

# The New Viking Wave: Cultural Heritage and Capitalism

Katla Kjartansdóttir  
Icelandic Centre of Ethnology and Folklore

**Abstract** – This article focuses on the ambivalent theme of Viking heritage, myth, and image deriving from the Old North within modern Icelandic society and its effect on Icelandic national image and identity. It sheds light on its development and use in social, cultural, and historical context and questions why this particular element has constantly been used as a recurrent theme in the identity and image construction of the Icelandic nation. It concludes that capitalism, tourism, and globalization can be seen as major factors as shown in the variety of ways in which the cultural heritage of the Vikings has been used, whether it is within museums and heritage sites or in presidential speeches. For decades capitalism and neoliberalism have been the main driving forces in Icelandic society that undoubtedly have affected its cultural policy and social discourse, a social discourse that for instance connected risky investments abroad with highly obscure theories of Viking lineage. This can be seen as an example of how a small nation-state uses its cultural heritage to strengthen its national cohesion: the link between the state and the nation, past and present, politics and culture.

**Keywords** – National image/identity, tourism, collective memory, cultural heritage, globalization/capitalism, Vikings

## Introduction

A few years ago a new wave seemed to hit Icelandic shores. Or perhaps one should rather call it a renewal of an old wave. It was what might be called the new Viking wave. The discourse concerning so-called Viking heritage, myth, and image has for long been rather ambivalent in Icelandic society, and at times it has even been coloured with slight awkwardness or even embarrassment. In this article I will take a closer look at this dynamic theme and focus on its development in a social, cultural, and historical context. In particular, I will focus on how a variety of “Viking elements” have been used as a recurrent theme in the so-called identity and image construction of the Icelandic nation. As pointed out by Anthony Smith and many

Katla Kjartansdóttir, “The New Viking Wave: Cultural Heritage and Capitalism,” 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.

others, the creation of national images and identities is never a once-and-for-all affair, but rather a recurrent activity that each generation needs to contribute to periodically.<sup>1</sup> Hence in order to shape and sustain national cohesion, one must constantly evoke or recreate the various meanings of any national image/identity and regularly revisit the variety of symbols, myths, and rituals. In that context national museums and heritage sites are essential social spaces or sites where such negotiations take place—and/or where meaning of such identity can be contested. In the field of nationalism studies the formation of national images has long been seen mainly as some sort of a top-down delivery that could be handed down by the elite, the state, and various other social institutions, such as heritage tourism, and then received by rather passive receivers often referred to as the people or the unnamed masses.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, however, theories of this sort have been under attack and formations of national images (and identities) have increasingly been depicted as diverse, fluid, and ongoing processes. They have even been portrayed as interactive dialogues or dynamic negotiations that take place between, and within, the various spheres and spaces of society—private as well as public. That is to say, the focus has to some degree been shifting from the state, its institutions, and the elite towards the various micro-levels of society as well as towards the so-called masses that increasingly have been seen as a decisive factor in the continuing process of national image and identity negotiations.<sup>3</sup> In perhaps a similar vein, reflexivity has also been seen as key to understanding these terms and their formation. According to Anthony Giddens, identity becomes a project that is constantly being remade and in which individuals constantly construct or organize self-narratives in an attempt to establish and control their pasts and secure their futures.<sup>4</sup> Homi Bhabha has also been on a similar track when describing cultural identity not as given in some essential way but rather as developed over the course of history as terms of this identity are worked out, both internally and in relation to external others. Their meanings are

---

<sup>1</sup> Smith 1986: 206; Connor 1990: 92.

<sup>2</sup> Hutchinson 1994; Kohn 1982.

<sup>3</sup> Löfgren 1989; Connor 1990; de Certau 1989; Bhabha 1990. But this somewhat new approach has perhaps been influenced by theories within visual studies that for long have described visual experience as an interactive process or a dialogue between the producer, the visual text, and the receiver; see for instance Crouch & Lübbren 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Giddens 1991, 1994.

thus continuously being renegotiated and as a result, as Bhabha explains, our relationship to such an identity has to be fundamentally ambivalent:

Identification is a process of identifying with and through another object, an object of otherness, at which point the agency of identification—the subject—is itself always ambivalent, because of the intervention of that otherness.<sup>5</sup>

As an ethnologist with a special interest in ambivalence, private space as well as public space, and “micro” no less than “macro,” I have embraced theories of this kind. Therefore, in my research on the Viking theme as a major part of Icelandic national image construction, I intend to focus on a broad mixture of social and cultural elements that can be found on both micro and macro levels of Icelandic society. That is to say, my intention is to examine this particular Viking theme and shed light on the various ways in which it has been woven into the Icelandic cultural fabric and national image/identity through the years, whether through media, objects, visual culture, presidential speeches, tourism, cultural heritage or, last but not least, certain discourses connected with contemporary investments abroad by Icelandic businessmen—the so-called Venture Vikings.

### The Icelandic Viking Image Construction

My investigation starts around the period that sometimes has been called the dawn of the Icelandic nation building, a process that began to develop quite extensively in the late 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.<sup>6</sup> Many Icelandic scholars who have been focusing on this process agree that during this period, when the national image began to take its form, the notion of a so-called Golden Age became of immense importance in the Icelandic national discourse. When Icelandic intellectuals, poets, and politicians started to create a collective sense of national unity and cultural continuity, the notion of the Golden Age was created as historian Sigríður Matthíasdóttir has described:

---

<sup>5</sup> Bhabha & Rutherford 1990: 211.

<sup>6</sup> Sigurðsson 1996; Hálfðánarson 2001.

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

In the period of 1900–1930 nationalism in Iceland was redefined and reshaped. Two important aspects of the 20th century nationalist myth were firmly established in this era. First, the cultural understanding that the nation, based on the national language, resembles a living organism, a national person with one identity, one will and the same interests applying to each and every Icelander. Second, there is an historical understanding where a national Golden-Age is constructed as the primary model for the modern nation-state.<sup>7</sup>

In short this was seen as the age of strong and proud heroes who, according to the Icelandic sagas, fought to defend their land, family, and honour. This was the age of the commonwealth, the age before foreign rule, and thus “the age before everything went wrong”—or so the Icelandic nationalist discourse went for a long time. But as stated, this particular period, the Golden Age, from the settlement until the loss of political autonomy in the 13th century, was seen as a highly prolific source—a source that was brought into play in the midst of the nation-building process and that even today is constantly dived into when it comes to giving the collective sense of national cohesion and cultural continuity a boost.<sup>8</sup> But as elsewhere in Europe it was the Icelandic elite, the intellectuals, the poets, and the politicians who were in the forefront of the nation-building process. It was, in other words, mostly in their hands to make use of, or create, the various images, themes, myths, and symbols that later could be used as tools in the political struggle for independence.

Another cultural factor of similar importance was the Icelandic sagas that throughout the nation-building process gained their status as one of the major national symbols and, as representative of the Golden Age, they became one of the major aspects in the making of Icelandic national image and identity.<sup>9</sup> Although the younger generations in contemporary Icelandic society do not relate as well to the stories as perhaps their ancestors did, one can still today see many traces of their former importance for the Icelandic national image and

---

<sup>7</sup> Matthíasdóttir 2004: 372.

<sup>8</sup> As can be seen in a recent presidential speech referred to later in this article.

<sup>9</sup> Sigurðsson 1996; Hálfðánarson 1996, 1997, 2001.

collective identity.<sup>10</sup> Within heritage tourism one can, for instance, clearly see many examples of their use and even recreation. As an example, in most parts of Iceland one can find some sort of heritage centre related to the sagas or even guided tours of the so-called saga trails, which often also play a major part in creating a collective sense of not just national, but also local, image and identity. The importance of national exhibitions of this sort for the shaping of collective identity has been stressed by a number of theorists within various disciplines, and the term “musealization” has been used to describe one of six possible strategies in the quest for such an identity.<sup>11</sup> According to Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, who is a key figure in the fields of museology and visual culture, such collections have “through the years played an important role in creating national identity as well as promoting national agendas,” and furthermore, “their role is to unite a populace, to reduce conflict and to ensure political stability and continuity.”<sup>12</sup>

If we agree with theorists such as Hooper-Greenhill and Tony Bennett, who have described national museums and heritage sites as “social spaces” where indications of certain power relations, knowledge, and ideology are being transmitted, the question inevitably arises about what kind of knowledge is being conveyed within such spaces and who provides the meaning of that knowledge. As I see it, the interpretation of all visual experiences mainly lies in the dynamic relationship between the producer, the visual text, and the viewer, while Hooper-Greenhill and Bennett mainly focus on the institutional apparatus as the key provider of meaning, power, and knowledge in accordance with the ideas of Michel Foucault, presented in works such as *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*.<sup>13</sup> Bennett has, for instance, pointed out how indications of “reality” and “scientific truth” are often used within museums, which could be seen as an example of how the institutional apparatus imposes and practises its knowledge and power.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Icelandic youngsters are, for instance, still obliged to read at least two to four Icelandic sagas during their primary and secondary education.

<sup>11</sup> Grabmann 2001: 219.

<sup>12</sup> Hooper-Greenhill 1994: 2.

<sup>13</sup> Hooper-Greenhill 1994; Bennett 1995.

<sup>14</sup> Bennett 1995: 21.

Regarding this relationship between the institutional apparatus and the viewer, Bennett tends to depict the viewer as far too passive in the meaning-making process. The viewer's role in the production (or contesting) of knowledge is of a more essential kind and the value of objects, images, symbols, myths, and rituals largely depends on the receiver.

### Icelandic Heritage Tourism

The saga heroes and perhaps especially the Viking theme seem to be up and coming within Icelandic heritage tourism. One of the Icelandic sagas, *Gísla saga Súrsónar*, is supposed to have taken place in Dýrafjörður in the Westfjords. In that area many place names from the story have been marked especially and many tourist websites state that one can easily take a riding trail around certain areas there with this particular saga as the main guide.<sup>15</sup> A Viking ship replica that can take tourists on short trips was recently built there, and a town festival where people dress up in Viking costumes and have fun “the Viking way” is regularly held. This is a part of a recent tourist project in the area called “Vikings in the Westfjords.”<sup>16</sup>

A similar example is the opening of a new heritage centre that was built in 2006 in the small village of Borgarnes in western Iceland. The centre primarily offers a historical exhibition that relates to the settlement period of that area, and one can also attend a play called *Mr. Skallagrímsson*, which mainly focuses on one of the heroes from the sagas, Egill Skallagrímsson. A few years later the play *Brák*, which tells the story of one of the female slaves who were brought from the British Isles to Iceland during the settlement period, was also put on stage.<sup>17</sup> Other examples where the cultural heritage of the Old North (sometimes with obscure connections to the Vikings)<sup>18</sup> is put

---

<sup>15</sup> Vesturferðir [West Tours],  
<<http://www.vesturferdir.is/index.php?k=2&f=94&lang=en>>.

<sup>16</sup> “Ferðapjónusta í Dýrafirði eflist” [Increase in Tourist Services in Dýrafjörður] 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Landsnámssetur Íslands [The Settlement Centre],  
<[http://www.landnam.is/default.asp?Sid\\_Id=26364&tId=99&Tre\\_Rod=001|&qsr](http://www.landnam.is/default.asp?Sid_Id=26364&tId=99&Tre_Rod=001|&qsr)>.

<sup>18</sup> Here it is important to note that the term “Settlement” is more frequently used in the Icelandic context than “the Viking Age,” and the term *landnámsmaður* (settler) is also

on display are *Njálusetrið* in Hvolsvöllur (southern Iceland), Saga Museum in Perlan (Reykjavík) and the Manuscript Exhibition in the Culture House (Reykjavík).

But as Andrew Wawn points out, Hlíðarendi had long been a place of pilgrimage for Victorian lovers of *Njals Saga*, and according to him many Victorians did seek what they believed to be their Viking Age heritage. He states:

It was those old northern values, after all, that in the eyes of many Victorians, underpinned the best of Britain at home and abroad—imperial power, mercantile prosperity, technological progress, social stability and justice. What was more natural than to have books that help trace the roots of that prowess back to its Norwegian homelands, or to the north Atlantic island where the legacy could still be heard in its linguistically purest form”?<sup>19</sup>

I have only mentioned a few examples here of how the cultural heritage of the Viking Age has been utilized within the Icelandic tourist and heritage industry as a theme aimed at both foreign as well as domestic travellers. As stated, however, the cultural influence of the Vikings is extensive, and for Icelanders in particular the Vikings certainly have been, and still are, used as a major link to connect the past with the present as well as man with landscape. But as we know, such connections are fundamental when creating the collective memory that is the foundation of any national image and identity construction.<sup>20</sup> People both make and are made by landscape. It is, in other words, mainly through people’s experiences, practices, and performances that landscape starts to gain its meaning. Or rather it is through such interaction that their meaning is constantly negotiated and renegotiated. And in that respect one can emphasize that spaces, and perhaps in particular contested spaces such as landscape/nature or heritage sites, can be of particular importance in the process of creating and sustaining national identities and images.

---

rather used for the saga heroes that often have been called Vikings, at least since Victorian times in Britain; see Wawn 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Wawn 2000: 38–40.

<sup>20</sup> Halbwach 1992.

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

Regarding the negotiation of Icelandic national identity, this relation has been seen to be of particular importance. As stated earlier, the special relationship and almost biological link between man and nature have long been emphasized in Icelandic national discourse. According to a number of Icelandic theorists who have examined the creation of Icelandic image and identity, this relationship played indeed a fundamental role, especially during the struggles for independence, from the late 19th century to around the mid-20th century.<sup>21</sup> This can be seen reflected, for instance, in the writings of various poets and politicians of the time who emphasized especially this strong connection between the nation, nature, and cultural heritage. It has also been pointed out that the Icelandic intelligentsia around this period was much influenced by Romantic ideologies and German national theorists such as Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) and Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), who both emphasized similar themes in their writings on nation formation and the nature of national identities. According to their ideas, nature and nation were linked in almost biological ways and thus the heart of every nation, the *Volkegeist*, was to be discovered among those who were working and living in a constant relationship with nature, such as fishermen and peasants. Thus it was also within their culture, their customs, and their stories that the true soul of every nation was to be found. And perhaps therefore it has, even to this day, been mainly various bits and pieces from that particular culture that have become known as national culture in Iceland.<sup>22</sup>

As stated above, along with the Golden Age and the sagas, the image of the Vikings and so-called Viking heritage are also a major part of the Icelandic image construction. Up to a point one could perhaps state that the sagas, the Golden Age, and the Viking image all relate to one another, although according to many Icelandic historians and archaeologists the heroes of the sagas, the Icelandic settlers, and heroes of the Golden Age were not Vikings at all. A debate has been ongoing for some time between Icelandic academia and heritage tourism as to whether, and how, this complex term “Viking” should be applied. Scholars have emphasized that the Icelandic settlers can hardly be described as typical Vikings simply because they were the

---

<sup>21</sup> Sigurðsson 1996; Hálfðánarson 1996, 1997, 2001; Karlsson 1985; Matthíasdóttir 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Sigurðsson 1996; Hálfðánarson 1996, 1997, 2001; Karlsson 1985; Matthíasdóttir 2004.

first inhabitants. As we know, typical Viking invasions normally included someone to invade. One of the main attributes that are normally used when describing Vikings and their culture is that they were barbaric intruders. According to the sagas and archaeological findings, however, there seems to have been very few, mostly young, men who travelled abroad occasionally and perhaps killed a man or two. But whether the rest of the population, mostly farmers living peacefully, should also be called Vikings has not yet been fully agreed upon.<sup>23</sup>

A discourse of this kind has, however, been regularly revisited through the years and the question still remains whether and how this ambivalent Viking heritage, image, and myth should be presented and how much emphasis should be put on this particular theme as part of the national image. When the Icelandic National Museum was reopened in September 2004 after a long restoration process, it was for instance debated whether a giant replica of a Viking sword should be erected in a nearby square.<sup>24</sup> After a thorough discussion as to whether this would be appropriate, the idea seemed to vanish and the sword has yet not been erected.<sup>25</sup> A so-called Viking village has however long been operated (notably without any state support) in Hafnarfjörður, a small town on the outskirts of the Reykjavík area, where people can experience “Viking” festivals and various other “Viking” events, or as the advertisement goes: “Experience traditional Icelandic food in a unique Viking atmosphere! Enjoy a three course “Viking dinner” including one beer and one schnapps of ‘Black death’ for ISK 6,200.”<sup>26</sup> And just to emphasize even more how life-changing this experience can be, I will quote another advertisement from the same “village”:

---

<sup>23</sup> Vísindavefurinn [The Icelandic Web of Science], <<http://visindavefur.hi.is/svar.php?id=6617>>; see also Andrew Wawn, who states in his book *The Vikings and Victorians* (2000) that the Victorians invented the Vikings (or at least the term) in early 19th-century Britain. In this article, however, I will not use the Victorian understanding of the term but rather the wide, obscure, and sometimes misunderstood interpretation of it that remains ambivalent (partly because that's the nature of kitsch). And of course its meaning also depends on the cultural context.

<sup>24</sup> Guðlaugsson 2004.

<sup>25</sup> See also Elísson 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Fjörukráin, <<http://www.fjorukrain.is/en/viking%5Frestaurant/>>.

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

In June 2005 we opened a cave behind the Hotel Viking. In and around it we'll have our Viking kidnapping as we have had for many years, the difference is that now we are going to do it for everybody, not only groups, who wants to have an adventure and welcome drink the Viking way. Before these caves this was only done for people coming for our famous Viking dinner. These hijackings are well organized and managed by our artists and the Viking warriors in a magical surrounding fit for Vikings and guests. At the same time you will be able to see some nice handwork from Iceland, Faroe Islands and Greenland. The cave will be around 220 square meters and fit for all sizes of groups from one and up. As before there will be some singing and buses will be stormed by our Viking warriors offering "Mead" to drink—Viking Beer.<sup>27</sup>

Although much of this is probably presented with a tongue-in-cheek or a somewhat ironic undertone, one can clearly see how an often highly simplified and skewed Viking image is still being promoted despite all scholarly attempts to correct it. In many ways it even seems that this particular theme has been given a new boost that can be traced back to the year 2000, when Icelanders celebrated the millennium of the Nordic discovery of America. According to some Icelandic sagas Erik the Red, who travelled from Iceland and founded the Nordic settlement in Greenland, had a son, Leif the Lucky, who became the first European to visit the New World. As part of these celebrations a huge replica of a Viking ship, called the *Icelander*, was built, which then sailed the same route as Leif the Lucky did 1000 years earlier. On the same occasion a reconstruction of *Eiríksstaðir*, the place where Erik the Red lived and where Leif the Lucky was born, was built just beside the spot where the original farm was, according to recent archaeological findings. Today the place is presented as an exact replica of a Viking farm, where guides are dressed in Viking costumes and guests are offered "traditional Viking" food along with "traditional Viking" drinks.<sup>28</sup>

A few years after the celebrations, however, the replica Viking ship *Íslendingur* became a problem because nobody knew what to do

---

<sup>27</sup> Fjörukraín, <<http://www.fjorukrain.is/en/the%5Fcave/>>.

<sup>28</sup> "The Vikings" (n.d.).

with it. After several years of debating whether the ship should be sold abroad or whether the Icelandic state should buy it, the Icelandic minister of education finally decided that a new Viking village should be established, now with state support, and there the ship should at last gain its proper place.<sup>29</sup> Whether this alone ought to be seen as a token of a new Viking wave is of course too much of a claim, but when phrases such as “the Venture Vikings”<sup>30</sup> found their way into both Icelandic as well as foreign media in reference to a few Icelandic businessmen, and their investments abroad were described as Viking invasions—as it was put in an article in *BBC News Magazine*<sup>31</sup> with the headline, “The Vikings Are Coming!” along with a picture of a man with a “traditional” Viking helmet—there could hardly be any doubt. It became obvious that the Viking myth was still thriving within a variety of contemporary Icelandic, as well as foreign, social and cultural contexts—and it even found its way into presidential speeches.

### Venture Vikings or Barbarians from the Old North?

In a public meeting held by the Icelandic Society of Historians on 10 January 2006, the Icelandic president, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, emphasized quite strongly the importance of the Viking heritage for contemporary Icelandic society and especially in relation to Icelandic investments abroad. According to the president, this particular heritage could be seen as a contributing factor to the business success that a few Icelandic businessmen, to whom he referred as the Venture Vikings, had managed to gain through their various international investments. In his speech the president named ten characteristics and qualities as the main reasons for the businessmen’s success that, in his view, could all be traced back to their Icelandic cultural heritage, the foundations of Icelandic society or the “true” nature of Icelandic national identity. These were factors such as trust, daring, and courage—characteristics that, as he presented it, could all be traced back to “our forefathers” the Vikings along with various other so-called uniquely Icelandic elements. Or in his own words:

---

<sup>29</sup> Nordic Adventure Travel, <[http://www.nat.is/Sofn/vikingaskipid\\_islendingur.htm](http://www.nat.is/Sofn/vikingaskipid_islendingur.htm)>.

<sup>30</sup> In Icelandic, “Útrásarvíkingur.”

<sup>31</sup> Winterman 2006.

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

It is interesting to consider the question of how elements in our culture and history have played a part in our overseas ventures, how qualities we have inherited from our ancestors give us, perhaps, an advantage in the international arena and how perceptions and habits that for centuries set their stamp on our society have proved valuable assets for today's achievers on the international stage.<sup>32</sup>

He also states,

Iceland's pioneer settlers were an offshoot of the culture of the Vikings, the people who in the period between about 800 and 1000 AD were the world's greatest travellers, who did not hesitate to undertake long journeys in search of fame and fortune.<sup>33</sup>

And on a similar note he emphasizes that

the key to the successes that we have won in our ventures abroad has been our culture itself, the heritage that each new generation has received from the old; our society, tempered by the struggle for survival in ages past; the attitudes and habits that lie at the core of Icelandic civilisation. Our thrust into overseas markets in recent years is deeply rooted in our history. It is a reflection of our common national consciousness, though admittedly changes in the world as a whole have also played a crucial role.<sup>34</sup>

When reading through this recent presidential speech it is very interesting to look at the various themes and elements that the president has chosen to focus on and which he has chosen to describe as especially Icelandic. First and foremost it is interesting to note how he, throughout the speech, constantly connects the past with the present and unavoidably the notion of a collective memory comes to mind. As we know, such a memory has been seen as one of the fundamental elements when forming a collective sense or shared

---

<sup>32</sup> Grímsson 2006: 2.

<sup>33</sup> Grímsson 2006: 3.

<sup>34</sup> Grímsson 2006: 3.

understanding of any national image and identity. Whether unconsciously or not, the president seems to be well aware of the importance of a collective memory as he goes on to say that

the eighth element is the heritage I mentioned at the beginning of this lecture, the Settlement and the Viking Age, which give us our models, the deep-rooted view that those who venture out into unknown territory deserve our honour, that crossing the sea and settling in a new country brings one admiration and respect. The achievers of our own day are frequently judged by these standards, and we look upon them as the heirs to a tradition that goes all the way back to the time of the first pioneer settlers in Iceland.<sup>35</sup>

Evidently it is being emphasized, in a Herderian sense, that the reasons for the success of a few Icelandic businessmen abroad is to be found in the Icelandic past and in the lifestyle of our forefathers the Vikings.<sup>36</sup>

Some of the Icelandic businessmen themselves seem to have been aware of these notions and to an extent tried to make some sort of use of them. In November 2006 my colleague and I conducted fieldwork at a so-called *þorrablót*, the Icelandic midwinter feast, held in London by the Icelandic bank Glitnir. There the bank manager (and Venture Viking) Bjarni Ármannsson stated that for several years the bank had been inviting their staff and business partners in Britain to feasts where “traditional” Icelandic food and drink is served and where “Viking helmets” and sheep horns are given to the guests. When interviewed, the bank manager stated that the whole charade was part of a calculated “image-making” of the bank. Along with the traditional name Glitnir of Old Norse origins, they wanted their business parties to be different and memorable in order to make the branding of the bank more efficient. In a similar vein, Ármannsson described how the bank made use of the strong smell of Icelandic shark meat to force their way into people’s senses by sending their guests some shark meat in an invitation box, banking on the idea that

---

<sup>35</sup> Grímsson 2006: 7.

<sup>36</sup> See also Magnússon 2006.

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

after that experience they would remember the bank for the rest of their lives.<sup>37</sup>

When interviewing the bank manager and some of his staff as well, it appeared that the whole show was a very effective marketing strategy where irony, humour, and national imagery played a major part. Within the international business arena, standing out from the crowd is of immense importance, and according to the Icelandic bank manager, horrible-smelling food certainly can be helpful in that respect. The so-called Viking heritage, or what could be called bits and pieces of Icelandic national imagery, seemed to have found its way into the international business arena and was used there as a marketing tool. So although working within the international business arena, Icelandic Venture Vikings used their cultural heritage, such as the name Glitnir, sheep horns, shark meat, Black Death, and Viking helmets, to gain status and power within the international culture of capitalism and business.

In this context, a number of cultural theorists have pointed out how the maintenance of borders and boundaries (along with national images and identities) remain crucial under the conditions of globalization, even though they may be in constant flux. This corresponds with a growing resistance to those perceived to be outsiders, who it is feared might appropriate the cultural knowledge, identities, and economies of indigenous (often a minority) people. The right to an identity has now become the basis for making claims to both intellectual as well as cultural property.<sup>38</sup>

In his book *The Representation of the Past—Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World*, Kevin Walsh is on a similar track when stating that

Western capitalist nations developed into economies that were no longer truly “national” economies. The globalization of capital, the situation of branches of multinationals in many different countries, the outflow of foreign portfolio investments from the UK to other countries, and foreign

---

<sup>37</sup> Notes based on joint fieldwork with my fellow folklorist Kristinn Schram on the Glitnir þorablót in London, Nov. 2006. See also his article in this volume.

<sup>38</sup> Rowlands 1995; Lowenthal 1998; Appadurai 1996, 2001.

portfolio investments into that country, are examples of how national economies have been replaced by international economies. This view, that the national economy and society are subordinate to global forces is known as the world system theory. In this light, it may be possible to consider yet another reason for the development of heritage. It has been, and still is, a desire to maintain the only thing that nations can still call their own. In the case of Britain, the loss of power has been more difficult for some to accept than others. Britain is clearly no longer an imperial power and the economy does not even belong to the nation. Striving for something left that was truly “British”, the heritage was recognized as a powerful and hegemonic resource.<sup>39</sup>

In recent decades a similar development has been the case in Iceland and there are parallels between Iceland and Britain over a long period. Here I have mentioned how the Victorians used the past and the obscure link to the Old North heritage of the Vikings, and then also in subsequent years how they have been striving for their heritage in the age of globalization, capitalism, and neoliberalism. In relation to Iceland I have also shown in this article how the so-called Viking heritage of the Old North has been and is being revisited and used in a variety of social, cultural, and historical contexts as the nation’s constant reminder of its idyllic past in order to achieve national cohesion, affirm collective memory and cultural continuity, and to give the national identity a boost.<sup>40</sup>

## Conclusion

To conclude, the Viking theme seems to be thriving rather well within Icelandic society. Whether with an ironic undertone or not, it is clearly still being practiced and performed by Icelanders both at home and abroad. It is perhaps no surprise that a quite strong Viking emphasis is apparent within Icelandic heritage tourism, and in almost every souvenir shop in Iceland there is at least one plastic helmet with the traditional Viking horns attached. However, when the Icelandic

---

<sup>39</sup> Walsh 1992: 52.

<sup>40</sup> I am here referring to the economic boom that now has ended in a major economic crash.

## ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

president as well as the media and businessmen themselves start to use phrases such as “the Icelandic Venture Vikings” and connect their various investments abroad to some rather skewed Viking myths, one unavoidably starts to wonder why these socially exclusive (in relation to race and gender) symbols, myths, and rituals are still embraced, presented, and performed as part of the Icelandic national image at the beginning of the 21st century. When answering such a question one must keep in mind the various ways in which national images are negotiated and also their social and cultural context. Within the context of heritage and tourism it is a well-known fact that aspects of truth quite often become obscured and perhaps even completely irrelevant. Ever since tourism became a rising industry people have been concerned with the link between heritage, tourism, and national images, and many have been worried about the negative influences of mass tourism and the so-called heritage industry on some obscure cultural authenticity. Terms such as “Disneyfication” and “McDonaldization” have even been used to describe that particular industry as machinery with the capability of changing “real” national identities into mere fabrications by using recently invented or even false national traditions, myths, and symbols. But then one is reminded of Benedict Anderson, who stated that nations should not be defined by their falsity or authenticity but rather by the style in which they are imagined.<sup>41</sup> The only trouble is who gets to decide what is true and what is false in that regard.

If we take as an example a tourist who enters a Viking village, she is, in most cases, very well aware of how the so-called historical facts are perhaps not all very accurate—and she simply accepts it. She just plays along and at times she may get a chance to do so with appropriate objects or even costumes. However, despite the somewhat ironic undertones that almost unavoidably become a part of such a cultural context, the role of the shared symbols, myths, and images are of a similar kind as in the case of a serious presidential speech. Their recurrent use, in whatever context, can be seen as a part of the constant negotiation and renegotiation of a collective national memory, image, and identity and its various fluid meanings. So perhaps, when asked about my Viking heritage, I might answer without hesitation, “Yes, yes, yes, of course—we all have Viking

---

<sup>41</sup> Anderson 1991: 6.

blood in our veins,” or roar like Jón Páll Sigmarsson when taking part in the World’s Strongest Man contest: “I’m a Viking, not an Eskimo!”—or perhaps not. In relation to the recent crisis of the Icelandic financial system, the Venture Vikings are not as popular as they used to be. How this will affect the Icelandic national image is not yet quite clear, but it certainly will be interesting to see if the Viking theme will maintain its position as an important element in the continuing image-weaving of the nation.

## References

- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso.
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Appadurai, A. (2001). “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination,” in *Globalization*, ed. A. Appadurai, Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 1–21.
- Babha, H. K., & Rutherford, J. (1990). “The Third Space,” in *Identity, Community Culture, Difference*, ed. J. Rutherford, London: Lawrence and Wishart, pp. 207–221.
- Bennett, T. (1995). *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics*, London: Routledge.
- Certeau, M. (1988). *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Connor, W. (1990). “When Is a Nation,” *Ethnic and Racial studies*, 13(1), pp. 92–103.
- Crouch, D., & Lübbren, N. (2003). *Visual Culture and Tourism*, Oxford: Berg.
- Elísson, G. (2004). “Sverðið í sverðinum” [The Sword in the Ground], *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins*, 29 May. Retrieved from <[http://www.mbl.is/mm/gagnasafn/grein.html?grein\\_id=801019](http://www.mbl.is/mm/gagnasafn/grein.html?grein_id=801019)>, accessed 10 Oct. 2010.
- “Ferðaþjónusta í Dýrafirði eflist” [Increase in Tourist Services in Dýrafjörður] (2009). *Bajarins Besta* [Best in Town], 8 Oct. Retrieved from <<http://www.bb.is/?pageid=26&NewsID=138685>>, accessed 10 Oct. 2010.

- Fjörúkráin [Viking Village]. Retrieved from  
 <<http://www.fjorukrain.is/en/viking%5Frestaurant/>> and  
 <<http://www.fjorukrain.is/en/the%5Fcave/>>, accessed 10 Oct.  
 2010.
- Grabmann, B. (2001). "Identity in the Making," in *Boundaries and Identities. Nation, Politics and Culture in Scotland*, eds. C. D. Domenico, A. Law, J. Skinner, & M. Smith, Dundee: Abertay Press.
- Grímsson, Ó. R. (2006). "Icelandic Ventures," Office of the President of Iceland. Retrieved from  
 <<http://forseti.is/Raedurogkvedjur/Raedur2006/>>, accessed  
 10 Oct. 2010.
- Guðlaugsson, M. (2004). "Ritdeila um risasverð" [A Debate about Gigantic Swords], BA thesis, Listaháskóli Íslands.
- Halbwach, M. (1992). *On Collective Memory*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hálfðánarson, G. (1996). "Hvað gerir Íslendinga að þjóð? Nokkrar hugleiðingar um uppruna og eðli þjóða" [What Makes Icelanders a Nation? A Few Thoughts on the Origins and Nature of Nations], *Skírnir* (spring, 170), pp. 7–31.
- Hálfðánarson, G. (1997). "Þjóð og minningar" [Nation and Memory], *Ráðstefnurit íslenska sögufþingsins* [Papers Presented at the Icelandic Historical Congress], pp. 354–365.
- Hálfðánarson, G. (2001). *Íslenska þjóðríkið—uppruni og endimörk* [The Rise and Fall of the Icelandic Nation-State], Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag og Reykjavíkúráðakademían.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1994). *Museums and the Making of "Ourselves." The Role of Objects in National Identity*, Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Hutchinson, J. (1994). "Cultural Nationalism and Moral Regeneration," in *Nationalism*, eds. J. Hutchinson & A. Smith, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 122–131.
- Karlsson, G. (1985). "Spjall um rómantík og þjóðernisstefnu" [Conversation on Romanticism and Nationalism], *Tímarit Máls og Menningar*, 4(46), pp. 449–457.
- Kohn, H. (1982). *Nationalism. Its Meaning and History*, Malabar, Florida: Robert E. Krieger.

THE NEW VIKING WAVE: CULTURAL HERITAGE AND CAPITALISM

- Landsnámssetur Íslands [The Settlement Centre]. Retrieved from <[http://www.landnam.is/default.asp?Sid\\_Id=26364&tId=99&Tre\\_Rod=001|&qsr](http://www.landnam.is/default.asp?Sid_Id=26364&tId=99&Tre_Rod=001|&qsr)>, accessed 10 Oct. 2010.
- Löfgrén, O. (1989). “The Nationalization of Culture,” *Ethnologia Europaea*, 19, pp. 5–23.
- Lowenthal, D. (1985). *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lowenthal, D. (1998). *The Heritage Crusade*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Magnússon, S. G. (2006). “Við erum frábær!” [We Are Great!], *Kistan*. Retrieved from <[http://kistan.is/Default.asp?Sid\\_Id=28002&tre\\_rod=002|&tId=2&FRE\\_ID=39395&Meira=1](http://kistan.is/Default.asp?Sid_Id=28002&tre_rod=002|&tId=2&FRE_ID=39395&Meira=1)>, accessed 10 Oct. 2010.
- Matthíasdóttir, S. (2004). *Hinn sanni Íslendingur. Djóðerni, kyngervi og vald á Íslandi 1900–1930* [The True Icelander. National Identity, Sexual Identity, and Power in Iceland, 1900–1930], Reykjavík: Háskólaútgáfan.
- Nordic Adventure Travel. Retrieved from <[http://www.nat.is/Sofn/vikingaskipid\\_islendingur.htm](http://www.nat.is/Sofn/vikingaskipid_islendingur.htm)>, accessed 10 Oct. 2010.
- Rowlands, M. (2002). “Heritage and Cultural Property—The Power of Origins: Questions of Cultural Rights,” in *The Material Culture Reader*, ed. V. Buchli, Oxford: Berg, pp.105–115.
- Sigurðsson, G. (1996). “Icelandic National Identity—From Romanticism to Tourism,” in *Making Europe in Nordic Contexts*, ed. P. J. Anttonen, Turku: NIF Publications, pp. 41–75.
- Vesturferðir [West Tours]. Retrieved from <<http://www.vesturferdir.is/index.php?k=2&f=94&lang=en>>, accessed 10 Oct. 2010.
- “The Vikings” (n.d.). Celestial Navigation Net. Retrieved from <<http://www.celestialnavigation.net/vikings.htm>>, accessed 10 Oct. 2010.
- Vísindavefurinn [The Icelandic Web of Science]. Retrieved from <<http://visindavefur.hi.is/svar.php?id=6617>>, accessed 10 Oct. 2010.
- Wawn, A. (2000). *The Vikings and the Victorians. Inventing the Old North in 19th-Century Britain*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.

ICELAND AND IMAGES OF THE NORTH

Walsh, K. (1992). *The Representation of the Past. Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World*, London: Routledge.

Winterman, D. (2006). "The Vikings Are Coming," *BBC News*, 23 Nov. Retrieved from <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6170062.stm>>, accessed 10 Oct. 2010.