



Brethren Nation

BY JONAS MOODY PHOTOS BY PÁLL STEFÁNSSON

With the debate over family values raging on both sides of the Atlantic, Icelandic society dances to the beat of its own ethical drum, banding together to pioneer inroads into the terra incognita of non-traditional families like same-sex parents, unions outside the church and interracial adoption.

“I cannot believe they leave their babies parked in buggies outside the grocery store before they go in to shop!” American expat Taffeta Wood observes of a common Icelandic practice. “This they do after they lock their cars!” Though this may be deemed poor parenting or even blatant neglect in other national mentalities, Icelanders will tell you that their trust in one another, when it comes to families, is implicit.

Stances on hot-button social issues like gay marriage and abortion are already rising to the top of campaign platforms for the upcoming 2008 presidential elections in the U.S., while the highly contested viability of a European social model has thrown Western European heads of government into diplomatic fisticuffs with their unlike-minded Eastern counterparts. Smack-dab between the two sparring continents, however, is the small island nation of Iceland, which has blazed its own path when it comes to family values. Indeed, the curious social matrix of Iceland – a community so small and intimate

on one hand, yet doggedly progressive and conscious of its societal modernity on the other – has proven to support its own as the nation diverges from Western conventions of coupling and parenting to explore new ground.

When an Icelandic meets an Icelandic, a ritual dance occurs: “Where are you from?”

“Grew up in Breidholt, but my people are from the West Fjords and Strandir.”

“Aha. My mother’s side is from Ísafjörður. They worked for the Olsen shrimping company.”

“No kidding! My grandfather was one of the shift captains there for years.”

“You don’t say. Good people there.”

Coincidence? Unlikely. At least not with just over 300,000 people. Once the dance has concluded, and it can go on for some time, there

is a mutual recognition: we are the same. What's more, in the modern era this dance has been codified into a searchable online database of genealogical records dating back as far as the eighth century. Dubbed *islendingabok.is*, the project is a byproduct of research by biomedical company deCODE genetics, which essentially purchased the entire genealogical history of the Icelandic people in 1998 to study genetic disease in a relatively homogenous, isolated population. The gist is that Icelanders log in with their national identity number and look up how they are related to other Icelanders, past and present, which is somehow endlessly pleasing to the Icelandic mind. Only four generations away from Björk isn't bad, but 11 generations away from Halldór Laxness? Shameful.

This larger sense of interconnectedness, however, tends to work against identifying as smaller familial units like the conventional nuclear family. "Compared to other nations, Iceland is not quite as obsessed with the notion of having a mother-figure and father-figure," says clinical psychologist Dr. Þórkatla Adalsteinsdóttir, who specializes in family therapy. "We are used to having a big family around the children, with many relatives involved in their upbringing. Family ties are stronger here. In my family among us five brothers and sisters there are 17 children, but they are all *our* children."

How the kibbutz envisions the cultivation of land, so do the Icelanders see the fostering of their familial ties. Naturally, this inherent societal collectivism gives rise to state policies that support the family along socialist lines, with a strong emphasis on childrearing. Maternity and paternity leaves – a minimum of three months for each parent, plus three months for the two to divvy up at will – are funded by the state, as are annual child benefit payments.

Unlike the debate in the U.S. over the sacred nature of marriage in social policy, Iceland seems to be abandoning the entire institution in favor of unions based entirely on civil law. There is a growing tendency to forego marriage in the church in favor of civil marriage or even paperwork nuptials, that is, the state-recognized "consensual union". No veil, no rings, no cake here; only a one-page photocopied application and two dotted lines. According to Statistics Iceland 10,718 couples have been joined in consensual unions or civil matrimony in the last five years while only 6,612 couples have been joined in holy matrimony.

Likewise, attitudes towards same-sex unions and families are progressive. Registered partnerships, which are performed by state officiants and equivalent to marriage although not recognized as such by the national church, have been offered to gay couples since 1996. However the same tendency toward simple consensual union is also exhibited in the gay community, with Statistics Iceland reporting 20 gay couples entering into registered partnerships in 2006 compared with 52 gay couples establishing consensual unions.

Additionally, more recent legislation from 2006 has made gay couples eligible for primary adoption and artificial insemination through the state healthcare system, though in the former regard the law is largely symbolic as no country that puts up children for overseas adoption accepts petitions from same-sex parents, and primary adoption within Iceland is almost unheard of. For this reason, gay couples have had to show both diligence and resourcefulness in their endeavor to become parents, including lesbians and gay men

joining forces (though not genitals) to conceive through what is known as *heimasprauta* or "home insemination", involving a paper cup, a needleless syringe, and maybe some candles for a baby-making mood.

"The children in [same-sex] families are in a good situation because the parents have invested a lot into having their child, more so than in families where causal sex resulted in a surprise baby," Dr. Adalsteinsdóttir observes. "I know two or three lesbian families, and they tell me they've never encountered any prejudice."

While prejudice toward same-sex families may be negligible, prejudice toward outsiders is not, especially those who are perceptibly different than the flaxen-haired, apple-cheeked natives. Dr. Adalsteinsdóttir notes that this growing phenomenon presents certain obstacles to overseas adoptions when it comes to bringing other ethnicities into the community (with the majority of such adoptions coming from China, India, and Thailand). "We are more prejudiced than any other country in Europe because of our isolation," she explains. "So it's a difficult task, but suddenly a very necessary task. We have to commingle with the rest of the world if we want to survive."

There is, however, a reprieve for families adopting "brown" babies from abroad: Iceland's overriding and nearly manic impulse to have children. "We have a positive attitude towards children because it's just pragmatism," explains Dr. Adalsteinsdóttir. "There are very few of us, and a lot of work to do. 'The more children, the better' – we still have that mindset. So when we go abroad to fetch children? 'Yes! More! More!'"

In this aggressively pregnant nation, filling up the land with little Icelanders is almost invariably perceived as a boon, even if the circumstances by which the children are conceived are less than desirable by outside standards, like young single mothers. If unplanned pregnancies arise, they are seldom seen as unwanted and inevitably kept within the family in place of adoption, which explains why primary adoption within the country is so rare. "There is a stigma here against people who don't raise their own children. We are a former fishing society and women are used to being alone with our children," says Dr. Adalsteinsdóttir. "This is our legacy. I'm not saying it's good or bad; it's just our mentality."

“**A**ll happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” So begins Tolstoy's story of Anna Karenina, who searches for truth and happiness in a moralizing world. While Icelanders may be defying certain ethical conventions of the West, their bold ventures into familial bliss seem to be paying off. The nation consistently ranks in the top five countries according to indicators of national well-being and happiness like the United Nations' Human Development Index (#2) or the World Values Surveys on happiness (#5) and life satisfaction (#7). But statistics aside, perhaps Icelanders have heeded Tolstoy's musing by pursuing happiness not one family at a time, but rather under the ethos of inclusion as a nation united.

In following are portraits of families emblematic of Iceland's current situation, including those who represent a dying breed, those who have become a staple in the social fabric of the country, and those who appear to be pioneering the future of the nation's home.

Gudbjörg Pálsdóttir, 41; Jóhanna Kristjánsdóttir, 4; Sigurlaug Rúnarsdóttir, 12; Steinunn Kristín Friðriksdóttir, 31 and Kristján Hans Óskarsson, 26.



Pride Makes Prime Bedfellows:

THE SAME-SEX FAMILY

It was about five years ago in a bar that Steinunn Kristín Fridriksdóttir, a 31-year-old lesbian playschool teacher, popped the question to her then co-worker Kristján Hans Óskarsson, a 26-year-old gay graduate student: “So, Kristján, do you wanna be a father?” The next morning Óskarsson contacted Fridriksdóttir and her partner, Gudbjörg Pálsdóttir, a 41-year-old playschool teacher, to see if this had been a serious proposition.

It was. About a year later Jóhanna Kristjánsdóttir, the daughter of a gay man and a lesbian, came to be.

“I knew I wanted this at some point in my life but I didn’t expect it to happen so early on,” says Óskarsson. “When this came up, I knew I wanted to.” Although Óskarsson’s hesitations were nil, it took some time for his mother to warm up to the idea.

At the time, explains Fridriksdóttir, there was a case in Sweden of two lesbians who had two children with a man but then the two women split. The birth mother wanted the man to pay child support and Kristján’s family was worried about the same situation happening here.

“Her immediate reaction was silence,” Óskarsson recalls about telling his mother. “But I could see in her face that she liked the idea. It’s difficult for many people to understand. It’s just such a new idea: gay man plus gay woman equals baby? How?” Despite her initial reticence, Jóhanna is now an important part of his mother’s life. “It changed my mom’s life in a very positive way,” says Óskarsson.

“And you can see it in Jóhanna,” Fridriksdóttir adds. “Sometimes when she smiles she’s just like her grandmother.”

For most of her life Fridriksdóttir had been resolute in her decision to have a baby but after meeting Pálsdóttir and her daughter from a previous relationship, Sigurlaug, now 12, Fridriksdóttir knew she wanted her child, like Sigurlaug, to know its father. “I don’t think a straight man would want to have a child in this way,” she explains. “This was an opportunity for a gay man to have a child.”

The arrangement was such that Óskarsson would provide his genetic material and that Jóhanna would bear his name, Kristjánsdóttir. Jóhanna would also know her origin and her father would be involved as much or as little as he chose.

But Óskarsson has no qualms about his role, adding that he does not feel precisely like her parent. “I’m not the one who is teaching

her how life is or who is there for her when she wakes up at night. So I feel like my relationship with her is more like an uncle.”

Though the story of how Jóhanna came to be might be unconventional, what’s apparent is that she was born of all parties’ deep desire to bring a child into the world.

“I bought an ovulation test so I knew when my cycle was,” begins Fridriksdóttir. “When the time was right we called Kristján. He came over and went to the bathroom and did his thing in a cup. Then we had a needleless syringe.”

“The method is called ‘home insemination,’” Óskarsson interjects.

“It was important for us [nodding towards Pálsdóttir] to be together for this. We lit candles and had a cozy moment.”

“Even if it was simple, it was very relaxed and unbelievably effective,” Óskarsson adds. “It felt right.”

“And it worked the first time,” concludes Fridriksdóttir. “I found out in a week.”

Although the moment of conception took only an instant, Jóhanna was in fact several years in the planning. “This was no one-night stand,” says Fridriksdóttir. “Some say that gay people shouldn’t have children, but the fact is that we can’t get pregnant by accident so if we do this, we do it with a lot of forethought and love.”

The three parents say they have never suffered discrimination and maintain a policy of openness when it comes to discussing their situation with their children. “We went to Spain when Sigurlaug was nine and by the time we left she had seen to it that everyone at the hotel knew how Jóhanna was conceived,” recalls Fridriksdóttir. “But it’s okay because we are open about it. We’re not trying to make it look like anything else.”

The trio is not only opening lines of communication between the homosexual and the heterosexual worlds, but also discovering an unexpected communion between gays and lesbians. “Because it’s such a small community here in Iceland, gays and lesbians are more involved with each other,” notes Fridriksdóttir.

Adds Óskarsson, “And there is a tendency to reject suggested limitations here. Icelanders have this attitude that they can make whatever they want happen.”

Ástbjörg Rut Jónsdóttir, 28
and Isabella Ronja Benediktsdóttir, 4.



Lady Madonna, et al.:

THE SINGLE MOTHER

Every night after studying for tomorrow's classes, Ástbjörg Rut Jónsdóttir, 28, goes to bed next to her four-year-old daughter, Ísabella Ronja Benediktsdóttir, in a small, second-floor apartment in downtown Reykjavík. She rents out Ronja's room to lodger Fitore Lekaj, an effervescent 36-year-old muralist from Albania, to supplement her income. What you won't find in their apartment is a man.

"I'm my own husband! Besides, there's no room in this house for a boyfriend," Jónsdóttir says shaking her head. "There's only one man in my house, and that's Fridgeir Cash, the cat." (Hannes Tango was tragically run over earlier this year and is buried in the backyard.)

As an active student at the Iceland Academy of Arts, a single mom, plus working as an interpreter, Jónsdóttir is typical of the overworked Icelander. "When parents don't pursue what makes them happy on some level, how can they be expected to make their children happy?" Jónsdóttir says, explaining her reasons for carrying on with school. "Single parents cannot lose themselves entirely in raising their children because in the end it's their children who pay for their unhappiness and bitterness. People my age realize this."

Besides help from Lekaj, Jónsdóttir also relies on her extended family, "They are my rock." With her mother and stepfather in Borgarnes, an hour away, and a bevy of close friends in Reykjavík,

Jónsdóttir is not raising Ronja alone. "My daughter knows these people and is comfortable around people besides me," explains Jónsdóttir of the benefits of outside help. "She likes to go for visits and mix things up. She doesn't necessarily always want to hang on mama."

After having Ronja at 25, Jónsdóttir split up with her boyfriend who later died this April. "Ronja was a surprise," she says. "We were careless. My life has changed in certain ways. You're not thinking about yourself as much. Your child is first on your mind. That said, my circle hasn't changed, and neither have my goals, to study theater and sign language."

Jónsdóttir guffaws at certain misconceptions about single mothers, that "we're desperate to find a man to save us." On the contrary, going out on the prowl is farthest from Jónsdóttir's mind. "I don't feel a great need to provide a father figure for Ronja," she says. "In this society today families are simply different. What's most important now is knowing where you come from, who you are, and that the people around you are going to support you. Being able to trust the people around you makes all the difference – it's far more important than having some father figure or mother figure. People my age are beginning to open up discourse about this very mentality."

Fridrik Halldór Brynjólfsson, 18 and girlfriend; Jóhanna Helga Halldórsdóttir, 41; Baby boy Brynjólfsson, 8 days old; Brynjólfur Fridriksson, 46; Brynjar Óli Brynjólfsson, 16; Ari Björn Brynjólfsson, 7; Bylgja Guðrún Brynjólfsdóttir, 17; Anna Kristín Brynjólfsdóttir, 10.



From Breadbasket to Bassinet:

THE FARM FAMILY

The first thing that greets you when stepping inside the door at Brandsstadir farm, perched on a lonely hillside sloping down to the Blanda River in northern Iceland, is an expansive row of shoes, ordered from smallest to largest, that extends beyond the entrance hall and on into the depths of the house.

“Children are a help,” chuckles the farmer’s wife from beneath a mop of thick, curly, black hair with a newborn on her breast. “Even the little one feeds the calves. Everyone has their jobs and learns to be independent.” But it is not only their own six children, ranging in age from eight days to 18 years, that Jóhanna Halldórsdóttir, 41, and husband Brynjólfur Fridriksson, 46, have raised on their cattle and horse farm. After having their first baby in 1988, the couple was asked to take on problem children and work with them on the farm.

“It wasn’t a difficult decision,” explains Halldórsdóttir. “We just like children. Living on a farm is very good for problem kids. They come into contact with another world, with animals and nature. There is so much freedom in the countryside. They’re not as bound here either; it’s not like everything is prohibited. When children have to tend to an animal, there is something about it that brings about a sense of well-being.”

Though their first foster children came to them directly from parents, the couple was later put in touch with social services in

nearby Blönduós, which arranged for problem children to come to Brandsstadir from 1990 to 1999, at which time the size of the family had made it difficult to take on outside children.

Halldórsdóttir recalls the story of one boy who arrived on the farm when he was 14 and stayed for two years. He came from an alcoholic family and appeared to be on the road to prison. Now 32, the boy recently visited the farm again with his girlfriend to thank them. “He told us that his time on the farm had saved him from life on the street,” says Halldórsdóttir. “Sometimes it’s enough to change environments. There aren’t the temptations. I’m not saying the countryside is the only place to bring up kids, but it’s easier to keep them on the straight and narrow out here.”

But with greater demands placed on productivity and reduced subsidies, Icelandic farm families are not long for this world. If the era of the Icelandic farm and its family meets its demise, as all signs seem to indicate, the country stands to lose not only its breadbasket, but also its bassinet.

“We need the state to show more support for the farmer’s mentality, instead of focusing on efficiency and profit,” Halldórsdóttir explains. “That kind of thinking doesn’t allow for family farms; it needs factory farms, which simply don’t work here. If things don’t change, there are a lot of people who are going to give up. We simply can’t meet the growing demands.”

Sigurður Ingi Guðmundsson, 50; Guðbjörg Pálína Sigurdardóttir, 7; Halldór Ingi Sigurðsson, 14; and Birgitta Hrónn Halldórsdóttir, 48.



Babes without Borders:

INTERRACIAL ADOPTION

“It’s a little arrogant to think we’re alone in the world,” says author Birgitta Halldórsdóttir, 48, in defense of her belief in the occult. But it’s not just other worlds she’s interested in, but our very own as well. After adopting two children, Halldór Ingi, 14, from Thailand and Guðbjörg Pálína, 7, from India, with husband, farmer Sigurður Ingi Guðmundsson, 50, high-minded Halldórsdóttir is simply happy to have her “little brown princess,” she says, squeezing Guðbjörg close.

When not tending to her children or her sheep you’ll find Halldórsdóttir cooking up a plot for her next crime novel in the cowshed on her remote dairy farm, Sydri-Langamýri, in northern Iceland. “It’s good to have the kids grow up here and teach them to take care of the animals,” Halldórsdóttir explains. “When you’re a kid in the countryside you learn about certain truths in life like when an animal is born and dies and everything else in between. It’s much more natural and easier to deal with these events in life when they happen to people because you experienced these truths in life.”

As a child, Halldórsdóttir was herself adopted by the family who lived at Sydri-Langamýri. So when she and her husband could not conceive conventionally, they opted against artificial insemination, deciding to adopt. “Because I was adopted, I know how it is from firsthand experience and all its advantages. There are no children who are more welcomed into a family because you have to wait for them so long.”

Overseas adoption is a growing trend on the island as adoption

within the country is very rare. However, there is a history of adoption in Iceland and it’s not a pretty one. “I was a bit of an accident,” says Halldórsdóttir with a chuckle. “It was a man who was cheating on his wife, who were friends of my [adopted] mother and father.” At that time adopted children were often perceived as rejected and therefore undesirable but cultural norms have since progressed. “Fortunately today we live in the kind of society where practically no one grows up with their mother and father since everyone divorces,” says Halldórsdóttir. “Or people raise their stepchildren. Now anything goes. Everything is normal, which is much better.”

Although views on adoption have improved, some say Iceland is now marked by a new sense of racism as a response to a growing immigrant population. Though Halldórsdóttir says she has never personally encountered racism she does admit it exists here. “This is a good country, with clean air and water, but how dare we put ourselves above other people? This is blatant arrogance and it’s hard to fix. We’re not talking about frightened individuals, but rather mass anxiety.”

Fortunately, racism has not been a problem for Halldórsdóttir’s family, but she has thought about how the ethnicities of her children play into their identity. When they adopted Halldór from Thailand, the family had to promise to let him come back. However, neither have any interest in returning to their birth countries. “Halldór came here when he was 15 months and Guðbjörg only six months,” Halldórsdóttir says. “They identify as Icelanders. How on earth could they identify as Thai or Indian? I raised them to be Icelanders.”



Hörður Sveinsson, 26; Vigdís Elfa Hardardóttir, 1;
Högni Alvar Hardarson, 3; Anna Jóna Heimisdóttir, 25.

Ask the Local Gentry:

THE YOUNG PARENTS

When asked how their family works with two young children, photographer Hörður Sveinsson, 26, and aspiring herbalist Anna Jóna Heimisdóttir, 25, have simple answers: “Because I’m so pretty,” she says – “Because I’m so patient,” he says. Although their first child, Högni Alvar, now three, was not planned, they are quick to add: “He was entirely welcome.” The same may be said of their second child, Vigdís Elfa, born only one year ago.

“Both our families were delighted to hear we were having kids,” says Sveinsson. This reaction may be explained by how common young parents are in this nation with one of the highest population growth rates in Europe. “There were at least ten of us pregnant when we took or final exams in school,” says Heimisdóttir. “It’s not uncommon to have kids at our age, but rather uncommon to stay together afterwards.”

After having their two children, the couple’s plans to finish school and continue working have remained intact. They claim that attitudes towards having children, both from school administrators and employers, enabled them to pursue a career and have time for parenting. “There’s a lot of latitude,” explains Sveinsson. “I started working right before Vigdís was born but

my employer was still open and let me take paternity leave, even though I was just working for the summer. I’ve never had any hassle.”

As part of their education Sveinsson and Heimisdóttir have studied in Denmark, and visited Heimisdóttir’s parents in New Hampshire over the summer. “In America people talked to me at the playground. Everyone was very nice, but just surprised that I had these two children so young,” Heimisdóttir recalls. “But not as surprised as when I breastfed in public.”

Their experience abroad is not altogether unexpected, as trends in Western culture push for young families to wait and have their children once they’ve established themselves in their careers. But prudence is not a virtue of the Arctic, trumped by audacity at every turn. “In Iceland there is this thinking that *thetta reddast* (loosely translated: things will fall into place of their own accord),” claims Sveinsson. “Younger couples are *planning* to have kids now, not just by accident.”

“No one is going to look down on you,” adds Heimisdóttir. “You have your kids and *thetta reddast*. You just live your life one day at a time.”