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Ritualising Reykjavík
New Festivals in the Capital of Iceland
1998–2018

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Abstract: As the title suggests, the aim of this article is to consider the new festivals that have developed in Reykjavík between 1998 and 2018, noting how they have been influenced by the rise in the number of tourists and foreign citizens, a growing sense of international involvement, and the feeling that the ritual year needs "filling in" to make the city an all-year round attraction. Starting by noting the arrival of the Reykjavík Arts Festival in the 1970s, the article considers a range of urban festivals including Cultural Night, the arrival of Gay Pride, Women's Free Day, Iceland Airwaves and the development of Halloween in recent years. It also considers the key differences in nature between these new festivals and those that preceded them.

Keywords: modern festivals, invented traditions, Gay Pride, spaces, ritual, Reykjavik.

In June 2005, at the *First International Conference of the SIEF Working Group on the Ritual Year* in Malta, I presented a paper on "Ritual Space, Ritual Year, Ritual Gender: A View of the Old Norse and New Icelandic Ritual Year", in which I described how the ritual year in Iceland – and probably in many areas in the Nordic countries – was originally divided into two seasons which appear to have been associated in some way with two different sexes, the winter being associated with women and female goddesses while the summer was essentially associated with the male gods. I also noted the way in which the spaces and groups involved in Nordic festivals past and present seem to reflect weather, light and geographical conditions, midsummer in Iceland being associated with the nation and outdoor spaces, while midwinter is essentially an indoor celebration of family identity (Gunnell 2006; see also Gunnell 2021).

One of the themes of this Ritual Year volume is that of urban festivals, something which has provided me with a useful opportunity to consider the changes that have taken place in terms of public festivity in Iceland over the course of the two decades that passed between 1998 and 2018 (the date of the conference the lies behind this book). Most changes have occurred in the capital city which was rapidly growing in size in this period, increasingly making the city an entity in itself, and not least a hub for tourists and tourism in the wake of the enormous financial meltdown that took place in Iceland in 2008 (according to the Iceland Tourist Board, a total of c. 2.3 million tourists visited Iceland in 2018, as compared to c. 600,000 in 2000). One major result of this change was that the centre of the city was increasingly becoming a tourist domain during the day, while Icelanders tended to carry out their shopping in the malls outside the centre, something that has continued into the present day. The night time was and is naturally different.

The present population of Iceland is around 387,758. In 1998 the total population was around 273,000. Today around 236,500 people live in the Greater Reykjavík area, while in 1998 the figure was around 164,000 (Statistics Iceland 2023). One can understand why the city commonly sees itself as representing the nation.

Prior to 1996, the ritual year in the city largely reflected that which was common around the country (for further details on the following festivals, see Árni Björnsson 1995). Christmas was celebrated at home, fireworks were fired off on New Year's Eve, and in a few areas, people celebrated Twelfth Night with bonfires and masks (see also Gunnell 2012). After that, little happened during the spring apart from annual gatherings associated with work places involving preserved Icelandic meats (the so-called Þorrablót [lit. Þorri sacrifice]) until children went guising on Öskudagur (Ash Wednesday: see Kristín Einarsdóttir 2007) and were given summer presents on the first day of summer (according to the Icelandic calendar), in late April. Then came Labour Day on 1st May; *Sjómanndagur* (National Seamen's Day) on the first weekend in June; Þjóðhátíðardagur (the National Day) on 17th June (see further Gunnell 2016); and *Verslunarmannahelgi* (the National Bank Holiday) at the end of August, when a large number of people would leave town to take part in outdoor festivals around the countryside. After that people tended to retreat indoors until Christmas came.

The first step towards creating new festivals and processions that focused on Reykjavík (many of which were often echoed elsewhere in larger towns around the countryside), underlining the idea that Reykjavík was an international cultural capital that could effectively stand alongside other cultural capitals in Scandinavia (if not elsewhere), might be said to have taken place with the establishment of the Reykjavík *Listahátíð* (Arts Festival) in 1970 (one notes that from the start, the Arts Festival was connected to Reykjavík, rather than Iceland as a whole). This festival which has since taken place in the first part of June, leading up to the national

day, and brings in artists from all over the world, was initially the brainchild of the director of the Nordic House in Reykjavík, but he received effective support from the pianist Vladimir Ashkenazy who was then living in the city (see "Árleg listahátíð…" 1968: 24; "Listahátíð í Reykjavík…" 1969: 3; and "Listahátíð í Reykjavík" 1970: 19).

Soon after this came another festive development which reflected Iceland's increasing awareness and involvement in international movements. This was the establishment of *Kvennafrídagurinn* (Women's Day Off) on 24th October 1975, when the women of Iceland attracted world attention by going on strike from all kinds of work for a day ("Kvennafrídagur" 1975: 15). The strike, held on United Nations Day, was initially designed to commemorate the UN International Women's Year. It nonetheless went on to lead to the establishment of the Icelandic women's political party (*Kvennaflokkurinn*) and even the election of the world's first democratically elected female president, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir. Still celebrated today at regular intervals (rather than annually), and most recently in 2023, this festival, which still has its heart in Reykjavík, centred around a procession that ended in a large-scale gathering in the centre of town after women had left work (and child-care) at a time that reflected the average difference between women's and men's wages for the same job. In 2018, they stopped work at 2.55 p.m., underlining that their wages were around 25% lower than those of men (see further Ćirić 2018).

Another reflection of this sense of growing international awareness and involvement came when the annual anti-NATO walk that used to go from the military airport at Keflavík into the city (Stefán Pálsson & Páll Hilmarsson 2015) was effectively moved into the middle of the city in 1980 ("Blysför í miðborginni" 1980: 1). Still going at the start of Christmas on the evening of 23rd December (St Þorlákur's Mass: the last shopping evening when shops are open until 11 p.m.) and still led by the school choir of what used to be the most left-wing grammar school in Reykjavík, the candlelit *Friðarganga* (Peace March) starts at 18.00. Led by the carol-singing students, it moves along what used to be usual route for processions in Reykjavík, that is, along the main shopping street from the main downtown bus station into one of the three main squares in the old centre where a speech is held. It was, and still is, essentially a statement of solidarity with peace movements throughout the world. It has since become a traditional feature of the Christmas festival for many Reykjavík people.

Each of the above developments underlined the idea that Reykjavík was now not only the centre of Iceland, its representative in terms of international attention, but also an increasingly international city in nature, well aware of the growing attention of the world, and people's growing involvement in international politics.

The more radical recent developments in urban festivities can be said to have begun in the mid-nineties, essentially under the guidance of Reykjavík's first female

mayor, Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, who had been one of the leading members of the earlier-noted Icelandic women's political party. It was the Tourist Committee of her council that decided, in July 1996, that the establishment of a so-called *Menningarnótt* (Cultural Night) in mid-August, in honour of the 210th anniversary of the city, would be a good way of pulling the inhabitants of the city together and drawing more tourists to the country. The original plan was to create a different kind of city festival to that which was normally experienced by Icelanders. In short, following the model known in other capitals ("Engin útihátíð" 1996: 4), the festival would:

> offer citizens *and foreign tourists* various kinds of cultural activities throughout the night or at least from midnight until 5 or 6 in the morning. The idea is that galleries, restaurants, book shops and perhaps other places will be open throughout the night, offering art exhibitions, concerts, readings, dramatic performances and more. The conditions for restaurants to have permission to stay open longer than usual is that they must offer some form of programme that follows these ideas.
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> ("Menningarnótt haldin í Reykjavík" 1996: 7; my emphasis.)

Stress was placed on the fact that "this is not a night for drunkenness; the focus is on culture for all the family," something which is somewhat illustrative of the hours that Icelanders commonly lead during the light nights of the summer.

From the start, however, it was clear that activities on Cultural Night would not be limited to the night-time. Soon after this, the day started to be connected to the Reykjavík Marathon, which (since 1984) had always circled the centre of the city, allowing the event to take on a role that in a sense echoes the border-tracing rituals known around the world from earlier times (see "Reykjavík maraþon" 1984: 23; see also "Hatíðarhöld um helgina…" 1996: 23; "Menningarnótt á afmælisnótt" 1996: 13 and "Vökum af list" 1996: 13 and 15; and "Menningarnóttin og maraþon…" 1998: 6). Cultural Night, which always takes place on a Saturday (either on the 18th September or the first Saturday after this) and ends at around midnight (now at 11.00) with a dazzling municipal firework display over the city harbour (even after the financial crash of 2008), has continued to play a central role in the life of the city ever since.

Various things are worth bearing in mind about the nature and timing of this newly-created festival. Over and above the fact that increased tourism was evidently one of the new factors involved (see above), it is also worth noting that 1996 saw the start of the gradually increasing wave of emigration to Iceland of people from other cultures (the number of foreign citizens jumped from 938 to 1,258 that year; by 2018, the figure had reached 11,537 (cf. Statistics Iceland 2019). In short, the city was beginning to become aware that it was now home to a wide range of people that had different cultural backgrounds. Bearing this in mind, it was interesting

to note that when I and a student of mine took interviews with immigrants that had come to Iceland from Vietnam and elsewhere in 2003 and 2004 (see Gunnell 2003), more than one of them noted that whereas the national day was really only for Icelanders born and bred, Cultural Night was something that they could personally relate to. In short, while they might not have been "Icelanders", they belonged to Reykjavík like everyone else. And certainly, it was noteworthy that the early Cultural Nights deliberately stressed that the festival was not just about being Icelandic. The programmes stressed that this is an international city, with open doors and a sense of brother- and sisterhood (something also underlined by both the Women's Day Off in 2023 [also referred to as *Kvennaverkfall* or Women's Strike] and Gay Pride [see below] that same year, in which the use of Icelandic was joined by English in both events).

With regard to timing, it is also worth noting that Cultural Night took on the role of a "final" summer celebration (after the National Day and the Bank Holiday festivals and various tourist trips out of the city), a final festive late night out before the return to work and school as darkness is starting to return. The firework display against the backdrop of growing darkness underlines this in no small way. In a sense, there are certain parallels here to the role of Twelfth Night underlining the end of Christmas.

Over the six years that followed the arrival of Cultural Night, new city festivities started appearing one after another, most of them taking place at the weekends so that they did not disturb the working week. The year 1999 saw the beginning of Reykjavík Gay Pride, under no small influence from a young man named Páll Óskar Hjálmtýrsson, a much-loved Icelandic pop star who almost single-handedly changed Iceland's attitudes to homosexuality in the space of just a few years. First held in this form in June 1999 to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots in New York (see "Hinsegin helgi" 1999: 19; and "Hringiðan" 1999: 40), the three-day festival was initially built up around yet another weekend procession (with floats) that rolled into the centre of town along the usual protest route noted above. *Gleðigangan* (lit. The Gay Procession), as it has come to be called, went on to become the high point of a week-long LGBT festival held in mid-August that was called is now called *Hinsegin dagar* (lit. Gay Days: see further Valgerður Óskarsdóttir 2014). Today it has become a summer highlight for all the family, and is of a size that has meant it has had to take a new route to the centre of town (partly also because much of the old protest route has become a "pedestrian street"). In 2018, the festival began with the more recent mayor, Dagur B. Eggertsson (another Social Democrat) and others painting one of the streets in the centre of town with rainbow colours, effectively underlining that the festival had now become a physical part of the town (see Sylvía Rut Sigfúsdóttir 2018; see also "20 Years of Reykjavík Pride" 2019). This has since become an annual ritual.

In 1999, Reykjavik also saw the arrival of another kind of arts festival in the form of the international music festival, Iceland Airwaves, which has since been held annually in early November. This festival began as a local music festival held in an empty air hanger ("Sérstök kynning…" 1999: 68), but as a result of the ever-growing international interest in Icelandic rock music, it quickly began involving not only famous foreign bands, but also an increasing number of tourists, in a period that up until then had been comparatively unattractive to outsiders. Like Cultural Night and the Arts Festival, the festival takes over the entire centre of the city, using a wide range of venues. While it focuses on the evening, it lasts a long weekend as the *Hinsegin dagar* used to do. It has evidently become now a high point of the autumn for a particular generation (at home and abroad), and an obvious generator of both money and international attention (see also "Iceland Airwaves").

The growing awareness of the potential that could be found in connecting festivities with tourism can be clearly seen in the next festivals that came to be added to the Reykjavík calendar. In 2000, the older traditional festival of *Sjómannadagur* (Seaman's Day), which, as noted above, used to be held in early June, found itself transformed into another weekend long festival called *Hátíð hafsins* (The Festival of the Sea), extending the focus away from seamen and their families onto a wide range of generally marine-related activities aimed at both families and tourists. This festival was deliberately centred in the neighbourhood of the old harbour in Reykjavík, an area that the city was gradually transforming into a new cultural and culinary centre aimed at both tourists and local people. (See "Hátíð hafsins" 2000: 12.)

Two years year later, in 2002, a less successful attempt was made to kick-start yet another music festival in the centre of the city in mid-August at the time when, as noted above, many Icelanders (and especially the young) used to leave the city for outdoor Bank Holiday festivals in the countryside (see above). Named *Innipúkar* (lit. Indoor Demons), this was arguably partly aimed at those tourists who were in town at a time during which the city was relatively empty of Icelanders (see "Innipúkar sameinist" 2002: 44).

Closely related to the development of the festivals noted above, and not least Cultural Night, was yet another festival planned by the mayor, Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, which was deliberately designed to fill in another culturally "dead space" that existed between Christmas and the later spring festivals. This was the Reykjavík *Vetrarhátíð* (called the "Winter Lights" festival in English) set in early February. Initially planned to take place in 2000 (see "Árleg vetrarhátíð" 2000: 14), the weekend-long festival eventually started in 2002, with light and warm water as its theme (see "Ljós í myrkri" and "Logandi vatnsbunur…" 2002: 26 and 60). As Ingibjörg Sólrún noted (see "Árleg vetrarhátíð" above), she had been inspired by the Stockholm Festival of Water that was held between 1991 and 1999 (Wikipedia 2019), and the Helsinki Forces of Light festival (since changed into the Lux Festival,

now held in January: see "Lux Helsinki" 2019). Described on its 2018 web site as "an annual event that celebrates both the winter world and the growing sun light after a long period of darkness," which involves "light installations, culture and outdoor activities," the Winter Lights festival is once again meant to provide "entertainment for Reykjavík's locals and guests alike" ("Winter Lights Festival" 2019). As the party manifesto for the Social Democrat *Reykjavíkurlistinn* (Reykjavík List) party Ingibjörg Sólrún had led announced in 2002, the deliberate development of such festivals was seen as part of creating a new modern, international cultural city (see "Borg…" 2002: 38). Indeed, this particular festival has since gone on to incorporate two other small sub-festivals which go by the name of *Safnakvöld* (Museum Night) (since 2005), when museums organise various activities for visitors to visit free in the evening (see "Yfir hundrað viðburðir" 2005: 51); and *Sundlauganótt* (Pool Night) (since 2012), when the various warm outdoor swimming pools of Reykjavík do the same ("Grindhvaladráp…" 2012: 58).

After the financial crash of 2008, which left Iceland desperate to repair its fortunes as fast as possible, all of the above city festivals, which were now effectively spread across the year, became very useful tools to be employed as part of the highly-successful government-run *Inspired by Iceland* tourism campaign. Indeed, one of the aims of *Inspired by Iceland* was to underline that Iceland, and especially Reykjavík, has something culturally to offer visitors all year round (see further Inspired by Iceland 2019), and without question, most of the festive occasions that have come into being since this time can be seen to have an international dimension, something seen in their English names, their theme or their direct aim to attract guests from abroad.

One of the more recent developments in this sense is the annual *Drusluganga* (SlutWalk) which takes place in late July. Started in 2011, and deliberately modelled on the "SlutWalk" held in Toronto in April of that same year ("Drusluganga…" 2011: 54), the walk (like *Gleðigangan* nowadays) runs from the Hallgrímskirkja church which dominates the Reykjavík horizon down into the centre of town. Like the Toronto festival, this is another gender-related protest against rape and other forms of violence against women, which, like Gay Pride, involves costuming of various kinds. It has naturally been fed by the #Metoo movement in recent years.

Another recent arrival has been the international "Secret Solstice" music festival which started in 2014 ("Hita upp..." 2014: 41), and takes place in a sports stadium in Reykjavík over three days around the 20th June. Since this is both privately run (as "Airwaves" recently also became) and (unlike "Airwaves") essentially limited in space (on the outskirts of the main city), it is nonetheless questionable whether it should be counted as a public festive occasion like the others discussed here ("Secret Solstice" 2019).

Somewhat different is the gradual development of Halloween (*Hrekkjavaka*) in Iceland in late October. In the past, the adoption of this festival had been questioned, essentially because Iceland (like many other Nordic countries) already had its own "Trick or Treat" festival for children on Ash Wednesday (see above). Although some villages had Yuletide festivals which involved similar costuming and house-visiting traditions (see Vilborg Davíðsdóttir 2007), Halloween tended to be viewed as a "foreign", American tradition that should be avoided.

The first step towards a more widespread acceptance of this festival can be said to have taken place in Reykjavík in around 1998, in the Hamrahlíð Grammar School, where the authorities were trying to get students to abandon their longstanding tradition of leaving town for a an annual late autumn barn-dance in the countryside, something which had come to be associated by the press (and students) with drunkenness and debauchery. A thematic costumed dance in school connected with Halloween seemed like the perfect replacement (see "Hrekkjavaka í MH" 1998: 72). At around the same time, smaller parties aimed at the same late-teen early twenties age group had started to be held in the English Department of the University of Iceland and among the English-speaking immigrants, and restaurants, dance places, shops and newspapers were catching on fast. By 2008, the festival was evidently becoming widespread in the city, but essentially still in the form of costume-parties and dances (see "Skrautleg hrekkjavaka" 2008: 39).

Arguably, the first signs of a movement down into the younger generation could be seen around 2009, when a newspaper noted how "Halloween is starting to put down roots as a festival in Iceland. Children in costumes are going from shop to shop singing, and receiving sweets as a reward" ("Hryllingur…" 2009: 37). This was an interesting statement for several reasons. First of all, the pattern of visiting shops and singing during daytime mentioned here is modelled not so much on American traditions, as on the Icelandic Ash Wednesday traditions noted above. Secondly, any analysis of Icelandic papers from previous years on the "tímarit.is" website (2023) underlines that at this time young children rarely seem to have been involved. Nonetheless, one can see growing encouragement for such a development from both newspapers and shops (see "Hryllileg hrekkjavaka…" 2011: 10, which provided a link to a web site where various kinds of information on costumes and foods were available). All the same, it was not until 2015 that one started seeing pictures of younger children in costume in the papers alongside images of lit pumpkins and decorative biscuits (see Inga Rún Sigurðardóttir 2015, in comparison to Kristín Heiða Kristínsdóttir 2013).

Following on from this, a new tradition has started to develop in the city in the last seven or eight years, whereby the parents of younger children in different areas have started using Facebook to assemble a list of safe houses for children to visit in costume during the evening of 31st October. A clear differentiation between

this tradition and that associated with Ash Wednesday has also come into being, in that these visits take place in the evening rather than the daytime, and involve homes being visited rather than shops. In short, both the timing and the spaces are different. Furthermore, the fact that the tradition takes place in neighbourhoods rather than the centre of the city underlines that it is not aimed at tourists or the international press but rather the locals, the schools and local communities.

As this short article has underlined, the present festive scene in Reykjavík both in 2018 and still in the present day is obviously very different from what it used to be twenty five years ago, at a time when the focus tended to be more inward looking. If one examines what happened between 1998 and 2018 in comparison to the earlier ritual year, several interesting patterns become clear. First of all, there is no question that, as in the past, we are dealing here with festivities which involve a breakdown of normal patterns of order and some degree of entertainment. These are all times when, as Victor Turner writes: "much of what has been bound by social structure is liberated; notably the sense of comradeship and communion, in brief of communitas" (Turner 1882: 29). If we consider these festivals on the basis of the useful play/ ritual dyad suggested by Richard Schechner (2013: 49 and 79–80), there is also little question that in all cases, as in the past, we are dealing with some form of repeated ritual, even when it comes down to music and artistic gatherings. In all cases this is a ritual that makes or underlines a statement of shared identity (see Schechner 2013: 225–249 on the seven "functions" of performance, two of which underline this element: in other words, "to make or change identity", and "to foster community"). This statement of identity can sometimes be visual, as is effectively outlined by face-paints and costumes of the Halloween groups; the wristbands worn by the "Airwaves" and "Secret Solstice" crowds; the candles borne by the Peace Marchers; and the placards and garish clothing worn by those participating in the *Druslaganga* and *Gleðiganga*. However, it can also be stressed simply by personal involvement in a gathering that takes place in a limited space and during a limited moment of time when people are behaving "differently". It can involve being part of a march, listening to a concert, visiting the various venues as part of "Cultural Night", or simply watching a large firework display huddled together as part of a huge crowd.

One might also consider the degree of costuming involved in many of these traditions which not only underline the element of artistic creation, but also that of carnival, emphasising a strong element of release (something particularly necessary in the dark winter months of the Nordic countries). Here we witness three more of Schechner's performative functions: those of creating beauty, entertaining, and healing (see Schechner 2013: 225–249).

We are nonetheless in most cases dealing with invented traditions (Hobsbowm 1983), most of which (apart from Halloween) are very much top-down,

unlike those traditions of the ancient past which tended to be related in some way to turning points in the course of the natural year. In a sense, one can see slight parallels to the festivals instituted by the Roman emperors or Orwell's Big Brother (Orwell 1954) that were designed to keep the masses occupied, although in Iceland, fortunately, we have not been dealing with a dictatorship trying to prevent revolution. All the same, it is evident that most of the traditions noted above have been introduced with a particular purpose in mind: to make a political point, or to bring in tourism, effectively increasing Reykjavík's attraction as an international cultural hub, filling in the spaces of the year that are not already occupied. Many of these festivals can thus be viewed as being essentially planned and organised performances that were designed to be seen and cause a reaction, rather than anything automatically designed by and for the group itself, the organisers here being the town council, entrepreneurs or people with a political statement in mind. Rather than being group rituals which later go on to become "heritage" events designed to be displayed to the outside world, here (for the main part) we have events that are from the beginning designed to work like heritage and designed to attract the attention of the media. Indeed, as this article underlines, much of the research that lies behind it has been undertaken by the means of public social media and the papers.

In spite of the strong element of deliberate "creation" that lies behind these festive gatherings, it is nonetheless evident that very few Reykjavík people would question their existence, any more than they ever complain about the enormous cost of the annual city firework display on "Cultural Night". (The only thing that might bring that to an end in the next few years is consideration of potential environmental damage and global warming.) As people recognise, there is little question that all of the above have played an effective part in turning Reykjavík into a cultural centre that can compete with other cultural centres around the world. This was something that the romantic nationalist painter, Sigurður Guðmundsson (1833–1874) could only dream of in 1873, when he put together two simple lists of how cultural life in Reykjavík needed to be developed to give people (and visitors) something to do all year round (see Sveinn Einarsson 2017: 362–363). As noted above, and as Sigurður was well aware, the Reykjavík climate is far from being the most attractive even at the best of times, and a little brightness, a little noise, and a little carnival can always come in useful, not least when you have comparatively recently become aware that your economy can collapse at any minute.

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