self-assessing his involvement. Quite organically, *Up Helly Aa for Aa* have begun undertaking forms of participatory action research in order to explore and bring attention to what they see as institutionally approved gender discrimination so that it may be challenged (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002; Askins et al. 2018).

The oft-claimed distinctiveness of the Shetland Isles and the particular shared consciousness of Shetlanders themselves is a feature of much academic writing in relation to community (Cohen 1987), culture (Finkel 2010), gender roles (Abrams 2012), history (Hunter 1999), identity (Smout 1994), literature (Smith 2014), and politics (Cartrite 2010). These outputs cannot help but recognise the Nordic influence on Shetland and thus contribute pieces of a puzzle in appreciating the significance of what Watt (2012) refers to as Norseman's Bias.

Outside of the isles it is less widely known that UHA is not solely a Lerwick-centric event. Instead, UHAs take place across around a dozen Shetland parishes each year beginning with the Scalloway Fire Festival in January – followed by Lerwick on the last Tuesday of that month – and ending with the Delting UHA in March. It is in the town of Lerwick however, that the celebration originates. The standard organisation of each UHA is as follows: a small number of individuals (men) sit on a committee overseeing the running of their parish's annual UHA event, until it is their turn to be Jarl (chief Viking). Having chosen a unique persona (e.g., Erik the Red) and aesthetic, they lead their Jarl

Squad comprised of friends and family around various community engagements (schools, care homes, etc.) on the day of UHA (a Friday, apart from in Lerwick which is on a Tuesday). It culminates that evening in a torchlight procession of guizers led by the Jarl Squad with their galley (a hand-crafted replica longship built over several months), which is ceremonially set alight as the main spectacle. Over the course of the night and into the early morning, the Jarl Squad tours local hosting venues (typically community halls) to celebrate, sing, drink and dance in Shetland's version of a ceilidh. At the same time, many squads of guizers also tour the venues to perform acts (skits, routines, etc.) of varying purpose and quality, to entertain in between dances.

The *Icelandic* and *Orkneyinga* sagas (and likely more) contain examples of strong Norse women and yet to date, across all parishes there has only been one female Jarl – Lesley Simpson, Jarl in the 2015 South Mainland Up Helly Aa (SMUHA). More significantly, in Lerwick women and girls are not permitted to join the town's UHA committee, be part of a Jarl Squad or Junior Jarl Squad (both exist in Lerwick and have their own celebrations) or take part in guizing – not even as an accompanying musician or as a fiddle-box carrier, a rite-of-passage entry role for young guizers. This normalised lack of representation presents a problem for Shetland in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Brown 1998; Finkel 2010), as evidenced in discourse around the campaign for gender equality in UHA led by the local informal organisation *Up Helly Aa for Aa*.

### **Brief history, expanded mythology**

A single exact meaning of the term 'Up Helly Aa' (UHA) is difficult to find. Generally, it is understood as originating in an enmeshing of pagan and Christian words relating to midwinter, the sabbath and holy time - 'helly' in Shetland dialect has itself come to mean weekend (Mitchell 1948; Graham 1993; Christie-Johnston and Christie-Johnston 2014).

Mitchell (1948) provides an extensive history of the riotous escapades of young 19<sup>th</sup> century Lerwick men leading flaming tar barrels through the streets at Yuletide, creating mischief in costume and often causing criminal damage. It is not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that something begins to take shape resembling the UHA we see today. Local authorities eventually banned the tar barrelling and it was replaced with a more sedate midwinter procession of guizers carrying flaming torches in January 1876. Organised revelry began in 1882 and within six years a committee had taken full charge of UHA celebrations, with a torch committee (actual purpose unclear at the time) and the Lerwick Brass Band in place (Mitchell 1948; Brown 1998). A galley – as the replica Viking longship built for UHA is known locally – first appeared as part of the event in 1889 during a period of transformation led by left-leaning creatives and intellectuals such as J.J. Haldane Burgess. A much-revered figure in Shetland, Burgess was an educated and accomplished writer whose scholarship of Scandinavian language and history influenced the elaborate Viking immersion UHA is now famous for (Mitchell 1948; Hunter 1999; Smith 2014). Romanticised interpretations of Norse mythology and history were popular in the Victorian era and in 1897 Burgess introduced his 'Up Helly Aa Song' as a rousing theme for the festivities. It is now regarded in some circles as an unofficial 'national anthem' for Shetland.

*Grand old Vikings ruled upon the ocean vast,  
Their brave battle-songs still thunder on the blast;  
Their wild war-cry comes a-ringing from the past;  
We answer it 'A-oi'!*

*Roll their glory down the ages,  
Sons of warriors and sages,  
When the fight for Freedom rages,  
Be bold and strong as they!*

For Finkel (2010), the festival is a recent invention – in the vein of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), though Finkel does not cite them explicitly – and cannot be considered an age-old tradition passed down from generation to generation, as many participants in UHA claim it to be.

In many respects, the contemporary interpretation of the festival can be seen as a repetitive performance of an inauthentic representation of the past, which has Shetland men identifying more with questionable Norse ancestry than Scottish nationality... It is the idea of this heritage, rather than actual historical accounts, that is one of the main drivers of the festival and how it is collectively imagined and celebrated.

(Finkel 2010, p.278)

Indeed, Mitchell (1948) agrees that until the involvement of Burgess and his contemporaries, the tar-barrelling and subsequent torchlight processions had no specific Norse connection but rather were something more loosely pagan in origin. If constructive criticism of UHA – and thus the justification for this paper – were merely a matter of historical inaccuracy then it would be a petty argument, as Hunter (1999) makes clear. However, that is not the sum-total of concern. The impact of language, symbols, rituals and representations is well documented – not least in this journal in relation to Scotland – as is the power of those in positions of cultural influence. There is a social necessity to invent and maintain solidarity and a sense of shared values (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). While one of the most common unifiers is a sense of shared national/regional identity as per Anderson's (1991) imagined communities and Billig's (1995) banal nationalism, this macro form of collective consciousness does not comfortably fit in the case of Shetland (Smout 1994).

The collective contemporary memory of Shetland as a rural Scottish archipelago exists in opposition to the authority held over it by the distant mainland capital, whether that is identified as Edinburgh or London. Resistant to enforced – often assumed to be intrusive and unnecessary – change, a distinctive and self-assured shared cultural identity becomes increasingly important and conspicuous (Cohen 1987). The idea of historical tradition is strengthened in opposition to the geographically distant Other of late/post modernity (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Cohen 1987; Blaikie 2010). Through UHA and associated Norse imagery, visual symbols of a romanticised, strong yet simplified past (the noble savage, the poetic warrior, etc.) are repeated, ritualised, legitimised and thus embedded as the norm over time. Brown is particularly direct on the matter:

Up-Helly-Aa is a man's event. There is a virility and defiance in the night's proceedings, with man and fire pitted against the dark and the winter elements. Women are excluded from direct participation [...] without apparent equivocation, Up-Helly-Aa reveres male strength, bonding and ability to organize. In celebrating the community, the event seems to celebrate man alone. The core images of the festival are of supreme masculinity.

(Brown 1998, p.17)

Year-round, everyday (banal) reminders of this socially constructed identity are found all over the isles in Norse references found in business logos, local newspaper *The Shetland Times*, Shetland Islands Council (SIC), tourist paraphernalia, art and literature, school activities, road-signs, tattoos, etc.

(Church 1990; Billig 1995; Brown 1998; Watt 2012). Additionally, this is annually reinforced in the participation in, witnessing and consumption of local media coverage of UHA events across Shetland (Anderson 1991; Brown 1998). In much of this Shetland is not unique, strictly speaking – similar phenomena occur in Caithness and Orkney (Rosie 2012).

If Vikings as a proxy for Shetlanders are depicted as men, then who is to question their authority?

### **Shieldmaidens and Seamstresses**

Raising issues of discrimination, misogyny, tradition and responsibility has stirred up a hornet's nest in the community, particularly on social media. Shetlanders – friends, neighbours, colleagues – on both sides of the controversy have engaged in online discourse running the full spectrum of emotions, (dis)respect and levels of informed debate (Hughson 2019; Johnson 2019; Sandison 2019). Since the beginning of 2018 a private corner of Facebook for the *Up Helly Aa for Aa* group has gained around 140 members (at time of writing; June/July 2019) – like-minded women and (it is important to note) men who have a space to share experiences, resources, information and support in relative safety online. Members vary in their backgrounds, education and politics; not all were born in or are necessarily currently living in Shetland (though the vast majority are natives/residents). What they share is a personal connection to the isles, the hope for an inclusive Lerwick Up Helly Aa (LUHA) and Junior Up Helly Aa (JUHA) specifically, and a more equal Shetland generally.

As with many other rural communities, Shetland's socially constructed identity with its agricultural and fishing foundations are tied up in perpetuating a traditional division of gender roles and patriarchal symbolic power (Cohen 1987; Church 1990; Little and Panelli 2003; Abrams 2012). That LUHA remains a 'local bastion of the patriarchy' (Pennington 2018) is paradoxical in the context of everyday reality in Shetland, where women make just as significant a practical contribution to crofting and the local fishing, textiles and tourism industries that support the isles' economy, alongside oil and gas production (Cohen 1987; Brown 1998; Finkel 2010; Abrams 2012).

In Lerwick the hypermasculinity of beards, axes, and fire, on the last Tuesday of January is in stark contrast to the domesticated and subordinate contribution of women in their accepted LUHA roles – sewing costumes in the preceding months, hosting and cooking/serving food in venues around the town (Brown 1998; Finkel 2010). Gender research situated in rural – predominantly English-speaking – areas find several examples of rural cultural practices and community spaces which are structured around a gendered division of labour (Little and Austin 1996; Little and Panelli 2003). Conflating traditional norms and values with the symbolism of an imagined history (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and the performative expectations of a 'rural idyll' (Little and Austin 1996, p.110), the roles for women in LUHA are founded in nurturing and subservient functions which replicate the construction of family and community by hegemonic masculinity (Brown 1998; Little and Panelli 2003; Finkel 2010). Women are afforded the spotlight and status of being entrusted with caring responsibilities for the public and overseeing celebrations in the absence of the Jarl Squad, and simultaneously hidden in plain sight; at home sewing in the winter months and/or contained within the walls of hosting venues, and thus intentionally limited in their opportunities to participate.

The symbolic power of UHA's position in a shared Shetland identity is, therefore – in the case of Lerwick specifically, but also across the isles to varying degrees – a self-perpetuating, patriarchal acquisition of authority and privilege. This explains, in part, the defence of LUHA's format by many men and women involved in it – alongside their mistaking gender equality as an affront to their interpretation of tradition:

To me, I know how much the women behind the scenes do for Up Helly Aa. Dressmakers that do all the sewing, they love what they do and they see it as their part to play. There's no way that they're being discriminated against. I think some traditions are changed for change's sake.

A Former Lerwick Jarl (Constable and White 2019)

We are not adverse [sic] to change because of gender issues. We oppose it because Up Helly Aa is part of our culture and heritage and we love it the way it is. It's more than a festival to us; it is our tradition, it is a feeling of belonging and a strong sense of pride in who we are. [...] Personally, I would not like to see females being included in squads in Lerwick Up Helly Aa. Inclusion of women would change it into something the majority of participants do not want and ultimately end it as the spectacle we know and enjoy it to be.

(Hughson 2019)

This echoes a common defence from supporters of the status quo; unsurprisingly, they are not in favour of change unless there is a clear majority of Shetlanders who agree with it – evidencing either a lack of self-awareness regarding their position of dominance in this debate already, or a confidence in the symbolic power wielded by the LUHA committee. Hughson (2019) and others point to the results of methodologically-questionable local opinion surveys as evidencing their belief in the legitimacy of their superiority over the minority campaign for equality.

It is, however, the idea of anyone exerting dominance – and more specifically gendered dominance – in 21<sup>st</sup> century Shetland that members of *Up Helly Aa for Aa* seek to better understand and challenge. They (including the lead author) work collaboratively to rationalise an emotionally charged issue in a small, familiar community and encourage their friends, neighbours and fellow islanders to engage with the questions raised by the status quo (Johnson 2019). Together, *Up Helly Aa for Aa* use the resources produced by the Shetland Islands Council (SIC), Scottish and UK governments, the LUHA committee, and other organisations/institutions alongside the individual expertise of members to educate themselves and generate knowledge from their own experience – thus becoming active expert subjects resisting the local expression of patriarchy (Friere 1972; Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002; Askins et al. 2018).

There are several administrators of the Facebook group but otherwise *Up Helly Aa for Aa* has a flat organisational structure. In the space of 18 months members have: held creative workshops and disseminated a variety of media, policy, legal and academic material within the Facebook group; written letters/opinion pieces for *The Shetland Times* and *Shetland News* website (either representing the group or as individuals) and were also profiled by the *Shetland News* (Marter 2019a), and; they have written to representatives of the SIC and submitted Freedom Of Information (FOI) requests, benefitting from informal legal advice from within the group. Members met with then Shetland MSP Tavish Scott at his constituency surgery, participated in local radio debate show *Speakeasy* on *BBC Radio Shetland* and appeared in a short *BBC* documentary on the issue (Constable and White 2019).

A recent attempt to register a women's squad of guizers at the Lerwick Galley Shed saw the female applicants prevented from entering the building to do so (Pennington 2018), and a written application for 2020's event has not been responded to. In one respect at least, tradition is being upheld:

No doubt, the new-found freedom and success of the lady 'first fitters' on New'r's Day Morn 1901 had inspired a number of girls with the idea that [...] there was no reason why they

should not go out with the guizers on Up-Helly-Aa. The Committee put its foot down on this experiment, and, so far as it is known, it was not repeated.

(Mitchell 1948, p.152)

### The Shetland Saga

The exclusion of women and girls from guizing and/or being part of the Jarl Squad in the Lerwick Up Helly Aa (LUHA) and the town's Junior Up Helly Aa (JUHA) event has not only recently become an issue, but rather it has taken until now for those Shetlanders who want change to gain confidence in numbers and approach. Over thirty years ago a letter appeared in *The Shetland Times* calling for inclusion and progress on behalf of the *Reclaim Up-Helly-A' Campaign*, though it appeared to have little positive impact at the time (Brown 1998). It is noted by Brown (1998) that public silence on the matter reigned for the next decade. On the day the SMUHA was led by Shetland's first female Jarl, a letter from Robertson (2015) appeared in *The Shetland Times* reflecting on her experience of growing up in Lerwick. Recalling a headteacher's concern at the low numbers of Anderson High School (Lerwick's secondary school) boys participating in JUHA, Robertson excitedly suggested that she and her friends form a squad to help boost numbers:

I was 13. All hell broke loose. At least one member of the Up-Helly-A' committee came to the school to complain and intervene.

(Robertson 2015)

A few years later, she suggested 'Women in UHA' as a topic for the school debating society:

Although the debate was allowed to go ahead I was stopped on several occasions by ancillary staff members and told in no un-certain terms that 'You can't change the Lerwick Up-Helly-A'' and 'It's tradition, you can't change tradition'.

(Robertson 2015)

Anecdotal? – yes, but similar stories are not uncommon. In 2018 four Anderson High girls applied to the JUHA committee to form a guizing squad for the following year's junior event, but were rejected:

An e-mail from the committee read: 'We therefore regret that we're unable to accept the Squad Details Form submitted for the girls [sic] squad as this does not meet the stated criteria for participation.'

(Marter 2019a)

Since its inception, *Up Helly Aa for Aa* have made two formal attempts to engage with the LUHA committee to discuss their concerns but have received no response nor recognition (Huband 2019; Marter 2019a). A long-standing approach of the LUHA committee has been to avoid any form of public engagement, whether inquiries from the public and local/national media or participating in live debates on *BBC Radio Shetland* and at Shetland's regular Althing public forum (itself a nod to Norse democratic conferences called Tings) (Cope 2016; Marter 2019a; Webster 2019). When a local undergraduate (Murray 2007) contacted the committee to request the opportunity of discussing their position on women for her dissertation, she was ignored and was later told by a witness that a senior committee member had simply torn up her letter.

Instead it is left to citizen supporters of the status quo, LUHA venue hostesses and self-proclaimed 'LUHA insiders' to defend their side; denying accusations of sexism/misogyny and countering with defence of tradition and the apparently impossible logistics of changing format, denouncing what is viewed in some circles as an apparently threatening feminist agenda and claiming the moral high ground of the majority (Cope 2016; Hughson 2019). What is particularly interesting in examples of these discourses is the apparent openness to updating the JUHA to include participation from girls – though as the individuals making these concessions are not committee members, there are no actionable declarations.

It therefore became necessary for *Up Helly Aa for Aa* to begin to investigate what actions might be taken and whose responsibility it was, expanding upon calls from members for greater accountability from locally influential people and institutions (Huband 2019; Johnson 2019). LUHA is funded, supported by and profited upon in some way by a number of individuals and organisations, including but not limited to BBC Radio Shetland, Promote Shetland, Shetland Arts, Visit Scotland, *The Shetland Times*, Voluntary Action Shetland, Serco Northlink Ferries, Lerwick Port Authority (Brown 1998; Finkel 2010; Lunklet 2019). This information was publicly available on the LUHA website until recently – *Up Helly Aa for Aa* noted on the 26<sup>th</sup> April 2019 that a number of pieces of information had been removed.

The SIC involvement is significant in itself. Besides the unknowable number of current and former council employees who have been involved in UHA, the local authority set the day after LUHA as a Public Holiday across the isles – costing the public purse over £22,000 in 2019 (Marter 2019c; Shetland Times 2019) – and the LUHA galley shed was at least partly publicly funded. The Jarl Squad are welcome in a number of public buildings including schools, the Jarl has the freedom of the town for 24hrs and the LUHA Raven Flag is flown above the Lerwick Town Hall where the Jarl Squad are hosted at a civic reception (Brown 1998; Finkel 2010; Marter 2019a, 2019c; Shetland Times 2019). As is the case with UHA in other Parishes, some roads are closed for parts of the day and sections of street lighting turned off for the torchlight procession and galley burning, and it is in connection to these features that local Police Scotland officers are present. A FOI request confirmed that the Council's legally required equality outcomes do not extend to community events such as LUHA, as evidenced in its Mainstreaming Report (Shetland Islands Council 2017).

Members of *Up Helly Aa for Aa* view the SIC and the then local MSP as failing in their responsibilities to work on eliminating discrimination, advancing equality, promoting understanding and improving relations within the community (Equality Act 2010; Huband 2019; Johnson 2019). SIC Council Chief Executive Maggie Sandison and Council Convener Malcolm Bell argue that the local authority executes its responsibilities within the letter of the law and that responsibility for UHA lies with the public themselves, legitimising the hegemonic status quo:

I believe in equality of opportunity for men and women in all aspects of their lives and I can also see there is much to celebrate about Lerwick Up Helly Aa too. [...] It took a community to create Up Helly Aa and it will take a community to change Up Helly Aa – not the action of this council.

I have said before that if women in Shetland want Up Helly Aa to change, it will happen. Most men involved have a mother, wife, sister, daughter and they have influence and power and they certainly do not need the council to wield that power for them.

(Sandison 2019)

As a council we don't promote or support Up Helly Aa. I, in line with all my predecessors, host a civic reception in the town hall on the morning of Up Helly Aa. [...] The cost of civic reception

is fairly minimal; other aspects of council involvements such as putting up barriers and road signs is actually paid for by the committee.

I think the civic reception is appropriate but in itself doesn't support one view or the other. As a council we are absolutely committed to equality and equality of opportunity. But this is a community festival, run by the community for the community, and it is for the community for change it if they want to.

Malcolm Bell (Marter 2019a)

The role of Lerwick schools (primary and secondary) in the Junior event is also contested, with a lack of official clarity regarding involvement in the processes associated with selecting, supporting and celebrating a Junior Jarl and (his) squad. Direction from the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), a major education trade union in Scotland, is that schools should recognise, challenge and combat misogynistic attitudes and behaviours in their many varied forms (EIS 2016). In February 2019 *Up Helly Aa for Aa* (under its slightly different, original group name) wrote to the SIC Director of Children's Services:

[...] Shetland for UHA Equality [former group name] would like to work with you to gain the welcome inclusion of girls into squads in the Junior Lerwick UHA.

As a first step towards this, please can you explain to us, in detail, what each of the three Lerwick schools are doing to advance equality of opportunity and eliminate discrimination in the context of the Junior UHA?

Unexpectedly, the council response was to initiate an internal complaints procedure on behalf of the group, who rejected the Stage One conclusion from the SIC and requested an investigation into the matter. This led to the SIC (having apparently sought legal advice) issuing a press release in connection with their Stage Two conclusion in May, clarifying their position that their involvement in LUHA and the Junior event complied with equalities rules (Shetland Islands Council 2019). A FOI request from *Up Helly Aa for Aa* clarified that the decision came from the council's internal legal team and no independent counsel was sought.

In March 2019 Serco Northlink – whose fleet of ferries to the Northern Isles carry Viking imagery on their hulls – were written to, asking them to consider withdrawing sponsorship of LUHA in light of what *Up Helly Aa for Aa* view as gender discrimination. At the time of writing (June/July 2019) three holding responses had been received but no actual reply. Around the same time an email from an individual member was sent to the then MSP for Shetland Tavish Scott, who did not reply until a follow-up request came from an email address set up specifically for *Up Helly Aa for Aa*. His response was non-committal, as was his response to group members who met him at a constituency surgery in May. Soon after, Scott blocked two members of the group on Twitter. On 26<sup>th</sup> June 2019, Scott announced he was stepping down from the role of MSP after 20 years (Shetland News 2019) which triggered a by-election in Shetland on 29<sup>th</sup> August 2019, adding uncertainty to any progress that might be made in the near future.

Political support has come, however, from Maree Todd, Highlands and Islands List MSP and Scottish Government minister for children and young people. Todd described the exclusion of women and girls as 'harmful' and 'indefensible' (Marter 2019b), and exhibited perhaps a greater self-awareness and understanding of the underlying issues than some islanders may have:

The MSP for the Highlands and Islands said she was well aware that local people may well dismiss her views because 'firstly I am a woman, secondly my politics are not of the most

popular in the local community although there are plenty of people who support the SNP, and finally I am not from Shetland’.

(Marter 2019b)

## Conclusion

The controversy over gender exclusion in Lerwick’s Up Helly Aa is both an old and new issue for Shetland with no clear end in sight, unless an appropriate figure of authority takes charge. In the meantime, it falls to members of *Up Helly Aa for Aa* to continue their grassroots efforts to highlight and challenge discrimination and misogyny wherever and however they can. Their active participation in the community thus far has been relatively tentative, and more work is in development. This group of women and men are entitled to claim a Shetland identity and to encourage change for the benefit of all – indeed, their aim is most definitely not to cause the demise of UHA but rather to reinvigorate it for future generations to continue to enjoy.

Though some locals may disagree, much of how Shetland imagines and presents itself is founded on an invented cultural heritage and centred around the annual ritual of UHA; necessary for ‘establishing [and] symbolizing social cohesion’ (Hobsbawm 1983, p.9). Dissent regarding celebrations in Lerwick are borne of the town’s particular status quo ‘legitimizing institutions, status [and] relations of authority’ (ibid). The discriminatory practices of a small group of individuals are in part aided and legitimised by the structural bodies with responsibility for the isles, providing supporters of the status quo with the argument that changing LUHA, i.e., allowing women and girls to guize and join Jarl squads, will change the established format and ruin the festival. How inclusivity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will destroy LUHA, and presumably by extension Lerwick itself, remains unclear. Neither Hawick nor the Highlands have suffered since signalling moves towards equal opportunity for women and girls in their iconic traditional practices. The enigmatic LUHA committee are obstructive in their absence from this debate, while the local authority appears unwilling and/or unable to challenge them.

What does this say about the social, cultural and political makeup of the town’s institutions? Clearly, a fierce pride in and defence of cultural practices associated with an interpretation of Shetland’s Viking history persists, and there is nothing wrong in that up to a point. However, Up Helly Aa in its present form – specifically Lerwick’s celebrations – reinforces a gendered division of labour, harbours misogynistic or at least sexist attitudes, and limits the opportunities and representation of women and girls in Shetland.

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