

The Icelandic Family System

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My task to-day is to present some reflections on the Icelandic family system. This presentation can of course never be more than a limited introduction since a detailed description of the issue at hand would certainly require a full series of lectures. I have therefore chosen to limit my scope somewhat drastically and to dwell on one or two areas only. However, by doing so, I hope to touch upon some of the items which I take to be characteristic of the present day family system in Iceland. In particular I shall be dealing with the extraordinarily high incidence of illegitimacy and relating this fact to the different forms of family organisation. This calls for a comparative look to the Scandinavian countries to which Iceland has many close links both historically and culturally. Also a backward look into Icelandic history will prove necessary for reasons that will be explained later on.

The family system of any society is but a part of the wider social structure, intertwined with other social systems, such as the political, the economical, the religious, etc. in many different ways in many different societies. The Icelandic society, its past and present, may or may not be familiar to you. In case it is not I feel obliged to offer to you a fragment of background information before discussing the Icelandic family.

First, a few words about the population. Iceland was settled by Norse-Celtic immigrants during a period which lasted from 870 A.D. to 930. The great majority of the settlers came from western Norway, while a sizeable number came from the Celtic areas of the British Isles, chiefly from Nordic families who were settled there. Slaves and many of the free workers brought by the settlers may well have been purely Celtic.

Nothing is known for certain about the size of the Icelandic population during the first eight centuries of the

country's history. But from as early as the beginning of the 18th century there is reliable information on this point. In 1703, by an order of the Danish King, a general census was carried out registering every person under name, age, family position and occupation. In this year the population numbered 50,358. This low number was not exceeded until by the middle of the nineteenth century. It doubled in 102 years and reached 100,000 in 1925. It then doubled again in only 42 years, passing the 200,000 mark in 1967. To-day the population is just under 220,000.

Along with the explosive increase in population there has followed a no less drastic change in population distribution. At the turn of this century 78.6% of the population was living in rural areas and 21.4% in urban areas (urban areas including towns and villages of 200 inhabitants and over). In 1973 the situation is completely reversed as by then 86.2% live in urban areas and 13.8% in rural areas. Reykjavik alone, the capital and the neighbouring communities, now count for more than 50% of the total population.

The change from a completely rural to a predominantly urban population has been effected by a radical change in the distribution of the population by industry. At the census in 1703 all the working people were engaged in farming, although some did some fishing for part of the year or held an official post as well. In 1910 just under 50% were engaged in farming, but in 1971 this percentage has dropped to a mere 11%. This movement away from farming has not, as you might expect, been caused by an influx of manpower into fishing and fish processing. In these last 60 years there has also been a drop in this sector since in 1910 it counted for 18.6% of those in employment, but 14.2% in 1971. The big increase has been in various other manufacturing, construction, commerce and other services. This does not change the fact that fishing is the all important industry in Iceland to-day, accounting for 80% of the total export value. The explanation for the relative drop in

manpower in fishing is to be found in the advanced mechanization of this industry, a development which has greatly cut down the number of working hands needed.

This short review on population, residence and industry is presented as a fragmentary background information. But however fragmentary it indicates the revolutionary change which Icelandic society has gone through both economically and socio-culturally in a relatively very short time. It is worth noticing that the impact of industrialization and urbanization is not felt until at the turn of the present century, and does not really accelerate until during these last three decades since the Second World War. Before this sudden development Iceland remained basically the same peasant society for centuries.

As we now turn to the discussion of the family it does not need much imagination to realize that it must have been very considerably affected by the rapid social changes. What has happened and still is happening reflects many of the characteristics which are well known to social scientists who have studied the transition of the family from a basically peasant type of society to an industrialized and urbanized one. What is unique about the Icelandic case, at least among the societies of Western Europe, is the extremely short span of time during which this transition has taken place. Thus one still finds in Iceland many individuals who experienced in their youth the conditions of the traditional peasant culture. From these individuals as well as from historical sources one learns that the family has during the process of change lost weight in many respects. The peasant family was of the extended-family type, three or four generations living together on the farm. Economically the family was to a large degree self-sufficient, producing food and clothing from the sizeable flock of sheep and the few heads of cattle. The socialization of the young generation was a family responsibility altogether including education, religious instruction, and the learning of such technical skills as the future role of a farmer or a farmer's wife would require. The care of the aged

and the infirm as well as of the social mis-fits was also in the hands of the family, sometimes with financial support from the communal fund.

To-day all this is a picture of the recent past. The urban family is of the nuclear-family type, a consumption unit, leaning heavily on the multifarious system of the welfare state for its existence.

This much for an introduction and please accept my apology for the sweeping generalizations.

I said earlier that my main concern in this lecture would be the question of illegitimacy and how it relates to different types of family organization. I am aware that this particular approach, to take as one's starting point the question of illegitimacy when dealing with the family system, may seem strange to you. It certainly is more common to find this question referred to once the discussion proper of the family and marriage is concluded. But I believe there are some very strong arguments in favour of my approach when the issue at hand is to describe the Icelandic family system. These arguments, I hope, will emerge as the discussion advances. It seems safe to suggest that one major reason why Iceland is referred to in contemporary sociological discussion on marriage and the family is the fact that it presents the highest rate of illegitimate births in Europe. In 1973 every third child, 33.6%, was born illegitimate. The rate has been increasing for the last few years, from the still very high national average of ca. 25% during 1940 – 1965, reaching the 30% limit by 1968. The sudden rise in the six year period 1968 – 1973 after the rate had remained stable for twenty five years needs an explanation. Mothers of illegitimate children are to be found in the lowest age-group of mothers. In 1971 82.4% of these mothers were 24 years of age or younger and as much as 44.6% 19 years old and younger. Since 1965 the total birth rate has been steadily going down undoubtedly through the increasing use of the contraceptive pill. But this decline of the birth rate is extremely unevenly divided according

to the age-groups. Thus at the same time as there is a decline of 43% in the age-group 30 — 34 during a fifteen years period the decline in the lowest age-group of mothers, 15 — 19 years of age, is only 10%. Now, since the great majority of illegitimate births fall within the lowest age-groups it is inevitable that the uneven decline of the birth rate works automatically for a higher share of the illegitimate births within the total number of births. This, I believe, is the main explanation for the sudden rise of the rate of illegitimacy during the last few years.

But this, of course, gives no explanation of the very high rate of say 25% in the first place. Compared with the Scandinavian countries, which in legal terms are quite similar to Iceland as far as the question of illegitimacy is concerned, the latter is in a category very much of its own. The rate for Norway during 1961 — 70 was 5%, Denmark 9.8%, Sweden 14.3%. In the case of Sweden, however, there has been a very sharp rise in the years since 1970, the three years average 1971 — 73 being 25%. I have not had the opportunity to study these recent developments in Sweden, but my guess is that similar forces are at work there as in Iceland, i.e., that the decline of the birth rate is markedly slower in the lower age-groups than in the higher.

It has been argued that the Icelandic case must be explained in terms of an extraordinary degree of sexual permissiveness prevailing among the Icelanders. Thus, a Swedish-American sociologist, Professor Richard F. Tomasson, University of New Mexico, affirms in his book on Swedish society (Sweden: Prototype of Modern Society) that, and I quote: “It should be pointed out that Sweden is not even the most sexually permissive of the Scandinavian countries; it is Iceland”, unquote (p. 179). Professor Tomasson then goes on substantiating his case by referring to the record high rate of illegitimacy. Now, sexual permissiveness is a matter of definition, but I certainly believe that the explanation of the Icelandic situation is to be found on more objective, or should I say, more neutral grounds than that of sexual morality. It has to do with types of family

organization which differ from those of Swedish society, or for that matter from all other European societies.

Some years ago I made a study of all illegitimate births which had been registered over a period of twenty years in a typical fishing community in Iceland with a population of just over 4000. From the records I was able to classify these births according to the family setting into which the illegitimate child was born. The outcome was as follows: Total number of live births during these 20 years was 1881. Thereof illegitimate 575 or 30.6%. The classification according to family setting gave the following result. 52.7% of all illegitimate births were traced to parents who were cohabiting, 16% to parents who were publicly engaged or had got married when the illegitimate child was baptized. This leaves 31.3% of all illegitimate births to the third and final category or the single mother. In other terms, one seems justified in making a sharp distinction between on the hand *de jure* cases of illegitimacy and *de facto* cases on the other. This distinction reveals that the *de facto* cases are responsible for approximately 10% illegitimacy. It is these 10% one should bear in mind when making comparison with the rates of other nations and drawing conclusions about the size of the issue as a social problem.

Turning back to the previous two categories of those who were cohabiting and those engaged it soon became clear that I was dealing with two if not three distinctive types of family organization all of which had in common that they were non-marriage family types. This conclusion was later confirmed in my interviews with 60 randomly selected families. In what follows I shall give a brief description of each type.

First, the cohabitation family. This family type is characterized by prolonged, quite often life-long cohabitation, with a minimal orientation towards making the union legal in terms of marriage. In most respects this family is in no way different from the marriage-family. It is even true to say that it is its

strength that it passes as a marriage-family within the community. After a few years have passed very few are aware of the true nature of the family relationship. It certainly helps for this family to pass incognito, as it were, that in Icelandic law and custom a married woman does not give up her family name as she marries.

Even though the cohabitation family was responsible for over 50% of all the illegitimate births in my study there were clear indications that it was receding in popularity and social acceptance. This was borne out statistically in that its share in the illegitimate births had been reduced from 65% during 1946 – 50 to less than 40% in 1961 – 64. In my interviews I also got a strong impression of an increasing disapproval of this arrangement especially in terms of disadvantages, mostly financial, which it can imply for the female partner. In fact there is a considerable element of risk involved for if there is a dissolution of a cohabitation relationship there exist no legal provisions comparable to what happens in cases of divorce. To-day with the increased awareness of women's rights there is hardly any doubt that the cohabitation family is seen as a less and less attractive alternative.

Second, the engagement family. Even though this family type has some important factors in common with the previous non-marriage type, the cohabitation family, the dissimilarities are so great that they fully justify a clear distinction between the two. What they have in common is the fact that in both cases a family living is started on the basis of the public engagement. Further it is to be noted that as time passes the characteristics of the typical engagement family are gradually replaced by those of the cohabitation family. But this development is an exception from the rule. What is much more characteristic of the engagement family is that it develops not into a cohabitation family but into a marriage family. It is, I believe, exactly this firm orientation towards marriage which is decisive for its apparent ease at functioning within the com-

munity. Other points of departure from the cohabitation family pattern concern age, economic status and social approval.

The engagement family is a very young family and the young age is one of the main reasons offered for the delayed marriage. The legal age for marriage is now 18 for both partners but used to be 21 for the boy and 18 for the girl. The average age for first marriages was in 1966 — 70 25 for males and 22.9 for females. There is no reliable data available on the average age of those who get publicly engaged but 18 — 19 is hardly far off the mark.

But since the legal age for marriage is 18 it is difficult to argue that it is the question of the low age which decides in favor of an engagement family setting and not a marriage one. What is much more important in this respect is the economic situation. As long as the young couple are not in a position to establish their own, independent household, they are not in a position to get married. But while engaged they get support from their parents, first of all in that they make their provisional home within the parental home of the one or the other, but also in taking care of the first child if the young mother is working or perhaps finishing her education. The engagement family is accordingly heavily dependent on the respective families of orientation, economically and otherwise.

The fact that the girl may and often does become pregnant under these circumstances is not a major issue which is likely to call for a hurried marriage. It is accepted and so also is the fact that the child will be born illegitimate. It is a telling confirmation of this acceptance that 62.5% of all first births during 1966 — 70 were in fact illegitimate. This extremely high rate cannot be explained in any other terms than that of the engagement family pattern.

The question of marriage, however, is never far off. There are definitely limits as to the approved length of time before

the making of a separate, independent household and entering marriage. If and when these limits are passed it is likely to create concern, especially on behalf of the girl's parents, about the stability and durability of the relationship. In particular marriage becomes a live issue when time has come to baptize the illegitimate, first child. It seems to be a common belief, though without any basis in law, that once you take care to marry first and then have the child baptized the status of the child as born illegitimate will be changed. The fact of the matter is that by marriage, altogether irrespective of whether the child is baptized or not, it receives a legal status of a legitimate child. But the kind of legal fiction which is involved in this peculiar marriage-baptism combination fits rather nicely into the engagement family pattern, since it works for a not too delayed marriage and is at the same time meant to deal with the somewhat unpleasant, and irrational fact of the child's illegitimacy at birth.

Marriage is then likely to happen between the births of the first and second child. This assumption has strong support from birth statistics. Earlier it was mentioned that more than 60% of all first births are illegitimate but if we look at births of a second child we find that the rate has dropped to less than 20%, 19.3 to be exact.

Before I leave the engagement family I would like to make a few comments about its social recognition. As already has been implied the fact that this family type is seen as a preliminary stage to marriage is decisive for its way of functioning within the community. This marriage-orientation which works in favour of the engagement family in its present form disfavors at the same time the more traditional type of the cohabitation family. When I made my investigations ten years ago there were some indications of class differences as far as social approval was concerned. In particular this was true of the cohabitation family, i.e. that it was a low class phenomenon. But in a much more restricted sense the difference of class was

also meant to apply to the engagement family. To-day it is my belief that the engagement family pattern is more widely accepted than ever. This increased acceptance is to my mind, together with the uneven decline of the birth rate which was mentioned earlier, the main reason for the steady rise of the illegitimacy rate these last seven or eight years.

I am aware that the foregoing discussion on the non-marriage family types might leave the impression that the status of marriage is somewhat precarious in Icelandic society. But one soon realises when considering the interplay of the different types of family organization that the marriage family is very definitely the norm. Thus we have seen that the engagement family is justified in its orientation towards marriage and also that the cohabitation family is viable in so far as it passes as a marriage family. This status of the marriage family as the norm is confirmed by statistics on marriage which show that marriage rates for Iceland are quite high compared with the other Scandinavian countries. In 1973 this rate was 8.25 but 7.45 in Finland, 7.11 in Norway, 6.17 in Denmark and as low as 4.70 in Sweden. These are rates per thousand of the mean population.

Nothing so far has been directly offered as an explanation of the functional ease of the non-marriage family patterns in Icelandic society. This I propose to do in conclusion by taking a brief look at the historical roots of the institution of engagement.

Professor Tomasson in his book on Sweden, which I quoted earlier, offers the following explanation of what he interpretes as the sexual permissiveness of the Icelanders: "This extraordinary permissiveness has its roots in the same old Scandinavian patterns as in Sweden, only the traditional patterns survived with greater force in Iceland" (op.cit., p.179). These old Scandinavian patterns are described as follows: "The permissiveness for the unmarried that prevails in Sweden appears

to have its roots in the courtship practices of the rural past. Premarital sexual relations, under specific conditions, such as night courtship, were more or less tolerated under surveillance of family and community, particularly the youthful peer group, which served as the dominant agency of social control. And generally when pregnancy followed, so did marriage". (Ibid, p. 176). This description is borrowed from Alva Myrdal in her book *Nation and Family*. And without casting any doubt as to the accuracy of this description for Sweden it must be said that it is most inaccurate when applied to the Icelandic scene. For one thing it takes no account of the geographical distances between the Icelandic farms which alone would have made the nocturnal visits, so congenial for the Swedish youth, a most onerous task for the Icelandic lovers. And, for another, it completely overlooks the important role which the institution of engagement played in shaping the Icelandic pattern.

In pre-Christianized Iceland, i.e. before the year 1000, there were three distinctive stages in the process leading to marriage, the proposal followed by matchmaking negotiations, the ceremonial betrothal and finally the wedding feast. For our immediate purposes it is the second stage, the betrothal ceremony, which is the most important because eventually it is this element of the pre-Christian wedding procedure that was incorporated into ecclesiastical law. By so doing the Church did in fact sanction a form of civil marriage, because such was the legal importance of betrothal that children born to those betrothed were by law legitimate. Following the Reformation in 1550 a new legislation on marriage was introduced in the year 1587. In this legislation the betrothal ceremony is conspicuously absent but in its place there is a detailed instruction on public engagement. This new institution of engagement was clearly meant to deal the marriage-creating-significance of the traditional betrothal ceremony a final blow. But what really happened was a transfer of associations from one institution to the other, the most important of which was the moral right of betrothed persons to lead a married way of life. This

interpretation is confirmed by a number of later instructions issued by secular and ecclesiastical authorities to the effect that engagement provided no basis, legal or moral, for sexual relationships. In the end the authorities saw no other way to establish the absolute status of marriage than to abolish the institution of engagement altogether by an act of law. This happened in 1799.

Now this whole process from the introduction of engagement to its abolition seems clearly to indicate that people were in fact living together as man and wife outside of wedlock and felt morally justified to do so. This pattern, I might add, was continued after the legal abolition of engagement.

To conclude I would like to suggest to you that it is indeed this historical background which must be kept in mind when one tries to understand some of the peculiarities of the present-day Icelandic family system.

Scandinavian Place Names in Scotland as a Source of Knowledge

W. F. H. Nicolaisen

Although the documentary evidence for the historical presence of Scandinavian-speaking people in Scotland is by no means as scant as that for, let us say, the Picts or other p-Celts, the isolation and study of Scottish place names of Scandinavian origin have, over the last few decades, provided certain new insights into the life and culture of the name givers and users — insights which could not easily be gained from any other existing source. In order to serve as adequately informative sources of knowledge, such place names must, of course, previously have been reliably identified as having been, fully or at least partly, coined by speakers of a Scandinavian language; they must also have been acceptably interpreted with regard to