

Politics and the Female Image in Iceland
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National dress is a significant factor in a culture's international identity and therefore, is especially political. While each nation has a higher, official culture that is portrayed internationally, people living within that culture have their own creative craft and ways of doing things. Although ritualistic aspects, including national dress, bind a society together, liminal moments tend to lead to a change in ritual or rather, the creation of a new narrative. Dr. Karl Aspelund used his study of national dress, and more specifically the female image, in Iceland to reveal the political influences that surround a nation's identity in the form of dress.

The idea of "the folk," which originated in the 18th century primarily in Scandinavia, presents the notion that each area has an individual identity and their clothing is specific to that identity. However, autocratic societies began to formalize dress for political reasons as a way of maintaining control and to create a sense of belonging to the state for smaller towns. Still, people on the outskirts of these "empires" decided they also had the ability to create their own dress and did so to separate themselves and resist forced assimilation. This is the foundation of how the two distinct types of Icelandic dress, "invented" and "vernacular," came to surface.

The start of the 19th century brought about a male-female dichotomy, which caused a change to national dress in Iceland. Men in society adopted the fashions of the mainland [Copenhagen], where they were receiving education, to avoid shame and at the same time as a point of pride. However, while Icelandic towns were developing and introducing urbanized events, their fashion was not representative of an urban city. This caused upper class men to begin pushing for the riddance of vernacular, or classic, clothing and advocating dressing in mainland fashions regardless of its impracticality for their living conditions. This came at a time when the female image was becoming the image for every nation, placing women in the impossible position, at the hands of men, of being the perfect visual embodiment of their nation's culture. At this transitional time, women in Iceland banded together to take back national dress.

In the 1820s, upper class ladies gathered groups of women to plot the eradication of the "Danish" outfits. Since the expectation of urban dress was not reflected in reality, women began romanticizing the homeland and the vernacular fashions. Later in the 1860s, the women of Reykjavik, which had become a half-Danish town, realized their influence and responsibility to create a national identity through dress and spread the image of Icelanders wearing vernacular dress through means of photograph propaganda. At the turn of the 20th century though, this dress was actually stolen by the Danish bourgeoisie; the invented dress designed to revive Icelandic culture and distinguish from Danish identity even became part of the Queen's royal outfit, given to her by the upper-class ladies of Reykjavik. This costume, as it were, became the official symbol of statehood. Finally, years later in the late 1960s and early 1970s, vernacular dress ceased to be worn on a daily basis; but in the 1980s, teenagers grasped their influence on culture and hosted a movement to revive vernacular dress. Although it is not worn anymore, these women restored 18th century costume bringing vernacular dress into ceremonial fashion.

Through Dr. Aspelund's study and telling of history of Icelandic national dress, it is obvious that national dress is regularly influenced by and changed because of the people in power. That power is not always governmental; however, simply being an upper class member, or in this case a female, can give individuals, or groups of people, the ability to shape the visual identity of a nation. In the case of Iceland's history of national dress, it was not about nationalism, but a reaction to homogenization and a regaining of female autonomy over what is worn.