5 From a Life With a Different Body to a Recreated Folklore of Accentuated Difference

Sigríður Benediksdóttir versus
Stutta-Sigga

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Introduction

People who are considered physically and/or mentally different often become the object of gossip. Gossip, in turn, are narratives of both a lived experience of difference and a living tradition of tales of difference. As stories are what combines our fields of folklore and history we work with a narrative approach to disability. Tanya Titchkosky and Rod Michalko are two scholars who have given rise to a narrative understanding of disability as they claim that a disability and a disability understanding is not only portrayed in stories but also formed and shaped by them (Michalko and Titchkosky, 2020, Titchkosky and Michalko 2014, Titchkosky 2002, 2009, 2007, Michalko 2017, 2002). By combining disability studies, microhistory, and folkloristics this chapter aims to follow up on two main questions: First, to build a “life-thread” from official records of an individual who doubtlessly experienced being different and secondly to see how and why gossip about that person was created and recreated through time, affecting the social memory about this person. From an extended list of people who fit these criteria of being in both the historical and the folkloric records we chose Sigríður Benediksdóttir (nicknamed Stutta-Sigga or Short-Sigga), child minder and storyteller (1815–1900), as her life is well documented in official sources and thus allows for a detailed contextualisation and analysis.

The examined source material is taken from both the historical documents produced during Sigríður’s lifetime, and different kinds of printed legends and newspaper items that were collected, recorded, and printed in the 19th and 20th century, as well as a photograph of Sigríður. According to the source material Sigríður had physical, as well as cognitive or mental differences which prompted the creation and the spread of legends and gossip about her personality and bodily constitution. It is our intention to showcase Sigríður as an individual, applying a method that combines

different genres of stories revealing how disability is formed in narratives. The aim is to review vastly complex public records and later legends that are full of gaps. Together they form an illusion of a continuous story thread that outlines Sigríður's life and her role as a character in the legends, that can be interpreted as representation of a disability understanding at the time of narration both in life and legend.

Our goal is to tell the stories about Sigríður from the perspectives of history and folklore, and thereby the reader on a narrative journey, from a life with a different body to a recreated folklore of accentuated difference. In the end, we will attempt to set all the complicated and contradictory stories of Sigríður Benediktsdóttir into a new context with ourselves through photographs, telling a new recreated story of Sigríður's life and legends. When working with personal stories of people that are long dead and consent and participation is not possible there is little or no established ethical regulation that we are expected to uphold (Fogel *et al.* 2010, p. 91–94, McKee and Porter 2012, p. 66–68, Wilkinson 2002, p. 38–39). We ground our research on what Cresswell calls an advocacy/participatory worldview in research design. Such approach intends to reform and change the lives of both the informants and researchers by addressing important social issues such as inequality, oppression, domination, suppression, and alienation (Cresswell 2009, p. 9–10). As we work with the stories of Sigríður as an individual and her life and stories as a contribution to the research, we draw out the injustice imbedded in the stories and retell them from a point of empowerment. By our recreation of the narrative, we change, not her life, but her story and our own understanding of it. With this mind-set towards Sigríður, we also nod in the direction of collaborative history and its high ethical standard, where people with intellectual disabilities participate in research through their own oral history, public records, and social memory, focusing on recent past which the living remember and can collaborate on (Atkinson and Walmsley 2010, p. 280–282). Building on advocacy and participatory research design our research and writing is anchored in respect, justice, integrity, ethical decision making, and the code of conduct implemented through collaborative history as if Sigríður were a living partaker in the research.

Historical and folkloric sources

Until the first decade of the 20th century, public supervision was in the hands of clergymen, provosts, district administrative officers, and county magistrates. While the clergy was responsible for the basic education of the public and the preparation for confirmation, the secular authority was responsible for providing minimum support for those who did not have the capacity to work and to sustain themselves. Lack of those two factors, the education that was the basis of confirmation and the capacity to work, led to marginalisation.

The records created by the authorities are, in Sigríður's case, church records, parish registers, and county records. In the records, the supervisor in question wrote what Sólveig Ólafsdóttir names "claims," which are systematic comments found in parish registers, church books, or local commune accounts and other public records about the subject in question. By systematically analysing contemporary remarks about Sigríður we can spin her "life-thread." The methodology of life-threads is a method to review vastly complex public records full of gaps and combine them into one continuous thread – a life-span – that outlines the steady or defined points of life for a person.

The synthesis of the life-thread of Sigríður will then be compared to legendary stories and folktales about Stutta-Sigga, as she is always referred to in the legends. Although legends usually sound truthful, they are not historical truths and can quite often have little to no actual truth to them. However, even if legends are not true as such, they do reflect a certain social truth as they mirror people's ideas, beliefs, and attitudes about culture, society, and nature. Legend events can be rooted in a time long before the legends are narrated or written, but it is the time and context of narration that is visible in the social mirror of legends (Tangherlini 1994, p. 15–22, Dégh 2001, p. 23–27, Oring 2008, p. 129–131). Legends of Sigríður were collected and printed in the 20th century and are accessible in books, archives of folklore and newspapers. Each narrative is textually and contextually analysed to draw forth a social mirroring in the legend (Hufford 2003, p. 152–155, Latvala and Laurén 2013, p. 251–254).

As the legends partially reflect Sigríður's life-thread, she was likely subjected to gossip in her lifetime. A few decades after Sigríður's death, the gossip shifts from oral tradition to paper and the traceable recreation of the legends begins. Gossip can, via retelling, develop into more structured stories that spread through society and often circulate from tale to experience and back to the tale (Honko 1964, p. 103–105, Dégh and Vázsonyi 1974, p. 227–229). Many such stories finally disappear when new and noteworthy people or situations arise. Some, however, live on through generations and get a firmer footing, and the stories about Stutta-Sigga are an example of this. When her stories were written down, forty years after her death, they had survived at least one, if not two generations of storytelling. The process of writing and publishing undoubtedly¹ fixed them in the structured legend form we find in the first publication in 1940².

The last set of sources we make use of are two photographs of Sigríður, both taken late in her life. One has been widely used and is archived in Iceland's National Museum, the other is kept in the local museum at Akureyri and despite being accessible from there seems not to have been used in any publication. As photographs are a form of narrative the context of these photos and their use through time is an important part of the narrative journey. The photo of Sigríður is also the closest we can get to include herself in the research and to form a connection to her we step into

her photograph by taking a new image of where we mirror her stances and our own embodied experiences (see [Figs. 5.1, 5.2, 5.3](#)). Working with photographs and the analysis of them is also an example of source material that combines our two fields as both history and folkloristics have methodological traditions for using photographs.

Sigríður in life

Sigríður Benediktsdóttir was born on December 18th, 1815, on the farm Flögusel in the parish of Myrká in North Iceland. Her parents were Benedikt Sigfússon, farmer at Flögusel and his wife Rósa Oddsdóttir (*Myrká in Hörgárdalur parish*, n.d. BA/3-1-1). They had many children and, in the census of 1816 the year after Sigríður was born, nine of them were recorded, of which she was the youngest (The national archives of Iceland, n.d.). Sigríður lived in Flögusel until her mother died in 1845. The priest of the parish did not think highly of the family, calling them “invalid paupers”³ and said that that their home was “rather unkempt.” He wrote the following claims

Figure 5.1 A small portrait of Sigríður Benendiktsdóttir face and shoulders wearing her Sunday best outfit. The “passport” style image is cropped from [Figure 5.2](#). It is difficult to determine if Sigríður is looking thoughtfully into the camera as her eyes are puckered. She has a high forehead, broad nose, and deep lines around the mouth.

Figure 5.2 Sigríður is in her finest sweater/jacket, with a dark cravat, a clean apron, and a cap with tassel. This is a woman in her very best clothing. It is never claimed that the photo was taken at the birthday party, but she would undoubtedly have worn the same, or a similar outfit on that occasion as most women had one set of fine clothing. She stands by a chair and is stooping slightly. She has her left hand around the chair, grabbing it as if to support the unsteady chair, rather than to support herself. The right hand, showing signs of labour, rests on her apron string. She looks towards the viewer so that we look directly in her face, but the gaze is uneasy and past the lens, the photographer, and the viewer. The social context in 1940, mentioning the photo and the birthday, builds a strong element of credibility for the birthday legend, as well as the legend cluster, since the photo proves Sigga's existence. The photo was, however, not printed with the legends until 1948, in *Hjartaásinn*. In the many reprints and reproductions that followed the mention of the photograph is often taken out of the birthday party context, or completely omitted.

Sources: Kona, peysuföt. STÆ2-282.

Figure 5.3 Eva Þórdís Ebenezersdóttir, stands next to a sofa chair. She is barefoot and her right foot is grounded on the floor while her left foot is propped on the carved wooden armrest of the sofa, bending her left arm in front of her resting the elbow on the knee. On her right she uses her hand to hold her prosthetic, designed for the left leg, standing next to her. The prosthetic is in yellow, gold and black colours, as well as steel and skin tones. She is wearing an old-fashioned apron in yellow and brown tones and has a knitted shawl around her shoulders in similar colours; both items are of high value to her and reflect Sigríður's Sunday best. In Sigríður's photo the chair is a scale used to showcase Sigríður's difference and impairment, her short stature. The viewer, however, does not know the actual size of the chair and the proof lies consequently in the eye and understanding of the onlooker. We can only wonder if Sigríður wanted to or agreed to showing her impairment with the aid of the chair. Here Eva Þórdís is looking directly at the audience, with a defiant smirk in her eyes, willingly showing her impairment and compelling the viewer to face her difference no matter how uncomfortable that might make them feel.

about Sigríður: In 1825 (10 years old): “Unspeakable, deaf and unhappy.” In 1838 (13 years old): “Does not speak and learns not what she ought.” In 1832 (17 years old): “Cannot learn a thing.” In 1833 (18 years old): “Does not speak.” In 1834 (19 years old) “Reads haltingly – does not speak and learns not what she ought.” In 1835 (20 years old): “Unintellectual.” In 1836 (21 years old): “Close to an imbecile – cannot learn.” The following year the priest changed his tone in his claims about Sigríður, writing in bold letters that “she could not learn anything good,” and in the subsequent years he wrote “feeble-minded” in the column where the parishioners’ behaviour was recorded (*Myrká in Hörgárdalur parish*, n.d. BC/4-1-1).

Sigríður Benediktsdóttir in Sörlatunga. A total runt, fragile and has been a dependent all her life. An imbecile, and before, when she was with her parents, she had a lacking process in learning to speak properly and knowledge of Christianity, but now, in the close to a year since she was taken from her father’s home and has had a thorough guidance and she know the subjects, has knowledge of Christianity, what will happen hopefully, is fortune will choose a good place for her studies next winter. Her maintenance will be 148 fish] (*Myrká in Hörgárdalur parish*, n.d. BC/4-1-1).

Sigríður stayed for the next contracted year at Sörlatunga, with the farmer couple Guðjón Grímsson and his wife Ólöf Jónsdóttir for the last attempt to educate her for a confirmation. The parish priest described Ólöf in the parish records, early in 1846, in the following way: “Without a doubt the best person in M. [Myrká] Parish.” In the same visitation Sigríður is described as “illiterate” though she knows both the “the subjects and the creed” by heart, and instead of her behaviour being described as “feeble-minded” it changed into “adequate” (*Myrká in Hörgárdalur parish*, n.d. BC/4-1-1). At the age of 31, Sigríður was confirmed with a special license from the Bishop of Iceland. At that point she knew “small lessons of Luther and the confession, as well as verses and prayers. [She] is illiterate, has difficulties speaking, and is terribly slow witted” (*Myrká in Hörgárdalur parish*, n.d. BA/6-1-1).

Later in the spring Sigríður was moved to a parsonage in Bægisá after working for bread and board at Féeggsstaðir. On that occasion, the following claim about Sigríður was noted in the county records: “The greatest runt who cannot find a workplace, cannot work long-term for her board, as well being in ill health. Her maintenance is now 120 fish.” In the following years Sigríður was moved around the county, from one farm to another, and the claims about her focused mainly on her “bad behaviour” and “laziness.” (*Skriðuhreppur*, n.d., H-7/3). Sigríður gave birth to a son on September 22, 1855. The boy was baptised the same day at Hólar in the parish of Bakkasókn where she had been placed that year. He was named Kristján Magnús and Sigríður declared that Friðrik Elíasson, a

farmworker from Fnjóskadalur, was the father (*Bægisá in Hörgárdalur parish*, n.d. BA/6-1-1). Mother and son stayed together at Hólar for just eight months. In the spring of 1856, they were separated: The boy was placed at the farm Syðri- Bægisá in the parish of Bægisársókn and Sigríður was placed at the farm Saurbær in the parish of Myrkársókn. The county records described Sigríður at that time as “very unintelligent, of small stature, unskillful at work and lazy. Therefore, works very little and her maintenance this year is 62 fish.” The county had to pay 323 fish for the maintenance of Kristján Magnús as he was fatherless and less than a year old according to the county record (*Skriðuhreppur*, n.d., H-7/3). The boy died from diphtheria at aged four, on the 20th of December 1859 on the farm Syðri-Bægisá (*Bægisá in Hörgárdalur parish*, n.d. BA/8-1-1). During those four years Kristján Magnús lived, he was written about in the county record, where it was recounted that Friðrik, whom Sigríður had named as the father, denied the paternity. The boy was, therefore, always referred by his mother’s name: Sigríðarson. There were complaints that no formal investigation had been undertaken regarding the paternity of the boy (*Skriðuhreppur*, n.d., H-7/3). Kristján Magnús died fatherless, and there is no evidence, either in the county record or in the judicial record of Eyjafjörður district that any efforts were made to find out who the father was.

Sigríður had been placed at the farm Neðstaland the year the boy died, where she was described as a “little worker, knows little” (*Skriðuhreppur*, n.d., H-7/3). She got to stay there for two years, until she was placed at Auðnubrekka in the parish of Möðruvallaklausturssókn where she stayed for almost a decade. Her health was not so good but improved quite a bit a few years later. Her maintenance was half that of a dependant’s maintenance, or 120 fish. The following decade she was placed with her sister, Rósa, and her brother-in-law Guðmundur Guðmundsson. She moved with them from the farm Ásgerðarstaðasel to the farm Flaga where she was recorded with the claim “idiot.” She was described as “crippled” the same year in the county record (*Skriðuhreppur*, n.d., H-7/3). It seems that Sigríður moved around quite a bit after that and in 1881 it was noted that her maintenance to her superiors, the farmers at Nýibær, was only minimum amount because she had “wandered a lot” (*Skriðuhreppur*, n.d., H-7/26).

Sigríður again stayed for a few years with her sister and brother-in-law in Nýibær in Myrkársókn. The claims about her during that time were “simple minded, half minded, knows little, and an orphan.” In 1888 or when Sigríður was 73 years old she was described as “frail” (*Skriðuhreppur*, n.d., H-7/26). She was again described as “idiot” in the county records of 1890 (*Census*, n.d., AA/4-1-1). In 1891 she was named as “short Sigríður” and was placed again at Auðbrekka. The county officials allowed her to stay there for the next eight years even though she was registered at Skriða in the county record as she was then a “decrepit old person” (*Möðruvallaklaustur in Hörgárdalur parish*, n.d., BC/8-1-1, *Skriðuhreppur*, n.d., H-7/26). Sigríður

Benediktsdóttir died on the 15th of April 1900, “a dependant on the county in Hólakot” in the parish of Möðruvallaklausturssókn.

Stutta-Sigga in legends

In 1940 an “Episode of Stutta-Sigga” was published in the magazine *Gríma, tímarit fyrir íslensk þjóðleg fræði*, a journal that was a platform for folklore, legends, and popular histories. This publication became the foundation for most of the later recreated and reprinted legends about Stutta-Sigga. The “episode” is a cluster of legends Sigríður Benediktsdóttir who was, according to the legends, widely known as Stutta-Sigga. The legends span her life from a very young age to death, from stories of violence and hardship in her childhood that marked her body all her life. Her short stature, which is the basis for her nickname *stutta* or ‘short’, is grounded in her parents not being tall people and in addition malnutrition and hardship influenced her growth. The legends also tell of her education and confirmation, her pregnancies and childbirth. The last part of the legend cluster tells of her advanced age and interactions with people in her community, especially, men of power.

The legends about Sigga reflect the time of their telling or publication much more than the time of Sigríður’s life, so the contextual information of who tells and who publishes the legends is consequently important. The “episode” is put together by Jónas Rafnar, one of two editors of *Gríma*, and the material is credited to at least five editors, i.e., the landowners Guðmundur Guðmundsson, Höskuldur Magnússon, and Sturla Þórðarson, and the published authors Friðgeir Berg and Margeir Jónsson. These men belonged to the upper echelons of society and held both cultural and financial capital. As most of the editors were only born after Sigríður Benediksdóttir’s death, they are, the second generation of storytellers when it comes to stories of Stutta-Sigga. It is likely that they heard the stories from fathers or grandfathers, and then narrated them to Rafnar who published the stories as the “Episode of Stutta-Sigga” (Rafnar and Jónsson 1940, p. 3–16). From this initial publication of the legends of Stutta-Sigga sprung many reprints in different media. First was Guðmundur Frímann, editor of the magazine *Hjartaásinn* (Ace of Hearts), who in 1948 selected three childhood stories from the original issue and reprinted them in his magazine along with the only photograph known to exist of Sigríður Benediksdóttir (Frímann, 1948, p. 27–29). The in the books *Gríma hin nýja* (The New Gríma) in 1964 (Jónsson, 1964, p. 236–238) and in a collection of local legends, *Eyfirskar sagnir* (Legends from Eyjafjörður), in 1977, where the picture of Sigríður is included (Rafnar 1977, p. 215–227). In the years 1954–1966 Stutta-Sigga and her family are mentioned on four occasions in a column called “stories of abandoned farms” in the newspaper *Frjáls þjóð* (Þorsteinsson 1954, p. 28, Ásgeirsson 1961a, p. 5, 961b, p. 3, 1964, p. 2, 1966, p. 3). Here, Sigríður Benediksdóttir or Stutta-Sigga is only mentioned as

one of 18 siblings from Flögusel and it is clear that the publishers expect their readers to know Sigríður's/Sigga's fate, life, and legends from the original episode in Gríma.

In the Christmas issue of the weekly paper *Dagur* in 1966, a selection of legends about Stutta-Sigga, spanning her life and accompanied with her picture, were printed. Most of the legends are again taken from Gríma. In addition, a man called Hallur Benediktson shared his memories of his great aunt Sigríður Benediksdóttir. The memory involves Sigga minding him as a child and that he was wary of her and scared she would pinch him, which she, however, never did (Stutta Sigga, 1966, p. 32). In 1987 Sigga is mentioned in an audio recording made by folklorist Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson who collected folklore material at the time. Eiríksson asks his interviewee if he has heard stories of Stutta-Sigga and the man responds that there had been stories of her haunting the countryside where she had lived, but then trivialises his recollection by saying that he does not remember clearly (Jónsson 1978). As the audio collection of Árnastofnun was not public at the time of the collection in 1987, Sigga does not make an appearance in published records for some time. It is only in 1992 that *Dagur* reprints the legends of Stutta-Sigga. The text is in most parts the same as before, but the context is a bit different. The title is now “Bæklaður sveitarómagi eftir misþyrmingar í æsku” (“A crippled pauper after violence in her youth.”) The legends are also separated with uncouth subheadings, and it is accompanied by a vulgar pen drawing that shows a woman that has bent over, whipped her skirts above her hips showing her bare bottom as she peeks back towards the viewer with an obscene grin. The picture is a reference to one of the stories told of Stutta-Sigga in the paper (Sæmundsson 1992, p.11), the same story is discussed below.

Sigríður's photograph (see Fig. 5.2) is used in exhibitions throughout the 1990s where the artist defines her as a vagabond on the margins of society. This status of Stutta-Sigga as a part of a designated group of wanderers in Iceland's past is then strengthened by folklorist Jón Jónsson work about vagabonds in Icelandic legends and folklore in 2006. In the years following Jónsson has used his findings both for entertainment, through storytelling sessions as well as for further research and publication of the book *Á mörkum mennskunnar. Viðhorf til förufólks í sögnum og samfélagi* (On the edge of humanity. Attitudes towards vagabonds in legends and society) (Jónsson 2006, p. 146–150, 2015, 2018, p. 25–32). Jónsson mostly builds on the texts about Sigga from Gríma hin nýja, and she is also one of two people he dedicates his book to.

In addition to the previously mentioned examples, there are a few smaller mentions of Stutta-Sigga but they do not tell the stories or give much context or information beyond her name. The most recent example in the long list of tales that form Sigga's story is this research, both presentations and this chapter, which accumulates the stories and not the least, tells them again.

The narrative afterlife of Sigríður

By comparing and analysing the historical evidence and the legends reveals both congruities and incongruities in Sigríður's story. On this basis it is possible to see how a disability narrative comes to life. Information from the official records can be either similar as the folklore, or utterly contradictory. The reason for incongruities is that the records were collected and written by officials with authority over the individual, whereas the folklore is written down and published much later, as an interesting story, with no consequences regarding the real person in question. What is congruent between live, and legends is just as important as the similarities which give the legends the air of being true and important. The strongest similarities between the official records and the legends concern events of her childhood and death. When it comes to her adult life, however, the legends take flight and tell of events that the public records are silent about. In some cases that is because the stories are not material for public records, Jónsson points out that even if there is a historical connection between the legends and the life of Sigríður Benediksdóttir, the later narratives are first and foremost folklore, reflecting the ideas and attitudes of the storytellers of the 20th century (Jónsson 2018, p. 31). Despite this statement he uses the 20th century legends to tell a believable story about the 19th century and does not reflect on the contextual meaning of the legend for the 20th century narrators or what ideas they are portraying by recreating the stories of Stutta-Sigga.

One of the most interesting cases of such incongruity between the official records and the folklore has to do with Sigríður having children. According to the legends she had two children, one when she was roughly 30 years old by a man in another parish. It is said that neighbouring (male) farmers⁴ assisted during birth as the midwife was not available. This was supposedly a difficult birth, and the child was stillborn or died shortly after the birth. A few years later Sigga had another child and when asked about the boy's father she pointed to a man who denied any such relations. By the power of the district sheriff, Sigga and the supposed father were called before a magistrate in Akureyri where the court ruled the man to be the child's father. The legend claims that Sigga prided herself on her child, saying that, even though she had not achieved much in her life, at least she had been a mother. The boy was, however, raised by others and died at the age of five (Anon 1940, p. 12–13). As mentioned above, Sigríður did have a son, Kristján Magnús, but he was her only child. By that time, the other child was allegedly already born, but there is no record of the child, stillborn or alive. Another incongruity is the supposed court case and the official recognition of Kristján Magnús' father. There would have been official records of that, but there are none. In addition, the record clearly lists Kristján Magnús as fatherless. What the two legendary accounts have in common, and is not found in the records, is the involvement of men in the affairs of

Sigríður's pregnancies and birth's Men deliver the stillborn child and men of power and status in society concern themselves on Sigríður's behalf about the father of her child without consulting her. In addition, the magistrate, yet another powerful man, rules in Sigríður's favour when it comes to determining said paternity. In the years 1940–1970, when the legends are first published, this reflects both the power structure between the genders and the prescriptivism that governed the lives of disabled people (see [Chapter 4](#) in this volume).

The fact that the magistrates and merchants are, in the legends of Stutta-Sigga supportive, is in contradiction to the legend tradition of the 19th century where the higher classes are more likely to be depicted in a negative light, as the oppressors and bullies. The storytellers of Stutta-Sigga are telling positive stories of their peers and using the poor and strange woman to emphasise their gracious gestures. Sigga is a tool to paint the men in the story in a positive light. This reveals how strongly 20th century ideas about for example body, gender and social class, colour the legends supposedly happening about a century before. The two-pronged method applied here has made it possible to claim that the legends paint a different picture as they reflect the time when the legends were collected and published rather than the real life of Sigríður.

The positive light of the gentry is one reason for the re-telling of the legends of Stutta-Sigga but there are other influential factors. In some of the legends of Sigga there are narrative elements that are reminiscent of older well-known supernatural legends. A good example of this is the following story:

When [Sigga] was living in Auðbrekka, her job was to herd cows to pasture, for a shortcut she started herding them over a field that belonged to the next farm Hátún. The farmer there, named Gísli, disliked this shortcut and mentioned it to her often asking her to stop, but she did not heed him and replied to him with profanities. Once, as before Gísli spoke to her about this matter, but that time she turned his back to him, whipped her skirts up from her behind, peered between her thighs and called: “look in the mirror dear Gísli!”. It goes without saying that Sigga was not wearing any panties (Anon, 1940, p. 13–14).⁵

At first glance this short narrative may seem to be a crude, and for many a humorous, story of how strange and off-putting Stutta-Sigga was seen. The most important part of the story is not the little old woman with the low social status but the agency and gumption to moon at her superior, male neighbour to get him to leave her alone. This same theme can be found in tales of how to repel a supernatural being, the repelling trick is to do exactly what Sigga does, moon the ghost (Gunnell 2014, p. 43–44).⁶ The powerplay in such ghost stories is also often like where a human is trying to get a more powerful being to leave them alone. The resemblance is uncanny, and there

are other legends in the cluster about Stutta-Sigga with similar connections to known folktales and legends.

Sigga even fits into the role of the underprivileged in folk and fairy tales when she is described to have been clothed in rags as a child, living in dirty corners. In one story it is even claimed that she was sleeping in the cinders of the hearth. Even if Sigga is no Cinderella, the legends about her do have legend and fairy-tale elements known to the audience that aid the narrative power of the stories. Usually, stories change with time adjusting to the understanding and mindset of the audience and storytellers (Þorsteinsdóttir 2011, p. 80–82). As mentioned before, the republished texts about Sigga are almost identical from one to the other. As the texts adhere to well-known themes and phrases from legends and fairy tales, they catch the audience's interest and facilitate connecting to the stories.

By connecting the stories of a real person to known folktales, the story also becomes a vehicle for the narrative's agency, meaning and function, bringing forth another reason for recreating the stories. The meaning and understanding changes dramatically due to the context given each time. Such changes of meaning caused by changes of context can give us insight into how and why certain ideas about people, and bodies, that are considered different become rooted and traditionalised in social memory by the means of folklore, forming, and reforming our ideas about others. Moving through time and generations, originating in gossip about Sigríður, the legends about Stutta-Sigga take us from narratives of a real-life person, with a different body and behaviour, to folklore of accentuated difference and marginalization set in familiar story.

Sigríður in photos

The third strand in the weaving of Sigríður's story is how the photograph of her has been used. In the legends, the photograph (see [Fig. 5.1](#)) is mentioned; and it is used both in publications of the legends, as well as on two more occasions, in Dagur in 1966 and in Jónsson's book *Á mörkum mennskunnar* in 2018.

While Sigga was living in Skriða she once took it upon herself to go over to Bægisá to find out from the church records when she had been born. A little while later some neighbours were invited to her birthday celebration. It was a lively gathering, and Sigga was in the seventh heaven, and very happy for the occasion, as she got a few small birthdays presents. She claimed that this was her first birthday. Sigga's photograph was taken around the same time; it was a good photograph and can be found in many places (Anon 1940, p. 16).

This legend is interesting, as it upholds the idea of Sigga as an old woman being very active and with a strong agency to go after what she wants. We are also given the sense that she is respected and liked, as the family she lives with throws her a party, which her neighbours attend complete with

presents. Both attendance and gifts are an act of kindness and regard for the old and often difficult woman. In the end, the strength, agency, respect, and kindness are, however, shadowed by the notion that Sigga did not know her birthday until she was in old age, and by her claim that this was her first ever celebration of the day. Even here in this happy and joyful legend we are, once again, reminded of Sigga's difficult lifespan on the margins of society.

Then, in 1991, artist Birgir Andrésson uses Sigríður's photo in an exhibition showing 60 black-and-white photographs, along with names of people that all are long dead. Andrésson titles his assortment of photos *Annars vegar fólk* (Other kinds of people) (Andrésson 1991). Nine years later Andrésson sets the exhibition up again with the same title privately at Reykjavík Akadémían, and publicly at the National Gallery of Iceland (Andrésson 2000). In 2010 the Akureyri museum used the photo of Sigríður as part of the exhibition *The treasures of Eyjafjörður* where the photograph is credited to Jón Júlíus Árnason and claimed to have been taken in Akureyri (Hallgrímsson 2010, p. 25). As mentioned above, the folklorist Jón Jónsson has also used the photo both in his publication in 2018, as well as in teaching and storytelling in the last few years.

Disability scholars have criticised how images and impairments have been paired together to emphasise the strangeness of the body, with no regard or respect to the person portrayed (Garland-Thomson 2009, p. 79–94, Snyder and Mitchell 2010, p. 156–181). The same criticism holds also true for both photographs of Sigríður: In both cases the pictures have been transmitted without context or description. In Fig. 6.1, the presumed oddity of her height is emphasised by the chair that represents a scale of reference; and Andrésson's (1991) usage and the discourse in his exhibition *Annars vegar fólk* stigmatises her as 'odd' and not as an individual in her own right.

With the photo exhibition in 1991, then repeated in 2000, a radical addition is made to the narrative of Sigga's life. Andrésson published a book to accompany the exhibition titled *Nálægð Annars vegar fólk* (Proximity People on the Other Road), where he claims not to be a historian but a mere artist doing his best to shed light on the diversity that forms culture. At the same time, he clearly situates these individuals as outsiders, wanderers, and those who do not fit into the society of the past, as well as romanticising their situation by implying that their marginalised and ostracised position was by their own choice (Þorláksson 1991, p. 28, Proppé 2000, p. 32). Wandering, in Iceland, at the lifetime of Sigríður and the others portrayed in Andrésson's exhibition, was in most cases involuntary, a lifestyle forced upon people by society and the authorities (Jónsson 2018, p. 14–21), as can be seen in the life-thread of Sigríður. Andrésson recreated the narrative of Sigríður, and others, by forming a strong romantic context of the free and strange individuals that simply did not fit in with others. For Sigríður this addition to the narrative erases the context of the tension

between social responsibility and the wandering, leaving the story with a character which has little or no connection to her society. She has become Stutta-Sigga, a free-spirited character that defied society's norms and chose to wander. Gone is the real Sigríður who, throughout her life, was forced by the local authorities to wander between homes, as well as being bullied and gossiped about.

The photographic representation we offer here proposes a counter-narrative to the all too familiar “freakish” photos of disabled people, which have little or no connection with the persons themselves, as the focus is purely and only on their embodied difference and disabilities. We propose that such old photos can be used but it is essential that they are approached with respect. We want to create a staring space and context (Garland-Thomson 2009, p. 79–94) that is safe and respectful to Sigríður, as well as the watchers and readers of the picture. To make that safe and respectful space we do draw up a rich context of the life and afterlife of the person pictured, context is based on well researched sources analysed from the viewpoint of the subject, Sigríður, and disability studies.

Both the analysis of the old photograph, and the design for the new photo are based on Roland Barthes (1915–1980) book *Camera Lucida*. Barthes describes the difference between what he referred to as *studium*, a cultural, linguistic, and political interpretation of a photograph, and *punctum*, an emotional, wounding and personally touching reaction which establishes a direct relationship with the object or person within the photograph (Barthes 1981, p. 26–27).

What we attempt with the new photo (see Fig. 5.3) is to defy the repeated story of a beaten and rude little woman by recreating the narrative with respect, drawing on emotions of pride, defiance, and life-saving stubbornness; aspects that we experienced during our preparation for this chapter. We have discovered a tenacious Sigríður, and that is the story we want to tell and re-tell with all the photos and the context of the story of her life and legends created and re-created.

Conclusion

Our detailed analysis reveals how the physical and mental impairments of Sigríður marked her as different from the alleged norm of her society. That difference then inspired talk that had a disabling effect on Sigríður's life, disabling her with and through stories. While her different body and behaviour ceased to exist, the gossip did not die with her. The stories continued and have been re-created throughout the decades. Sigríður's life has gradually been turned into a fixed, legendary, and somewhat stereotypical account of her character as different. She has been transformed from a real person with differences to a legendary character of disability.

Dropping the prefix Stutta (e. Short) does not take away from Sigríður's embodiment of difference, but it reminds us to think of her as a person with

her own experiences and life, before focusing on her difference and disabilities. Sigga was born at Flögusel in the year 1815 and experienced abuse and hardship during her childhood that marked her for life. As a teenager and young woman, she had her own way of understanding her surroundings and did not fall easily into the mould that society had carved for her peers. As she did not learn and speak as others, she was denied the right of Christian confirmation and the traditional passage to adulthood at the age of 14. It was years later that a priest from a neighbouring parish realised that, even if she did not do things like others, she still knew and understood the values of Christianity that society expected of people. With his help she was confirmed and became an adult at the age 31. Despite this transition people did not fully know how to be around Sigga, and all her life she was kept on the margins of society, expected to wander between households and seldom having a steady home. Everywhere she came she was put to work for her board before being sent on to the next farm. And people talked.

They talked about her difficult childhood, they talked about her body and how it was different, they talked about the way she spoke and how she understood the world. They talked about her wandering, and her relationships with men. They talked about her pregnancy, the father of her child, and the child itself. They talked about her strangeness, struggles and temper. At the age of 85, Sigga passed away, after a long and hard life on the outer margins of society. The talk did not die with her, but kept going and growing, taking on elements of different understanding as the times changed. Forty years after Sigga died, the talk was written down and printed, and the stories thereby fixed on the pages of the legend journal *Grima*. The talk about Sigga had been elaborated and accentuated to make her legendary, exciting, and horrifying, a story worth telling. The talk was over, text had taken over and no matter how much the times changed, the story did not. Time did affect the text, by turning and twisting its meaning, turning Sigga's life into a vision of the cruelty of the past and a grotesque joke, where she was increasingly diminished, into a stereotypical character of a weird and insufferable little old lady, to be laughed at.

The text, the story, the former talk is still here but times have changed yet again. Making fun of different and disabled people is not tolerated anymore, and the past was more complex than formerly believed. After this winding journey we look at Sigga's life, legends, and photo with a new perspective of curiosity, laced with honour and respect. What we find, then, is a woman who was stubborn to the point of self-preservation, living through hardship, exclusion, and loss her whole life, and even beyond the grave as her position of powerlessness in life was continued and accentuated in the legends later told. At this point in time, we want to give Sigga back power in her own story. We look at her life, legends and photograph with an open mind and witness in them a survivor of disabling attitudes and circumstances. We tell her story anew in the academic setting of this chapter, as well as the disability art of new photograph, inspired by Sigga herself, giving her the respect,

she earned but was never given, and the power she never had a chance to wield. We can only hope she approves.

Notes

1. Publishing of folktales has been a highly editorial process and has tended to fix the stories, so they move away from oral tradition to more of a literature tradition. See for example Gunnell, T., 2010. Daisies rise to become oaks: The politics of early folktale collection in northern Europe. *Folklore*, 121 (1), 12-37. Doi: [10.1080/00155870903492063](https://doi.org/10.1080/00155870903492063)
2. It is worth mentioning that the gossip about Sigríður must have been limited to the local area of where she lived. In line with this, the legends were also mostly locally printed and published until the last decade of the 20th century. Newspapers and periodicals were local and even the legends published in books that might have gotten a wider audience are always linked strongly to the area in question. It is not until recently that Sigríður's horizon has broadened, and her stories have become more widely known.
3. Translations of the phrases in this section are by Sólveig Ólafsdóttir for this chapter.
4. Apparently, it took no less than three grown men to deliver the child and the discourse of the story paints them in most heroic colors while we know nothing of Sigríðurs response to the loss of the child or the aftermath of the difficult birth.
5. Translation of the legend by Eva Þórdís Ebenezersdóttir for this chapter.
6. Bengt af Klintberg classifies this tale type as C "Showing one's backside to a pursuer" (af Klintberg, B., 2010. *The Types of the Swedish Folk Legend*. Academia Scientiarum Fennica. p. 63). An example of this legend in Icelandic lore is the story "Horfðu í glóðaraugað mitt, Gunna," in Jón Þorkelsson legend collection from 1956, p. 31.

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