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IDENTITY THROUGH DNA AND SPIRITUALISM IN ICELAND

*Christophe Pons
IDEMEC - CNRS - AMU
cpons@mshs.univ-aix.fr*

« Contemporary Icelanders defined themselves through fidelity to their own early history. While other peoples invent traditions to match a new historical situation, the Icelanders reproduced the celebrated images of another epoch to invent themselves. Far from contributing to their survival, this cultural reproduction may have been directly destructive to their social reproduction. In comparison with the old, 'real' Icelanders, the contemporary people were non-distinct, even invisible. By inventing the Icelanders from past images, the present people was defined out. »

Kirsten Hastrup, *Nature and Policy in Iceland 1400-1800*, 1990, p. 194.

My intention here is to examine two historical events that took place in Iceland about a century apart, both of which provoked a great deal of popular interest. The first is the influence of spiritualism¹ that arrived on the island at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and that never ceased to increase throughout the development of the independence movement that would free Iceland from the Danish Crown between 1918 and 1944. The second event, closer to us, marks the end of the 1990s, and is still unfolding today. It has to do with the place that research on human genome took in this country, and the craze it generated. Seemingly, these two events do not have much in common. Generally, in the West, spiritualism in both protestant and catholic countries has mostly lost its influence, and the trend is rather to classify it among "beliefs" that have become historically obsolete. On the other hand, genomic research projects us into the future, a synonym of either progress or ethical dangers – it depends – but nevertheless always a manifestation of an evolving science.

However, even though spiritualist theories are now relegated to the most remote fringes of science, it is worth recalling that, at the time, they also unfolded in learned circles; far from rejecting these theories outright, these circles, on the contrary, did their outmost to test their validity in the pure positive tradition of experimentation. The staggering number of experiments conducted by leading universities on both sides of the Atlantic are proof of the expectations that a large number of enlightened people had for spiritualism, as a sign of some new science towards which they must aim. In the end, the present distancing of the scientific universe from these theories results more from abandonment than a concerted invalidation (Bensaude-Vincent, Blondel 2002). In providing this historical reminder, I do not intend in any way to compare spiritualism and research on the human genome from a scientific point of view, but rather to underline the fact that a nineteenth century Icelander could credit spiritualism with the same level of scientific validity as his grandchild, today, would attach to research on the human genome. Therefore, it is clearly between these popular interests, at a century's interval, that a parallel must be drawn, because the craze for spiritualism in the nineteenth century can help us understand the collective enthusiasm for research on the human genome in the twentieth. Indeed, a similar underlying symbolic thought seems to run through both of these interests that, when the events arose, triggered analogies between specific cultural principles. This "symbolic thought" is certainly not the cause of these historical events, but it is probably at the root of the shape and shade they took. The "cultural principles" in question that, in a more modern language we would call "conceptual operators," are categories of *identity* and *ancestrality*. In Iceland, there is a strong homology between the living and the dead, both in the living community's perception of the dead, which is in a way similar to their image of the living community, but also in the personalized relations that each individual maintains with some of the ancestors he carries within. Empirically, this homological rapport is expressed through extremely tenuous relations: not only do Icelanders keep track of their ancestors, they also meet them and send them messages, thereby maintaining a long-standing intimate partnership with them. Within the context of this "Icelandic symbolic thought," *identity* and *ancestrality* categories form an inextricably-linked pair that certain "markers" of events in the community of the living cause to powerfully resurface.

Spiritualism and Independence in the Nineteenth Century

No doubt the desire for independence existed in Iceland throughout the seven centuries of colonization between 1262 and 1944. But it is during the second part of the nineteenth century that a real "nationalist awakening" occurred. For the small number of Icelanders at that time, this "awakening" manifested itself less as a fierce battle against a foreign power than as an internal need to recreate a national spiritⁱⁱ. Within this laborious task of reinventing a distinct identity, the migratory movement of a handful of Icelanders who left for Manitoba, on the banks of Lake Winnipeg, played an important role. They were indeed the first to recreate a free Icelandic community, called the *Vesturheimur*, the *Western World*. In 1891, these thousand or so Icelanders were granted a treaty of exception by the Canadian government, which provided them not only with a territory but also with the recognition of their Icelandic nationality and language while allowing them to benefit from the same rights as all Canadian nationals. This community, liberated from Danish custody, would in turn nourish independence in its native country. This will become apparent in particular through a crop of magazines, edited in the *Vesturheimur* and distributed in Iceland. *Grosso modo*, this budding independence movement would be structured around two major themes, strangely linked together. First, as can be expected, there was a political reflection regarding the terms and

conditions upon which an original constitution should be restored. It should assert Icelandic identity by distancing it from Danish monarchism. From this perspective, inspiration came mainly from the archaic Icelandic Republic created in 930, shortly before its conversion to Christianity. But this political reflection was also based on a passionate interest in spiritualist theories and, in particular, in those focusing on the return of ancestors. It is obvious that in most Reformed countries, including Denmark, this movement was extremely popular at the end of the nineteenth century. Yet it takes on a special dimension in Iceland, because the *process* of national reconstruction is based not only on the need to establish a republican constitution, but also on a "new religion," one's own that, while remaining Christian, would distinguish itself from colonial Christianity. This spiritualist movement made it possible to conjure up ancestors and rely on them to create this new religion. According to the words of Haraldur Nielsson, theologian and nephew of the bishop of Iceland, the aim was to "*reconstruct a rationalist Lutheranism based on positive faith that the spiritualist way will strengthen and ennoble*" (Jónsson, 1968: 72-73). Therefore, at the turn of that century, the unofficial histories of religious spiritualism and political independence merged in the living-rooms of Reykjavík where politicians, essayists, poets and clergy met around mediums giving voice to "ancestors". These experiences, still private, would then rapidly enjoy a popular success. Of course, it stands to reason that all of Iceland did not become spiritualist, nor did all the political parties and interest groups become unanimously focused on this dialogue with the dead. On the contrary, as of 1905 the sometimes-violent stands taken against what was called pejoratively the association of ghosts (*draugafélagið*) demonstrate opposite feelings (Gissurarson & Swatos, 1997: 107-108). But, at the same time, after a local government was recognized in 1904, the dynamic forces of spiritualism made their solemn declaration of national independence by presenting, on the ancient plains of the Parliament of *Þingvellir*, the very young but oh so popular medium Indriði Indriðason astride a fiery white stallion, mimicking as such the revived image of *Óðin*, the shaman-god, on his mythical mount *Sleipnir*. During the same period, Guðmundur Jónsson, another young medium, was giving voice to illustrious ancestors, among whom was the famous Snorri Sturluson (thirteenth century), by drafting, through automatic writing, articles that would then be published under the name of these presumed authors (Guðnarsson & Ásgeirsson, 1996: 73-82). On December 1, 1918, a treaty finally granted autonomy and, eighteen days later, one of the first associations of the autonomous Iceland to be created was the *Sálarransóknarfélags Íslands*, the spiritualist society of Iceland. Relations between this movement and the Lutheran Church of Iceland would remain ambiguous. Though the Church would not recognize spiritualism, it did not oppose it either and, until recently, several clergymen demonstrated their interest in it, even their affiliation to it.

If this rapid overview is too incomplete to have real historical value, it demonstrates nevertheless the process by which ancestors supported the issue of shaping a national identity. There was, so to speak, a symbolic shift in the political debate that, in stating the identity issue, released that of ancestry. What is remarkable is really not so much that these ancestors appeared on the occasion of an important event, but that they appeared suddenly in the public arena. The return of the dead coming to "solve" the affairs of the living is not new in the Nordic mentality. Icelanders (and more broadly Scandinavians) did not wait for spiritualist theories before calling on their dead. But these contacts usually took place within family units. This time, the role these ancestors were playing in establishing the new spirit of national consciousness had an original collective dimension. The influence of the spiritualist circle in Iceland declined little by little as of the 1970s, with ancestors returning to the more intimate spaces of their lineage groups. This didn't mean that their public role would not resurface.

Ancestors and DNA in the Twentieth Century

Iceland now enjoys a certain prestige among Western media. Indeed, this small country at the boundaries of Northern Europe is often presented in laudatory terms: one of the oldest republics in the world; now focusing on its social system; demonstrating a very high standard of living; without conflict or unemployment; where one can live to a very old age thanks to the contact with "wilderness". But the enchantment with this Nordic postcard was suddenly shattered in 1998 when the Icelandic government allowed a biomedical research company to undertake the systematic recording of its 280,000 citizens' DNA. The company involved is called *deCode Genetics*, founded and directed by the Icelander Kári Stefánsson but financed and registered in Delaware, USA. Through this agreement, Iceland became the first nation in the world to identify its genetic pool by recording the individual genetic maps of its entire population. One of the main interesting elements in this event is the profoundly divergent reactions it created, in particular between the Icelandic "passivity" (since, with the exception of a few groups of opponents, public opinion was rather favorable) and the astonishment of foreign media, especially European, which often presented the event in apocalyptic terms. The overall feeling was one of alarm towards Icelandic public opinion. What seemed especially shocking was the fact that this country was part of the European West! In short, there was a non-exotic element that prevented people from transferring this affair to some distant alterity, and this proximity made it that much more shocking. How could Icelanders, who are modern people, morally and ethically agree to reveal and sell their DNA, that sacred and indivisible value of the twentieth century man? This is a summary of the essence of the lack of understanding, which was very clearly encapsulated in these introductory sentences of a French article: "*This story is not taking place in Papua, nor the Solomon Island. It is unfolding near us, in Europe, in the northern part of the continent, in Iceland*" (Piquart, 2001). As for the Icelanders, their reasons for supporting this agreement were multiple. First, without dwelling on it, one must mention a series of economic reasons. Indeed, *deCode* soon turned out to be very lucrative by attracting important funds, creating several high-level jobs and providing unforeseen prospects in the field of scientific research. But the CEO Kári Stefánsson also evoked other arguments to which Icelanders were particularly responsive. It is these arguments that made the identity and ancestry categories resurface, raising the national debate to another level. Kári Stefánsson probably knowingly brandished them, in a premeditated manner we might say, well aware that they would certainly please. But this certainly went beyond his desires: his arguments had the impact of reactants in stimulating the underlying symbolic thought, making public opinion "vibrate" in favor of this project. The genetic venture was then propelled by this symbolic thought that had suddenly been reactivated, to such a point that Kári Stefánsson became a sort of "prophet" in his protestant country -- a new emblematic and charismatic figure of Iceland that headlined national news for many months. The arguments involved were twofold: international influence and a necessary exhaustiveness.

First, the international influence, since Iceland was to gain a major advance in the field of very high-level research from all this. *deCode* was indeed announcing that the precise documentation of the genetic identity of this small nation would bring about huge progress in medical research and create an understanding of the process of hereditary transmission of a great number of diseases, to such a point that an Icelandic opponent to this project noted that Kári Stefánsson's leitmotif was basically to tell his people: "We Icelanders will save the world!" (Reverchon, 2001). However, what can the idea of "saving the world" mean for a small remote country that has only 280,000 inhabitants, and was a colony for seven centuries? It provided it with an unexpected projection to the front and centre of the international scene and, furthermore, a projection into modernity! This concept of modernity is very important in

Iceland. Indeed, according to popular perception, the country's economic and social expansion is due to the American presence which, during the Cold War, allowed it to develop along the lines of the Western model. In less than twenty years, without having to experience the intermediate step of the industrial revolution, Iceland moved from a quasi-autarkic society, marked by withdrawal into clan unity, to a tertiary society at the forefront of the richest countries. If this simplified depiction requires qualification, it nevertheless corresponds to the most widely accepted popular understanding of the Icelandic common sense. From this angle, the corollary to this stunning propulsion was a strong ambiguous dual feeling of shame and pride. A feeling of shame because, according to Icelanders themselves, "*until the Second World War, we were primitives, living in stone huts, covered with grass, built directly on the ground. We led a miserable life; we were blood relations!*" But also a feeling of pride, because this degrading and primitive past is also the mythical and mythicized past of their ancestors, the Vikings, a people recognized and respected by all, whose history they can read in the prestigious literature of the great medieval sagas. This dual feeling was then translated into what could be called an *evolutionary complex*, that is to say, in the sort of seemingly impossible task of remaining profoundly archaic while aspiring to the greatest possible modernity. This is of course the great challenge of this kind of national identity that rests on the double bind of the *evolutionary complex – determining* "how to be archaic and modern at the same time". On the one hand, they cannot build a positive image of themselves without linking it to the notion of ancestrality; on the other, they are haunted by the idea of having been (fewer than forty years ago) at the bottom of the ladder according to nineteenth century evolutionary theories which, even though they no longer prevail in learned circles, are largely dominant in common representations. At another level, it is once again this evolutionary complex that partly explains the Icelandic frenzy for consuming everything that is perceived as providing an external sign of modernity, and especially for recording in comparison to other Western countries. Therefore, we regularly learn about the most recent record-setting through the Icelandic media: the record number of food processors per household; the record number of Internet connections per inhabitant; the record number of subscriptions to cellular phones, and so on.

So, what *deCode Genetics* was making possible was really a gratifying redefinition of this identity! With *deCode*, Icelandic archaism became the subject of international interest; in addition, this took place within what is perceived as the *high-tech* of scientific modernity: research on the human genome. Furthermore, Kári Stefánsson did not cease to boast of the genealogical merits of his nation, the only one in all the Western World to have families capable of retracing their ancestors as far back as thirty-eight generations; of identifying the mythical Vikings as the founding ancestors of their lineage, authors of the medieval literature of which Icelanders are nowadays pathologically proud, but that links them to this notion of archaism and primitive representations among Westerners. By thrusting this archaic past into ultra-modernity, Kári Stefánsson met the dual challenge of the Icelandic *evolutionist shame*. But this feat that allowed Icelanders to value once again the representation of their identity was not perceived in the same way by foreign media. In the Old World, the idea of touching the human genome conjured up different ghosts, those of genetic manipulation and the modified man. We became sensitive to the dangers of attacks on private property, to the disclosure of personal information, and especially to the manipulation of lineagesⁱⁱⁱ. And, on this last point, the fact that a Nordic nation was involved, wrapped in this common imagery of the tall blue-eyed blond, probably had an impact on the demonization *process* of the *deCode* project. Therefore, it is remarkable that Icelanders did not become worried about the arguments surrounding genetic manipulation of lineages and were able to become filled with enthusiasm for this project, without having to also manage ethical and moral issues too

difficult to imagine. This is where the second argument mentioned earlier came into play: the necessary exhaustiveness.

Indeed, the *deCode* project insisted on the importance of the collective character of its venture. But Kári Stefánsson's genius was to declare that by being exhaustive, the project could identify a genetic pool of 650,000 people when there were only 280,000 Icelanders! The aim here is not to discuss the *deCode* arguments, but to underline the fact that, for the average person, this arithmetic seemed at the least surprising. How could you obtain a genetic pool of 650,000 individuals by adding up the DNA maps of 280,000 individuals? In fact, *deCode* was proposing a multiple research combining the genetic data of the living, the collection of genealogies recorded since at least 1703, and the medical files of Icelanders who had died in the past twenty years^{iv}. In this country where the practice of genealogy is a national sport, it was possible to meet the challenge. Through genetic-genealogical crosschecking, it became achievable to trace the genetic maps of every Icelander who had died since the first decades of the twentieth century! Such an argument meant therefore that the research on the human genome could trace the presence of 370,000 ancestors concealed among the 280,000 living, which also meant it could perform the arithmetical magic of a *pars pro toto*, where everything is superior to the sum of its parts. Icelanders – who by the way are very good at counting – were very receptive to this argument which provided a total of 650,000 by adding the 280,000, because it concluded the identity debate with a process of unification of the living and the dead within a unique genealogical continuum.

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The paralleling of these historical events is supported on two levels.

On the one hand, both events provide evidence regarding the structure of the categories of identity and ancestry within the Icelandic symbolic thought. We should evidently note that the entrenchment of these categories is not specific to Iceland. It is in fact a classic in ethnography, a number of societies having made us familiar with this semantic shift from the notion of the individual that becomes loaded with ancestral affiliations. To repeat a now famous expression, we are facing a context in which "to be is to participate" (Lévy-Bruhl, 1927). In the first case, it seems obvious that the ancestry category was set in motion by the identity category: it was the historical and social context of the nineteenth century, revolving around the reconstruction of a national identity that called upon ancestry by providing spiritualism with a founding role and place. On the other hand, the structure is reversed since the public debate was transformed into a national identity issue because, from the outset, it relied on the archaic and primitive past of Icelandic ancestors.

On the other hand, these events also bear witness to an original but certainly recurrent process throughout the history of Iceland (these two examples serving simply as illustrations) that is separate from the usual model of the reappearance of the dead. As mentioned earlier, ancestors relate first of all to their lineage groups. Even if they frequently make incursions into other families because of the social networks and relations that the living carry out among themselves, ancestors are nonetheless identified as acting individuals. Moreover, when they manifest themselves, it is always for a specific reason – to announce a death or an upcoming birth; to remind us of symbolic transmissions; to request services; etc. But this is in no way the type of rapport at stake in the two historical events that we have just examined. The dead do not intervene in an active way, as identifiable and acting ancestors, but rather as the passive form of a collective property of the Icelandic people. Therefore, this abstract appropriation of ancestors as markers of a common belonging is perhaps really a sign of the ongoing reinvention of the Icelandic collective identity. As Kirsten Hastrup already noted regarding a previous period, « *the Icelanders reproduced the celebrated images of another epoch to invent themselves* » (1990: 194).

Translation by Patricia Dumas

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ⁱ Even though it is the terms *spírítismi* (*spiritism*) or *andatrú* (belief in spirits) that are used, it is more accurate to talk about *spiritualism* in defining the esotericism movement that surfaced on the island. Regarding the distinction between spiritism and spiritualism, see Janet Oppenheim 1985; regarding western esotericism, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff 1996.

ⁱⁱ During the second part of the nineteenth century, Denmark becomes increasingly conciliatory; in 1874, King Christian IX granted Iceland a specific constitution, the premises of some autonomy towards Copenhagen.

ⁱⁱⁱ For an analysis of the multiple reactions demonstrating the diverging views (moral landscape) on the ways of considering the human body, its constituents and its symbolic, civic and legal features, see the works of Pálsson and Rabinow.

^{iv} Since that date, Icelandic hospitals have indeed kept a body of medical files relating to the symptoms, illnesses and treatments of each patient. Furthermore, the files of about 30,000 patients were supplemented with some tissue specimen from corpses. These pieces of nails, hair, skin and blood, totally useless in the past, have become precious DNA samples.