Out and Sometimes Home Again. The Politics of Icelandic Migration

Dr. Adriënne Heijnen, Department of Anthropology and Ethnography, University of Aarhus.
adrienne.heijnen@hum.au.dk

Anthropological studies of migration have been inspired by the political project of anthropology of giving voice to the poor, the political silent and invisible groups in society. The anthropology of traditional people – predominantly men – was followed by the anthropology of the poor in Western societies, of women, the sick and handicapped, and recently by the anthropology of children. Discussions of migration have therefore more than often departed from case studies of movements of people caused by shortage of resources or of war and violent conflicts. Migration is then addressed as the outcome of an imbalance in or disturbance of economic conditions, the movement of people going in one direction from poor underdeveloped regions of conflict to rich, developed countries (cf. Massey et al. 1993: 440). Even though analyses of migration in the context of social problems, vulnerable persons, violence, diffused identities and power are highly significant (see e.g. Brettell 2003; Trager 2005), I will focus in this paper on a different side of migration. Migration has the potential of empowering people and of becoming the building stone for a strong national identity, even when it is caused by changing power relations or the unequal distribution of economic resources. I will demonstrate how migration can become a metaphor for independence, individual autonomy, and a source of inspiration and justification for new movements of people and objects.

Another argument I would like to make concerns the importance of addressing the emic side of migration – of course if the available data and analytical framework allows us doing so. Migration should not only be discussed departing from external factors, but also from what it means for people to move away from their homeland and to travel. Ideologies and imaginations that might be the driving force behind migration and moving are both historically and politically shaped. Migration history is selective. Even though there might be centuries between one migration period and another, people's memory and ideology related to it can have consequences for whether migration is considered to be a possibility for members of the society and – I am even tempted to suggest that – these cultural imaginations can have a real impact in generating other periods of migration.

The geographical setting I depart from is the North Atlantic island, Iceland. In present day Iceland, specific migration periods are woven together through a powerful self-image supported by the metaphor of the travelling Viking. The political discourse of migration in the Icelandic context

deals not with victims of diaspora and starvation – even though there is enough evidence for hardship – but with empowered individuals who despite for violence and a harsh climate always find ways of surviving and increasing wealth and well-being.

The history of Icelandic migration

The settlement of Iceland began in the last quarter of the 9th century and was part of a larger movement of Norse expansion, ending around the year 1000 in attempts to settle on the eastern fringes of North America. This moving around with the sea as travel ground was evoked by several developments: improved shipbuilding techniques; political unrest; and the pressure on land, which had become increasingly scarce due to a growing population and primogeniture inheritance laws. The establishment of Viking settlements in the North Atlantic is evidenced in written records (sagas, ecclesiastic annals, etc.), material culture, environmental records, place names and other linguistic relics. The historical sources dealing with the settlement of Iceland have been written significantly later than the settlement took place. This makes the historical value of the documents less convincing, although archaeological evidence has been found that supports the old records to some degree. A Polish archaeologist, who had conducted some excavations in Iceland, told me how astonished he was by the fact that he was able to find the exact location of a former farm only by reading a saga.

Written documents such as *Landnámabok*, the Book of Settlement from the beginning of the 12th century, *Íslendingabók*; Book of Icelanders, written by Ari Þorgilsson around the same time, and the Saga of Haraldur hárfagri claim that the ancestors of the Icelandic people are the peasant aristocracy of Norway. Carlyle, in his early Kings of Norway, writes that about the year of grace 860, there were no kings in Norway, nothing but numerous jarls, essentially kinglets, each presiding over a kind of republic or parliamentary little territories". When Haraldur Hárfagri became king in 860, he united large parts of Norway ruling with hardship and depriving farmers from their land. The old literature makes us believe that, rather than succumbing to the King, Norway's peasant aristocracy, the ancestors of the Icelanders, took their destiny in their own hands. They chose to sail away and find their luck elsewhere. The Saga of Haraldr Hárfagri mentions: "In the discontent when King Haraldur seized on the lands of Norway, the out-countries of Iceland and the Faroe Islands were discovered and peopled."

According to *Landnámabók*, the Book of settlement, the first group that settled in Iceland consisted of 383 men and 54 women, but it is generally thought that this is not the complete number. In

addition to the Norwegian peasant aristocracy, the Icelandic sagas also mention the presence of Celtic people, especially slaves, and recent studies of historical sources and of Icelandic DNA have shown that the group of Icelandic ancestors was much less homogenous than the literature indicates (Gulcher et. al 2000; Helgason 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2003). Genetic research conducted by the Icelandic company Decode Genetics has resulted in finding evidence for a considerable large amount of British women in the Icelandic ancestor group, probably half of the amount of women arriving in Iceland. This is a logical consequence of the Viking settlements in Scotland, the Orkneys and Shetlands. We have seen the picture before: migrating men marrying local women. In addition to Celtic influence, the Icelandic anthropologist Agnar Helgason found two copies of a lineage from the non-European haplogroup C, probably arriving in Iceland from Asia through Scandinavia (ibid.).

Despite the non-Nordic influence, the Icelandic law system and the language are definitively of a Nordic origin. People were of course not Icelandic at the moment they arrived at the island and gave it the name Iceland. Evidence for the development of a separate ethno-linguistic group of Icelanders is first found much later in the written literature of the 12th century, when a separate history and language was established through respectively *Íslendingabók* (the Book of Icelanders) and the first Grammatical Treatise (Hastrup 1985: 228).

The settlement period is not the only event which is important to understand current day Icelandic conceptions of mobility and migration. There was another significant way of sailing out during Iceland's commonwealth period, although less politicalized as the settlement period. This practice is called *að fara í viking*, and is in the literature either translated as raiding or – more peaceful – as going on an expedition or voyage. *Að fara í víking* was part of the training of young men, who through sailing abroad were expected to gain wealth and status and thereby adulthood (Hastrup 1985: 223). Numerous examples of references to these voyages are made in the Old Norse literature. In *Víga-Glúm saga* is for example written:

"Ingjaldur hét maður, sonur Helga hins magra. Hann bjó að Þverá í Eyjafirði. Hann var forn goðorðsmaður og höfðingi mikill […]. Hann var kvongaður maður og átti tvo sonu, Steinólf og Eyjólf. Þeir voru menn vel mannaðir og voru báðir fríðir sýnum […]. Eyjólfur var fjögur sumur í víkingu og þótti hinn mesti garpur og framgöngumaður, fékk gott orð og mikið fé."

A man was called Ingjaldur, he was the son of Helgi the Thin (the man who first inhabited the North of Iceland, there is a statue of him and his wife in Akureyri). He lived at the Þver river in the Eyjafjord. He was a former goði and a famous chieftain […] he was a married man and had two sons Steinólf and Eyjólfur. They were mature and handsome sons [….] Eyjólfur had been 'in Viking' for four summers and people thought him to be a hero and leader, he got a very good reputation and gained a lot of wealth.

Although the aim was to return to Iceland, these kinds of trips could stretch over several years, resulting - if successfully – in the enrichment of the individual, the family and the society. Iceland being an island with no natural resources other than fish, the country depended on the trips made by the farmers and their sons during the summer time. Wealth and status were always gained outside the country. In those days, no linguistic distinction between trader and traveller was made. They were both called *farmadur* (Hastrup 1985: 224-228). The Danish anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup argues that the Icelanders' voyages to Norway during this period had a symbolic meaning in addition to their commercial significance (Hastrup 1985: 224-228). Inspired by Sahlins (1976: 207), Hastrup states that there is no material logic apart from practical interest, and the practical interest of men in production is symbolically constituted. The practical interests of Icelandic society were symbolically constituted, in the sense of buying grain (for porridge and beer, not for bread), the buying of timber (for boats and building requirements), the claim on distant relatives for inheritance and shelter in winter, the establishment of genealogical knowledge and the search for (ethno) historical identity, etc. these were all part of the Icelandic cultural order (Hastrup 1985: 227).

In the 13th century, conditions worsened for the Icelanders and due to changing power relations, a colder climate and epidemics, the Icelanders' were no longer able to build their own ships. The written records of the 13th century do not mention any ship owned by an Icelander. Travelling was lost, and thereby it's symbolic value. Without the possibility of sailing out, autonomy could no longer be maintained. Hastrup again (1985: 224) states that the self-referring symbols on which Iceland's particular national autonomy was based (cf. Deutsch 1966: 214-215) were gradually impoverished, and this impoverishment was paralleled by a gradual disintegration of the social and political structure. Iceland had become part of Norway in 1262 and came under Danish supremacy when Norway was formally united with Denmark by the treaty of Kalmar in 1397. Conditions worsened further in the next century, the country's isolation increased and a trade monopoly by the Danish king introduced in the 1602 (end 1854), eagerly exploited by the Icelandic farming elite,

caused severe poverty. Between 1783-1785, an extremely violent volcanic eruption in Iceland, the Lakagigar eruption in the Skaftafellarea influenced the climate in large parts of the world and caused the death of ca. 10.000 Icelanders, reducing Iceland's population to only 39.000. Voices were heard in Denmark at that time that discussed the possibility of moving all inhabitants to the scarcely populated regions of Jutland in Denmark. The plan was never carried out, but it is a sad witness of the hardship the Icelanders experienced.

Copenhagen was already in those days the home for a few Icelandic intellectuals and that number increased. It is also among this group that national romantic ideas developed that glorified the period from the settlement until the end of the Free State when Iceland was encapsulated in the kingdom of Denmark. The national romantic movement turned the history of the settlement of Iceland into a history of aristocratic heroes of a Norwegian origin, and migration, the sailing away from Norway to find new land and resources, became the symbol for the independent nature of the Icelandic people. Eventually the ideas of these intellectuals were adopted by the Icelanders in the homeland, leading to the formation of a political independence movement.

Icelandic gained full independence from Denmark during the Second World War in 1944. Nevertheless, when we move to present day Iceland – and therewith to my current research project – the settlement period has once again become a powerful source of imagination. Currently, the country is in a phase of migration not only of men but also of money. Adjustment of Iceland's legal and administrative system towards EEA provisions, as well as a move towards a liberal policy and privatisation, have led to an explosive growth of high-risk global investments by Icelandic businessmen especially since 2004. Iceland's business activities have received much international attention, because of their sudden appearance and accumulation but also due to the almost aggressive risk behaviour of businessmen**.** This high-risk behaviour, in combination with the small economy, lead last year to the appearance of several negative international reports. An example is the report *Iceland Geysir crisis* by the Danish bank. The report stated that the Icelandic economy is the most overheated in the OECD area. The low unemployment rate of 1% pushes wage growth to 7% and inflation is running above 4%. The account deficit is in the beginning of 2006 closing in on 20% of GDP and on top of all this, the report mentions: "there has been a stunning expansion of debt, leverage and risk-taking that is almost without precedents anywhere in the world." (Valgreen et al. 2006). The report states that recession will take place in 2006-2007 with an inflation of 10%.

Iceland's financial institutions reacted strongly to this Danish report. The Icelandic bank *Landsbanki* published immediately a report with the title *Is Something Rotten in the State of Iceland?* The Icelandic authors stated that the Danish report has been based on inaccurate statistical data and a limited understanding of the Icelandic economic and social forces, even though – they added – one should think that a Danish bank, due to the historical relations between the two countries, would be the right institution to conduct such an assessment (Guðmundsson and Karlsdóttir 2006). Now, one year later, triumph is on the Icelandic side. The profit of Icelandic companies is huge and the economy seems more stable than foreign analyses have pointed out. The Icelandic bank Kaupthingbanki, which can be considered as the mother of Icelandic global investing, is currently at rank 795 in Forbes' list of the world's largest companies and Icelandic companies stand for 1,04 % of all global investments (Hermannsdóttir 2007). This is astonishing when one considers that the country only counts 309.000 inhabitants (Iceland's statistics, www.hagstofa.is, 1 April 2007).

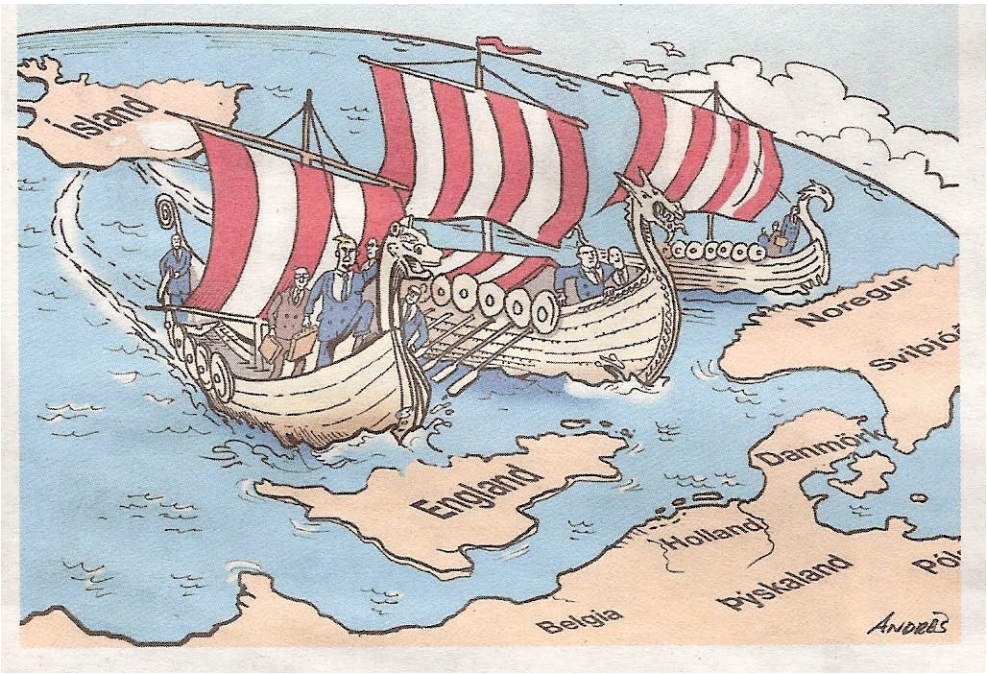
Migration comes in here in several ways: In the first place due to the global flow of men and money. Icelanders call the global business voyage of Icelandic businessmen for *utrás*. The Icelandic literary scholar Jón Karl Helgason has traced the etymology of the word *útrás*. According to the dictionary *Orðabók Menningarsjóðs* by Árna Böðvarsson of 1963 the word *útrás* has two main meanings. In the first place it can mean *ós*, the mouth of a river or source, indicating flowing. The oldest example of this meaning derives from the beginning of the 18th century in *Jarðabók* Árna Magnússonar og Páls Vídalín. The other meaning of the word is *'að ráðast fram úr vígi'*, suddenly appearing from shelter or from a fortress in the sense of 'outvasion' as opposite to invasion. This meaning first appears in 1849 in the journal *Norðurfara*. In a meaning that only very recently appeared, namely in the second half of the 20th century, the word means outlet or outburst of feelings and emotions (Helgason 2006). Icelanders might visualise their emotional life with volcanoes and geysers. In a business context nowadays, the word stresses the sailing out to obtain resources in a similar way as the first settlers of Iceland, but also brings about associations with accumulation until a certain point, where after outburst is unavoidable. This of course represents the small Icelandic market which has been exhausted to such a degree that as soon as legislations allowed it, foreign markets were invaded.

In the second place the Icelandic Business Voyage is related to the short term migration of Icelanders for studying abroad. Currently attempts are made in Iceland to find indicators for the success of the global investments. One indicator is that many Icelanders have a degree from well-known universities abroad. The idea of the person who goes *í viking* to gain wealth and status abroad and thereby adulthood, like was done in Iceland's early history is an interesting parallel to the Icelandic student who moves abroad for gaining knowledge. Because the average age at which Icelandic women give birth is low in comparison to other countries, many students have small children. The important ideology of travelling, however, does not keep students from moving abroad, neither when this implies the splitting of the family; man and woman living in two different countries. A research project on *útrás* currently conducted by The Institute of Research Business of the University of Iceland suggests that the Icelanders' international high education provides beginning businessmen with the advantages of an international network and an understanding of what it means to deal with other people and cultures.

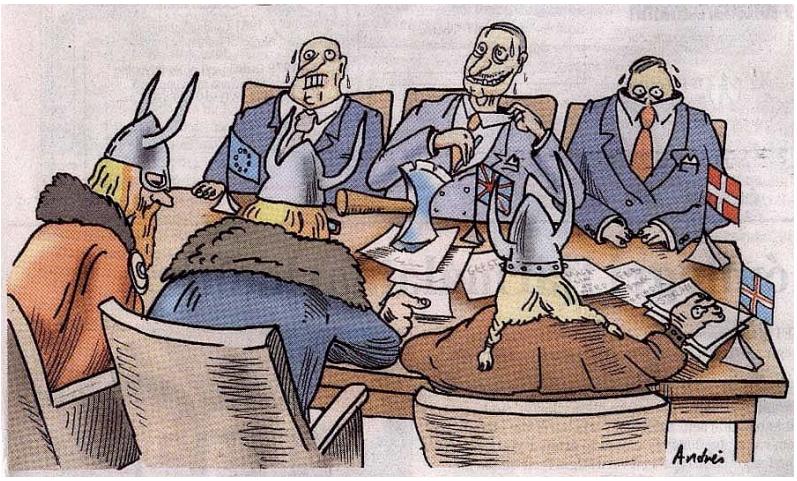
Migration is relevant for the current business voyage in a third way because of the fact that the political discourses around the Icelanders' current business voyage take advantage of the romantic discourse around Iceland's settlement period. The current investments are arisen from, and generate in their turn, dramatic changes in Icelandic society. During the 13 years I have conducted research in Iceland, I experienced many changes, accumulating dramatically the past few years. The investments and business activities abroad have had huge influence on economic activity and entrepreneurship within the country. As the global market was explored, Iceland itself became commercialised. Relationship between common and private property changed for the advantage of private property, relationships between citizens and the state are changing, as well as the importance of kinship for access to capital and status. As a matter of fact due to the dissolving of the former agricultural and fishing society Icelandic identity itself is put at stake.

As we have seen during other periods, such as the modernisation of the Icelandic society in the beginning of the 20th century, dramatic change goes hand in hand with the ideology of continuity and Iceland's settlement period offers once again inspiration. The Icelandic business men are called within the political discourse and media for the new generation of Vikings. A main and conservative Icelandic news paper published the astrology of one of Iceland's most important businessmen, Jón Ásgeir Jóhannesson, who bought several companies in Denmark: The newspaper states: "He is one of the modern Vikings, one of the new generation of Icelanders who have liberated themselves from minority complexes and fear and dare to think big (Morgunblaðið

Icelandic businessmen: the new generation of Vikings.



Source: Morgunblaðið, 31 may 2007, p. 8.



Source: Morgunblaðið, menningarblað, lésbók, 11 November 2006

2005)". While the independence movement of the 19th century used Iceland's settlement period to create the image of the independent Icelander, nowadays the settlement is a source for inspiration for other discourses on what it means to be Icelandic. Features that emerge as typical Icelandic are being fearless, global and innovative. The parallel drawn between the heroic settlement period and the current business successes generates an idea of continuity in Icelandic mentality right from the Viking Age through the hardships of the 13th to the 19th century up to present day Iceland.

This ideology is so appealing that only a small group of Icelanders, mostly intellectuals, is critical nowadays towards the dramatic changes that occur. Whenever a company abroad is purchased a strong national ideology is expressed in popular discourses. Especially when a company is bought in Denmark – the former colonial power – Icelanders who have nothing to do with business might talk about 'we (the Icelandic people) bought the company'. An example of this strong identification with history as source of inspiration is a conversation I had with a taxi driver when I was on my way to the Icelandic bank Kaupthingbanki for interview two staff members on the role of the bank in the current global investments. The taxi driver asked me why I went there: I told him about my research project and he asked me whether I wanted to know why Icelandic businessmen are so successful and willing to take high risk. Before I could answer him, he answered me and said:

"Við erum óhræð þjóð (we are a fearless people)", "Why is that?" I asked him. "Why are you fearless?" He answered: "I think that you need to go a long way back in time to be able to understand that," Post men, for example, they often walked extremely difficult roads, perhaps they lend in a snowstorm, so they only could see a meter ahead. Nevertheless they made it. To give you a small example: When I was hunting "then I lend in a snowstorm. I hardly could see." "What did you do?" I asked him. "I began looking for my traces but I didn't find them. Nevertheless I knew in what direction I needed to go." The taxi driver places his right hand upwards at his nose, makes a movement forward with his hand and let his gesture follow by the words, "I just knew it". "You felt it?" I asked him, using the word skynja which means to feel, but also to get a hint, or to perceive. "Yes", his answer was, "I felt it. And after one hour I found my car. I never turned afraid. I didn't feel fear". He takes a break and then concludes: "I don't need to know what the weather will be, I don't need to know whether ships have been lost at sea. If it happens, it happens. Despite for what happens, one continues to live. It isn't important what happens around us, life will always continue."

The taxidriver explains the high-risk behaviour of Icelandic business men by a combination of experiences of difficult conditions, the importance of intuition and survival and the confidence that life always continues no matter what.

I hope that this brief impression of Icelandic migration has illustrated that the imagination, ideology and even cosmology is significant for understanding the driving force of migration.

Bibliography

Brettell, Carline (ed.), 2003. *Anthropology and Migration. Essays on Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and Identity*. Walnut Creek: Altamira.

Deutsch, Karl W., 1966. *The Nerves of Government. Models of Political Communication and Control*. New York: The Free Press.

Guðmundsson and Karlsdóttir, 2006. Is Something Rotten in the State of Iceland? *Insight.* Reykjavík: Landsbanki Íslands, 22 March 2006.

Hastrup, Kirsten, 1985. *Culture and History in Medieval Iceland. An Anthropological Analysis of Structure and Change*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Helgason A, Nicholson G, Stefansson K, Donnelly P., 2003. A reassessment of genetic diversity in Icelanders: Strong evidence from multiple loci for relative homogeneity caused by genetic drift. *Annals of Human Genetics*, 67, p. 281-97.

Helgason, A., Hickey, E., Goodacre, S., Vega, E., Bosnes, V., Stefánsson, K., Ward, R., Sykes, B. 2001. mtDNA and the islands of the North Atlantic: Estimating the proportions of Norse and Gaelic ancestry. *American Journal of Human Genetics*, 68, p. 723-737.

Gulcher, J., Helgason, A., Stefánsson, K. 2000. Genetic homogeneity of Icelanders (Correspondence). *Nature Genetics*, 26, p. 395

Helgason, A., Sigurðardóttir, S., Nicholson, J., Sykes, B., Hill, E., Bradley, D.G., Bosnes, V., Gulcher, J.R., Ward, R., Stefánsson, K. 2000A. Estimating Scandinavian and Gaelic ancestry in the male settlers of Iceland. *American Journal of Human Genetics* 67, p. 697-717.

Helgason, A, S. Sigurðardóttir, J. Gulcher, R. Ward and K. Stefánsson 2000B. mtDNA and the origin of the Icelanders: Deciphering signals of recent population history. *American Journal of Human Genetics*, 66, p. 999-1016

Helgason A (2004) Uppruni Íslendinga (The Origin of the Icelanders). In: *Hlutavelta tímans: Menningararfur á Þjóðminjasafni*, Árni Björnsson and Hrefna Róbertsdóttir (eds.). Reykjavík: Þjóðminjasafn Íslands.

Helgason, Jón Karl, 2006. Víkingar Efnisins. Goðsögnin um útrás Íslendinga. *Morgunblaðið*, (Menningarblað, Lesbók), 11 November 2006.

Hermannsdóttir, Auður, 2007. Ör vöxtur beinna fjárfestinga Íslendinga erlendis. *Vísbending*, 32 tbl., 3-4.

Massey, Douglas S., Joaquin Arango, Adela Pellegrino, Ali Kouaouci, Hugo Graeme and J. Edward Taylor, 1993. Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal. *Population and Development Review*, 19 (3), p. 431 -467.

Sahlins, Marshall, 1976. *Culture and Practical Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Trager, Lillian (ed.), 2005. *Migration and economy. Global and Local Dynamics*. Walnut Creek: Altamira, 2005.

Valgreen et al., 2006. *Iceland: Geysir Crisis*. Copenhagen: Den Danske Bank.