

Social Changes and culture in Icelandic Coastal villages

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Abstract

Coastal villages in Iceland which have always been characterized by transformation have in the last two decades been shaped by restructuring of the fisheries, new economic activities such as in tourism, and growing number of foreign laborers. The article examines social and economic transformations in coastal areas based on different research projects that were all based on field research in fishery based villages the northwest part of Iceland. My discussion brings forward some issues regarding the inhabitants' changing perceptions of local culture during this time. In the last two decades the concept of culture has become an instrument of both local populations in marginal areas and ethnic groups all over the world with more knowledge of other people and other ways of living. Unlike before, culture is increasingly used in the villages in North West of Iceland to describe commonalities and diversities found within them. I illustrate how inhabitants of small villages talk about culture and how they show local culture to tourists. Furthermore with a growing population of foreign origin a conception of multiculturalism has appeared in the region which again makes the inhabitants more reflective of local culture of the region. These changes can only be understood if put into a global context. However it is important to combine a spatial perspective that

sheds light on transnational connections with a historical one to understand the cultural transformations in the villages.

Keywords :Coastal villages, locality, culture, labour migrants, multiculturalure

Coastal villages in Iceland have always been characterized by economic and societal changes and by mobility of people and products. In the last two decades societal changes have been shaped by restructuring of the fisheries, new economic activities such as in tourism, and growing number of foreign laborers. This article examines social and economic transformations in coastal areas based on different research projects that were all based on field research in the northwest part of Iceland. This is an area where fishery has always played a central role for people's existence. The various research projects that I have worked on in this area since 1989 have given me a chance to observe societal changes over almost two decades. My discussion brings forward some issues regarding the inhabitants' changing perceptions of local culture during this time. I will depict how inhabitants of small villages talk about culture and how they show local culture to tourists. Furthermore with a growing population of foreign origin a conception of multiculturalism has appeared in the region which again makes the inhabitants more reflective of local culture. These changes can only be understood if put into a global context. However it is important to combine a spatial perspective that sheds light on transnational connections with a historical one to understand the cultural transformations in the villages. Unlike before, culture is increasingly used to describe commonalities and diversities found within such villages.

In the past anthropologists studied locally based cultures of different people in demarcate communities. Today they as well as other social scientists are concerned with the complex relationship between culture and place (Appadurai 1996;

Bauman 2000; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Urry 2001). They no longer see culture as tied to territories in the same way they used to while most still continue to examine people's daily lives in particular localities. Anthropologists have instead of describing cultures been concerned with processes that bring about ongoing recreation of cultural identities and cultural representations. They have for some time examined how production, consumption, politics, and identities become detached from and re-attached to local places (Kearny 1995). A critical examination, and even rejection, of the culture concept has been going on in anthropology while local populations and ethnic groups have been taking on the culture concept for their own use often in a reflexive way in defining their realities (Eriksen 2002). Culture has in a sense become an instrument of both local populations in marginal areas and ethnic groups with more knowledge of other people and other ways of living. Culture is moreover constructed in a more reflexive way than ever before as people consciously define their culture for tourism or to sell a product and is often connected with power and material resources (Hannertz, 1996).

Global perspectives in social sciences have been concerned with spatial relations, with cultural construction of places, and with conceptions of culture as flexible and hybrid. Localities places are important for people's sense of identity but as will be shown in this paper local meanings and collective identities are socially constructed and ever changing and "hybrid" (Urry 2001). However, cultural production is grounded in various substrates of shared social experience, experience that has existential meaning for those who partake in it. This experience is formed within hierarchy of constraints and dynamic processes that link global process with the local structuring of social lives (Friedman, 2000). In the following discussion of cultural change in fishery based localities in Iceland I will examine social and economic changes and how culture and perception of its linkage with place changes. As the main goal of this article is

to examine cultural change I will begin with a short historical overview of the developments fishery villages in Iceland with a special focus on the West Fjords region. I will then give examples from my different research project to depict how these cultural changes took shape.

Historical background of fishery villages

Coastal villages in Iceland, such as those in the West Fjords, are usually geographically isolated and with houses build close to each other. They have from 200 to 1000 inhabitants, with one larger town of 2.700 inhabitants. These villages are commonly located in fjords with little lowland, and came into being when boats were small and proximity to good fishing grounds was more important than nowadays. Most of them developed as single enterprise villages where one company (with a local owner) possessed the main processing plant as well as some fishing vessels that provided fish for the plant.

In the nineteenth century there was a large exodus from farming regions into coastal areas all around Iceland. At this time there was great increase in the processing of salted fish for foreign markets and many landless people saw an opportunity for a better life in the growing fisheries. The 20th century was characterized by growing prosperity in these villages especially after the Second World War. In the development of a modern welfare state of the decades following the Second World War, integrating the widely dispersed fishing communities into the national economy was an important goal. The fishery villages were seen as part of the national economy and official regional politics were concerned with maintaining employment in villages and towns. Important part of this goal was to modernize the fish industry. Loans were provided by the state to buy trawlers, and numerous measures were taken to improve life in the villages along the coast, such as providing local services,

especially in health care and education. Road construction, bridge building and assistance with building new harbors were also important in this development (Bærenholdt, 1994; Skaptadóttir 1995).

Gradually more new trawlers and new and larger freezing plants were bought to most fishery villages with the aid of the government and the municipalities. The prosperity of coastal villages in the sixties and seventies can clearly be observed from the many large houses build in the villages all around Iceland at this time. Although most villages were more or less one-company villages, in most the municipality was to varying degree involved in the fishery firms. The municipality was for example involved in providing loans, investing in vessels and in the processing factories. Thus fish processing plans were in some cases in the ownership of private individuals as well as the municipality (Guðmundsson 1993; Skaptadóttir 2004).

In the 1990s there was a diminishing governmental and general support for regional development. Earlier regional development efforts were criticized for poor results and for leading to problems such as over-investments in fishing vessels. Great importance was given to increasing productivity of fish processing firms. To ensure more productivity the goal was been set on creating larger production units in the fishery industry. The ITQ system that is now in existence is an example of the application of such market solution. Economizing and efficiency of the fishery have been emphasized as the main goal of this management system. A quota system was first established in 1984 as a temporary solution to problems of diminishing fish stocks and over-investment in vessels. In 1991 the system was extended and quotas became divisible and could be sold and rented between vessels (Individually transferable quotas). One of the effects of the ITQ system already in the 1990s was a concentration of quota shares into the hands of few large companies. The number of small companies holding quotas, on

the other hand, decreased severely already in the first years (Pálsson & Helgason, 1996).

Little attention has been paid to the social effects of the economic transformations on family and work life in small villages, or of locally-based sustainable development. This was a transformation from a regulated, comparatively organized fisheries sector with units of production embedded within local communities, to a globally oriented, free market industry with highly mobile units of production with just as much in investing abroad as locally (Eyþórsson 1996). One of the consequences of the ITQ system for inhabitants of fishery villages is, as Eyþórsson points out, that locally-based control over the access to resources has increasingly been lost. When individuals owning quota sell their quota they benefit greatly but if they sell it to companies in other parts of Iceland as is usually the case other inhabitants are affected as they can no longer bring fish to land. Those who own quota can sell it for much higher price they would get for landing their catch. Many of them have chosen to sell, invest the money elsewhere, or move away. The industry as a whole is showing greater profits and is successful. The privatization of the fish stocks has been the most important goal of the ITQ system and economic efficiency its main measurement of success. However, the localities as many other small peripheral localities of the north have gone through serious crisis as the result of market solutions to the industries economic problems (Skaptadóttir, Mørkøre and Riabova 2001). Many villagers have been left with fewer jobs and with houses that cannot be sold or only for a very low price. In the West Fjords some have left their houses unsold to start a new life elsewhere in Iceland while those who decide to stay there face new challenges.

In spite of this situation new people keep moving into coastal villages from other parts of Iceland and from abroad. For the most part they have come to work in fish processing plants. Despite fewer jobs in the fewer jobs due to restructuring

of the fishing industry, the fish processing firms began to lack workers in the early 1990s. Not being able to find workers in Iceland the employers searched for labourers abroad, primarily from Poland. In 1996, 70% of all new work permits granted in Iceland were issued to firms that hired workers in fish processing jobs (Directorate of Labour 1999). By this time the out-migration of native-born Icelanders from the area of West Fjords had already been an on-going process, and was the highest in the country from the years 1997 to 2002 (Statistics Iceland 2007).

International migration is a quite new phenomenon in Iceland, but it has been rising rapidly. In 1981, foreign citizens were only 1.4 % of the total population whereas in the year 2006 the proportion was 6% (Statistics Iceland 2007). Even though the largest numbers of immigrants reside in the capital area, the percentage of foreign-born residents among the population has generally been much higher in the coastal villages, such as those in the West Fjords. For example, in 1999 foreign citizens represented 7% of the population in the area whereas in other regions this ratio ranged from 2% to 3%. There are some villages within larger municipalities where more than half of the population are foreign-born or of foreign ancestry. Presently the share of foreigners in the population of the West Fjords remains fairly constant at around 7% (Statistics Iceland 2007; Skaptadóttir and Wojtynska 2007). As we see from this brief history of coastal villages in Iceland and in particular of the West Fjords is that they have never been stable units, but always going through changes. These changes and the different movements of people into the villages and out of them are part of their cultural formations.

Moving out from culture, into?

I first came to do field research in a coastal village in the West Fjords in 1989 in relation to my doctoral project. Before going there some of my friends, even those with roots in fishing communities, told me I was leaving culture behind and soon would smell like fish. The village I chose to live in was known at this time in Iceland for its right wing politics and for economic prosperity based on emphasis on private property. It was a village not much unlike others based industrial development and Fordist regimes, where large production facilities, a relatively stable work force and the welfare state were combined in one company town (Gupta and Ferguson 2002: 67). The village went through a history of more or less continued increased prosperity most of the 20th century, especially after the IIWW as many other villages in Iceland. There were very few tourists at this time coming to the village. Out-of-towners living temporarily in the village were primarily seasonal laborers, or music teachers from other parts of Iceland or abroad. During my field work period I worked in the fish plant with women of foreign origin. Already by the 1970s and 1980s temporary workers had been arriving in the West Fjords from countries as diverse as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Sweden and Denmark. They were few in number and they were predominantly young single women who stayed only for a season. They wanted to travel before going to college or settling down and often they continued to the mainland of Europe after making money in the fish plants. Occasionally they would meet a partner in the villages and settle there.

When doing field research at this time I experienced for the first time in my life living in a territorial bound "community". In the village which at this time had about 1100 inhabitants everyone knew a great deal about every other inhabitant in the village, this included name, marital status and number of

children, work place and hobbies. There was about a half an hour drive to a larger town of 2700 inhabitants mentioned above on a good day, but in bad weather this can be a dangerous road, with rocks and small avalanches falling on it.

One dominant family owned most of the firms that provided jobs for the inhabitants of the village such as the fishery firm, the mini department store and hardware store. As the main job providers the managers saw it as their duty to give jobs to all members of the community. Class divisions were clearly visible, but usually referred to in indirect way. A particular term was used for this dominant family that consisted of the father, who had started the company and had died by this time, and his children who were running the different businesses in the village. The social and economic ties within the community were generally very much based on kinship and reciprocity. The same few families who owned the companies in the village were also active in politics and were on municipal board and active in local associations and cultural life. Although the one family was the most dominant in economic life, there were also few other visible families in economic and social life. These families were also to some extent linked through marriage. In the late 1980s it was common that people would trace kinship relations within the village for me. No major economic crisis had occurred for some decades and there was hardly any unemployment in the village. Trawlers were bought and the fish plant equipped with the newest technology. The financing of the major fishery firm was secured primarily by governmental loans as other fishery enterprises in Iceland.

This was a community that of course had its internal conflicts, but close knit networks. People who suffered crisis such as caused by bad weather or accidents at sea, or long term illness received help from other villagers. Inhabitants who I talked with compared their own village favorable to the surrounding villages and pointed out the extraordinary beauty of the surrounding mountains. Local identity was important but

somehow taken for granted and not speculated much over. People were mostly busy being modern Icelanders, having modern things. They were aware of a negative view of fishery villages as culture less entities but took pride in being central in the national economy and being part of the fisheries. This was in fact an important aspect of their local identity. They were proud of their fishermen and that of the West Fjords area. Women who were doing the work in the fish plants that most people in the capital area looked down upon expressed repeatedly a pride in providing wealth for the nation. Some people claimed that they were different than other Icelanders as they lived closer to nature and unlike people from the city they had experienced how nature gives and how nature takes both as fishermen and through difficult weather and avalanches.

The inhabitants were at this time active in many different kinds of organizations, some of which have existed for many decades such as the women's association, the local rescue team, the Lions, a church choir and a women's choir. These and other associations organized different cultural activities not only for themselves but also for the other villages in the region. They commonly use the funds raised to finance some communal things, such as for the church or community hall. There is a golf course next to the village, a football field and a swimming hall, which serves as a popular meeting place.

At one point during my field work when talking with a local woman asked me about my project and anthropology. I told her that anthropologists studied diverse cultures and cultural difference. She then explained to me that in this village they did not really have culture except perhaps the choirs, the local theater group and the music school. In fact her conception at this time was the same as my friends who were using this concept to talk about art and higher education. She had never even heard of the meaning used by anthropologists.

Cultural coastal communities

I went back to do field work in the same village and another in the vicinity in the summer of 1996 and again in the summer of 1997 to study women's strategies in a time of diminishing work in the fisheries and returned there for a shorter trip two years later for a related project on coping strategies. Although as already mentioned I had experienced living in a close knit community for the first time in 1989 I had not thought much about the concept of community in a critical way. It was only at this time when coming back that I could not help becoming interested in questions regarding the concept of community and locality. This is primarily because I noticed that important changes had occurred in the way people talked about the locality where they lived. Unlike before people in both villages continually spoke about the village they lived and its possibility for future survival. Having a local culture had also become important among the people living in these two villages.

Both of these villages had been going through serious economic crisis. By this time the main company of the village where I had lived in 1989 had become bankrupt with 70% of the population becoming unemployed, many of them for the first time in their lives. The crisis was felt all through the community as most of the economic activities in the village were related to the fisheries. This was a big shock for the villagers, as they had been very proud of the local economic life. Moreover much of the quota and thereby the right to fish had been sold away and some of the inhabitants were gaining money from renting out their quota. This created tensions between individuals within the villages, and those who were renting out or selling their quota were accused by some of the other villagers for selling out and leaving others without jobs. Living in the village was no longer taken for granted at all and people kept explaining to me in a defensive way why they insisted on living in a place they themselves doubted had much of a future. Many people, rela-

tives and friends, had been moving away and since then the population has been less stable. The prices of houses had gone down and people who wanted to leave and search for employment elsewhere had problems selling their houses. In spite of the crisis some people were still moving there from other parts of the country and for temporary work from abroad. The old families who had been dominant before were no longer as visible as they used to be. There was no longer an expectation from the villagers that the company owners automatically provided jobs for them, were involved in local politics, or assisted them in any way as had been the case before. They could be shareholders in larger companies who had opened their processing plants in the village and could move on to other areas any time. A similar story occurred in the other village where I did fieldwork at this time.

Because of the economic changes the inhabitants were increasingly concerned with strategies to create new jobs. The local municipal government was very involved with various attempts. Small boat fishing is an example of one such strategy. Another strategy that built on informal ties and local identity was the establishment of a handicraft center in the village. This and similar handicraft centers in other villages were established in relation to a development project which had the goal help women create new economic opportunities based on knowledge they already held. In many small villages in Iceland, there is a long tradition of women sewing clothes and knitting sweaters and mittens for family members as store bought clothes were not always easily available until two or three decades ago. Women and few men produced handmade crafts, preferring local materials and design, and sold them to other villagers as well as to Icelandic and foreign tourists during the summer months. The women knitted wool sweaters and mittens with a pattern that was not just Icelandic but from the West Fjords. They made dolls (that were named after the area), made handbags and jewelry from fish skin. They used natural materials

and emphasize the closeness of fishing communities to the resources of nature and their woodcarvings and quilts often depict fishery-related themes.

With the economic transformations and consequently a search for new economic options the concept of culture has become a project for local identity and for tourism development. In addition, the handicraft center served as a tourist information center for the village and surrounding area in the villages where I did field research. Thus women were playing a greater role in the presentation of the village to outsiders than men. In this way they played an important part in the making and re-interpretation of local culture. This strategy consisted very much in going back in history of the village, the area or the larger region of the West Fjord peninsula. Other projects such as building an old fishing build on the same idea. This fishing site still attracts many buses of foreign tourists there all summer long.

Even though the growth of tourism had at this time been slower in marginal regions than in Reykjavik the number of tourists had been growing. Moreover the inhabitants increasingly were traveling to other parts of the world as tourists. People were talking about their history in a different way than before but also the surrounding nature, focusing on untouched nature not just the most beautiful mountains. Although the inhabitants commonly had pictures of the village on the wall in their own homes, the fishery villages themselves or the activities going on there, were not objects shown to tourists and there was very little emphasis on recent history, but instead on the distant past.

As many experienced this time period as a time of crisis similar to a natural catastrophe, they emphasized the importance of strengthening links within the community. They expressed an interest in making the village more viable as part of making a better life for themselves. They maintained that it is not enough to build economic opportunities and employment although it is most basic. For example, the municipal authorities

supported cultural activities and emphasized good public services. People in both villages pointed out the importance of keeping up people's spirits. Similarly for most of the women, being a member of the handicraft center was not only a way to be able to sell their products and supplement the household income. When I asked a member of the handicraft center about the role of the center in the community, she said, "For people in such a small village it is important to stick together. Participating in the handicraft center gives you a feeling of belonging and a chance to socialize." They argued that the social activities related to the center are not only important for them as individuals but also plays a vital role in keeping their community viable.

The handicraft center and the seasonal fishing site are good examples of localization as the people involved emphasize the local distinctiveness in both their production and marketing. Local distinctiveness refers to nature and landscape as well as to local history. In their local ways they used similar methods used elsewhere in tourism and through medial and traveling they had become more conscious of what made themselves different than the rest of the world. But they expressed this difference using similar terms as other local populations in peripheral areas.

Multicultural Coastal Communities

While doing research in the fishery villages in the late 1990s I had begun to notice that there were a growing number of foreigners coming to work to these villages. Because I was dealing with other research issues at this time I did not look at this closely. Since 2003, because of this development, I have however, been doing research on foreign labor migration to Iceland, with the West Fjords as one of the areas of study. I have thus returned here repeatedly to for field work in few of villages in this area.

The West Fjords region had until recently the highest percentage of foreign citizens and foreign born in the country. As mentioned above the area has a longer history of migrant labour both from other parts of Iceland and from other countries. The majority of the foreign citizens currently living in the West Fjords came only temporarily on one-year contract to work in the fish processing, often with intention to stay no longer than two or three years. Most of them are from Poland, but also from other countries. The main reason Icelandic women gave for why they no longer wanted this kind of job was the low wages for such a physically hard job. They said that they preferred jobs in the service sectors, such as the health services, caring for young children, old people and the handicapped. Although Polish people are the most numerous in the area there are people from 30 national backgrounds living there.

For these labor migrants moving to Iceland is primarily a strategy in order to make better lives for themselves and their families back home. Most of them send remittances to their relatives and some have been able to invest in an apartment or a house in their country of origin. While many have returned, some of them have settled for a longer time, nevertheless most with the idea of returning in the future. Those currently coming to work there are usually related to someone already working and living in the West Fjords. This has also been encouraged by the employers who claim that bringing family potentially creates more stable work force that will stay for a longer time in the area. Because of much out migration from the villages good and inexpensive housing is easily available and thus some of the migrants have invested in a house or an apartment in the villages. Although the largest numbers of migrants in the villages work in the fish processing plants and other unskilled manual jobs, there are also some skilled people such as music teachers working there. Music teachers from all over Europe and especially Central and East Europe have played an impor-

tant role not merely in the music life of the region but also in the local theatre.

With the growing number of immigrants in the area nationality has become a new marker of difference within the villages. There are limitations to the relations between the majority of the migrants and Icelanders because of language problems and because the foreign workers commonly only work with other foreigners. In breaks at work people sit at separate tables where they speak their own language. Furthermore those born and raised in there and the migrants have different perceptions of the villages. The migrants only infrequently share the Icelander's admirations of the local landscape and they do not share the historical knowledge about the importance of the fisheries as a source of pride (Skaptadóttir and Wojtynska 2007). For those who have only stayed for few years a coastal village is primarily a place of work. Back home whereto they return for at least one month a year is where social life matters. Thus many of them have limited interest in participating in local events arranged by local associations or being active participants in these organizations. There are obviously exceptions to this, for example people who have decided to stay for good or have married an Icelander. Music teachers are also usually very active in cultural life of the villages.

The attitudes of Icelanders to these new inhabitants of their villages are mixed. Some of the Icelanders express distress about the lack of interest in learning Icelandic and disappointment about little participation in social events and they try to figure out ways to involve them. They need members to keep the choirs and the theatre club alive. Even though negative views may be found among some inhabitants the local authorities have chosen to define this as a challenge instead of as a problem. There is a strong emphasis by the municipal authorities in the villages of the West Fjords to make these new inhabitants feel welcome in a time of great out migration to the capital area. They have services that are difficult to maintain with a small population such as the

schools and health services. A multicultural center has been opened in the region serving not only the region but providing information for foreigners all over Iceland. Already in 1996 the first celebration of various nationalities residing in the area was held organized by local associations with support from the local authorities. This has since been held regularly. In these celebrations, people of the different nationalities, celebrate together and show arts, food and various artifacts from their country of origin. In these celebrations Icelandic participants show traditional food or materials from the past, especially from the area. There is a great deal of discussion going on about multiculturalism and people talk about different individual behavior in terms of cultural difference.

Conclusion

The fisheries and fishery based localities as those described in this article have always depended on a world markets. The last two decades the fish industries have been characterized by economic restructuring and new technologies in production. Moreover, the fish industry currently depends for the most part on the work of migrant laborers. When I began my research in coastal communities in 1989 the concept of culture was not used in the way it is used today. It was only used to describe art or what is also called high culture. People took their living in a coastal village as more or less for granted. This does not mean that they existed in a stable society that was suddenly transformed by globalization as they had witnessed great transformations during their lives. Moreover, although people did not themselves reflect as much on their own culture before, former identities and local meanings were also socially, politically ideologically and economically constructed. Since the concept of culture is increasingly used to describe what makes them different from others. Inhabitants for example talk about

local culture in relation to tourism development as we have seen in the discussion above.

With globalization people have gained more knowledge about how other people live through television, the internet and traveling. Thus people are aware of the difference in lifestyles between different countries and use the concept of culture to describe this difference. At the same time localities as those in the West Fjords of Iceland are becoming multicultural as people with different national heritage, speaking diverse languages are sharing their life in a small village. These different movements of people depict different realities and possibilities of the world population but they are both part of cultural formation in various places. When discussing globalization and global processes such as those described in this article it is important not to replicate the older developmental ideas and accept the view of globalization as a force that only provides economic freedom and welfare to people. This gives a simple picture of the world which ignores people's various social and economic positions, experiences, strategies and identities. Instead we should examine the global processes at work locally and not lose sight of the fact that while the global technology and communication systems open up possibilities for many we also witness growing polarizations in the global economy (Bauman, 1998) Moreover we are reminded of the fact that the conceptualization of locality, domestic and transnational life and global processes are difficult to understand without reference to each other.

In the different research projects I found different ways in which culture is represented in the villages. My examples of changing conceptions of culture in small resource based villages in the West Fjords is similar to local global connections in peripheral areas elsewhere, but perhaps they are stronger felt because of the interconnectedness of such small populations and with a narrow economic base. To be able to understand the effects of globalization and the global-local connection and ar-

ticulation we need detailed studies of the nature of these changes for people's lives and how they cope with these changes. In this way we can examine more closely the nature of cultural production.

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