

Gudrun Helgadóttir

Nation in a sheep's coat: The Icelandic sweater

Abstract

The Icelandic sweater is presented and received as being traditional—even ancient—authentically Icelandic and hand made by Icelandic women from the wool of Icelandic sheep. Even so, the sweater type, the so-called 'Icelandic sweater' in English, only dates back to the mid-20th century and is not necessarily made in Iceland nor from indigenous wool. Nevertheless, the sweater is a successful invention of a tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983), popular among Icelanders and tourists alike since its introduction in the mid-20th century. It has gained ground as a national symbol, particularly in times of crisis for example in the reconstruction of values in the aftermath of the Icelandic bank collapse of 2008. I traced the development of the discourse about wool and the origins of the Icelandic sweater by looking at publications of the Icelandic National Craft Association, current design discourse in Iceland and its effect on the development of the wool industry. I then tied these factors to notions of tradition, authenticity, national culture, image and souvenirs.

Keywords: Lopapeysa / The Icelandic sweater, textiles, souvenir, heritage, image

Introduction

This article traces the development of the Icelandic sweater, including its production, material and style. This historical overview is complemented by a discussion about the role of the sweater in national image making and as a case of invented tradition. For this research, I analysed thematically contributions to the journal of the Icelandic Handicrafts association, *Hugur og hönd* (Mind and Hand), for 30 years, from 1978 to 2008. I included recent research on Icelandic design and artistic input as it contributes to discourse analysis of the Icelandic sweater as well as media reports on the popularity of the Icelandic sweater following the 2008 collapse of the Icelandic banks. I begin with a discussion of theoretical framework for interpreting the Icelandic sweater.

First, there is a difference in the name given to the sweater between Icelandic and other languages. In Icelandic, the term is *lopapeysa*. *Lopi* is the name of the yarn traditionally used in its making, and *peysa* means sweater, so in Icelandic the term literally means 'sweater made of lopi'. In other languages, the sweater is named after its perceived country of origin.

The basic feature of the sweater design is a circular yoke with a pattern of at least two colours. The body of the sweater is knitted on circular needles, and the sleeves are picked up onto the needle containing the bodice. The shaping of the shoulders by gradually casting off is incorporated into the pattern of the yoke. Originally, the sweater had a patterned band of at least two colours at the hem, the wrist and the yoke, forming the main pattern across the shoulders. During the 21st century, this changed so that now it is common for only the yoke to be patterned.

The Icelandic sweater as we now know it emerged around the middle of the 20th century and was influenced, on one hand, by the nature of the material used and, on the other hand, by folk patterns of neighbouring nations. The sweater soon became so popular that in my childhood, during the 60s and 70s, one might say that the sweater was the Icelanders' uniform or vernacular national dress. The Icelandic sweater was in tune with the times: it was hand made from natural fibre, it had folk connotations and almost every Icelandic woman could knit one. For example, I lived out my adolescence in a grey sweater with a pattern based on piano keys.



Wearing my favourite sweater in 1974. Photo by Elísabet Jökulsdóttir

The cultural significance of textiles lies both in their utility and in the meaning they carry for art, craft and design (Lucie-Smith, 1981). Here the focus is on an everyday object, a garment type meaning different things in different times. As Edensor puts it,

We grow up relating to things in changing but familiar object worlds and the presence of these objects and their ordering in space provide material proof of shared ways of living over time that are replete with cultural values and meanings rarely subject to reflexive assessment. (2004, p. 102)

What follows is a reflexive assessment of the cultural values and meanings of lopapeysa, an object that combines utility and meaning.

Invention of tradition

Textiles are an integral part of the human environment and can be traced back to prehistoric times. It is common to strongly associate textiles, both as everyday objects and as symbolic dress, to the image of a particular nation and for such textiles to enjoy symbolic status as such. China silk, India cotton and Scottish tartan are but a few examples (Trevor-Roper, 1983). Historical research on crafts reveals that concerted efforts were made to define textile traditions in the Nordic countries and market them (Helgadóttir, Sverrisdóttir, 2011; Kragelund, 2009). Knitted sweaters have such a connotation that relates to several places, such as the Aran Islands, Norway and Cowichan, to name a few. Garments such as these can also symbolically refer to occupations or roles. For example, Luutonen (2008) describes the Finnish Jukka pullover as a gendered statement. In this context, the existence of an iconic garment such as the Icelandic sweater fits well.

The context of textiles, their production, consumption, commerce and conservation can be viewed through different sets of academic lenses: social, economic, aesthetic, art historical, gendered—the list goes on. For the purposes of this study, I situate the development of the Icelandic sweater and the meanings attached in the context of Hobsbawm and Ranger's invention of tradition (1983). The tradition can be purposely designed, initiated

and staged by agents on a particular occasion, or it can gain ground in a less obvious way within a particular time and space. Tradition here refers to values and symbolic meanings involving repetition and the intention to create practices that will last and thereby bond the present with selected aspects of the historical past (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983).

Traditions grounded in the historical past are not the only form of invented national distinctiveness. Habits, daily life and their environments are even more important for orientation in the landscapes of national culture. Edensor focuses on how nations use objects as national symbols and argues that this usage is not necessarily based on the authenticity of the object (Edensor, 2004). As I argue below, the Icelandic sweater is traditional, invented and imported. Its claim of authenticity and uniqueness rests on reference to the special characteristics of the fleece: it contains two types of fibre, and the sheep have several natural colours in various shades of white, grey, black and brown.

In a previous paper on the Icelandic sweater, I suggest that after the 2008 recession, we will see a resurgent interest in tradition—that by wearing an Icelandic sweater, Icelanders will use tradition to reaffirm their identity and to boost morale (Helgadóttir, 2008). Even as early as the fall of 2008, the Icelandic Homecraft Association could not keep up with the demand for knitting courses in which lopi was the chosen material. In Iceland between September 2008 and January 2009, an estimated 10,000 sweaters were sold in shops specialising in wool; a serious shortage of knitters meant that the demand for sweaters could not be met (Eiríksdóttir, February 20th 2009).

It is in times of change, with the erosion of habit, that traditions are often invented in an attempt to cope with change. In other words, stakeholders harness tradition to support their claims to status. This became evident in the change of style by politicians and financiers in the aftermath of the Icelandic bank collapse: they exchanged suits for Icelandic sweaters and jeans. Harkening back to tradition, however, suggests that the custom no longer belongs within the realm of everyday life. It only exists as a way to evoke tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Thus, the tension is constant between preservation, contemporary roles and uses of tradition.

Gender and textiles

Historically textiles have been a medium of expression for working people, particularly women. This subject matter invites a gendered viewing, given that textile production is historically and contemporaneously bound up in the female realm (Bachmann, 1998; Conroy, 1998; Parker, 1986). This holds true in Iceland. As my previous research on crafts education suggests, textile production is the prerogative of women (Helgadóttir, 1997; Helgadóttir, 1989). Knitting is taught as part of Textile Crafts, a compulsory school subject (*handmennt* or *sloyd* in the Scandinavian languages). Originally, crafts education was part of girls' *sloyd*, and it is probably accurate to claim that every Icelandic woman over 40 knows how to knit. The origin and development of textiles as a school subject can be traced to Scandinavian influences (Helgadóttir, 1997). The original aims were similar to for instance the introduction of the subject in Norway, that is to improve the economic and social situation of children by building “lasting objects, knowledge and skill that was useful for everyday life, and a collective perspective on maintaining self-sufficiency at the local level, for a better life in society” (Digranes, 2009, p. 33).

The hand-knitted Icelandic sweater emerged in an era when the importance of hand knitting in Icelandic textile production was rapidly decreasing. It is no coincidence that this was in the post-WWII era, when Iceland was a newly established nation-state, nor that an everyday object such as a woollen sweater became a distinguishing national symbol.

It should be noted that the sweater has had two noticeable peaks in popularity with Icelanders. The first occurred in the period after Iceland declared sovereignty from Denmark

in 1944 and lasted from about 1950 to the 1970s. These decades coincided with a period of nation building and confrontation with the outside world, for instance during the so-called Cod Wars, altercations between Iceland and the UK over fishing rights around Iceland, as it incrementally expanded its territorial waters. The second peak started around the millennium as part of nation branding and designers turning to folk traditions in the face of globalisation. Around the millennium, Icelandic businesses and financial institutions were expanding abroad in ventures that proved unsustainable and resulted in the collapse of the national banking sector in October 2008, resulting in economic recession, political and social crisis.

Reassessment of values and return to traditions was much discussed during the political upheaval that followed the collapse of the financial institutions in Iceland. The preceding era of growth was in hindsight characterised by greed, recklessness and aggressive competition where young, rich and driven men were idolized as leaders. In the immediate aftermath of the collapse women were called upon to take charge of the financial institutions and the resurrection of the economy and political sphere. The virtues of moderation, industriousness and self-sufficiency; making do, do-it-yourself and taking responsibility were lauded. Popular action against the government and the financial sector in the winter of 2008-09 was for instance called the Kitchen Utensil Uprising because an important action during the demonstrations was to drum on pots and pans during the protest. Knitting sessions were another form of protest. In these protests women's mundane tools of the domestic sphere—kitchen utensils and knitting needles—were symbolic counterpoints to the extravagance of the preceding era (Petursson, 2009). In these circumstances the Icelandic sweater has again become important, one might even claim that it has been subjected to the reflexive assessment Edensor (2004) cite above, calls for.

Anecdotal evidence by women who started knitting again post-2008 to save money suggests an alternate motive: knitting as a form of personally taking action to counter 'the situation', as people called the period immediately after the bank collapse. Knitting was seen as emotionally healing. The repetitive nature of the technique is soothing while at the same time productive and creative. As Luutonen puts it, 'It seems that crafts provide a good way of having something important in life, to experience its highlights, and to strengthen your identity, to leave your fingerprints in the world' (2008, p. 332). Knitting thus represented a return to the authenticity of hand production, heritage and national symbolism.

Icelandic wool and lopi

The original material and hence what may be considered the authentic material used for the Icelandic sweater was wool from Icelandic sheep. The fleece has two kinds of hair: an inner layer of soft, short hair and an outer layer of longer, coarser hair that acts as a raincoat on top of the insulating inner layer (Adalsteinsson, 1956; Gudmundsson, 1988; Bjarnadottir, 1966; Gudjonsson, 1985).

Before industrialisation, while wool was worked exclusively by hand, the two kinds of fibre were separated and used differently for various kinds of textiles. The quality of wool work depended largely on this conscientious separation and on making the most of the different qualities of *tog* (long and coarse hair) and *þel* (short and soft hair) (Bjarnadottir, 1966). Mechanisation has never produced a technique to replace the human hand in this process.

For decades, the discourse about wool production in Iceland problematised the dual quality of the wool, given that the coarse outer layer makes the wool coarser than, for instance, Merino wool and thus is not as suitable for fine clothing. Every Icelander knows the sensation of stinging underwear and itchy sweaters that result from the coarser strands. Academic papers were published on the possibilities of separating the wool mechanically, but though mechanical solutions are technically possible, they have never gained ground (Pálsson,

1944/1978; Palsson & Sigurjonsson, 1969/1978). With the development of a modern wool industry, the two kinds of strands were mixed, and the yarns spun consequently coarser.

It follows that lopi, the yarn most commonly used for the Icelandic sweater, includes both the fine and coarse hairs of the fleece. Prior to mechanisation, the word 'lopi' referred to yarn that had not yet been spun and was not considered a finished product. In the wool factories, the product that existed between the combing and spinning stages was also called lopi, but it was not used for knitting until the 20th century (Gudjonsson, 1985; Bjarnadottir, 1938). Gudjonsson maintains that lopi did not become popular for hand knitting until around WWII. So the material for the iconic Icelandic sweater is not the product of traditional handicrafts but is the offspring of the industrialisation of wool work.

Wool production and knitting in Iceland

Textile historian Gudjonsson estimates that knitting was introduced to Iceland in the 16th century, and she suggests that the technique soon became an important aspect of textile tradition. As early as 1584, an important reference appears in a Bible published by Gudbrandur Þorlakksson, a reference in which the robe of Christ is described as having been knitted. The popular image of Iceland's agricultural society of the past is one in which each household was mostly self-sufficient, especially in the production of textiles. Sheep wool was the main resource, and when knitting was introduced, it became extremely important for the production of clothes. Gudjonsson puts it succinctly: 'one might say that for over three hundred years the Icelandic nation barely laid down the knitting needles from dawn till dusk, save for the darkest night and perhaps harvest season' (Gudjonsson, 1985, p. 8). This is the received truth about the lives of bygone generations of Icelanders, and little has shaken the foundations of this belief in Iceland's sheep as being fundamental to the survival of the nation.

From 1978 to 2008, Icelandic wool was the topic of fifteen articles published in *Hugur og hönd*, not including those about knitting patterns. In 1978, the focus was on traditional wool work, especially the separation of coarse and fine strands, which was seen as a mark of quality and a means of safeguarding the craft's heritage (Kristjansdottir, 1978; Jonsdottir, 1978). This focus on separating the wool is also evident in papers about the wool industry that date back to the early 20th century (e.g. Palsson, 1944/1978; Palsson & Sigurjonsson, 1969/1978). The authors argue for conserving the hand-crafting techniques of wool work at a time when the wool industry was developing.

This focus was picked up again in articles from 1990 to 1996, when official emphasis was on supporting handicrafts after the collapse of the wool industry (Gisladottir, 1990; Adalsteinsson, 1990; Björgvinsdottir, 1990; Sigurgeirsson, 1990; Thoroddsen, 1990; Halldorsdottir, 1991; Hafsteinsdottir, 1996).

A few authors wrote about the history of wool work and the cultivation of sheep (e.g. Gudjonsson, 1985; Adalsteinsson, 1986). Two articles promote the need for new designs in wool (Josefsdottir, 1986; Kristjansdottir, 1995). Halldorsdottir summarises the discussions from a conference dedicated to craft design (Halldorsdottir, 1991). In Josefsdottir (1986) reviewed the status of the wool industry, especially the knitting factories and their products. She concludes that during the wool-working renaissance in the inner circle of Icelandic crafts, new ideas emerged, especially the call for closer connections between crafts and designs, such as the rejuvenation of tradition through the design process and design methods. Josefsdottir called for 'New life—new design' (1986, p. 25) and asked why the 'high flying bird of technology' had not picked up the fine, soft threads her foremothers had handpicked (Josefsdottir, 1986, p. 23). In this, she again refers to the issue of separating coarse from fine hairs in the fleece. Ironically, however, it is only because of the impossibility of separating the

coarse and fine strands mechanically that lopi became available and, thus, that the Icelandic sweater came about.

The Icelandic sweater

The origin of the Icelandic sweater has been the subject of myth making. Several women have been named its originator. Thorisdottir settles the debate by pointing out that ‘...it is impossible to claim that a single person designed the Icelandic sweater. “It is a collaborative design project by the Icelandic nation, particularly Icelandic women.” (Thorisdottir, 2007, p. 12). The Icelandic sweater is based on foreign models, but Icelandic designers were instrumental in making it popular by designing patterns that were marketed by the wool industry. The inspiration for the designs came partly from old Icelandic patterns as well as from imported embroidery manuals, which were adapted to work with the cut of the garment (Gudjonsson, 1985).

While the discourse on Icelandic wool refers almost exclusively to pure wool, mixing Icelandic with imported wool to enhance its softness has been widely practiced for a long time. Natural colours have been artificially enhanced, and the wool is sometimes coloured according to the dictates of fashion. According to Gudjonsson, Icelandic sweaters destined for export are usually knitted in natural colours, while sweaters intended for domestic use employ a wider range of colours (Gudjonsson, 1985). This is tantalising, as it suggests that notions of authenticity are promoted in the public sphere but that the private sphere is less orthodox and allows for greater experimentation.

While the Icelandic sweater is perceived as more traditional, more authentic and more indicative of closeness to nature when knitted in the natural colours of Icelandic sheep, multicoloured patterns have always been used alongside them. In the 80s and 90s, the sweater enjoyed limited popularity, except as a souvenir. Several authors specifically called for a redesign of the Icelandic sweater (Kristjansdottir, 1995; Halldorsdottir, 1991; Josefsdottir, 1986), but this was not to occur for another decade.

Contemporary designers of the Icelandic sweater have invoked national heritage by assigning Icelandic names, both personal and place names, to their products. Many of the companies producing these items have, however, been given foreign names, such as *Farmers Market* and *Zo-on*. Furthermore, many sweaters are now made overseas, corroborating Edensor’s claim that commodities can be considered national regardless of their locus of production. In an interview, designer Bergþora Gudnadottir, who designs contemporary Icelandic sweaters, argues that regardless of whether the Icelandic sweater originated in Iceland, it has gained status as a symbol of Iceland (Thorisdottir, 2007).

During the last decade or so, the iconic status of the Icelandic sweater has been reinforced by the extensive use of patterns, not only on fleece jackets, t-shirts and dog fashion but also in a variety of products ranging from handbags and bottle covers to paper napkins. This demonstrates an intense nation-branding project that went hand in hand with the development of Iceland as a tourist destination (Office of the Prime Minister, 2008).

The renaissance of *lopapeysa* around the millennium was manifest by contemporary designers in terms of new patterns that mixed yarns, included zippers, narrowed the cut, and dropped the pattern band at the hips, thus making the sweater lighter and slimmer looking. The use of colour, material and cut has become less orthodox, and new items such as vests, sleeves, skirts and dresses have appeared.

During the last decades of the 20th century, the Icelandic sweater was threatened by the design of new textiles, such as synthetic fleece. Specifically targeting the outdoor enthusiast, fleece became the textile of choice for everyday outdoor garments. The renaissance of the Icelandic sweater grew out of this crisis of the wool industry, which collapsed almost entirely, while sheep farming also went through hard times (Hafsteinsdottir,

1996; Kristjansdottir, 1995). During this time of fierce competition with synthetic fleece, the Icelandic sweater was resurrected.

Sheep nation

It is commonly claimed that the natural conditions Iceland affords its people and its sheep, shape the national culture in a unique way. One typical observation found in the wool discourse is that ‘Sheep were the foundation on which human habitat in the land was based. We lived in close connection with the harsh and unique Icelandic nature; using its resources to stay alive’ (Adalsteinsson, quoted in Josefsdottir, 1986, p. 23). The research of Adalsteinsson, the foremost authority on the origin and biology of Icelandic sheep, forms part of the epistemological foundation on which other scholars and practitioners of wool craft build. He speaks of sheep culture as the ‘relationship of people, sheep and nature’ (Adalsteinsson, 1986, p. 14).

In a 2007 project called *Model Society*, artist Sarah Browne capitalises on the notion of sheep culture. She employs the Icelandic sweater as a medium for exploring the Icelander’s image of self. Browne uses texts deliberately to symbolise literary heritage, which features strongly in the image of Iceland, and draws the connection between text and the textiles mentioned earlier. In Browne’s work, several strands of the national discourse are fused. She sees the sweater as the perfect expression of the relationship between people and landscape (Palsson, 2007).

The people–sheep relationship, or sheep culture, is perhaps most famously depicted in the character Bjartur in Halldor Laxness’s novel *Independent People*, who believes that in his absence, his pregnant wife will appreciate the company of his most prized ewe. His wife, however, is rather pragmatic and prefers to enjoy the ewe as a material resource for physical, rather than intellectual, sustenance. Bjartur and the ewe strongly resemble each other in their stubbornness, this characteristic often being attributed to both people and sheep (Laxness, 2005).

The Icelandic sweater signifies sheep culture and in current discourse sheep, sweater and people are tied together: ‘You might say that the Icelandic sweater springs from one of the major symbols of the Icelandic nation, the Icelandic sheep that mirrors also our main pride; purity and nature’ (Thorisdottir, 2007, p. 8). Katrin Andresdottir, prize winner in a design competition concerning a new pattern for the Icelandic sweater, observed that the sweater would remain ‘the leader ewe of Icelandic crafts, even if many see it as a scrawny beast that gives no sustenance’ (Kristjansdottir, 1995, p. 36).

The wool discourse can be traced through the crafts movement and the various attempts at a sustainable wool industry. Farmers Market is a young business specialising in clothes made from Icelandic raw materials, especially wool. An interview with the entrepreneurs was headlined by the claim that Icelandic distinctiveness is what will sell Iceland in the future. They emphasise heritage and distinction as a premise for design in the era of globalisation, which subsequently has been dubbed ‘glocalisation’. In the global marketing discourse, designers suggest that the distinction of Iceland should be its pure, robust and unique raw materials and traditions; they note that wool is the ideal medium for this message (Freyr, 2006).

The reference to a national symbol evokes ideas of origin, distinction and authenticity and, therefore, the tendency to see the symbol as pure and untouched by cultural influences from elsewhere. Such influences are stifled, and the multi-cultural nature of national symbols is more or less deliberately overlooked. Palsson connects the purity discourse in the wool—and specifically the Icelandic sweater—with the discursive element of purity in Icelandic nature, language, and genome (Palsson, 2007). To do so requires suppressing the fact that indigenous and imported wool are combined, as mentioned earlier. The marketing discourse

conceals the possibility that an Icelandic sweater might include wool from either an Icelandic or Falkland Island sheep (Gudjonsson, 1985).

Even though the purity and origin of the sweater are in question, the close connection between people and sheep symbolised by the Icelandic sweater is not. Pálsson suggests that the sweater could be regarded as ‘an extension of the skin of the Icelander's body’ (2007, p. 150). Regardless of its origin, there are various indications that this most popular souvenir is, without doubt, traditional and symbolic of Iceland.

While proponents of crafts are preoccupied with the qualities of wool as material and with which techniques best capture these qualities, artists and designers concern themselves with articles, such as the Icelandic sweater, their symbolism and meaning and the material from which they are made. These characteristics capture their attention as they design commodities for global markets, such as tourism.

There are reasons why the Icelandic sweater grew in iconic status as being suitable for the Northern climate. The wool has exceptional insulating qualities, and the coarse strands are water resistant, so the material retains its popularity for outdoor use, especially for recreation (Freyr, 2006). The claim made in 1944 still holds: ‘it is necessary to constantly produce as much underwear, socks and sweaters for working people at sea and in the country and for everyone who practises outdoor sports and mountaineering’ (Pálsson, 1944/1978, p. 50). Similarly, decades later, Björgvinsdóttir hopes that ‘our wool would be restored and recognised as prime material for garments promoting health and wellness’ (Björgvinsdóttir, 1990, p. 40).

Pálsson suggests that the circular pattern of the yoke is not only important as a visual characteristic. Because the pattern calls for the use of multiple colours the sweater is at least two or threefold around the shoulders, and at the wrists, the sweater is especially insulating (Pálsson, 2007). Considering the Icelandic sweater's competition against synthetic fabrics for outdoor use, it is worth pointing out that Bergþóra Guðnadóttir, a leading designer in the resurrection of the Icelandic sweater, previously worked for a leading outdoor garment producer and designed one of their most popular pieces of outdoor wear: a fleece cardigan embroidered with the circular Icelandic sweater pattern.

Confident in the lopi's ability to survive, Guðnadóttir challenged the common belief that the synthetic fleece would be the death knell for the Icelandic sweater. She believes that lopi brings out the best in Icelandic wool and invokes the identification of people with sheep by suggesting that the sweater is the Icelander's fleece. This image of the resilient sheep has become even more important in light of the dramatic fall from prosperity to crisis that the Icelanders have experienced since the fall of 2008.

Conclusions

Sheep culture, even the identification of Icelanders with sheep, may be seen as part of the imagery of Iceland, and it logically follows that designers talk of the Icelandic woollen sweater as a form of symbolic dress: the coat of the nation mirroring the sheep's fleece. The inherent contrast of coarse and fine strands is echoed in the irony and loving identification which runs through the discourses of Icelandic sheep culture.

The Icelandic sweater is an invented tradition that evolved over several decades, particularly in times of crisis, when attention turned to the image and identity of the Icelandic nation. The sweater's centrality was renewed amidst the banging of pots, shouting of protest and clattering of knitting needles in the hands of angry women trying to construct a future while the nation struggled to regain its senses. It is symbolic that lopi, the quintessential Icelandic material, has a dual nature of being both soft and harsh, offering touch love for comfort in hard times.

Gudrun Helgadóttir

Professor, PhD

Hólar University College, Iceland, Department of Tourism

Email address: gudr@holar.is

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