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HERDING LIVESTOCK AND MANAGING PEOPLE

The cultural sustainability of a harvest festival

Guðrún Helgadóttir

Introduction

Harvest has been a cause for celebration for humans from time immemorial, and with the growth of tourism, these festivals attract visitors from outside the celebrating communities. As with other forms of cultural tourism, there is a certain balance between maintaining the original focus of the festival, its authenticity if you will, and catering to the growing number of visitors not directly involved in the core activity. This balance is the theme in this study. It expands on previous studies of horse round-ups or horse gathering in Northern Iceland conducted by participant observations and visitor surveys (Helgadóttir 2006, 2015; Helgadóttir & Sturlaugsdóttir 2009). Here the focus is on the subjective experience of the horse farmers as expressed in semi-structured interviews.

Harvest festivals are not only celebrations of ripe fruit and grains, a loaded Thanksgiving dinner table, pressing grapes or the excess of tomatoes flowing through the streets at La Tomatina. In the arctic and sub-arctic north, human sustenance traditionally consisted largely of animal protein. Hence, what counts for a harvest festival in Iceland is réttir, the gathering of livestock from summer pasture.

The research question addressed here is how residents perceive the changes in the harvest festival, Laufskálarátt, over the timespan they have participated in the festival.

Literature review

It has long been acknowledged that harvest festivals attract tourists or as Janiskee (1980) dubbed them ‘Rural delights for day tripping urbanites’ (p. 96), with a concern for the cultural sustainability of the harvest festivals suffering from commodification or ‘gimmickry’. These concerns have by no means subsided in the period of festivalisation of culture (Richards 2007) and are exacerbated today by renewed concerns over mass tourism that have led residents in heavily visited city destinations to protest (Golomb & Novy 2017). A common theme in these concerns is the negative effect of commodification, the devaluation of cultural assets in the tourism marketplace.

Tourism in cultural attractions is a complex phenomenon, and conventional marketing that relies on simple, easy to grasp messages can hardly do justice to these cultural assets.
The tourist has a transient relationship with the destination, while the resident has a long-term, even lifelong and transgenerational investment in the destination culture. The understanding of the tourist informed by marketing can therefore be explained by Baudrillard’s (2000) concept of simulacra, where the marketing message is but a shadow of the deeper truth on which the attraction rests. Destination marketing is in many respects a case in point of this theory as destination marketing, nation branding, nation building and contemporary cultural movements shape the cultural experience.

Acceptance and positive attitudes to tourism are closely linked to perceived positive economic impact for residents and community (Kim, Uysal & Sirgy 2013). The conclusion of research on the social impacts of tourism is that in the organisation and development of tourism, the residents’ quality of life is an important sustainability factor. Residents experience the impacts of visitation differently, which is important to take into account in the internal marketing and planning of tourism-related activities. Residents who value peacefulness and quiet are, for example, less likely to accept the impact of people congregating in their neighbourhood than residents who value access to cultural events (Andereck & Nyaupane 2011; Canavan 2014; Ridderstraat, Croes & Nijkamp 2016).

The cultural clash between tourists and residents has mainly been explored in developing countries and in destinations for indigenous tourism (Smith 2009). However, residents in developed countries also have negative experiences of tourists not respecting the norms and values of the destination community hence the concern with overtourism. In the case of Barcelona, tourist nudity in public sparked an outcry, and this became an outlet for a long-brewing frustration with the pressures of increasing visitor numbers and the increasing presence of the tourism industry (Golomb & Novy 2017).

The presence at festivals of guests that show disrespect for the occasion, the community and the values celebrated is a threat to the cultural sustainability of the festival. Furthermore, the outsider at the festival may not intend to be disrespectful; he or she may simply be ignorant, not getting it. This raises the question of how wide destination marketers can, or should, cast the net to promote festivals (Helgadóttir & Dashper 2016).

**Background**

Sheep and horse farming in North-West Iceland relies partially on the use of common lands, that is, mountain pastures, for summer grazing. Farmers drive or herd their sheep to the pastures after lambing season, and their horses later in the summer when the pastures can carry their grazing and trampling. In autumn, the sheep and horses are gathered and herded back to the lowlands and sorted at communal corrals, before herding or driving them back to their respective farms (Aldred 2012; Helgadóttir 2015).

The sorting at the corral is a community gathering, the core of the festival that has developed to celebrate the success of bringing back the animals that grazed freely in the summer. Around this core, the festival has grown, spawning satellite events, products and services for visitors. The growth is mainly due to marketing efforts by Destination Management Organisations (DMOs) and the tourism sector in those rural areas. The timing is late September, which extends the shoulder season of tourism in the areas by a month. Tourism is, therefore, a stakeholder in these harvest festivals in addition to the main stakeholders, the farmers (Helgadóttir 2015).

The farmers are responsible for the management of the livestock and the pastures, for the corral, fences and for the organisation of the gathering and sorting, the core attraction in the event. The municipality nominates members to the committee responsible
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for managing the commons, the fences and corral as well as organising the gathering and sorting of livestock (Fjallskilareglugerð). Although this is strictly speaking not the role of the committee, it organises a dance on the evening of the gathering. Tourism is not their business, but tourism is there to stay at the harvest festival as it attracts crowds of spectators who are not directly involved in the core activity. This is a mixed blessing as the corrals are for animals, rather than people. They are in use 1–2 days per year, and the farmers who are responsible for them have no direct gain from the visitors. Tourist operators, on the other hand, have gain from the visitors but do not manage the core event and have no jurisdiction on the corral site.

Laufskálarétt is perhaps the most visited of the horse gatherings in Iceland. In 2017, there were 380 adult horses from 23 farms grazing on the commons in Kolbeinsdalur. The maximum number of horses allowed grazing there in the summer of 2017 was 400. According to information from the commons committee (fjallskilastjórn) about 50 per cent of the horses belong to five of the farms. On the day of the gathering about 300 riders participate, and an estimated number of visitors at the corral is 2,000–2,500 (Helgadóttir 2015).

In the case of the harvest festival of horse gathering, the actual work of gathering and sorting the horses is the harvesting, that is the core activity in the event. While a tourist presence is expected (Helgadóttir & Sturlaugsdóttir 2009), their participation can be problematic as they can get in the way of the people carrying out the work, which of course leads to resident dissatisfaction with the touristification of the festival. The harvesting takes place in public, but the festivities take place not only in public venues such as bars and restaurants but also in most homes in the region. Traditionally the homes were open to visitors, as most of them were in some way connected to the region, but as the numbers grow, the chances of a total stranger making an appearance at your party increase.

While everyone loves a good party and the tradition is to have a house full of guests, and good cheer, an inherent stakeholder conflict must constantly be resolved. This resolving process is key to the cultural sustainability (Soini & Birkeland 2014) of the event. In one of the few studies conducted on Laufskálarétt, Gísladóttir (2012) took an ethnographic look at the festival. She concluded that the locals are actors on a heritage stage where guests can feel a belonging to space and place through the heritagised image of country culture, ‘be an Icelandic farmer for a moment’ (p. 63). The tension described earlier, between attending to the core activity of horse husbandry and the increasingly demanding role of host, forms the research problem addressed in this chapter.

Method

This chapter is part of a longitudinal study of the horse gathering in North-West Iceland and is hence a case study. The author has been conducting research at this annual festival since 2002, some years with assistance from students in the event management programme at Hólar University College. Various methods have been used for data collection: visitor surveys on-site, participant observation and semi-structured interviews. This chapter focuses on the festival from the resident rather than visitor perspective and is based on short semi-structured interviews with residents in the immediate vicinity of the most visited round-up, Laufskálarétt. It should be noted that the author is a resident and has participated in the horse gathering since 1996.

A convenience sample of residents was approached, and the sample snowballed as the initial interviewees suggested others and in total six people of varying age and attachment to the festival were interviewed. They were first asked when they first attended Laufskálarétt...
and what changes they have seen over the period in which they have been participating. This main question was followed up with questions about the festivalisation of the horse gathering, when and to what extent it became a celebration, who participates and how they experience this development. Apart from the initial question, the interviews were unstructured, meaning that the residents told their story and questions were used only to follow up on the initial question. For reasons of anonymity in a very small community, the interviewees are given numbers and their gender and age not reported.

The horse gathering

Horse round-up or horse gathering is used to describe the act of searching the commons for livestock and herding them to the corral. The ‘commons’ refers here to that part of the Kolbeinsdalur valley that is used for summer grazing by a number of farms that have in common the right to use the area. The herding on the commons takes place on the same day as the sorting at the corral. The riders set out early morning, and the fjalkóngur is in charge of the herding, directing people to where they should be and who should do what and when. The herd is on the east side of a river, and those who herd and those that want to ride with the herd cross the river. Visitors on organised tours stay on the west bank with their guides to watch the herding and then follow the herd when it has crossed the river and moves west toward the corral.

Usually the horses arrive at the corral around noon; the riders and herd appear at the top of a hill and flow down in a long line toward the corral. The sorting starts when all the horses have been herded to a pasture adjacent to the corral, the sorting takes a few hours and the farmers and assistants ride home with their horses in the late afternoon.

The corral is made of concrete walls and serves the purpose of enclosing the horses to sort them according to farms. The centre of the corral is the almenningur and radiating from there like pieces of a pie are the dílkur or the enclosures belonging to each farm. There is a wide entryway to the almenningur, where the horses are driven in larger groups to sort. When sorted, each horse has to pass through narrower doors to the dílkur of the farm. The older horses know the routine, but younger horses can have trouble understanding where they are supposed to go and hence become stressed.

The corral stands on a low hill by a river. To the north of it is a parking lot, to the south a field where the horses wait to be driven into the almenningur. When the horses and riders stream down the hillside from Kolbeinsdalur down to the corral, many visitors line up along the fence of this field to take pictures of the herd. While the farmers and their assistants are working in the almenningur and dílkur to sort their horses, the visitors mainly stay on the outside of the corral, walking around it, looking at horses and meeting people. However, there is a tendency among visitors to enter the corral, sitting on the walls and even walking among the horses.

Based on 20 years of participant observation this author contends that the people at the corral roughly fall into three categories: (1) the core group, those working at the corral sorting horses and bringing them home; (2) the experienced guests, those who are repeat visitors and local people who are not involved in the sorting but may be riding with the herd; and (3) the novices, that is, people who are there for the first time or are so loosely connected to the community at the festival that they have not ‘learned the ropes’ of participation.

The first group is mainly the farmers and horse owners who are busy with sorting their horses and do not really take part in the festivities outside the corral. The second group of experienced guests adds a distinctive ethos to the occasion, as among them are people, mostly men, who stand around often with a beer or flask in hand and sing, thereby displaying the tradition of singing and cheer. This group is often dressed in the traditional Icelandic
sweater, the occasional one even sporting a cowboy hat. The majority of this group is, however, there to meet people and enjoy the sight of the horses, speculating which of the foals have potential and greeting friends and relatives. The novices, or the third group, is a large group and potentially disruptive as they may not realise that by entering the corral they can interfere with the work and expose themselves to danger from running horses. On the outside of the corral they might try to participate in the singing without realising that, for this too, there are rules of the game; men stand shoulder to shoulder in a circle, singing songs they know all the words to in harmony. An out-of-key voice from an out-of-place body is tolerated but not particularly welcomed.

The sorting of horses takes about 3 hours, and when it is done the réttarstjóri, who directs the work at the corral, will allow the farms to leave with their horses one by one. It is important to give each group enough time and space so that they will not mix again on the way home.

It should be noted that farmer refers here both to male and female horse farmers and that many of the female farmers are actively herding and sorting their horses. However, the traditional division of tasks in the household means that the women are to the larger extent responsible for providing food for their family and guests. It is also worth noting that despite the fact that farmers are both male and female, all the formal roles within the event are played by males. The fjallkóngur and the réttarstjóri are men, although in other communities such roles have occasionally been held by women.

Findings

Three themes from the interviews are reported here: the festivalisation of the horse gathering (that is the change from a working to leisure event), the perceived sociocultural aspects of this festivalisation on the community, and the lived experience of the interviewees of the festival as it is today.

Festivalisation of the horse gathering

The informants agree that in their lifetime the horse gathering has changed from being simply one of the tasks of horse farming to becoming a festival. Before, they recall mostly the people directly involved with the gathering at the corral:

Around 1970 this was no festival or event, it was just people gathering their horses, just those working at the corral. Then there was a change when people moved here that started to invite acquaintances from the [national] horse sector. And then they started the round-up dance.

(Informant A)

Informant C remembers that in his childhood 30–40 years ago,

You did not enter the almennings if you wanted to survive, it was no place for the children or the elderly! It was more just work then, to get the horses and maybe we were 3–4 driving them home and no partying. Now we have maybe 30–40 people riding home with us; relatives, friends and friends of friends.

There are several key changes that the interviewees felt began to make the event into a festival over the last 40 years. First, the instigation of satellite events. The first of those
was a dance with live music on the evening of the gathering, which has attracted people for several decades now and a source of income for the local commons committee. In later years all the pubs and bars in the municipality offered live music on the Saturday and even the Friday evening. In the 1990s, a horse show in the then newly erected riding hall in the community was first held on the Friday evening, and this has become a tradition. The third satellite event is open house at horse farms on the Sunday, and last but not least, many homes in the vicinity of the corral now have private parties on the eve of the gathering.

Second, around 1980, interest arose in the event as a tourism magnet, and in the 1990s, the date of the gathering was set for perpetuity on the last Saturday in September. Before that, the date was set annually depending on the local farming and grazing conditions. From then on, the gathering has been marketed by the municipality of Skagafjörður and visitor numbers have risen. The municipality has also provided resources for improvements of the parking lot and the temporary toilet facilities. This happened in tandem with municipal tourism policy.

Third, developments in horse husbandry in the region have resulted in changes in how horses and people behave at the gathering, thus changing the ethos of the event. Previously, farmers kept large herds of horses where the mares were largely without contact with humans year round. ‘Before, these old brood mares, they were so wild and shy of humans’ (Informant A). It was therefore not without conflict to get them into their dilkur. It became for a while somewhat of a sport to wrestle with the horses at the corral, but in the 1990s an effort was made to stop this. This, combined with the changes in the horse husbandry, means that ‘today, horses are fewer and they are trained and fed, so they are used to the human touch’ (Informant C), which has led to a calmer atmosphere at the corral. ‘The old mares know their dilkur and if you are quick enough to open before they need to move with the whirl, they just walk in’ (Informant B).

**Sociocultural aspects of the festivalisation**

There is a long-standing tradition of hospitality and festivities in the municipality, and a common saying in Iceland is that the locals in Skagafjörður cheer and sing. When the author moved to Skagafjörður in the late 1990s a friend explained that this was a place where you could have a party in the middle of harvesting. This suggested that compared to other communities, there was more interest in having fun than profiting. This image has been used in the marketing of Skagafjörður as a destination for tourism and of Laufskálarétt as a festival. The interviewees were not quite sure how it came about that this horse gathering in particular became so popular and developed into a festival weekend but speculate that it may have to do with this old image of their community as prone to festivities.

Laufskálarétt is now firmly established as a festival in the community. The date is fixed, visitor numbers have been growing for over a decade and the festival has become a tourism attraction. Local homes receive a high number of visiting friends and relatives, both for accommodation and for food and drink. While this is in line with the hospitality tradition of the community, there are some concerns, which are manifested in discontentment with two things: lack of revenue from the commercial tourism presence and inappropriate behaviour by guests.

‘It is a pity that little else than effort remains on the farms’, says Informant C, commenting on the rising number of visitors and the fact that commercial tourism enterprises use attendance at the festival as an attraction. ‘It is one thing to have guests, but it is another matter when businesses bring people in and the farmers get nothing but extra work from it’
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(Informant C). The informants also agree that today the sale of horses at the corral is negligible, thus losing another traditional aspect of the event:

But there is no sale to speak of nowadays at the corral, before people sold maybe 2–3 foals but now people only buy trained horses. Before people would come to the farms to buy foals and colts, but now it is all online.

(Informant B)

Informant A recalls that the festivities grew from just family and friends enjoying the evening to ‘a hundred people passing through the home, many of whom we didn’t know, they were just drinking and partying’, which the family experienced as way out of hand. This overstepping of the boundaries that locals have also happens at the corral: ‘It is frustrating that people do not seem to realize that the dillur belongs to a farm and is for horses, one is almost fighting with people to be able to sort the horses’ (Informant B). Not only does this interfere with the work, but it can also be dangerous for the visitors to be in the way when gates open, and horses charge through. During the herding, tourism operators keep order among their guests. ‘The foreigners, they are easy – there is no problem with them getting in the way’ (Informant C).

It is more likely that visitors who are on their own or with experienced guests may step out of line. The author recalls an incident where an Icelandic man opened the gate for the herd without the fjallkóngur’s permission, much sooner than planned, and turned to his companions, saying, ‘There, didn’t I do a great job!’ Which wasn’t the case at all – not to mention the disrespect to the organisers of the herding that this action by an outsider shows.

Much of the undesired behaviour is associated with inebriation. Informant A recalls an incident where an Icelandic visitor was quite drunk at the corral but really wanted to ride home with his friends. So, he went around asking for a horse and was constantly turned down. But an opportunity availed itself when he saw an older gentleman who was loosely holding the rein of his saddled horse while chatting with another man. The drunk man clambered on the horse, took the reins and galloped away before the owner realised what was happening! While inebriation can be a problem and the locals try to manage it, they are not averse to drinking in moderation at the festival. The flask and bottle are a common sight, especially among the domestic visitors, many of whom are repeat visitors.

This is not to say that all informants had stories of troublesome domestic visitors; Informant E described what he believes is the attraction for the experienced guest:

I know of people who come to Laufskálarétt and tell me, I’m just there to see the herd come down [to the corral], this is something that moves me, I enjoy it and not because horses are my special interest, I like horses and like to be at the corral on the outside and meet friends and acquaintances for a chat while you guys are working your butt off herding and managing the herd I’m just here on the outside and the place is full of old and new friends’.

So, in this case, there is keen awareness of the distinction between participating as work and participating as leisure.

Lived experience of the festival

Despite the negative experiences, the informants near unanimously agree that Laufskálarétt is a festival that they enjoy and that it has a positive impact on the image of their community.
Most of them always go unless they are incapacitated by illness, childbirth or other major eventualities. Informant D explained it this way:

It is a festival of a kind of course for the locals who have horses on the commons to see them after the summer, it is always fun and exciting in my experience. This is not a boring task, it is a lot of fun to herd the horses and sort them.

An informant from the next municipality added, ‘When I’m at Laufskálarétt I feel as if I’m at an outdoor festival!’ (Informant E), and a horse tourism operator in the region feels the same way: ‘I feel Laufskálarétt is like, it is a people’s festival, a huge crowd’.

**Implications**

Laufskálarétt has in the lifetime of one generation changed from being a working event on the calendar for horse farmers in a small community in Northern Iceland to being a festival for the whole community attracting domestic and international visitors. What their experience shows is that much of this change was not anticipated by the locals, and that the dialogue between the farmers and the marketers and managers of tourism has been limited so that the community is vague on to what extent the development was planned and by whom.

The municipality, having a vested interest in the sustainability of both farming and tourism, comes in as a liaison in dialogue with both parties. The municipality contributes both to increasing the capacity of the site with improved parking and temporary toilet facilities, and to the marketing that makes this necessary. While these are expenses from the municipal budget, there is no direct revenue to cover those. The indirect benefits are identified in the tourism policy as profiling the municipality as a place where festivities are a strong feature.

How and to what extent the development of Laufskálarétt as a festival improves the quality of life for residents is still a question that needs to be asked now and should perhaps have been posed in the community decades ago. The answers might have reduced the risk of friction between the working event and the revelry, in terms of crowd management and transparency regarding the revenue and resource allocation. As the festival has become important to the community it is vital to address these questions to ensure the cultural, social and economic sustainability of the festival.

Whether and how it will be for the next generation needs to be discussed in relation to foreseeable changes in horse husbandry as the core attraction is the herding and sorting of horses. What would there be left to celebrate if there was no herd to gather for the harvest festival? Would it still be a celebration if the crowd of people disappears? Given the propensity for festivities in the community, as well as the centrality of horses in the destination, these are almost unthinkable questions. However, they need to be asked to find the way to the most feasible future scenario.

**References**

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