

Drinking in Iceland and Ideas of the North

Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir
The Reykjavík Academy (Iceland)

Abstract – It is hypothesized that ideas about the North as an extreme and turbulent force have been instrumental in shaping images relating to Icelanders’ drinking culture and the imagined position of alcohol in the community. In line with this understanding, the governing image of the position of alcohol in society has been of an excessive drinking pattern that is based on a special connection between alcohol and the national character. The objective of this study is to examine how specific preconceptions about the North have been linked to images of the drinking culture and to define emphases and conflicts surrounding these assumptions. Particular attention is paid to the image of the drinking pattern as it is represented abroad and how the image of the Icelandic drinking pattern is used in alcotourism. The sources used for this study are various types of written materials, newspapers, and advertisements, particularly from the last two decades. The method is analysis of text and discourse. The conclusions reveal that the image of Icelandic drinking culture is deeply rooted and has been instrumental in shaping the position on alcohol, although this does not preclude that the image is challenged. The image of drinking has an intrinsic value as it is used both to reject an old pattern and to justify a new one, yet images appear to have had little value as a tool for class distinction. On the other hand, preconceptions acquire practical value when used in promoting tourism.

Keywords – Iceland, images, the North, drinking patterns, alcotourism

For good is not, though good it is thought
mead for the sons of men;
the deeper he drinks the dimmer grows
the mind of many a man.

Drunk I became, dead drunk, forsooth
in the hall of hoary Fjalar;
that bout is best from which back fetches
each man his mind full clear.¹

¹ *The Poetic Edda* 1928: 20. Era svá gott,/sem gott kveða,/öl alda sonom;/því at færa veit,/er fleira drekkur,/síns til geðs gumi.//Ölr ek varð,/varð ofrölvi/at hins fróða Fialars;/því er öldr bazt,/at aprt uf heimtír/hverr sitt geð gumi [14]. *Eddadigte* I. *Völuspá. Hávamál*: 17–18.

Hildigunnur Ólafsdóttir, “Drinking in Iceland and Ideas of the North,” in *Iceland and Images of the North*, ed. Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson with the collaboration of Daniel Chartier, Québec: Presses de l’Université du Québec, “Droit au Pôle” series, and Reykjavík: ReykjavíkAkademían, 2011.

Introduction

In these verses from *Hávamál*, Odin, the greatest of the pagan gods and the god of wisdom, proclaims that he is well aware of the pleasures of drinking, but even the god has had a bad experience of excessive drinking, so he must caution against it. For a long time, contradictory ideas have been aspects of the discourse on alcohol. Hence, stereotypes of drinking cultures attributed to European nations have a long history in imagological studies. The 18th-century text *Der literarische Aspekt unserer Vorstellung vom Charakter fremder Völker* contains a brief description of peoples in Europe and their varying characteristics, where drinking is listed as the dominant vice of the Germans, a weakness that was associated with the northern nations and attributed to Tacitus's writings about Germania.² Most probably such a description was intended to be a guidebook for travellers, but it has also been suggested that the accounts were intended to entertain in the way ethnic jokes do today. Such images of peculiar drinking cultures do not necessarily correspond to realities, but images often have some factual basis even if they are social constructions.

In public discourse alcohol is usually seen as an irresistibly attractive but dangerous substance provoking conflicting views. Discussions of drinking are commonly organized around particular systems of thinking about alcohol. Room termed this way of thinking "governing images," similar to the concept of discursive formation introduced by Foucault.³ Room's main focus was on the discourses of problematic drinking, but in this study images of normalized drinking are under investigation.

Three images particularly relate to Icelanders' relationship with alcohol: the idea of an abstinent culture, a model of moderate drinking, and an excessive drinking pattern. One of these ideas, the conception of the abstaining Icelander, was particularly pronounced in the early 20th century when the temperance movement boomed. With the decline of the temperance movement in the latter part of the 20th century, the image of the dry Icelander seems to have faded

² Zacharasiewicz 2009: 29.

³ Room 1974.

DRINKING IN ICELAND AND IDEAS OF THE NORTH

away. Social reformers who either gave up the idea of temperance or disapproved of it have promoted the idea of moderate drinking as a model. The third image of an excessive drinking pattern will be particularly addressed in this study. This idea of unrestricted drinking as an integral part of the overall culture and character of the Icelandic people has been the governing image of the Icelandic drinking culture.

It is hypothesized that the image of the North as an unrestrained, extreme natural force has served particularly well in shaping this image relating to Icelanders' patterns of drinking and the imagined position of alcohol in the community. Those elements of the North that are of particular significance in this context relate to closeness between subsistence and the natural forces, a harsh climate, and a proximity to nature. Fishing and farming were for a long time the main industries and were shaped by seasonal rhythms that required hard work when necessary. In the rural culture people were close to nature, but even if nature could be generous, it could also be rough, and the climate was harsh. It is from these preconceptions that the idea of excessive drinking originates. It was presumed people were tough in all their doings and that when they would drink, they would do so heavily, although it was not so often. Such a climatological view implies that the wine cultures in southern Europe would belie a mild climate.

The objective of this study is to describe how the governing image of drinking in Iceland corresponds with the idea of the North. In this study, the main emphasis of the analysis will be on two themes: the image of the Icelandic drinking pattern as it is represented abroad, and how the image of drinking is used by domestic parties in alcotourism. In this context the term "image" refers to the perception of a particular drinking pattern, as a learned cultural practice through socialization and cultural habits.⁴ The concept of "drinking pattern" means the typical way a group drinks.⁵

⁴ *Imagology: A Handbook on Literary Representation of National Characters* 2005.

⁵ Horverak & Bye 2007: 47.

Tracing the significance of images in the various areas of society that emerge at different times is a challenging issue.⁶ Seeing that the traditional image of Icelandic drinking culture is based on a conception of society that has been greatly modified in the last decades, it may be a timely question whether the image of Iceland's drinking culture is changing. And how have the images of the position of alcohol in the community been used as commodities in promoting Iceland as a destination for tourists? How have alcoholic beverages been used as tools for image creation and distinction? In order to provide answers to these questions, an analysis will be presented of examples where excessive drinking appears as a governing image in books, booklets, publications, newspapers, and advertisements, primarily in the last two decades.

Drinking in North and South

Although ideas about the North have changed throughout history, the perception of the North as a wild and even uncivilized force, yet one that is free, untamed, strong, and formative for all human life, is still common.⁷ This understanding can be traced in Icelandic myths and sagas where nature and culture were sometimes presented as interconnected factors. Jenny Jochens writes about how geography and climate restricted availability of beer more in Iceland than in Norway, but that drinking was greatly treasured as one of the pleasures of Nordic living.⁸ Óttar Guðmundsson's book *Tíminn og tárrið* (Time and the Tear), where Icelanders' relationship with alcohol is dealt with in a historical light, abounds with examples of the commonality of drinking in Nordic mythology and particularly in poetry from the 19th century.⁹ In Ólafur Haukur Árnason's overview of the historical roots of the Icelandic alcohol policy, the emphasis is on attempts to curb alcohol sales to fight drunkenness, which is presumed to be an integral factor of Icelanders' drinking culture.¹⁰

⁶ *Imagology: A Handbook on Literary Representation of National Characters* 2005.

⁷ Davidson 2005.

⁸ Jochens 1993: 164–165.

⁹ Guðmundsson 1992.

¹⁰ Árnason 1992.

DRINKING IN ICELAND AND IDEAS OF THE NORTH

Even if these two authors do not directly link drinking to ideas about the North, it is an underlying theme for them both.

In modern literature, Icelandic authors have frequently used drinking and partying as themes in their books, without necessarily placing this in a Nordic context. Drinking in contemporary literature has often served to depict the lifestyle of modern citizens in a consumer society, such as in *101 Reykjavík* by Hallgrímur Helgason and *Sendiherrann* (The Ambassador) by Bragi Ólafsson. This representation of modern life and drinking in the North is even more striking in Icelandic films than in any other art form. Drinking scenes feature in almost every Icelandic movie, and the widely circulated screen version of *101 Reykjavík* is probably one of the most influential factors in recreating the image of drinking in the modern North.

Several attempts have been made to classify drinking cultures theoretically.¹¹ There are primarily two discernible approaches.

Anthropologists and ethnologists have used the method of examining an overall picture of a single community—which often, however, was only one village or tribe—and formulating measurements that explain the culture. This method has most frequently been used for studies in parts of the world outside Europe.¹²

Sociologists, particularly from the United States, have studied communities using sociological measurements such as the prevalence of temperance, various rules about drinking, and whether drinking is a part of the daily routine or only for special occasions, when drunkenness is expected and allowed. This method establishes four categories characterized by abstinence, constrained ritual drinking, banalized drinking, and fiesta drinking.¹³ Abstinence is the rule in some Islamic states but not all, Jewish communities practice ritual drinking, banalized drinking is common in the Mediterranean countries, and Mexico is an example of a culture where fiesta drunkenness is allowed.

¹¹ Room & Mäkelä 2000.

¹² Sulkunen 2002.

¹³ Room & Mäkelä 2000.

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

Different variations on these efforts to classify the cultural position of alcohol exist; however, sociologists Room and Mäkelä have pointed to the limitations of these categories and the necessity of adding factors such as regularity of drinking and frequency of drunkenness.¹⁴ Another factor that must be included in attempts to categorize drinking is how alcohol is linked to other aspects of social life.

European studies and discourse have often considered it sufficient to present drinking cultures as the diametrically opposed “wet” and “dry” communities. Wet communities are characterized by a weak temperance movement, high drinking rates, a large number of drinkers, frequent drinking—sometimes in substantially large quantities—and a high ratio of chronic alcohol abuse but few instances of alcohol poisoning. According to this theory, the Mediterranean countries are representative of the “wet” countries and the Nordic nations the “dry” countries. Yet this twofold division has not been found suitable for defining drinking patterns in individual European countries.¹⁵ Nonetheless, in the minds of many there is an innate difference in the drinking patterns of northern and southern European nations, even though this cannot be pinned down in systematic categories. Such an opinion is based on the notion that customs and culture in the Nordic countries are completely opposite to those in the Mediterranean countries, so that drinking patterns must be, too. This view may be supported with the argument that, because of the wine production industry, there are vast economic interests at stake in the Mediterranean countries, whereas the alcohol industry is less important to Nordic economies.

Comparative studies of trends in drinking patterns in European countries from 1950 to 2005 have shown that differences between the drinking patterns in the northern and the southern part of Europe relate mainly to attitudes towards intoxication, frequency of drinking, beverage choice, and drinking with meals.¹⁶ In the North, intoxication was approved of at special occasions, such as celebrations and festivities, but daily drinking and drinking wine with meals was rare.

¹⁴ Room & Mäkelä 2000.

¹⁵ Mäkelä et al. 2006.

¹⁶ Hupkens et al. 1993; Simpura & Karlsson, 2001; Mäkelä et al. 2006.

DRINKING IN ICELAND AND IDEAS OF THE NORTH

Traditionally, strong spirits were the favoured drink, but in the latter part of the 20th century they were replaced by beer, and more recently wine drinking has become an addition to the total alcohol consumption. Frequent drinking, usually in the form of daily wine drinking with meals, has characterized the Mediterranean drinking pattern with its strict norms for drinking and attitudes to drunkenness. However, these cultural prototypes are becoming blurred with the diffusion of lifestyles, causing Italian youths to prefer beer rather than wine and middle aged Icelanders to increase their consumption of wine, to use simple examples.

Variations in drinking cultures are not only reflected in the various drinking patterns but also in the alcohol control measures that societies apply. Historical criteria have shaped Icelanders' position on alcohol. In the early 20th century there was a total prohibition of alcohol in Iceland. The ban was later lifted, sale of wine was permitted in 1922, and the sale of hard liquor was legalized in 1935. The sale of beer, on the other hand, was prohibited from 1915 to 1989, or for seventy-four years. Despite increasingly more positive attitudes towards drinking, Icelandic society still has a very strict alcohol policy. A state-run retail monopoly with a limited number of outlets is in operation for selling all alcoholic beverages with higher alcohol content than 2.25% by volume. Pubs and restaurants have to request liquor licenses from the police. Other measures include a ban on all advertising of alcoholic beverages, an age limit of twenty for buying alcoholic beverages, and high alcohol taxes, and the legal limit for drunk driving is set at 50 mg% BAC. Alcohol sales peaked in 2007 when they rose to 7.5 litres of alcohol sold per 100,000 inhabitants aged fifteen and over.¹⁷ This is much lower than in the European Union member states, where the average adult drinks eleven to thirteen litres of pure alcohol per year.¹⁸ In the last forty years, there has been a harmonization in alcohol consumption levels, with rises in central and northern Europe but a decline in southern Europe.

Images usually arise out of a relationship with others or because of cultural confrontations.¹⁹ It has been pointed out that, in

¹⁷ "Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs", 2009: 325.

¹⁸ Anderson & Baumberg 2006: 77–78.

¹⁹ Leersen & Beller 2007.

traditional analysis of text, descriptions of national characteristics are frequently shaped by standard ideas about North and South, fringe positions, and paradoxes.²⁰ Therefore the view of drinking in northern countries is to a large extent shaped by the perception of the North by those in the South. The southern view, in turn, influences the self-understanding and self-awareness of northern communities. This gaze of the others may be of significance for the community as it can shed light on familiar phenomena. Different interest groups may also see an advantage in emphasizing a specific image.

Little discussion has taken place about alcohol as a factor in the image creation of the North, or the formative effects of ideas about the North on the perception of drinking patterns in northern countries. Of course, there is the simple fact that vineyards cannot be planted in northern climates, so the distinction between North and South is in this respect based upon natural restrictions. Nordic alcohol research has revealed that Icelanders have been slower and more traditional than other Nordic nations when it comes to adopting a so-called southern European drinking pattern.²¹ This is in line with the general notions that Iceland lagged behind in adopting novelties that were considered an inevitable component of a modern society. Although people in the Nordic countries have increased their wine drinking, and particularly the custom to drink wine with meals, they have not necessarily been drinking to intoxication more rarely. In recent years, research has been conducted into the growing uniformity of drinking patterns, changes to living conditions, and globalization.²² In Nordic alcohol research, more recent studies have also focused on the relationship between traditional and modern drinking patterns.²³ Room and Bullock (2002) used the North–South dimension to pose the question of why violence is considered a consequence of alcohol consumption in northern Europe, but not in southern Europe.²⁴ However, they did not find a clear answer because on none of the items under examination was there a North–South gradient.

²⁰ Leersen & Beller 2007.

²¹ Ólafsdóttir, Guðmundsdóttir, & Ásmundsson 1997.

²² Simpura 2001; Leifman 2001; Karlsson & Simpura 2001.

²³ Sulkunen, Sutton, Tigerstedt, & Warpenius 2000.

²⁴ Room & Bullock 2002.

Cultural conventions are not easily transferable, and the exalted descriptions of what residents of the North call the “wine culture” of the South are formed from a distance. In Greece, for example, much of the alcohol consumed is drunk in pubs by men, not at the family dining table.²⁵ Young people in France and Italy are adopting the beer conventions of the North and rejecting the wine consumption culture of their parents. Yet despite these changes, images of the alcohol conventions of Mediterranean nations have barely changed in daily discourse. Besides, the North–South dimension is still used to explain the difference between the northern liquor/beer culture and the wine culture of southern Europe.²⁶

Representing the Drinking Pattern Abroad

Traditional images of Icelandic drinking patterns have deep historical roots, as has been discussed above. The question is whether they can be declared obsolete and viewed as cultural relics. Much was made in older discourse of how foreigners viewed Icelanders’ drinking culture. Travel books written by foreigners visiting Iceland in the 19th century are often presented as examples of the astute perception of the visitor. Yet some of those authors specifically stated that they had never seen a drunken person in Iceland.²⁷ Those descriptions have been more easily forgotten than those that depict the extremes. Thus the image of drinking patterns was to a substantial degree formed by the perception of foreigners and foreigners’ views on Icelanders’ drinking culture. This discourse continued and visitors’ views on drinking continued to be news material. An example from the end of the 20th century is the coverage in *Morgunblaðið* of an English journalist’s writings on Iceland in the magazine *Bizarre* after having visited the country in 1998. The journalist was accompanied by an Icelandic photographer who took the pictures complementing the article.²⁸ “Elf settlements,” swimming pools, and traditional Icelandic food such as sheep heads and sour meat had not impressed the English journalist. But she was shocked at the price of alcohol and was puzzled over the peculiar drinking customs, and the

²⁵ Gefou-Madianou, Karlsson, & Österberg 2002: 220.

²⁶ Mäkelä & Room 2000.

²⁷ Ísleifsson 1996.

²⁸ “Glögg gestsauga” [Astute Eye of the Visitor] 1998: B2–B3.

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

photographer reports: “I think the nightlife and the crowd in the city centre on Saturday night was what amazed her most.” In the magazine *Bizarre*, the journalist wrote about her impression of Icelandic women going out: “Astró is crawling with drunken Viking girls who all look like Barbie dolls.”²⁹

Foreign visitors’ image of and participation in the nightlife in Reykjavík has made news particularly if the guests are international celebrities. Reportage of a visit to Reykjavík and the screening of the American film *Hostel* produced by Quentin Tarantino and directed by Eli Roth is an example where a promotion of the film was intermixed with their accounts of the nightlife in Reykjavík.³⁰ Descriptions of the images of Iceland and Icelanders as they appear in the foreign media appear to be taken very seriously by Icelanders, who sometimes attempt to influence them. Icelanders abroad often actively participate in this image creation.³¹

The well-known Icelandic musician Björk is a good example.³² She has made a name for herself as a progressive artist who is popular throughout the world, and she relates herself to the North to offset the image of multiculturalism and globalization. In her art creation she has worked not only with Icelandic artists but also Greenlandic choirs, which makes reference not only to Iceland but also the polar regions.

The North as an idea and a concept offers diverse possibilities for interpretation. Numerous studies have shown that many artists have used the North as a concept in their art. Somewhat surprisingly, Björk identifies herself with stereotypical Icelandic drinking culture to emphasize that her habits are consistent with the customs of the North. In an interview with the *Observer*, she says:

“I don’t like drinking with food, I think Iceland people are a bit old-school like that—we think if you drink with food then

²⁹ “Á Astró er allt morandi af drukknunum víkingastúlkum, sem allar líta út eins og Barbie-dúkkur.” “Glöggt gestsauga” [Astute Eye of the Visitor] 1998: B2–B3 (my translation).

³⁰ Jóhannsdóttir 2006.

³¹ Ísleifsson 2007.

³² Grace 2002.

DRINKING IN ICELAND AND IDEAS OF THE NORTH

you're an alcoholic...but if you drink lots, on a Friday night..."

"Then you're fine?"

"Yes. I think it's called 'binge drinking'. I don't see the point of drinking unless you end up dancing and letting go. I actually read somewhere that, if you look over a 40-year period, it's better for your body because then you get rid of so much stress. I'm a bit like, black and white, not in colour. But lots of drink, bit of dancing, bit of slapstick...is good! Thing is, you can't do that, that often. Twice a month would be good...but I can't wait, I think, fuck it!"³³

Björk presents this picture to emphasize that she is old-fashioned, connecting herself to the idea of the idiosyncratic Icelanders with their deeply rooted excessive drinking. She further emphasizes her uniqueness by comparing herself to black and white, suggesting that her position on drinking is clear and to the point. When a representative of progressive music like Björk paints a picture of herself as a representative of binge drinking, that image is undeniably still valid.

Considering unrestricted drinking as normalized behaviour is commonly illustrated in newspapers interviews as was reported in the article "Then There Were Drinking Bouts."³⁴ In this article a twenty-five-year-old woman says that it is in the nature of Icelanders to drink to become intoxicated, but it is changing, she adds. This view is also prevalent among professionals. In his book *Tíminn og tárið*, psychiatrist Óttar Guðmundsson writes: "The feeling is prevalent in the Icelandic national character that alcohol and drunkenness must always go hand-in-hand."³⁵ Based on this understanding, drinking for the purpose of getting drunk is integral to the Icelandic national character.

From the psychiatrist's comment on national character, let us move to the domain of the sociologist. Helgi Gunnlaugsson, professor of sociology, describes the drinking habits of Icelanders as

³³ Vernon 2007.

³⁴ "Þá voru drykkjur miklar" [Then There Were Drinking Bouts] 2004: 8–13 (my translation).

³⁵ Guðmundsson 1992: 123.

“shown to be exceedingly primitive” by international comparison.³⁶ This idea of primitivism is not new but was provocatively put forward by Halldór Laxness, who in *Dagleið á fjöllum*, published in 1937, alludes to his countrymen: “but uncivilized nations, as is well known, are highly susceptible to the thrall of alcohol, for example, Eskimos.”³⁷

The idea of Icelanders’ ignorance of good manners has not only appeared in allegations that they cannot handle their liquor. Clichés are common: they cannot cook, cannot appreciate good food. They do not know how to dance or sing. They are also considered worse drivers than people in neighbouring countries, and road culture is regarded to be at a low level.³⁸ All these allegations have been used to show how far the Icelandic nation had to go in becoming civilized. However, not all of these assertions may sound familiar to young adults in Iceland today. Such deficiencies, including the lack of manners of how to drink, have typically been ascribed to nations undergoing a civilization process. Another feature of the discourse on Icelandic drinking culture is that it seldom takes into account diversity; rather, the tendency is to look at the drinking culture as unchangeable and uniform.

Nevertheless, an example of a new pattern and a changed image of Icelanders’ position on alcohol appears in this intriguing article by former consul Þórir Gröndal:

The change over the last quarter-century in how the nation handles alcohol is remarkable. In the past it was “King Bacchus” who ruled; now he is, at best, like an acquaintance or friend whom one might, or might not, include [...] Icelanders on package tours abroad have started to behave just like regular tourists. The new generation that now holds positions of power and influence in Iceland is the first in many centuries that is free from the bonds of Bacchus. They are the people who can talk about alcohol culture without blushing, go on wine tasting tours of France, drink only specific types of single

³⁶ Gunnlaugsson 2001: 79.

³⁷ “en villipjóðum er sem kunnugt er mjög hætt við að falla fyrir áfengisbölinu, t.d. eskimóum.” Laxness 1962: 157 (my translation).

³⁸ “Reykjavíkurbrep” 2001: 28–29.

DRINKING IN ICELAND AND IDEAS OF THE NORTH

malt Scotch, and have more than one type of vodka in the cabinet.³⁹

This description suggests that the image has changed: drunken Icelanders have become cosmopolitan citizens of the world. Civilization has succeeded.

Alcotourism

Tourism studies and alcohol studies have been assimilated under the heading “alcotourism” by David Bell.⁴⁰ The term refers to the practice of travelling to drink, and to drinking while on holiday and while travelling. Drinking is often a part of tourists’ experience of a summer or winter holiday, but intoxication at the site visited can cause a public disorder and become a matter of control. Alcotourism includes a broad span of drinking places and events as diverse as stag parties and wine tasting. This research area has not been given much attention in tourism and alcohol studies.

Since the 1960s, cheap drinking has been among the many factors that attracted people from northerly countries to spend their holidays in southern Europe. With tourism as an increasingly important industry for the Icelandic economy it became essential to reach new target groups, one of them being the young and adventurous. In order to promote Iceland as an exciting destination for this marketing group, the image of the riotous and high-powered North can be an advantage, but the reality of high alcohol prices and restricted availability of alcohol has to be ignored.

Icelandair’s advertising campaign in the United Kingdom depicting Reykjavík as a nightlife city is an example of alcotourism marketing. Following this marketing, Reykjavík was often described as a “cool” city, and some Icelanders even thought Reykjavík was the number one “fun city” in Europe, when cities like Liverpool, Helsinki, and Tallinn were competing for the title.⁴¹ The campaign

³⁹ Gröndal 2001: B5.

⁴⁰ Bell 2008.

⁴¹ Salasuo 2005.

also delivered the message that Icelandic women were always ready to “drink and party,” as literary scholar Heiða Jóhannsdóttir has discussed in her work.⁴² This mix was also used in Icelandair’s advertising campaign in the Scandinavian countries, including that which appeared in *Politiken* in 2004. It included a picture of a girl in a bikini top with the upper part of her torso above water, while columns of steam rose in the background—the picture was perhaps meant to allude to the Blue Lagoon. Underneath, in big letters, was the caption: “Try an Icelandic cocktail.”⁴³ This was followed by a caption in smaller letters: “Take the most beautiful scenery, add a dash of adventure, mix with a good portion of relaxation, and you have an Icelandic dream cocktail.”⁴⁴ The text and picture suggest that the girl is the symbol of the cocktail cherry in the glass. The advertisement is marked not only with the Icelandair logo but also that of the Icelandic Tourist Board, showing that a public institution also supported the advertisement featuring the cocktail.

The response to the objectification of women in these advertisements elicited strong reactions from the feminist movement and also from interested parties in the tourism industry that attempt to target groups other than the British. A commentary in *Morgunblaðið* quoted Anton Antonsson, managing director of the Terra Nova-Sól travel agency:

It would be very dangerous if this nightlife image of Iceland were to become permanent. In any case, visitors looking for nightlife don’t stay long. It is those who tour the country for longer periods that create the most revenues, and we should try to hold on to them and to facilitate an increase in their numbers.⁴⁵

⁴² Jóhannsdóttir 2006.

⁴³ “Prøv en islandsk cocktail” [Try an Icelandic Cocktail] [Advertisement] 2004 (my translation).

⁴⁴ “Tag den smukkeste natur, tilføj et stenk eventyr og mix det med en pæn dosis afslapning, så har du en islandsk drømmecoctail” (my translation).

⁴⁵ “Það er stórhættulegt ef þessi nátturlífsmynd af Íslandi festist í sessi. Þeir sem sækjast eftir nátturlífinu stoppa hvort sem er stutt. Það eru hinir sem ferðast um landið um lengri tíma sem skapa mestu tekjurnar og við eigum að reyna að halda í þá og fjölga þeim.” “Allir leggist á eitt við að laða að ferðamenn” [Working Together to Attract Tourists] 2001: 17 (my translation).

Thus image creation by one interested party can lead to conflicts with another, as described by Ísleifsson.⁴⁶

Beer and Wine as Tools for Image Creation

An interesting question to consider is whether images of drinking patterns can be tools for people to show their social position and taste, as outlined in the theories of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu concerning class distinction.⁴⁷ The lifting of the ban on beer sales in Iceland in 1989, after seventy-four years of prohibition, definitely changed consumption culture. However, it also held great symbolic value. The stance on whether or not to allow the sale of beer reflected a generation gap. Opinion polls revealed that older women were opposed, and young men were in favour. Thus beer became the drink of the young and advanced—perhaps the social group that most frequently brings about innovation. It was a drink for a new era, and beer was presented as the antithesis to hard liquor, which belonged to the past. Hard liquor was seen as a symbol of the uncivilized North, whereas beer represented the culture and worldliness of the continent. Beer was not only a new product, but also a new tool for demonstrating good taste. However, as beer became popular with all social groups, it quickly lost its value as a tool for class distinction. The intoxicating characteristics of beer also caused beer drinking to lead to drunkenness. Research into drinking has shown that young men drink a vast amount of beer at once, presumably to feel intoxicated.⁴⁸ The heavy drinking of beer has thus served to reaffirm the image of unrestrained, as opposed to restrained, drinking.

The state liquor stores, which hold a monopoly on alcohol sales, have made a systematic effort to change their image over the last two decades. A new logo for ÁTVR (the State Alcohol and Tobacco Company of Iceland) was designed in 2001, depicting a cluster of grapes. The objective was to allude to an emphasis on wine sales, and the ÁTVR retail chain was subsequently renamed Vínbúð (Wine Store). In other words, a political decision was made to change the store's image and to revamp the image of alcohol. The logo also

⁴⁶ Ísleifsson 2002.

⁴⁷ Bourdieu 1984.

⁴⁸ *Afengisneysla á Íslandi* 2005.

delivered a message to customers about drinking wine with food, as well as about moderate drinking.

Wine is in many ways a convenient tool for changing an image. Specialist knowledge is involved in its marketing, newspapers commission wine specialists to write articles about wine, and discussions about wine are central to cooking programmes on both Icelandic and foreign television stations. Wine tasting courses and wine cellars imply a quest for knowledge and specialization, and with their knowledge of wines, consumers can demonstrate their superiority. Wine drinking, in itself, is not a useful tool to demonstrate one's social status. For wine drinking to become a marker for class distinction the consumer has to demonstrate that he or she is a wine connoisseur, preferring vintage wine and rejecting boxed wines. In subsequent years the demand for wine rose somewhat, but it was mostly the less expensive wines, particularly boxed wines, that became popular. Therefore, wine as a marker for social status shared the fate of beer as a somewhat failed tool for distinction because there was more demand for quantity than quality. Yet being a wine connoisseur has kept its status as a symbol of good taste and high social standing but has also acquired snob value.

In the case of Iceland it is not true to state that alcoholic beverages have symbolic value as markers of social class. It is interesting to observe how perceptions of drinking have little utility for class distinction within the community, which could be due to the social restraint of a small community seeking to strengthen its unity. Thus women are under pressure to imitate the imagined consumption patterns of men, and adolescents are under pressure to imitate adults. Rather than being a symbol of distinction, both beer and wine drinking can be valuable as symbols of unity, as both have eliminated the generation and gender gaps when it comes to their consumption. Beer became *the* main drink, and even though wine is often viewed as "ladies' tippie of choice," it is men who own the wine cellars.

Closing Words

The belief in the unique relationship between alcohol—particularly intoxication—and the national character appears to have deep roots and to thrive. This relationship extends only to alcohol, however; the

DRINKING IN ICELAND AND IDEAS OF THE NORTH

allusion to illegal drugs like hash and amphetamines is not quite unknown but much less clear. Although certain groups hold the view that Icelandic hash-smoking culture is unique, the idea is not prominent. This is possibly the case because alcohol has been incorporated into the community, whereas efforts are still being made to exclude other drugs. Besides, the illegal status of the drugs presumably plays a role.

In international comparisons, Icelanders' drinking patterns are typical of those of other Nordic nations.⁴⁹ Icelanders do hold a unique position when it comes to alcohol, but contrary to the stereotypical image, it is not related to their drinking patterns. The uniqueness is in the beer ban during most of the 20th century, the high percentage of inhabitants who have undergone alcohol rehabilitation treatment, and the widespread prevalence of AA meetings.⁵⁰ Historical factors may explain this need for staging a uniqueness. Iceland's position in the North Atlantic and an autonomous culture create a framework for the Icelandic community, which, as a result of its small size, is perpetually struggling for individuality and independence.

The publicly stated objective of alcohol policy has long been to control drinking. Many of those who supported the sale of beer hoped it would lead to changes in the pattern of drinking. Most who held that vision believed that beer was the first step towards civilizing drinking habits. Later, one could observe the same expectations concerning wine—that it was the right tool for changing the drinking pattern. Similar ideas are known from other Nordic countries, and Börje Olsson in Sweden has written about “the dream of a better drinking arrangement” where the vision is that the Swedes should adapt a continental drinking pattern.⁵¹

The image of the Icelandic excessive drinking pattern is kept alive because of its value in the arts, daily life, and business. Other agents that probably contribute to the survival of this image are public health and alcohol policy advocates. Sulkunen has pointed out that images of

⁴⁹ Mäkelä et al. 2006.

⁵⁰ Ólafsdóttir 2000.

⁵¹ Olsson 1990.

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

alcohol influence policy but that they also depend on the social and cultural environment of policy making.⁵² At a glance, one might assume that alcohol policy extends only to reality and pays no heed to images. Yet the policy makers or those who wish to influence alcohol policy are members of society and thus influenced by the representations of the prevailing drinking pattern. Alcohol policy has been shaped by an underlying desire for civilization; alcohol cannot be prohibited, but the momentum behind the policy is the hope that rules can be set for managing alcohol. By supporting the governing image of excessive drinking, it is possible to demonstrate the need for a more restricted drinking pattern. Such views have arisen in discussions about Reykjavík nightlife and serve to illustrate the status of the country's young people and the acute need for preventative measures.⁵³ Interestingly, the same idea is also used for commercial purposes by other interested parties, to get young people into the pubs and clubs in the city centre, and even to attract foreign tourists.

Images can be remarkably tenacious and take a long time to change, as witnessed by the governing image of an Icelandic excessive drinking pattern. When this image was supposed to be fading out, due to introduction of beer and increased share of wine, it is brought in the light again by outer realities. Due to global warming, the North as a geographic and cultural area has recently gained a new economic and political status where there are vested interests involved. This may probably lead to an increased tendency to connect the overall culture of Icelandic society to images of the North. Such an inclination might strengthen the image of unrestricted drinking as a characteristic of the North as opposed to the controlled drinking in the South.

In general, Icelanders are very concerned about images of their culture and the reputation of their country. Iceland is among the countries that have practiced nation branding on the grounds that a good image may create favourable conditions for foreign investment, tourism, and trade. In this context the image of drinking in Iceland matters.

⁵² Sulkunen 1998.

⁵³ Ólafsdóttir 2003.

References

- Áfengisneysla á Íslandi* [Alcohol Consumption in Iceland] (2005). Reykjavík: Lýðheilsustöð.
- “Allir leggist á eitt við að laða að ferðamenn” [Working Together to Attract Tourists] (2002). *Morgunblaðið*, 26 Jan., p. 17.
- Anderson, P., & Baumberg, B. (2006). *Alcohol in Europe. A Public Health Perspective. A Report for the European Commission*, London: Institute of Alcohol Studies.
- Árnason, Ó. H. (1992). *Áfengismálastefna Íslendinga—Stutt sögulegt yfirlit* [Icelanders’ Alcohol Policy—A Short Historical Overview], Reykjavík: Áfengisvarnaráð.
- Bell, D. (2009). “Destination Drinking: Toward a Research Agenda on Alcotourism,” *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*, 15(3), pp. 291–304.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (R. Nice, trans.), Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Davidson, P. (2005). *The Idea of North*, London: Reaction Books Ltd.
- Eddadigte. Völuspá. Hávamál.* (1962). Nordisk filologi Serie A. Tekster. Published by Jón Helgason. Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard.
- Gefou-Madianou, D., in collaboration with Karlsson, T., & Österberg, E. (2002). “Greece,” in *Alcohol Policies in EU Member States and Norway. A Collection of Country Reports*, eds. T. Karlsson & E. Österberg, Helsinki: STAKES, pp. 217–232.
- “Glöggst gestsauga” [Astute Eye of the Visitor] (1998). *Morgunblaðið*, 16 Jan., pp. B2–B3.
- Grace, S. (2002). *Canada and the Idea of the North*, Montreal and Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen’s University Press.
- Gröndal, Th. (2001). “Áfengisminjasafnið” [The Museum of Alcohol], *Morgunblaðið*, 14 Oct., p. B5.
- Guðmundsson, Ó. (1992). *Tíminn og táríð. Íslendingar og áfengi í 1100 ár* [Time and the Tear. Icelanders and Alcohol for 1100 Years], Reykjavík: Forlagið.
- Gunnlaugsson, H. (2001). “Vímuefni og samfélag” [Intoxicants and Community], in *Fíkniefni og forvarnir. Handbók fyrir heimili og skóla* [Narcotics and Prevention Handbook for Families and Schools], Reykjavík: Fræðslumiðstöð í fíknivörnum, p. 79.

- Horverak, Ø., & Bye, E. (2007). *Det norske drikkemonsteret. En studie basert på intervjudata fra 1973–2004* [The Norwegian Drinking Pattern. A Study Based on Interview Data from 1973 to 2004], Oslo: Statens institutt for rusmiddelforskning. SIRUS rapport nr. 2/2007.
- Hupkens, C. L., Knibbe, R. A., & Drop, M. J. (1993). “Alcohol Consumption in the European Community: Uniformity and Diversity in Drinking Patterns,” *Addiction*, 88, pp. 1391–1404.
- Imagology: A Handbook on the Literary Representation of National Characters, Adjusted Outline*. Oct. 2005. <<http://cf.hum.uva.nl/images/>>.
- Ísleifsson, S. R. (1996). *Ísland. Framandi land* [Iceland. A Strange Country], Reykjavík: Mál og menning.
- Ísleifsson, S. R. (2002). “Fyrirmyndarsamfélagið Ísland” [Iceland. The Ideal Society], *Ritið*, 2(1), pp. 117–129.
- Ísleifsson, S. R. (2007). “In Comes Wine, Out Goes Wit. Icelandic Independence and Prohibition of Alcohol,” *Encountering Foreign Worlds. Experiences at Home and Abroad. Proceedings from the 26th Nordic Conference of Historians, Reykjavík 8–12 August 2007*, pp.13–24.
- Jochens, J. (1993). “Gender and Drinking in the World of the Icelandic Sagas,” in *A Special Brew...Essays in Honour of Kristof Glaman*, ed. T. Riis, Odense: Odense University Press, pp. 155–181.
- Jóhannsdóttir, H. (2006). “Under the Tourist Gaze, Reykjavík as the City that Never Sleeps,” in *The Cultural Reconstruction of Places*, ed. Á. Eysteinnsson, Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, pp. 111–121.
- Karlsson, T., & Simpura, J. (2001). “Changes in Living Conditions and Their Links to Alcohol Consumption in 16 European Countries, 1950 to 2000,” *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 18, pp. 82–99.
- Laxness, H. (1962). *Dagleið á fjöllum. Greinar* [A Day Trip on the Mountain. Articles], 2nd ed., Reykjavík: Heimskringla.
- Leersen, J., & Beller, M. (2007). *Imagology. The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters. A Critical Survey*, Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Leifman, H. (2001). “Homogenisation in Alcohol Consumption in the European Union,” *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 18, pp. 15–39.

DRINKING IN ICELAND AND IDEAS OF THE NORTH

- Mäkelä, P., Gmel, G., Frittner, U., Kuendig, H., Kuntsche, S., Bloomfield, K., & Room, R. (2006). "Drinking Patterns and their Gender Differences in Europe," *Alcohol and Alcoholism*, 41, Supplement 1, pp. i8–i18.
- "Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs" (2009). *Nordic Statistics 1993–2007*, 25(4), p. 325.
- Ólafsdóttir, H. (2000). *Alcoholics Anonymous in Iceland. From Marginality to Mainstream Culture*, Reykjavik: University of Iceland Press.
- Ólafsdóttir, H. (2003). "Óregla á almannafæri" [Disorderly Public Conduct], in *Borgarbrot. Sextán sjónarhorn á borgarsamfélagið*, ed. P. Björnsson, Reykjavik: Borgarfræðasetur og Háskólaútgáfan, pp. 119–134.
- Ólafsdóttir, H., Guðmundsdóttir, Á., & Ásmundsson, G. (1997). "The Europeanization of Drinking Pattern in Iceland after the Legalization of Beer," *European Addiction Research*, 3, pp. 59–66.
- Olsson, B. (1990). "Alkoholpolitik och alkoholens fenomenologi. Uppfatningar som artikulerats i pressen" [Alcohol Policy and the Phenomenology of Alcohol. Conceptions Articulated in the Press], *Alcohol Policy – Journal of Nordic Alcohol Research*, 7, pp. 184–195.
- The Poetic Edda* (1928). Translated with an introduction and explanatory notes by L. M. Hollander, Austin: University of Texas.
- "Prøv en islandsk cocktail" [Try an Icelandic Cocktail] [Advertisement] (2004). *Politiken*, 21 Nov.
- "Reykjavíkurbréf" (2001). *Morgunblaðið*, 19 Aug., pp. 28–29.
- Room, R. (1974). "Governing Images and the Prevention of Alcohol Problems," *Preventive Medicine*, 3, pp. 11–23.
- Room, R., & Bullock, S., (2002). "Can Alcohol Expectancies and Attributions Explain Western Europe's North–South Gradient in Alcohol's Role in Violence?" *Contemporary Drug Problems*, 29(Fall), pp. 619–652.
- Room, R., & Mäkelä, K. (2000). "Typologies of the Cultural Position of Drinking," *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 61(3), pp. 475–483.
- Salasuo, M. (2005). "Partying and Drug Use in Helsinki, Liverpool and Tallinn," *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 22, English Supplement, pp. 133–134.

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

- Simpura, J. (2001). "Trends in Alcohol Consumption and Economic Explanations: Sociological and Economic Explanations and Alcohol Policies," *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 18, pp. 3–13.
- Simpura, J., & Karlsson, T. (2001). *Trends in Drinking Patterns in Fifteen European Countries, 1950 to 2000. A Collection of Country Reports*, Helsinki: Stakes.
- Sulkunen, P. (1998). "Images and Realities of Alcohol," *Addiction*, 93(9), pp. 1305–1312.
- Sulkunen, P. (2002). "Between Culture and Nature: Intoxication in Cultural Studies of Alcohol and Drug Use," *Contemporary Drug Problems*, 29 (Summer), pp. 253–276.
- Sulkunen, P., Sutton, C., Tigerstedt, C., & Warpenius, K. (2002). *Broken Spirits. Power and Ideas in Nordic Alcohol Control*, Helsinki: NAD Publication No. 39.
- Vernon, P. (2007). " 'I didn't like being a celebrity. It's a service job. Like washing toilets,' " *Observer*, 8 July.
- Zacharasiewicz, W. (2009). "The Theory of Climate and the North in Anglophone Literature," in *Images of the North. Histories – Identities – Ideas*, ed. S. Jakobsson, Amsterdam: Rodopi, pp. 25–49.
- "Þá voru drykkjur miklar" [Then There Were Drinking Bouts] (2004). *Tímarit Morgunblaðsins*, 8 Aug. pp. 8–11.