

The Vikings are coming!

A modern Icelandic self-image in the light of the economic crisis

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Summary

This article analyzes the connection between the economic crisis in Iceland in 2008 and the role of Viking imagery in the collective self-image of Iceland. This connection is informed by Iceland's status as a Danish dependency for centuries – a condition that deeply affected the development of Icelandic self-perception and its cultural life. In recent years, the Viking has appeared as an image of central cultural significance in Iceland's international relations with both Denmark and Great Britain in recent years. This article explores the connection between the sensational rise and fall of the so-called *útrásarvíkingar* (expansion Vikings), or Icelandic businessmen, and the effect of Iceland being a former dependency of Denmark on the general function of the Viking image in Iceland's collective identity. Thus, a postcolonial approach sheds light on how imagological representations of Vikings have affected modern Icelandic identity conceptualizations.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht die Verbindung zwischen dem finanziellen Kollaps Islands im Jahr 2008 und der Rolle von Wikingerimages für das als kollektive Selbstbild der Isländer. Dieser Konnex ist damit verbunden, dass Island jahrhundertlang dänischer Herrschaft unterworfen war – eine Bedingung, die Kultur und Selbstbild der Bevölkerung maßgeblich geprägt hat. Seit einigen Jahren erscheinen Wikingerimages als zentrale kulturelle Referenz innerhalb der Beziehungen Islands zu Dänemark und Großbritannien. Die Verbindung zwischen dem sensationellen Auf- und Abstieg der als *útrásarvíkingar* (Expansionswikinger) bezeichneten isländischen Geschäftsleute und der allgemeinen Funktion von Wikingerimages in der kollektiven – durch die historische Zugehörigkeit zu Dänemark geprägten – Identität Islands soll hier analysiert werden. Ein postkolonialer Zugang hilft aufzuzeigen, auf welche Weise imagologische Vorstellungen von Wikingern moderne isländische Identitätskonzepte beeinflussen.

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Introduction: Developments of significance in Viking symbolism

The Icelander Leifur “the Lucky” Eiríksson, who lived around 1000 AD, allegedly sailed to America 500 years before Christopher Columbus. He is now a symbol of the expansionism and adventurism associated with Viking culture. Iceland’s international airport is named after him and his statue stands in a central square in Iceland’s capital city, Reykjavík. There, it serves as one of many references to the Viking Age that include it in Iceland’s cultural heritage. This statue is a part of what archaeologist and egyptologist Jan Assmann describes in his book *Religion and Cultural Memory* as the continued interaction of symbols and memory: the statue serves as a “lieu de mémoire”¹. According to Assmann, memory is tied to such symbols or “lieux de mémoire” that become points of reference in the collective and connective levels of memory. Thus, it draws upon what he calls “connective semantics”², which are formed and negotiated by the Icelandic collective through discourse, images and other media as a means of constituting and sustaining that collective. The symbolic value of Icelandic Viking images and the country’s geographical and political position are attributes that connect centrally to the postcolonial features of modern conceptualizations of Icelandic self-image. Furthermore, Assmann refers to French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss’ division of societies into hot and cold types, determined by their relationship with the past. According to this terminology, Iceland is a “hot society”, where history is an internalized generator that helps to contextualize the future through historically based cultural memory.³

The developments in Iceland’s relationships with its neighbouring countries, mainly Greenland, Great Britain, Denmark and Norway, have been crucial factors that lead to Iceland’s current political and cultural condition. In the first half of the period preceding foreign rule in Iceland, c. 874–1262, the Viking culture of expansion and colonization influenced a region stretching from North America over Greenland to Scandinavia and the British Isles. This era is generally divided into three principal periods: The first

¹ Cf. Assmann, Jan: *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies*. Stanford 2006, 8. The term is inspired by the vast work *Les lieux de mémoire* (1984–92) edited by the French historian Pierre Nora.

² Assmann 2006, as footnote 1, 11.

³ Cf. *ibid.*

period is the Settlement Period, *Landnámsöld*, referring to the first permanent Scandinavian colonization of the country. The second period, the Viking Age, refers primarily to cultural structures and is considered to end around 1050. The third period, the Icelandic Commonwealth, refers to the Free State from 930 until 1262. The Viking is a symbolic reference to mainly the first two periods, and has maintained its symbolic value as a significant cultural power factor in the entire North Atlantic region to this day. However, in Iceland, Viking symbolism has unique allusions and connotations, some of which I will unfold here.⁴

The focus of this article is the Viking as a central but changeable element in modern collective Icelandic self-image. In my approach to the question of the role of Viking symbolism in recent socio-cultural developments relating to the economical crisis in Iceland, I combine theoretical perspectives from the fields of imagology, sociology, ethnology, postcolonial theory and nationalism studies. This interdisciplinary approach is also used to shed light on the role of the Viking as a national symbol or stereotype in the context of Iceland's relationship with Denmark, interpreting national identity formation as a relational process influenced by international power negotiations.

National identity – symbolism and memory

In the field of the conceptualization of national stereotypes, two aspects are decisive: relationships and images. First, when essentialist theories of national identity are discarded, the formation of national stereotypes, both of one's own nation and of the nations of others, can be investigated as a relational process. In the case of Iceland, this is to say that the country's feuds and political negotiations with its neighbours have influenced the significance and connotations of the Viking image. Second, conceptions of identity are built with the support of symbolic representations of characteristics of the collective. These self-images help generate ideas of coherence within the collective (nation state, country or region) as well as boundaries in relational spheres that define who "the others" are. Jan Assmann underlines that memory has a collective basis, even

⁴ This article is based on a research paper titled "The postcolonial North: Iceland's modern self-image: From Danish dependency to the resurrection of the Vikings" presented at the conference *Performing Colonial Modernity*, The University of Edinburgh, May 2010.

though a collective obviously does not have a memory. The collective basis of memory is not only social, but also cultural.⁵ Thus, the image of the Viking becomes a signifier of exchange between cultural memory and contextual reactivations.

Viking symbolism is related to a type of memory Assmann defines as “semantic memory”⁶, which is connected to learning and determined by meaning and references defined by a social context. He contrasts the views of Freud and Nietzsche on such a matrix of cultural contexts as being assimilative and limiting with his own emphasis on the individual’s wish to belong.⁷ From a basis in theory relating to cultural memory, the Viking image, as a cultural emblem, becomes a component in the process of the reciprocal constitution of the situated individual and the cultural collective of the Icelandic nation: “Both the collective and the individual turn to the archive of cultural traditions, the arsenal of symbolic forms, the ‘imaginary’ of myths and images, of ‘the great stories’, sagas and legends, scenes and constellations that live or can be reactivated in the treasure stores of a people.”⁸ In Iceland, references to the Viking appear as myths, images, sagas, legends etc., which makes the Viking a prevalent emblem of collective identification.

In the context of Iceland’s concrete political history, Viking imagery refers to a time of political autonomy. Iceland gained complete independence from the kingdom of Denmark in 1944, after it already had been recognized as a sovereign state in a personal union with the king of Denmark in 1918. The “de facto”⁹ postcolonial elements in current Icelandic society have their roots in the country’s subordination to the Norwegian king in 1262 – 400 years after its founding – and then to the Danish king in 1380. Especially importantly, it has its roots in the nationalistic movements of the 19th and 20th centuries¹⁰ as well as in interpretations of the country’s changing relationships with

⁵ Cf. Assmann 2006, as footnote 1, 8.

⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 6.

⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁹ I characterize the time after 1944 as “de facto” postcolonial, because Iceland never had status as a Danish colony.

¹⁰ The field of Icelandic nationalism has been studied widely. Amongst the central works is Hálfðanarson, Guðmundur and Ólafur Rastrick: “Culture and the Constitution of the Icelandic in the 19th and 20th Centuries”. In: Ausma Cimdiņa and Jonathan Osmond (eds.): *Power and Culture. Hegemony, Interaction and Dissent*. Pisa 2006, 101–117, in which references to further central scholarly works can be found.

neighbouring countries. Thus, the term “de facto” postcolonial refers to the attitudes to and repercussions of Iceland’s former condition, which can be seen in Iceland after 1944. In his article “Icelandic Anomalies”¹¹, Johann P. Arnason points out that Iceland’s position in a Denmark-centric realm since the 14th century has been determinative because Iceland’s position was of such a marginal character.¹² Viking imagery therefore refers to a period of cultural and political autonomy – a reference which has had different implications depending on the context in which it has been evoked. The Danish anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup states that the impact of the Viking Age has been primarily qualitative, rather than quantitative.¹³ Hastrup’s article generally supports an emphasis on the symbolic value of Viking culture founded on the descriptions of the *Landnámssöld* in Ari fróði Þorgilsson’s *Íslendingabók* dated to c. 1120.¹⁴

When discussing the field of mental, verbal and visual imagery used in the context of formations of self-images, it is productive to employ an imagological approach, which combines research of formations of national stereotypes and a broadness of the understanding of the image. Art historian and picture theorist W. J. T. Mitchell’s view on different types of images as being interconnected in a family-like structure¹⁵ is a point of departure in imagological studies.¹⁶ Mitchell divides images into five main categories: graphical, optical, perceptual, mental and verbal.¹⁷ As literary scholar Joep Leerssen expresses in an article on the interrelations between images: “They are tropes, commonplaces, obtain familiarity by dint of repetition and mutual resemblance; and in each case this means that whenever we encounter an individual instance of a

¹¹ Arnason, Johann P: “Icelandic Anomalies”. In: *Thesis Eleven*. (2004:77), 103–120.

¹² Cf. *ibid.*, 112.

¹³ Hastrup, Kirsten: “Icelandic topography and the sense of identity”. In: Michael Jones and Kenneth R. Olwig (eds.): *Nordic Landscapes. Region and Belonging on the Northern Edge of Europe*. Minneapolis/London 2008. 53–76, here: 55.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁵ Mitchell, W. H. T.: “What Is an Image?” In: *New Literary History*. 15 (1984:3), 503–537, here: 505.

¹⁶ Cf. Beller, Manfred: “Perception, image, ideology”. In: Idem and Joep Leerssen (eds.): *Imagology: The cultural construction and literary representation of national characters. A critical survey*. (= *Studia Imagologica*; 13) Amsterdam 2007, 3–16; Ísleifsson, Sumarliði: “On images”. 2007, http://www.inor.is/index.php?m=N&id=M_SUMARLGR1&type=&author=&category=&cid=SUMARGR4, 28.01.2011.

¹⁷ Mitchell 1984, as footnote 15, 505.

national characterization, the primary reference is *not* to empirical reality but to an intertext, a sounding-board, of other related textual instances.”¹⁸ Imagology’s inherent interdisciplinarity and the broadness of its empirical focus make it a fruitful method for approaching the complex field of national self-images or stereotypes. Jan Assmann outlines Derrida’s notion of what can be described as a synthesis of cultural memory and an imagological field, identified as an archive, “a form of memory that constitutes the present and makes the future possible through the medium of symbols that are linguistic and extralinguistic, discursive and nondiscursive, and that are permeated by the political structures of power and domination.”¹⁹

Inherent in the study of the dynamics of national stereotypes, such as the Viking stereotype, are the auto-image and hetero-image levels of imagery. The first is a self-image and the latter is an image created by “the other”.²⁰ Both auto- and hetero-images and their different manifestations overlap and affect one another in the process of modern Icelandic identity formation. Within this process, communication and reciprocal negotiation of national stereotypes, carried out by verbal, graphical and mental manifestations, play a significant role. This is reflected in the marketing term “nation branding”. As historian and branding specialist Wally Olins writes in *On Brand*: “All countries communicate all the time. [...] Collectively, all these millions of messages represent an idea of what the nation as a whole is up to, what it feels, what it wants, what it believes in.”²¹ In this case both pictures and official statements may serve as such messages and I propose that both kinds of messages are, to an extent, affected by Iceland’s former status as a dependency. These messages, created by agents within the nation, interact with images of the nation formed in other countries. Anthropologist Kristín Loftsdóttir comments on this process as follows: “Briefly put one can say that the Icelandic nation is highly concerned with mirroring itself in the image drawn of it

¹⁸ Leerssen, Joep: “Imagology: History and Method”. In: Beller and Leerssen, as footnote 16, 17–32, here: 26.

¹⁹ Assmann 2006, as footnote 1, 27.

²⁰ Cf. Leerssen, Joep: “Images – information – national identity and national stereotype”. 2003, <http://cf.hum.uva.nl/images/info/leers.html>, 28.01.2011.

²¹ Olins, Wally: *On Brand*. London 2003, 169.

in other countries.”²² She points to the tendency of the image that Iceland projects outwards to consist of a repetition of positive elements of identification, which are stereotypes of what the country/collective desires to be. Thus, nation branding exceeds the will to sell certain products.²³ Loftsdóttir has been amongst the scholars addressing the economic crisis from different theoretical angles. In a recent article investigating issues of regional, national and global identity, she emphasizes the elements of shame connected to the country’s newfound unpopularity.²⁴ This, I propose, is connected to an involuntary change in the balance between auto-image and hetero-image.

Icelandic cultural heritage as a coveted resource

The Viking as a signifier of Icelandic – and metonymically Old Norse – identity has been central in negotiations with Denmark over Iceland’s political status. Sociologist Anthony D. Smith points to two main forms of nationalism: the civic-territorial form versus the ethnic-genealogical one.²⁵ These forms are also reflected in different kinds of nation building. When looking at the disagreements between Denmark and Iceland during the 19th and 20th centuries, the schism between the civic-territorial and the ethnic-genealogical nation appears to be central. The two countries were bound together by the framework of the territorial nation, but the valuation of ethnicity as the basis of communities increased in this period, which resulted in great changes in Iceland’s political and cultural status.

During the period of Danish rule, balance of power was practically stable until the late 19th century. In this period, Danish cultural life was influenced by the devastating wars with Prussia and Austria in 1848–50 and 1864. In accordance with sociologist Anthony Giddens’ thesis about the growth of nationalism in times of transition or danger²⁶, cultural roots came to play an increased role in Denmark in this period. A popular phrase

²² “Í stuttu máli má segja að íslenska þjóðin sé mjög upptekin af því að spegla sig í þeirri ímynd sem brugðin upp af henni í öðrum löndum.” Loftsdóttir, Kristín: “Útrás Íslendinga og hnattvæðing hins þjóðlega”. In: *Ritið*. (2007:1), 159–177, here: 175.

²³ Cf. *ibid.*, 161.

²⁴ Idem: “The loss of innocence. Icelandic financial crisis and colonial past”. In: *Anthropology Today*. 26 (2010:6), 9–13.

²⁵ Smith, Anthony D.: *National Identity*. London 1991, 123.

²⁶ Cf. Giddens, Anthony: *The nation-state and violence*. Cambridge 1985.

in the post-war period was: “For every loss there is indemnity, what is lost externally has to be gained internally.”²⁷ The country had suffered geographical defeat and sought rearmament through a vertical focus on cultural roots and heritage. Dominant figures in Danish cultural life, such as the writers N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783–1872) and Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger (1779–1850), politician Orla Lehmann (1810–1870) as well as the head of the Royal Academy of Art, Niels Laurits Høyen (1798–1870), expressed views that connected praise of the Old Norse heritage with the need for cultural rearmament.²⁸ In a speech given in 1863, Høyen stated: “At the same time as we can rejoice over seeing our artists engaging in our mother country [*fødeland*] and its life, and as we can see that it is in fact possible to illustrate Nordic life – at the same time we have magnificent testimonies of the noble material we have in our own legends, even though we do not want to go further than to Saxo.”²⁹ In an earlier speech from 1844, Høyen emphasized the direct lineage from ancient Nordic deities and heroes to the contemporary rural population in Denmark.

Iceland was associated with this much-treasured Nordic cultural heritage and thus its general status and recognition improved, even though its struggle for autonomy was to last well into the 20th century. A statement from politician Orla Lehmann in 1832 emphasized Iceland’s cultural value to Denmark: “But as though frozen between the distant icy mountains, where the storms of time never reached, it [ancient life] stayed in almost unaltered purity in Iceland, so that we can see there a living antiquity, a talking image of the life of the past – that is why the Icelandic people must be dear to any

²⁷ “For hvert et Tab der kan Erstatning findes, hvad udad tabes, det maa indad vindes.” Allegedly originally written by the poet H. P. Holst (1811–1893).

²⁸ Cf. e. g.: Grundtvig, N. F. S.: “Den Danske, Tydske og den Franske Sag”. In: Idem: *Nik. Fred. Sev. Grundtvigs udvalgte Skrifter*. Edited by Holger Begtrup. Vol. IX. København 1909 [1848], 110–120; idem: “Budstikke i Høinorden”. In: Idem: *Nik. Fred. Sev. Grundtvigs udvalgte Skrifter*. Edited by Holger Begtrup. Vol. X. København 1909 [1864], 518–531; Høyen, N. L.: “Om Betingelserne for en skandinavisk Nationalkunsts Udvikling”. In: Idem: *Skrifter*. Edited by J. L. Ussing. København 1971 [1844], 351–368; Adam Oehlenschläger’s poem “Island”. In: Oehlenschläger, Adam: *Oehlenschlägers Samlede Digte i 5 Bind*. Vol II. Kjöbenhavn 1853 [1805], 102; Lehmann, Orla: “[review] *Om de danske Provindstalstænder med specielt hensyn paa Island* af B. Einarsson. Cand. jur. Kjøbh. 1832. Hos Reitzel. 8. VI. 40 Sider.” In: *Maanedskrift for Litteratur*. (1832:7), 523–537.

²⁹ From a speech given by N. L. Høyen to the Students’ Society, 1863. Available at <http://nomos-dk.dk/skraep/hoeyen.htm>, 28.01.2011.

Scandinavian”³⁰. This example supports the view that Iceland’s recognition had its roots in an association with stagnation, ingenuousness and naturalness, which leaves a place for the external projections that fit in the Danish cultural sphere of the time.

The focus of Iceland’s neighbouring countries on the Icelandic language and the saga literature as a precious heritage has been characterized by historian Sumarliði Ísleifsson as being the result of a Northern European need for “[...] a counterpart to Herodotus and Homer”³¹. Elsewhere, Ísleifsson points to the utopian construction of Iceland as a “Nordic Hellas”³². An example for the contrast of Nordic versus Roman and Greek Antiquity can be seen in Adam Oehlenschläger’s poem “Island” from 1805, in which the Danish-Icelandic artist Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770–1844) merges with pagan God Þór from Viking culture. In this way the Viking, as a cultural image in current Iceland, refers to a similar archive to what Iceland as such has represented to Denmark: a strong cultural and ethnic foundation, and a potent status in the geographical region. Jan Assmann proposes that in the case of late Egyptian cultures, rites of cultural remembering were reactions to external threats of cultural dissolution.³³ This can function as an analogy to the context of Iceland’s political condition around the beginning of the 20th century. Arguments for Icelandic autonomy had been proposed by philologist Jón Sigurðsson as early as 1848³⁴, and by 1904, Iceland had a legislative government led by *Heimastjórnarflokkurinn*, the Home Rule Party. Photos from the official visit of King Frederik VIII in 1907 show a procession led by men clad in Viking garments. The next year, in 1908, the Independence Party (*Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn*) was constituted. In the context of 1907, dressing as Vikings can be seen as a metonymical invocation of the country’s cultural potency and nationalism.

³⁰ “Men ligesom indefrosset mellem hine fjerne Iisfjelde, hvorhen Tidens Storme ei Naaede, veligeholdt det sig i næsten uforandret Reenhed paa Island, saa at vi i det see en levende Oldtid, et Talende Billede af Fortidens Liv – Derfor maa det islandske Folk være hver Skandinaver kjært [...]” Lehmann 1832, as footnote 28, 524f.

³¹ Ísleifsson, Sumarliði: “Iceland”. In: Beller and Leerssen 2007, as footnote 16, 177–179.

³² Idem: *Icelandic National images in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. http://www.inor.is/index.php?m=N&id=M_SUMARLGR1&type=&author=&category=&cid=SUMARGR1, 28.01.2011.

³³ Cf. Assmann 2006, as footnote 1.

³⁴ Cf. Sigurðsson, Jón: “Hugvekja til Íslendinga”. [“Awakening to Icelanders’ minds”] In: *Ný Félagsrit*. (1848:8), 1–24. Available at http://timarit.is/view_page_init.jsp?issId=135236&lang=da, 28.01.2011.

A shift in national and political symbolism

In recent years, Viking references have had a strong presence in Icelandic media and business in the guise of the so-called *útrásarvíkingar* (expansion Vikings). These new Vikings were celebrated but controversial figures well into the first decade of the new millennium. As businessmen they acted on a scene of a relatively newfound economic optimism at a time when Iceland was taking part in increased exchange with the globalized world.³⁵ However, the daring investments, extravagant life styles and doubtful liquidity of the *útrásarvíkingar* later linked them to the national economic collapse in the autumn of 2008. I propose that the position obtained by the *útrásarvíkingar* in Icelandic society previous to the economic crisis has roots in the earlier political relations with the country's powerful neighbours. Iceland's "de facto" postcolonial condition can, in Assmann's terms, be said to function as an implicit bonding memory that affects the cultural collective through later periods.³⁶ In Assmann's texts, where he proposes that it is emotions that give meaning to memories, a connection appears between the country's political development and a collective memory.³⁷ The emotions connected with struggling for and obtaining national autonomy in Iceland can, for example, be seen expressed in the annual celebration of the Independence Day on June 17th as well as in contemporary art by, among others, Björk Guðmundsdóttir³⁸ and Ragnar Kjartansson³⁹. I argue that in Iceland, where considerable periods of the past are characterized by external dominance and a struggle for national sovereignty, emotions connected to these memories influence discussions of both the past and the future. For this reason, I consider the initial positive reception and connotations of the *útrásarvíkingar* to be a phenomenon that relates to Iceland's particular form of postcolonial condition.

A related aspect in the connection between the economic meltdown in Iceland in 2008 and the conception of the Viking in collective Icelandic self-perception is the potent

³⁵ Cf. Loftsdóttir 2007, as footnote 22, 164f.

³⁶ Cf. Assmann 2006, as footnote 1, 21f.

³⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 3.

³⁸ Cf. Björk's song "Declare Independence" on the album *Volta* from 2007.

³⁹ Cf. Ragnar Kjartansson's video artwork *Colonization* from 2003, showing a Danish merchant beating up an Icelandic peasant.

cultural value of what Anthony D. Smith calls “the cult of golden ages”⁴⁰. The concept of the Icelandic “Golden Age” generally refers to the period of the Commonwealth (930–1262 AD). The period is primarily associated with the writing of saga literature, a decentralised Commonwealth, the system of the *Alþingi*, and the North Atlantic discoveries and settlements of Leifur heppni Eiríksson. Since it has been generally interpreted as a cultural high point, both because of the autonomous status and the level of literature produced in the country, it has status as a point of reference in modern identity formation.

When talking about Iceland’s past in the context of examining the Viking as an important cultural marker, the term ‘colonial’ has at least two meanings: The first meaning refers to the original Norse settlement as the foundation for creating common myths of ancestry⁴¹, and the second meaning refers to Iceland’s later period under Danish rule, which has had similarities with a colonial struggle for independence. When looking at imagological constructions of a “Golden Age” it is significant how, in the 19th century, symbols of the Commonwealth period overpowered those of the Viking or *Landnám* period. In particular, the Þingvellir cliff was a strongly charged motif in the period of negotiations with Denmark for independence. In the 19th and 20th centuries, voices in the Icelandic liberation movement argued that the parliament (*Alþingið*) should be re-established on the cliff, where it had been founded in 930 AD. The poet Jónas Hallgrímsson (1807–1845) expresses this view in the poem “Ísland” (1835) in the journal *Fjölnir*’s first volume.⁴² With reference to the political acts of the *Alþingi*, as well as figures from the sagas, the geographical site and its features are used to underline the cultural values of the Commonwealth period as the traditional “Golden Age”. This is an ode to the motherland as well as an expression of the political view that the *Alþingi* should return to Þingvellir in a manner that reflects the Romanticism of the period.

The Þingvellir motif was still potent towards the middle of the 20th century. The political context of pre-autonomous nation building enabled an actualization of the myth of ancestry and a change in the symbols with which the country wished to be identified.

⁴⁰ Smith 1991, as footnote 25, 67.

⁴¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 14.

⁴² Cf. Hallgrímsson, Jónas: “Ísland”. In: *Fjölnir. Árs-rit handa Íslendingum*. (1835:1), 21f. Available at http://timarit.is/view_page_init.jsp?issId=135071&lang=da, 31.01.2011.

The new 500-krónur notes decorated with a picture of Þingvellir and put into circulation in February 1944 – immediately before Iceland gained autonomy – are examples of what Wally Olins calls the re-branding of a nation.⁴³ Here, the reference to Þingvellir, a symbol of the Icelandic parliamentary tradition, the *Alþing* (and metonymically autonomy) together with a portrait of the leading figure in the independence movement, Jón Sigurðsson (1811–1879), constituted a synthesis of the “Golden Age” and contemporary nationalism. Implicit in this visual re-branding the Danish dominion of Iceland is replaced with the old Icelandic Commonwealth.

I propose that, in light of the actions and rhetoric of the last decade, focus has shifted within the framework of national identity. Thus, the *signifié* of the “Golden Age” now includes connotations of Viking culture from the first half of the autonomous period: expansion, colonization, strength, bravery, innovation, etc. I propose that, taken in this light, the shift in connotations within the trope of the “Golden Age” is not only a generator in the process of forming national identity in Iceland, but also a significant aspect in the process of the recent economic crisis.

The Viking as an ethnic resource

Another significant element is Anthony D. Smith’s term “ethnie”, which describes a pre-national ethno-cultural group with a collective name, an association with a certain piece of land and a myth of common ancestry⁴⁴. This sense of community is a central factor in nation building and conceptualization of national identity. The Icelandic people is a mixed entity, consisting primarily of descendants from Scandinavian settlers, Celtic slaves and European tradesmen. Thus, the conversion of the Viking Era into a “Golden Age” functions as a generator of an Icelandic “ethnie”. Hereby the Viking, the emblem of this “ethnie”, becomes an important link in modern identity formation. Thus, a metonymical connection emerges between the Viking as symbolic personification of the founding of the country and the role and connotations of the *útrásarvíkingar*. This metonymical link constitutes historical and ethno-cultural coherence – central elements in constituting a sense of nation identity and delineation. Loftsdóttir

⁴³ Cf. Olins 2003, as footnote 21, 157.

⁴⁴ Cf. Smith 1991, as footnote 25, 21.

refers to a common narrative framework used in the presentation and interpretation of Icelandic history⁴⁵, namely the ‘U-shaped curve’, marking the movement from the time of the free state (before submission to the Norwegian king in the 13th century) over the period of Norwegian and Danish dominion, to the renaissance of the Icelandic wish for independence.⁴⁶ In this historical narrative model, emphasis is put on autonomy and avoidance of external influence.

Loftsdóttir argues that ideas about cultural purity, as have been presented in, for example, National Socialist ideology, influence Icelandic self-perception to this day such that connotations of ethnic superiority, previously connected to Viking symbolism, may still be an inherit element in these images.⁴⁷

Elements of what political scientist Benedict Anderson calls a creole⁴⁸ relationship can be recognized in Iceland’s relationship with Denmark and Norway. By swearing loyalty to the Norwegian King in 1262, Icelanders renewed the connection between Iceland, Norway and Denmark, which were the countries of origin of many of Iceland’s original settlers. Norway, and thus Iceland, then came under the rule of the Danish king in c. 1380. Therefore, the usage of Viking inspired garments at the reception of the Danish king in 1907 is an expression of Iceland’s complex relation with Denmark. At one level, the reference to Viking culture could be interpreted as an accentuation of a common heritage. However, in the context of negotiations for increased independence, I consider the Viking-age references, which were also inherent in the king’s visit to Þingvellir, to be a means of expressing national differences and consciousness. Writer and politician Amílcar Cabral (1924–1973) stresses how culture can play a key role in liberation movements and nation building through utilization of cultural values as a means to obtain internal harmony, as well as a weapon against external domina-

⁴⁵ Cf. Loftsdóttir 2007, as footnote 22, 162.

⁴⁶ Loftsdóttir refers among others to Jónsson, Jón: *Íslenzkt þjóðerni. Alþýðufyrirlestrar*. Reykjavík 1903.

⁴⁷ Cf. Loftsdóttir 2007, as footnote 22, 163f.; one example Loftsdóttir gives is the conservative Icelandic language policy.

⁴⁸ Cf. Anderson, Benedict: *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London/New York 2006 [1983], 47ff.

tion.⁴⁹ This adds a national dimension to ethnic identity. Viking imagery is extensively present in contemporary Icelandic internal and external nation branding. Aside from statues in public spaces, one finds beer brands, souvenirs, shop names, stamps, sports clubs, and a national contest for males in strength and stamina called the *Vestfjarðar Víkingur*. In his book *Banal Nationalism*, social scientist Michael Billig contrasts nationalism associated with periphery and separatism⁵⁰ with a subtle but important form of nationalism: “Daily, they [nation-states] are reproduced as nations and their citizenry as nationals. [...] For such daily reproduction to occur, one might hypothesize that a whole complex of beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations and practices must also be reproduced.”⁵¹ In such a banal way the Viking image is reproduced in Icelandic society through brands, concepts and actions. Thus, identification with the positive aspects of the “Golden Age” of the “ethnie”, connected to economic and cultural expansion, are continuously circulated – in the field of banal nationalism, and in the field of international business.

Through the economical optimism of the previous decade, the *útrásarvíkingar* or “expansion Vikings” were personifications of positive aspects of the contemporary national Viking stereotype. Loftsdóttir points to the fact that the term conquest (*landvinninga*)⁵², which has been used when referring to the endeavours of the businessmen, is reminiscent of colonization. In this way, Viking discourse is defining the perception of the country’s role in international business. In an article from February 7th, 2009, the British daily newspaper *The Telegraph* announced that “the age of testosterone”⁵³ in Iceland was over. This corresponds with Loftsdóttir’s analysis from 2007 that underlines the implicit gendering of the nation through its public personifications. The Icelandic noun *víkingur* is masculine both as a result of its grammatical form, and in the context of modern business, where it refers to a group of male individuals.

⁴⁹ Cf. Cabral, Amílcar: “National liberation and culture”. In: Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds.): *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory. A reader*. New York 1994 [1973], 53–65.

⁵⁰ Cf. Billig, Michael: *Banal Nationalism*. London et al. 1995, 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵² Cf. Loftsdóttir 2007, as footnote 22, 166.

⁵³ “Iceland: Women end ‘Age of testosterone’”. In: *The Telegraph*, 7th February 2009. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/iceland/4544331/Iceland-women-end-age-of-testosterone.html>, 31.01.2011.

The complex role of these entrepreneurs in the Icelandic collective has postcolonial facets as well. Iceland battled severe inflation from the time it gained autonomy until the middle of the 1990s. The optimism of the last ten years has resulted in large investments and speculations, many of them carried out in Copenhagen. However, as the international economic crisis grew and Icelandic banks and funds did not have the necessary liquidity, the banks were taken over by the government and frustration over the political faith in the *útrásarvíkingar* became widespread. But why did the former government and a large part of the population have such faith in the sometimes inexplicable success of these Vikings? A part of the answer, I believe, lies in the high estimation of the independence and initiative that they personalized. The Independence Party, founded in 1929, has been the most influential party ever since its formation and enjoys the goodwill of the independence movements of earlier times. In this way, a connection emerges between the struggle for independence, nourished by a common narrative of a “Golden Age”, and the celebration of the daring young investors of the last decade. The attitude towards these new Vikings is connected first to colonization as a metonymical characteristic of power. The association with colonization (*landvinninga/útrás*) is a reversing of former political conditions and thus an attempt at reversing the power balance by means of inversion. Second, it is connected to economic development and a recent development from optimism towards pessimism in the field of international trade.

David the Viking: Developments within Viking symbolism

Johann P. Arnason states that major changes in Icelandic society have come from external, not internal, initiatives and movements: a modernization of the fishing industry, invasions by American and British troops during World War II and the Cold War.⁵⁴ This is an argument for seeing Icelandic strategies of identification as modes of reaction. Arnason’s analysis was written before the economic and political crisis of the recent years. With the rise and fall of the *útrásarvíkingar*, new and important aspects have emerged in connection with Icelandic self-image and self-promotion whereby yet a new layer has been added to Viking symbolism. In addition to the obvious associa-

⁵⁴ Cf. Arnason 2004, as footnote 11, 104f.

tion as a symbol of the economic and cultural grandeur of the ancient Vikings, the celebration of the conduct of the *útrásarvíkingar* can also be linked to disagreements in more recent times with Iceland's two powerful neighbours: Denmark and Great Britain. Denmark is a former authority and Great Britain was Iceland's opponent in fishing-related conflicts in the 1950s and 1970s, the so-called Cod Wars, in which Britain unsuccessfully tried to exert dominance over Iceland.

In contrast to the constancy of banal nationalism Anthony Giddens characterizes nationalism as being connected to transition and passion.⁵⁵ This description is another productive perspective in the case of a non-mundane use of the Viking as a national stereotype that can be found in a speech made by the President of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, at the Walbrook Club in London in 2005: "How to succeed in modern business. Lessons from the Icelandic voyage."⁵⁶ Here, a condition, which can be recognized as Iceland's change in status in the region as well as the context constituted by a British audience, influences the evocation of the Viking symbolism. The audience being the former opponent of the Cod Wars now readily attending "the Icelandic lesson" is reminiscent of a former lesser status in the region in a new reversed framework of redressing and can thus be said to generate the passion of transitory nationalism that was mentioned earlier.

In this speech the President uses the conflict as a central theme: "Each time Britain sent the Navy to stop us but each time we won – the only nation on earth to defeat the British Navy, not once but three times. With this track record, it is no wonder that young entrepreneurial Vikings have arrived in London full of confidence and ready to take the world."⁵⁷ This is an example of Assmann's description of memories of incidents becoming myths of victims and perpetrators, of heroes and villains.⁵⁸ Through such discourse the past is used in current politics and ideas of a collective consciousness are built. Earlier, Iceland was not counted among the significant nations in international business, whereas the position as outsider is now put to play in another way:

⁵⁵ Cf. Billig 1995, as footnote 50, 44.

⁵⁶ Grímsson, Ólafur Ragnar: "How to succeed in modern business. Lessons from the Icelandic voyage". 3rd May 2005, <http://forseti.is/media/files/05.05.03.Walbrook.Club.pdf>, 31.01.2011.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 1.

⁵⁸ Cf. Assmann 2006, as footnote 1, 7.

“We are succeeding because we are different, and our track record should inspire the business establishments in other countries to re-examine their previous beliefs and the norms that they think will guarantee results.”⁵⁹ In both quotes one can discern a deliberate rhetorical change of the power balance.

According to Loftsdóttir, the influence of Icelandic historian Jón Jónsson Aðils (1869–1920) on current Icelandic culture and self-perception is still evident.⁶⁰ She points to Jónsson’s encouragement to the Icelandic nation in *Íslenzkt þjóðerni*, written in 1903, to be ready for a future calling to rise up and make its mark on the world, as a notion, which is reflected in Icelandic society in the years before the commencement of the crisis in 2008. The previously mentioned u-shaped understanding of historical development creates a link between the high point of the Free State or Commonwealth and the new autonomy after the break with Denmark – the low point being the period under foreign rule. As mentioned, in the recent period of the *útrásarvíkingar*, the connotations and values connected to the settlement age (c. 874–930), that differ from those of the Commonwealth (930–1262), seem to have replaced the latter as a privileged reference point or “Golden Age” in Smith’s terms.

This combination of the nationalist historical narrative and emphasis on elements of Viking settlement culture is reflected in the President’s speech. The president subsequently lists 13 qualities that Icelanders possess, the ninth being a “heritage of discovery and exploration fostered by the medieval Viking sagas”⁶¹. This tradition, as the President expresses it, is “interpreting modern business ventures as an extension of the Viking spirit, applauding the successful entrepreneurs as heirs of this proud tradition.”⁶² What the President is referring to could also be described as “the myth of a common ancestry”, as expressed by Anthony D. Smith.⁶³ In his previously mentioned text, Jan Assmann suggests that reintroductions of such combinations of elements of political and historical myths and facts support a political collective’s continued coher-

⁵⁹ Grímsson 2005, as footnote 56, 3.

⁶⁰ Loftsdóttir 2007, as footnote 22, 176.

⁶¹ Grímsson 2005, as footnote 56, 5.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Cf. Smith 1991, as footnote 25, 21f.

ence.⁶⁴ Through the continued re-introduction and re-contextualization of the Viking as emblem of a “Golden Age” they function as such combinations of myth and history. The President’s speech can also be seen as a symptom of the collective euphoria and pride connected to a “David and Goliath-like” turn of events, where the initial power balance is inverted. It also points to a part of the explanation of why this economic strategy proved to be unsustainable and collapsed. It seems plausible that the overlap between a longing for a change in status and recognition, relatively newfound autonomy and a market consisting of former international opponents could result in the situation that the Icelandic economy currently finds itself in. According to Assmann, the dark side of bonding memory is clinging to the past and trapping the understanding of the future in the framework of the past.⁶⁵ In this case, the contemporary has been presented within the framework of past relational power structures. In this way, Viking symbolism has shaped the Icelandic economy through collective celebration of a national stereotype.

In an article from 2009, ethnographer Katla Kjartansdóttir states that, from the late 19th century onwards, the main themes of Icelandic imagology connected to conception of national identity “hardly developed at all”⁶⁶. Whereas I agree as far as the Viking heritage being a recurring theme, I insist on there being a significant development in the use and framing of this theme. The two central cultural icons of identification in this article, the David figure and the Viking, are both images that have been used as personifications of strength. Initial developments arose as a result of identifying with the idea of the Viking as colonizer, then with David the colonized or the underdog responding to the dominant. In contemporary Iceland they can be viewed as a Janus-faced national persona – “David the Viking”. The Viking is thus a reflexive emblem that has gained and generated meaning in various contexts of international relations and can thus be defined as a relationally defined identity marker.

⁶⁴ Cf. Assmann 2006, as footnote 1, 15.

⁶⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁶ Kjartansdóttir, Katla: “Remote, Rough and Romantic: Contemporary Images of Iceland in Visual, Oral and Textual Narrations”. In: Sverrir Jakobsson (ed.): *Images of the North. Histories, Identities, Ideas.* (= *Studia Imagologica*; 14) Amsterdam/New York 2009, 271–280, here: 277.

The Icelandic usage of the national/ethnic myth differs from the colonial struggle that philosopher Frantz Fanon describes in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). However, it is interesting to examine the difference. Fanon points to the fact that nationalism in colonized countries may seem aggressive because the liberation movements are trying to separate themselves from Western culture by emphasizing their distinctiveness.⁶⁷ The liberation movement in Iceland expressed a wish to be counted, not primarily as something different, but rather as an integrated and equal party within Western culture. Thus, one could observe a region fighting for autonomy while simultaneously expressing its support of the central elements of inequality in the imperial world order. This is exemplified by the Icelandic Students' Society's protest during the preparations for the 'Danish Colonial Exhibition' in 1905 where Iceland was to be represented. The union published the following statement:

It is known to us that on this location primarily primitive peoples of different kinds are exhibited; peoples which in one or more respects differ from normal cultural nations. This time Negroes and Eskimos are to be exhibited alongside with us. We regard this as being degrading for our culture and our nationality.⁶⁸

The statement is central because of at least two things: It resulted in a changing of the name of the exhibition to 'Danish Colonial exhibition *and* Exhibition from Iceland and The Faroe Islands'. Additionally, the attitude expressed towards Greenland was also important – it was seen as another Danish dominion. Central to this attitude is the fact that Greenlanders belonged neither to the same race nor the same "ethnie" as the other Nordic peoples. The disassociation with Greenland has at least two meanings. First, that at least these Icelandic intellectuals did not wish Iceland to be characterized as a colony. Second, that race was a central question in the context of finding one's place in the hierarchy of civilized peoples. Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson claims that nationalism and colonialism influenced Icelandic self-image as well as its attitude towards other coun-

⁶⁷ Cf. Fanon, Frantz: "On National Culture". In: Williams and Chrisman 1994, as footnote 49, 36–52, here: 39f.

⁶⁸ "Det er os bekendt, at man der fortrinsvis fremviser forskellige Naturfolk, der i en eller flere Henseender adskiller sig fra almindelige Kulturnationer. Denne Gang agter man at fremvise Negere og Eskimoer sammen med os. Dette anser vi for nedværdigende for vor Kultur og vor Nationalitet." Eggert, S. P. et al.: "Den danske Koloniudstilling og Islænderne. En Erklæring fra den islandske Studenterforening i Reykjavik". In: *Politiken*. 28th December 1904, 1.

tries in the period of the exhibition.⁶⁹ He states that Icelanders “[...] sat on the bench of cultured European nations from where we [Icelanders] could look at the others”⁷⁰.

The creole elements in the connection between Iceland and Eastern Scandinavia include a mutual identification. The associations with a “Hellas of the North”⁷¹, ethnic purity and the cradle of Nordic civilization have benefited two opposite agendas concerning Iceland’s political status. On the one hand, these associations can be seen as arguments why Denmark should not grant Iceland autonomy during an age of cultural rearmament, and on the other hand, the same elements supported a formation of conceptions of Icelandic national identity and consequently nationalism. Anthony D. Smith gives numerous examples of how national leaders – in times of hardship – often turn to the narrative of a “Golden Age” to reinforce a sense of community.⁷² The president’s speech is an indirect example of such a strategy. The Viking era is invoked at a time of success, but it is done in a forum of former opponents. The Icelandic success during the Cod Wars and their 2005 high point both have to do with a change in the power balance between Iceland and its powerful neighbours. In the light of the previous relations with Denmark and Britain, it seems no coincidence that the *útrásarvíkingar* chose Copenhagen and London as key targets for buying up buildings and businesses. This conduct can be said to be a performative step towards a definitive reversing of the power balance. Thus, the conceptualization of the Vikings of our time as elements in negotiations of national identity is determined by Iceland’s political condition of being a former dependency.

⁶⁹ Jóhannsson, Jón Yngvi: “Af reiðum Íslendingum. Deilur um Nylendusýninguna 1905”. In: Sverrir Jakobsson et al. (eds.): *Þjóðerni í þúsund ár?* Reykjavík 2003, 135–150, here: 148.

⁷⁰ “[...] tóku sér sæti á bekk menningaþjóða Evrópu, þaðan sem við gátum horft á hina.” Ibid.

⁷¹ Ísleifsson, as footnote 32.

⁷² Cf. Smith 1991, as footnote 25, *passim*.