

THAI MIGRANTS AND RELATIVE SUCCESS OF INTEGRATION IN ICELAND¹

Jóhanna G. Bissat
The Pennsylvania State University
Department of Anthropology
Population Research Institute

Field Address:
Bræðraborgarstíg 49
101 Reykjavík
Iceland

Phone: +354-820-4755
E-mail: jgy105@psu.edu

¹ The fieldwork for this project is funded by National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant Award # BCS 612808 from the Cultural Anthropology and the Arctic Social Sciences programs, an American Scandinavian Foundation Fellowship, and a Hill Foundation Grant from the Department of Anthropology at the Pennsylvania State University. I am grateful to Paul Durrenberger, Sal Oropesa, Gordon DeJong, Stephen Matthews, María Inclán, Gísli Pálsson, Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir, and Brian McManus for their guidance and support on this project. I would like to thank Helga Tryggvadóttir at Statistics Iceland (*Hagstofan*), as well as the Icelandic National Registry (*Þjóðskrá*), for their generous assistance and provision of data. Thank you to the staff of The Intercultural Centre (*Alþjóðahús*) of Reykjavík and the University of Iceland's Social Science Research Institute (*Félagsvísindastofnun*) for providing valuable research assistance and field support. All mistakes are my own.

ABSTRACT

In recent years, the process of integrating immigrants into their host societies has been a cause of stress in many Western countries. Iceland is no stranger to the process; in the last two decades, this island nation of 313,000 has struggled to integrate an increasing number of non-Scandinavian immigrants (8.8% of the total population), the majority of whom originate in Asia and Eastern Europe. In my preliminary fieldwork with Thai immigrants in Iceland (2005), I observed that immigrants who came specifically to get married to an Icelander appeared to be better integrated into Icelandic society, while those who came only for labor appeared more isolated within the Thai enclave. As a result, in the present study (currently in its fieldwork stage) I hypothesize that Thai marriage migrants are more successfully integrated into Icelandic society than Thai labor migrants. I use ethnographic participant-observation methods and a survey of a random sample of a complete frame of Thai immigrants in Iceland (pop. 1,002 in March 2008) to evaluate their integration into Icelandic society. The survey complements regular interaction with the population to investigate individual background, household composition, migration history, language knowledge and usage, social network composition, leisure activities and cuisine, religious and political involvement, and transnational activities. This study will contribute to migration theory with an in-depth example of how one group of relatively isolated immigrants contends with long-distance migration, and under what circumstances they try or do not try to integrate into their European host society. The study has implications for the formation of more accurate and helpful policies on immigrant integration, both in Iceland and in other European countries.

INTRODUCTION

The presence of foreign-born individuals in relatively homogeneous Iceland has increased markedly in the last decade. Concurrently, Iceland's context of reception is beginning to resemble that of many Western European countries: increasingly strict immigration policies (particularly towards migrant sources outside the European Economic Area), a conservative political party campaigning to lower the number of foreigners in the workforce, the ghettoization of foreign workers into low-skill labor, a high drop-out rate of foreign schoolchildren from Icelandic secondary schools, and even "Iceland for Icelanders" anti-immigrant groups forming on the internet.

On the other hand, Iceland is still a few decades behind the rest of Europe (Massey et al. 1990) in terms of the introduction of immigrants to its society; this lag will hopefully give the country more time to adjust its policies and achieve more positive integration outcomes than other European countries. Unlike most countries that serve as migrant destinations, Iceland has no shared borders, a small population, and a comprehensive national registry, all factors creating an optimal situation for the study of immigrant communities in Iceland. There are few possibilities for the existence of "undocumented" migrants in Iceland, which can be a problem in conducting similar research in other countries. Thus, early research and accurate analysis of the factors affecting immigrant integration (or non-integration) in Iceland has implications for the formation of more helpful national policies on immigration, both domestically and in other European countries.

Like most of Europe, Iceland was more a country of emigration than immigration in the 19th and 20th centuries (Karlsson 2000). Until the last 20-30 years, the largest foreign-born populations in Iceland were typically those from other Nordic countries—Iceland was a Danish

colony for much of its 1,100 year history, and in 1900, approximately 1% of the 80,000-strong population was Danish (Karlsson 2000). By the end of the last century Iceland's population had increased to 280,000, with 5% being foreign-born individuals from not only Scandinavia but countries including the United States, Poland, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Thailand. In the last ten years, the total number of foreign-born individuals has doubled and today makes up 10.8% of the national population of 313,376 (see Figure 1); this percentage includes those who are naturalized Icelandic citizens².

[Figure 1 about here]

The newest foreigners' countries of origin remain mostly the same today as those of eight to ten years ago, though with a greater emphasis on numbers from Eastern Europe and a tapering of arrivals from Asia in the last few years. This change can be explained by Iceland opening its labor market to several Eastern European countries in May 2006. Since signing the original EEA Agreement to free movement within the EEA in 1994, Iceland has prioritized granting work permits to EEA-citizens ahead of applicants from other countries. Prospective workers from Thailand, for example, who previously would have had few problems obtaining work permits in Iceland, began to face virtually impossible competition for entering the country as laborers. Today, the only path for most non-Europeans coming to Iceland is through family reunification or marriage to an Icelandic citizen. As of March 2008, there are 1,002 Thailand-born individuals living in Iceland, 545 of who are Icelandic citizens, and this project focuses on their community.

This paper is part of a dual-degree doctoral dissertation in anthropology and demography that is currently in its fieldwork stage. The purpose of the project as a whole is to measure the integration of Thai immigrants into Icelandic society using both anthropological and demographic approaches. I am spending 18 months in Iceland and using ethnographic

² Statistics Iceland website: <http://www.hagstofan.is>. Updated 11 March 2008; accessed 2 June 2008.

participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, and a survey of a random sample of Thai immigrants to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. I also use publicly-available population data from Statistics Iceland. For this paper, I focus on one particular question as part of my dissertation research: what effect does an immigrant's original reason for coming to Iceland (for marriage, labor, or other reasons) have on that immigrant's level of integration?

In earlier fieldwork with Thai immigrants in Iceland (2005), I observed two differentially-integrated groups among the interviewees. Individuals in one group were more comfortable with the Icelandic language, speaking Icelandic with their husbands and children, as well as in their place of work. They often had higher-paying jobs and more Icelandic social contacts, and several of them were successful local entrepreneurs. Those in the other group tended to have little or no Icelandic skills, worked at low-skill factory or fisheries jobs and spent most of their free time with other Thais in the area. Alcoholism and gambling, activities which Icelanders often attribute to the Thai migrant population as a whole, were more common among the latter group and severely limited these individuals' opportunities to integrate. I developed a hypothesis that Thai marriage migrants are more successfully integrated into Icelandic society than their labor-only counterparts, as evaluated by Icelandic language speaking skill, type of employment, level of entrepreneurship, participation in Icelandic municipal elections, and ethnic composition of their social networks.

IMMIGRANTS IN ICELAND: AN OVERVIEW

Data from the Icelandic national statistics center is shown in Figures 2 and 3 below. Figure 2 illustrates the change in both foreign and Thai populations in Iceland between 1981 (the earliest available year for online data) and 2008, on two scales. Increases in the general population of

foreigners are explained by Iceland's economic situation and the years of accession of newer countries to the European Union and thus the European Economic Area, of which Iceland is a member. A new aluminum factory opened in Iceland in 1996, stimulating a need for workers in every sector, including bottom-segment factory, cleaning and care jobs which both Asian and Eastern European migrants were quick to fill.

[Figure 2 about here]

However, the initiation of migratory flows in Iceland differed dramatically from that of the rest of Europe, in that labor recruitment programs have not played a large part in bringing migrants to Iceland (Massey, et al. 1998). Certainly, migrants have often come to Iceland because jobs were available (in 2007 the unemployment rate for Iceland hovered around 1%, one of the lowest in Europe), but not specifically in response to employment recruiters. Migrant networks have often inadvertently done the recruiting for companies themselves, as foreign-born employees continually sought to bring their relatives to work in Iceland without any outreach on the part of the company. For example, at the fish-processing factory where I conducted ethnographic research for this study, there were at least seven families (including married parents and children) among the 35 or so Thai, Filipino, and Vietnamese immigrant employees there. This translated into approximately 70% of the Asian workers coming to work at that factory as part of some kind of kinship network, a pattern that only began to shift after Iceland began to prioritize European workers.

In 2004 Poland and several other Eastern European nations became part of the EU and received the freedom to work in EEA countries. Iceland exercised its right as an EEA member to postpone a complete opening of its labor market to the new nations' populations for two years; thus the dramatic increase in foreigners in 2006 can be attributed to about 6000 mainly Polish

migrants arriving in Iceland in a short period of time, and Icelandic employers being forced to choose new hires from among EEA citizens before hiring anyone from outside the EEA. This change in policy effectively shut off the inflow of non-European workers into Iceland, since residence and work permits were handed out almost entirely to EEA-citizens only.

The first Thai immigrant arrived in Iceland in 1979, and for nearly ten years afterwards, the number of new arrivals from Thailand remained in the single-digits. By 1987, however, the number jumped up to 26, and then continued increasing markedly every year afterwards. From both ethnographic work and the survey, it appears that the initial migrants were female, unrelated to each other, and had independently come to Iceland in order to be with Icelandic men whom they had either already met and married in Thailand, or planned to marry once they arrived in Iceland.

Many of these early migrants came from the Northeast region of Thailand, an area known as *Isaan*. Thailand's political economy has not offered equal opportunities to all those living within its borders, particularly to those from Isaan—a relatively poor, rice-growing region (De Jong et al. 2002; De Jong et al. 1996). A strict social hierarchy in Thailand selects for gender, class, age, ethnicity, skin color, and place of birth, restricting those at the bottom levels to a narrow range of life choices. This tacitly oppressive system has given many Isaan Thais, particularly women, an incentive to look for a way out (Mills 1999)—even if it meant leaving their homeland for an unknown island in the North Atlantic. Preliminary survey results indicate that the majority of the Thai migrants in Iceland still come from the Isaan region and often consider themselves ethnically Lao as well as Thai.

By the late 1980s and '90s, both male and female siblings and children of the first wave of Thai migrants began arriving with the objective of working or going to school, alongside a

steady population of those who came in order to join an Icelandic spouse. In line with social capital and migrant networks theory (Massey 1997; Goss and Lindquist 1995), Thai restaurants and grocery stores opened as the incoming flow of Thai migrants gained momentum, and the municipalities of Reykjavík joined the Icelandic Red Cross in 2001 to open an immigrant resource center (The Intercultural Centre), providing interpreters and legal help for all migrant populations.

In 2003, there was a change in Icelandic immigration policy that stopped immigrants from sponsoring their siblings for permits to live and work in Iceland, a situation which had a great effect on individuals who wanted to bring in their siblings to work from outside of the EEA. Thai immigrants could now only bring in children under the age of 18 or parents over the age of 67. One young Thai female cashier working in a Reykjavík grocery store said,

“My older sister brought me here, since she got married to an Icelandic guy... I was lucky to get in before they shut down that way for Asians to get here. I don’t want to have a boyfriend or husband.”

Other Thai workers expressed similar feelings during my ethnographic work, of feeling lucky to have “gotten in” to Iceland before the shift of priority away from non-European work permit applicants; in fact, during interviews, several immigrant employers admitted to preferring Asian workers overall (and they were accustomed to receiving applications from Thai and Filipino family members of current workers, in abundance), but were forced to choose Polish or other Eastern-European workers after 2006 due to the new EEA-based policy.

Today’s population of 1,002 Thailand-born individuals living in Iceland is 73% female, with 12% of the population being under age 18. Iceland has a more balanced gender composition of Thai immigrants than that of mainland Europe; for example, Germany’s Thai

population is 84% female and Denmark's is 83% female (Plambech 2007). The reasons for this may be accounted for by a higher prevalence of females migrating from Thailand to mainland Europe for sex work (Mix and Piper 2003), a category of migration that has not appeared to be as significant in Iceland. There is no "red light" district in Iceland, and most of the erotic clubs in downtown Reykjavik have workers from Eastern Europe rather than from Asia.

Looking at the population pyramid for the Thai population today (see Figure 3), we see a slightly larger proportion of women in their 30s and 40s than men, which can be explained by the fact that almost all of the Thai men present in Iceland came either as children (under age 18) or as laborers, usually as younger brothers of the initial female migrant. Ethnographic data confirms that many of the Thai males arrived after their mothers or older sisters had already established themselves in Iceland.

[Figure 3 about here]

BACKGROUND

As is the case for describing any type of international migration, no single migration theory can encompass the Thai migrant situation in Iceland (Portes 1997). Parts of each of the well-known theories are needed to understand the phenomenon, ranging from economic explanations (neoclassical economics, new economics of labor migration, dual labor market theory) to social capital and migrant networks.

Migration studies based on neoclassical economics theory (Todaro 1980) traditionally focused on the rational, usually male, economic migrant who first crossed an international border to seek higher wages and a better life, later sending for his wife and children to join him. The impact of the new economics of migration theory (Stark and Bloom 1985) and feminist theory on

migration studies in the last few decades has done much to balance out the focus on individual, male economic migrants, and now includes whole households and women as migrants in their own right (Huang 2005; Mills 1999; Pessar 1997; Buijs 1993; Brettell and DeBerjeois 1992; Phizacklea 1983).

These perspectives often seek to illuminate the female side of international migration streams, and yet a dominant assumption is that the woman is still somehow “following” a male migrant, or at most accompanying him into the new country (Sinke 1999). There have been few studies focusing on women who migrate first, and then bring their dependents (including male children, siblings, and sometimes even husbands) later to the destination country (Kofman 1999), even though this pattern would be a relatively novel example of social capital and migrant networks (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1990; Massey et al. 1987). The current study attempts to illuminate this type of migration, which predominates among the Thai population living in Iceland.

There is also an assumption, particularly with the new economics of labor migration theory, that a household works together to send a migrant abroad as a means of diversifying their exposure to economic risk; it is not often considered that a woman (on her own) might be choosing to migrate for marriage as an only option for getting away from the obligations of her household, particularly if she is the youngest daughter (in Thai culture) and is therefore expected to care for her aging parents (DeJong et al. 1996).

A segmented labor market (Piore 1979) situation has also become prominent in Iceland, and is both the result and source of the recent inflow of immigrants to the country. Jobs which 30 to 40 years ago were well-paid and solely the domain of Icelanders—simply because there were so few immigrants in Iceland at that time—have moved into the bottom-segment of

employment in the last 10 to 20 years. Fish and meat processing, as well as work in candy and baked goods factories, have almost exclusively become the domain of immigrant labor in Iceland today; native workers are generally more educated and unwilling to work in these now-stigmatized jobs. Maid and janitor jobs at all levels, from the largest hotels to the smallest shops, are typically filled by immigrant labor—I have interviewed several Thai migrants who work overtime at factory jobs during weekdays, and who clean offices and Icelanders' homes on the weekends as supplementary income. One Thai woman in the Reykjavík fish factory told me:

“If [Thai people] can choose between working ‘O’ [common Thai abbreviation for ‘overtime’] or going to Icelandic language class, most Thai people want to work more.”

Nursing homes are also known to be easy places for immigrants to get jobs; notably, when discussing immigration, a common story heard in conversation with Icelanders has been that of an elderly man in a nursing home who asked his visiting children, “When are we going back to Iceland?”—because a significant portion of the caretakers are foreign, some are Asian and dark-haired, and many do not speak Icelandic very well, if at all. Wages in all of these bottom-segment jobs are very low, which again motivates immigrants to work overtime rather than learning Icelandic. Thai males seem to work even longer hours than the women, since almost all of them have come to Iceland exclusively to work; both males and females, however, tend to work the same kind of jobs, and both experience the same segmented labor market in Iceland.

This project examines both male and female experiences in migrating from Thailand to Iceland, but the Icelandic case is unique in that it is typically women who are the pioneer migrants, and that many of them are either “getting away” from the duties of their origin households (in the case of younger daughters), or they are trying to bring their own families to Iceland in order to have better life opportunities (in the case of older daughters and sons). There

are fewer Thai male than female migrants in Iceland, and almost all of the men arrived as dependents of the women, whether as sons, brothers, or even husbands.

To be sure, most of the Thai women in Iceland would have been unable to migrate to Iceland without a sponsor on the island, and that sponsor has often been a male Icelander. In that sense, many of the initial “pioneer” women migrants were still dependent on a man in order to be able to migrate in the first place. Many of the Thai women in Iceland migrated precisely in order to marry someone whom they met or heard about abroad. This is not a new pattern in any sense, as we are all familiar with the “mail-order bride” or “picture bride” phenomenon that has persisted throughout the modern history of cross-cultural marriages (Wilson 1988; Villapando 1989; Makabe 1995; Robinson 2007).

These so-called “mail-order brides,” while evident in the Thai-Icelandic migration stream, are not characteristic of the entire population. In the last 10-15 years the trend has been towards matchmaking websites on the internet (Constable 2003), where both men and women create “profiles” online and develop relationships in chat rooms before ever meeting in person. This modern incarnation of the international marriage “market³,” perhaps more appropriately depicted by the term “cyberbride” (Schaeffer-Grabiel 2004) than “mail-order bride,” stands in contrast with the older method of men paging through catalogs of women’s pictures; in the former, the women employ a great deal more agency in selecting a mate than they would in the latter (Minervini and McAndrew 2006).

Simultaneously, on the side of the men making the decision to marry a foreign bride, there are certainly Icelandic husbands who conform to the oft-reported stereotype of being in

³ The term “market” has been criticized (Robinson 2007) as an ill-suited term for the increase in cyber-relationships between individuals in rich and poor countries in recent years, as it downplays the role of the state in regulating the conditions of marriage migration as well as commodifies the personal agency and decision-making processes of both the men and women involved. I use the term here (in quotations) because the concept remains familiar to most readers, but I welcome recommendations for a term that better reflects the reality of these relationships.

some way unattractive as well as abusive—the “ugly male syndrome,” (Constable 2003)—and therefore looking outside their own country for a “traditional” woman who is both attractive and vulnerable. But once again, based on this project’s initial ethnography, this stereotype does not appear to be dominant in Icelandic-Asian relationships. Here, it tends to be more about economic differentials between Iceland and Thailand and a constrained marriage market in Iceland (particularly for males over a particular age) than the “ugly male” seeking a bride from outside of their home country. This pattern has parallels with a similar pattern in Germany, where men of a particular demographic seek out foreign brides, often from less-developed countries (Glowsky 2007).

Overall, few studies have addressed marriage as a specific migration strategy (Fan and Huang 1998), let alone whether the integration outcomes of marriage migrants differs from that of labor migrants (Piper and Roces 2003). There is a real need for this kind of research, given the increasing numbers of individuals who are choosing to migrate from developing countries to the West explicitly for marriage rather than strictly for sex work or low-skilled labor (Constable 2005). This project intends to help fill a gap in the literature by researching the different possible motives, methods, and outcomes of individuals who migrate for marriage and those who migrate for labor.

DATA AND METHODS

The research design for this study is a controlled comparison (Bernard, 2002; Spector, 1981). The two groups in question are comprised of individuals migrating from Thailand to Iceland, but the groups are differentiated by their initial reasons for migration. Participant-observation, which provided a foundation for creating the survey instrument, included three months spent working alongside Thai immigrants in a fish processing and freezing plant in Reykjavik, ongoing

attendance at as many Thai social gatherings as possible, and spending time at other workplaces and immigrant-owned Thai restaurants and groceries that are key gathering places for Thais in Reykjavík. Participant-observation is the backbone of validity in cultural anthropology; relationships have been established with key members of the Thai community and they provide constant feedback during all stages of the project.

The survey includes seven modules about individual and household demographics, migration histories, family and friendship networks, social activities, transnational activities, work and remittance information, and gender roles within the participant's household. After the initial ethnographic work took place, the survey was written in English, translated into Thai, and then back-translated into English to check for accuracy. The survey was tested, then modified, then tested again, all with individuals from the target population. After receiving 32 survey responses out of 42 total distributed (the basis for this paper), a final draft of the survey instrument will be used to collect data from an additional 238 participants during the rest of 2008. The final survey sample size will be 270 individuals, based on the total current population of adult Thai individuals (over age 18) being 879⁴. Both Bernard (2002) and the UCLA Department of Statistics' online sample size calculator (2005) suggest a sample size of 270 for a total population of 879 with a 95% confidence interval and 5% margin of error. The *n* of 270 will be the goal for as long there exists sufficient time and funding to conduct surveys.

The sampling frame is a total population list of all Thailand-born individuals living in Iceland as of June 2007, compiled by the Icelandic National Registry (*Hagstofan*). The sampling frame includes the national identity numbers of each individual (which also includes each person's birth date), their last known address, gender, citizenship, and the national identity number of the oldest person in each individual's household. Using this frame and a random

⁴ Statistics Iceland website: <http://www.hagstofan.is> Updated March 11 2008; accessed June 9 2008

number generator⁵, each unique address was assigned an identity number before drawing 515 addresses. This is the total number of unique addresses in the sampling frame; however, since each address typically has more than one Thai individual in residence, only the first 150 addresses from the drawing will be used. The excess addresses are to be used (in the order that they were drawn) for survey non-response or to replace individuals who are lacking any current contact information. The target population includes all first-generation Thai migrants, age 18 and over at the time of the study, who are currently residents of Iceland.

The recruitment process involves first confirming the address provided by the National Registry using triangulation with publicly-available sources. There exists a secure online database with all of the updated names, addresses, and national identity numbers of every individual resident in Iceland. Anyone with an online Icelandic bank account has access to this database. Once the address has been confirmed, then a phone or e-mail address is located using the online Icelandic telephone book⁶ to look for phone numbers. Current contact information for about 60% of the residents of the Reykjavík metropolitan area has been located using this triangulation method. For the remaining 40%, I will either go directly to their residences to inquire about survey participation, or (if that method fails), those individuals will be substituted with the next sampled names.

The earlier stage of data collection involved qualitative methods of participant-observation and semi-structured interviews. I applied for a job at a local fish-processing plant known for employing a large number of Thai immigrants and worked half-days at minimum wage for nearly three months. Hours of standing alongside each other at the conveyor belts, carefully removing bones and worms from fish after fish before freezing or packing the fillets,

⁵ <http://www.random.org>

⁶ Icelandic telephone book online: <http://www.ja.is>

provided an excellent environment for asking and hearing about the daily life of each immigrant. I used a semi-structured interview schedule to explore key issues among the community that came up during my earlier fieldwork with the Thai immigrants in 2005. I interviewed 20 individuals in this manner, both during working hours and during coffee breaks. I drew from this qualitative data to compose the second step of data collection, which was the quantitative survey, and also depend on this and other ethnographic experience to interpret the quantitative results from the survey. The experience also provided a valuable look into the dynamics between immigrant groups, particularly among the Asian groups and their interaction with the Polish workers.

Concurrently with my own survey work, I have been working as a research assistant at the University of Iceland's Social Science Research Institute (*Félagsvísindarstofnun*) to help interpret for their country-wide survey of all immigrant groups in Iceland. During this process (based on the Institute's random sampling of immigrant employers across Iceland), I have conducted informal interviews at 16 workplaces during lunch and coffee breaks, and this process has provided additional contextual data for interpreting the results of my survey.

Lastly, I obtain the latest general demographic data about Thai and general immigrant populations in Iceland from the national statistics center for Iceland (*Hagstofan*), available for public use online. The data is updated regularly and, considering that Iceland is a relatively remote island with strictly-controlled entry and exit points (for this reason it is very difficult to be an "illegal" or undocumented immigrant in Iceland), can be considered reliable in terms of documenting actual numbers of the populations currently resident in Iceland.

RESULTS

Preliminary survey results confirm that most Thai immigrants in Iceland come from provinces located in the northeast *Isaan* region (see Figure 4), a finding that conforms with studies of Thai immigrants in other countries (Plambech 2005; Mix and Piper 2003). Ethnographic work has also shown that most Thai immigrants in Iceland come from this region, both via interviews and by listening to the language that the Thai people use with each other (*Isaan* or Lao language—very distinct from Central or “Bangkok” Thai) at social gatherings.

[Figure 4 about here]

In accordance with the hypothesis being examined in this paper, a key independent variable is the reason why each respondent decided to first come to Iceland. Respondents are allowed to choose one of the following: 1) to join a spouse, fiancé, or boyfriend/girlfriend (the “marriage” option); 2) to work; 3) to join a Thai family member (and not to work; for example, a child arriving as a dependent); or 4) to study. Given the currently limited sample size, categories three and four were collapsed into a general “Other” category for the purposes of this paper.

One important confounder here is that many migrants may come originally for a job and marry later, or that they may initially come for marriage but later enter the job market (Piper and Roces 2003). Individuals may shift from one status to another throughout their time in Iceland; one Thai female factory worker told me in an interview that she had originally come to Iceland to get married to an Icelander, but then the man refused to let her work or even leave the house. She divorced him after three years (the minimum time necessary to secure Icelandic citizenship via marriage to a citizen) and began working immediately afterwards, and has not remarried since then, though she currently has an Icelandic boyfriend. Still, in her case (if she had been a survey respondent), she would be placed in the category of a “marriage” migrant because it was

her original reason for coming to Iceland, and that decision framed much of her initial adjustment experience in the country. Thus I have chosen to classify survey respondents based on their original, given reason for first coming to Iceland—the means by which they obtained a visa to come to Iceland (either through their spouse, employer, or a family member/school).

In Figure 5, we see a distribution of the type of immigrants coming from each region in Thailand, according to the survey results. Marriage migrants make up the largest percentage of those from the Northeast (*Isaan*) region, most likely for two reasons: 1) as stated before, this is the most economically-challenged region of Thailand, where the residents experience additional marginalization as a result of their stigmatized language and ethnicity—individuals and households of this region have perhaps the greatest motivation for international migration; and 2) the first wave of Thai migrants came from this area, and cumulative causation (Massey 1990) enables more and more individuals from this region to travel to Iceland as migrant networks decrease the costs for new migrations. The Northeast also sends a percentage of workers and those in the “Other” category (those who migrate to join family, or study)—most likely dependent children in the latter, brought after the parent has established themselves in Iceland. One young man from the Northeast told me that his grandmother had taken care of him for six years until his mother could send for him and his brother from Thailand, a story I heard several times during interviews.

[Figure 5 about here]

The capital city, Bangkok, sends an equal number of marriage and labor migrants, while the Central region sends a smaller percentage of both marriage and labor migrants than either of the other two regions, but sends more from the “Other” category. The other two regions of Thailand (Northern and Southern) have not appeared in the survey respondents thus far, though I

have spoken with a handful of individuals from the Northern region who live in Iceland. I expect that these populations will manifest themselves as the number of survey respondents increases, though the Northeast region will most likely remain the greatest sending area for immigrants in Iceland, as it is for many other European countries (Plambech 2005; Mix and Piper 2003).

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics of early cross-tabulations (see Table 1) from the survey thus far, matching reasons for migrating against Icelandic language speaking skill, type of employment, level of entrepreneurship, and participation in Icelandic municipal elections. All are potential indicators of integration, with Icelandic speaking skill being perhaps the most important; ethnographic work, as well as an open-ended question on the survey asking about what advice should be given to potential immigrants, have both shown that learning to speak Icelandic well is one of the first keys to integration in Icelandic society. Being able to speak English well is also a benefit, since most Icelandic language classes are taught in English with an emphasis on reading and writing—this is problematic for migrants who have little formal education and are sometimes barely literate in Thai (already their second language), let alone English.

Type of employment and level of entrepreneurship are also indicators of economic integration in Icelandic society, mostly due to the strongly segmented labor market in Iceland discussed earlier (Piore 1979). The majority of all respondents work in low-skill jobs, with the highest percentage being among those who migrated for work. Interviews suggested that marriage migrants tended to have more Icelandic social capital available to them, in the form of information about and access to higher-level jobs given by their in-laws or spouse's friends, than those who came for work (and thus tend to have fewer contacts with Icelandic networks). In other words, marriage migrants tend to depend more on Icelandic contacts for work information,

while work migrants tend to depend more on Thai contacts, which is necessarily more limited in terms of job integration.

The same holds true for entrepreneurial activity, which marriage migrants appear to be involved in more than work migrants (and far more than those who came for other reasons)—marriage migrants have access to greater capital in their Icelandic spouses, whether personally or in terms of requesting a business loan from a bank. This explanation bears out in one survey question about the source of capital when starting one's own business, where entrepreneurs typically name their spouses as business partners.

In terms of voter participation, these early results do not seem to indicate that marriage migrants are voting much more frequently than work migrants, though both groups vote with more frequency than the immigrants who came to join family or study. I chose Icelandic municipal elections as a variable rather than parliamentary elections, mainly because one must be an Icelandic citizen in order to vote for parliament; however, anyone who has been living in Iceland for five years (three years, for Scandinavian citizens) has the right to vote in a municipal election, which would encourage greater participation from immigrants within a shorter timeframe.

In contradiction with the hypothesis for this paper, it appears that a higher percentage of work migrants speak better Icelandic than the marriage migrants; this could be due to two factors, which must be evaluated in the future with a control variable for length of time in the country: 1) in recent years, many Icelandic employers have begun offering Icelandic classes (for free) directly through work, sometimes in the workplace itself during working hours; and 2) depending on the type of job, work migrants may actually be more exposed to the Icelandic

language than their marriage-migrant counterparts. The latter would be true if the worker is employed in a nursing home and had to interact with elderly Icelanders on a regular basis.

[Table 1 about here]

A few more points of clarification: the majority of the respondents so far have been disproportionately female (they should make up about 70% of the sample, not 90%), mostly because the sampled males seem to have moved more often without updating their contact information and are more difficult to locate. Once the triangulation method of finding contact information for individuals has been exhausted, I expect that there will be greater number of male respondents once I start going to their last residences in person and inquire about each person's current location (many of them move between other relatives' houses).

Also, in looking at the mean years of education, it is important to point out that while the average marriage migrant has apparently almost completed high school (twelve years in the Thai education system), this is incorrect because there is a high proportion of migrants who have only finished elementary school (six years), and another high proportion who have college educations (16+ years). Therefore it is difficult to say what the mean level of education is for marriage migrants, and even more difficult to say what role it plays in the integration of Thai immigrants; it helps in that a higher education usually means more familiarity with English, but since Thai educational qualifications are not recognized in Iceland, I have met a surprising number of college-educated immigrants who are working in low-skill jobs such as factories and nursing homes.

One woman interviewed told me that other than her Icelandic husband, I was the only person to whom she had told the truth about her education (she attended a prestigious university in Thailand), because she was afraid that her small circle of Thai friends from the factory would

treat her differently if they knew that she was significantly more educated than they were. She did not plan to stay in Iceland long, as she and her husband were looking to migrate together to Norway in the near future. It might be inferred that she wanted to preserve her temporary integration with the Thai community in Iceland, rather than use her education to seek out a better job in Iceland (and therefore integrate more with Icelandic society), because she was not committed to staying long-term in Iceland. Migrants' "commitment levels" to staying in Iceland are another variable that will be evaluated at a later stage of the project.

Table 2 includes a breakdown of the ethnic composition and size of friendship networks among survey respondents. In general, labor migrants appear to have larger networks overall, which may be a result of their wider exposure to people outside the home from the beginning of their move to Iceland. From both marriage and work groups, fewer respondents tend to have smaller networks of Thai friends; both groups have large numbers of Thai friends. Labor migrants appear to have a larger number of Icelandic friends, as well, compared to marriage migrants; this may be due to the fact that marriage migrants tended to be exposed to a small group of Icelandic people upon first arrival to Iceland, and may have formed closer friendships with those Icelanders. During interviews, several Thai women told me about a key Icelandic friend who came alongside them early in their stay in Iceland and helped them to adjust more easily; this bears out in my observation at Thai festivals in Iceland, where some Thai women bring an Icelandic female friend to the festival.

[Table 2 about here]

As the project progresses, more detailed social network analyses will give a better indication of how leisure time is spent and with whom, as there is a question asking about 28

different social activities and whether the respondent participates in them with Icelandic people, Thai people, other immigrant groups, or not at all.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper has been to compare the integration outcomes of Thai immigrants who came to Iceland for different reasons (marriage, work, and other) based on five dependent variables: Icelandic language speaking skill, type of employment, level of entrepreneurship, participation in Icelandic municipal elections, and composition of social networks. We have seen that employment and entrepreneurship outcomes may indicate a higher level of integration for marriage migrants than labor migrants, while voting behavior and social networks are more ambiguous as possible indicators of integration.

Icelandic speaking skill is perhaps the most surprising result, given that we expected marriage migrants to have better language skills due to exposure within their mixed households, but the problem may be that Thais who arrived recently depend more on English speaking skills with their spouses before beginning to learn Icelandic. Again, controls for length of time in the country must be used in future calculations, as well as children living in Iceland (since immigrants are often exposed to the native language via their school-age children), number of relatives in Iceland before arrival, and years of education.

While results have been fairly basic at this point, I anticipate using more sophisticated statistical techniques in the future to examine the relationships between these and other variables. Three other lines of inquiry remain for the dissertation, in addition to the question explored in this paper: (1) What do the social and migrant networks of the Thai immigrants in Iceland look like (including transnational activities), and how do these networks affect integration

outcomes? (2) How does the Icelandic context of reception impact Thai immigrants' motivation to integrate? (3) What role do household dynamics (particularly between a Thai woman and her Icelandic husband) play in determining integration outcomes? While collecting data to answer address these questions, the survey sample size will continue to increase in the next six months; the intention is to carry out 270 total surveys by December 2008, as well as conduct structured interviews with Thai business owners (approximately 20, mostly restaurant owners) in order to secure a better understanding of whether entrepreneurs are better integrated into Icelandic society or not. The more complete survey and ethnographic data gathered in relation to these four areas of research will hopefully provide a clearer picture of the Thai immigrant community in Iceland and the factors that help determine their level of integration into Icelandic society.

REFERENCES

- Alba, R. 1998. "Assimilation, Exclusion, or Neither? Models of the Incorporation of Immigrants in the United States." Pp. 1-32 in *Paths to Inclusion: the Integration of Migrants in the United States and Germany*, edited by P. H. Schuck and R. Munz. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Bourdieu, P. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." Pp. 241-58 in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. G. Richardson. New York: Greenwood.
- Brettell, C. and P. DeBerjeois. 1992. "Anthropology and the Study of Immigrant Women." Pp. 41-63 in *Seeking Common Ground: Multidisciplinary Studies of Immigrant Women in the United States*, edited by D. Gabaccia. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood.
- Buijs, G. 1993. *Migrant Women*. Oxford: Berg.
- Coleman, J. S. 1990. *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Constable, N. 2003. *Romance on a Global Stage: Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and "Mail Order" Marriages*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2005. "Introduction: Cross-Border Marriages, Gendered Mobility, and Global Hypergamy." Pp. 1-16 in *Cross-Border Marriages: Gender and Mobility in Transnational Asia*, edited by N. Constable. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Curran, S. R., F. Garip, C. Y. Chung, and K. Tangchonlatip. 2005. "Gendered Migrant Social Capital: Evidence from Thailand." *Social Forces* 84(1):225-255.
- De Jong G., A. Chamrathirong, and Q. Tran. 2002. "For Better, For Worse: Life Satisfaction Consequences of Migration." *International Migration Review* 36(3):838-863.
- De Jong G., K. Richter and P. Isarabhakdi. 1996. "Gender, Values, and Intentions to Move in Rural Thailand." *International Migration Review* 30(3):748-770.
- Fan, C. and Y. Huang. 1998. "Waves of Rural Brides: Female Marriage Migration in China." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 88(2):227-251.
- Glowsky, D. 2007. "Why Do German Men Marry Women from Less-Developed Countries? An Analysis of Transnational Assortative Matching Based on the German Socio-Economic Panel." *Zeitschrift fur Soziologie* 36(4):282-301.
- Huang, S., B. Yeoh, N. A. Rahman. 2005. *Asian Women as Transnational Domestic Workers*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Academic.

- Karlsson, G. 2000. *Iceland's 1100 Years: History of a Marginal Society*. Reykjavík: Mál og Menning.
- Mahler, S. J. and P. R. Pessar. 2006. "Gender Mattes: Ethnographers Bring Gender from the Periphery toward the Core of Migration Studies." *International Migration Review* 40:27-63.
- Makabe, T. 1995. *Picture Brides—Japanese Women in Canada*. Ontario: Multicultural History Society of Ontario.
- Massey, D. S. 1990. "Social Structure, Household Strategies and the Cumulative Causation of Migration." *Population Index* 56(1): 3-26.
- Massey, D. S., R. Alarcón, J. Durand, and H. González. 1987. *Return to Aztlan: The Social Process of International Migration from Western Mexico*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Massey, D. S., J. Arango, G. Hugo, A. Kouaouci, A. Pellegrino, and J. E. Taylor. 1998. *Worlds in Motion: Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millenium*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mills, M. B. 1999. *Thai Women in the Global Labor Force*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Minervini, B. and F. McAndrew. 2006. "The Mating Strategies and Mate Preferences of Mail Order Brides." *Cross Cultural Research* 40(2):111-129.
- Mix, P. R. and N. Piper. 2003. "Does Marriage 'Liberate' Women from Sex Work?—Thai Women in Germany." Pp. 53-71 in *Wife or Worker? Asian Women and Migration*, edited by N. Piper and M. Roces. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Pessar, P. R. 1997. "The Role of Gender, Households, and Social Networks in the Migration Process: A Review and Appraisal." Pp. 53-70 in *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience*, edited by C. Hirschman, P. Kasinitz and J. DeWind. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Phizacklea, A, ed.1983. *One Way Ticket: Migration and Female Labor*. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Piore, M. 1979. *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor in Industrial Societies*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Piper, N. and M. Roces. 2003. "Introduction: Marriage and Migration in an Age of Globalization." Pp. 1-21 in *Wife or Worker? Asian Women and Migration*, edited by N. Piper and M. Roces. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Plambech, S. 2005. "'Mail Order' Brides in Northwestern Jutland: Transnational Marriages in the Global Care Economy." *Dansk Sociologi* 16(1): 91-110.

- . 2007. “Managing Migration: Risks and Remittances among Migrant Thai Women.” Master’s Thesis, Institute of Social Anthropology, Lund University, Sweden.
- Portes, A. 1997. “Immigration Theory for a New Century: Some Problems and Opportunities.” Pp. 21-33 in *The Handbook of International Migration: The American Experience*, edited by C. Hirschman, P. Kasinitz and J. DeWind. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Robinson, K. 2007. “Marriage Migration, Family Values and the ‘Global Ecumene.’” *Gender, Place and Culture* 14(4):483-497.
- Schaeffer-Grabel, F. 2004. “Cyberbrides and Global Imaginaries: Mexican Women’s Turn from the National to the Foreign.” *Space and Culture* 7(1):33-48.
- Sinke, S. M. 1999. “Migration for Labor, Migration for Love: Marriage and Family Formation across Borders.” *Magazine of History*, Organizations of American Historians. 14(1):17-21.
- Stark, O. and D. E. Bloom. 1985. “The New Economics of Labor Migration.” *American Economic Review* 75:173-178.
- Todaro, M. P. 1980. “Internal Migration in Developing Countries: A Survey.” Pp. 361-402 in *Population and Economic Change in Developing Countries*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Villapando, V. 1989. “The Business of Selling Mail-Order Brides.” Pp. 318-327 in *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and about Asian American Women*, edited by Asian Women United of California. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Wilson, A. 1988. “American Catalogues of Asian Brides.” Pp. 114-125 in *Anthropology for the Nineties*, edited by Johnetta Cole. New York: Free Press.

Figure 1. Numbers of foreign-born populations in Iceland by region of origin 2008.

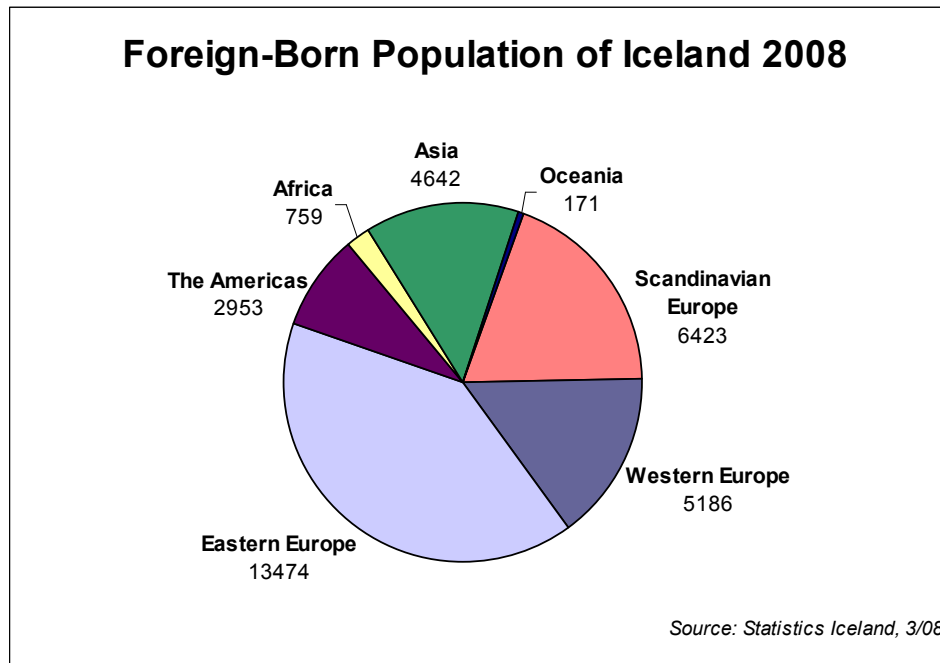


Figure 2. Change in immigrant populations in Iceland between 1981-2008.

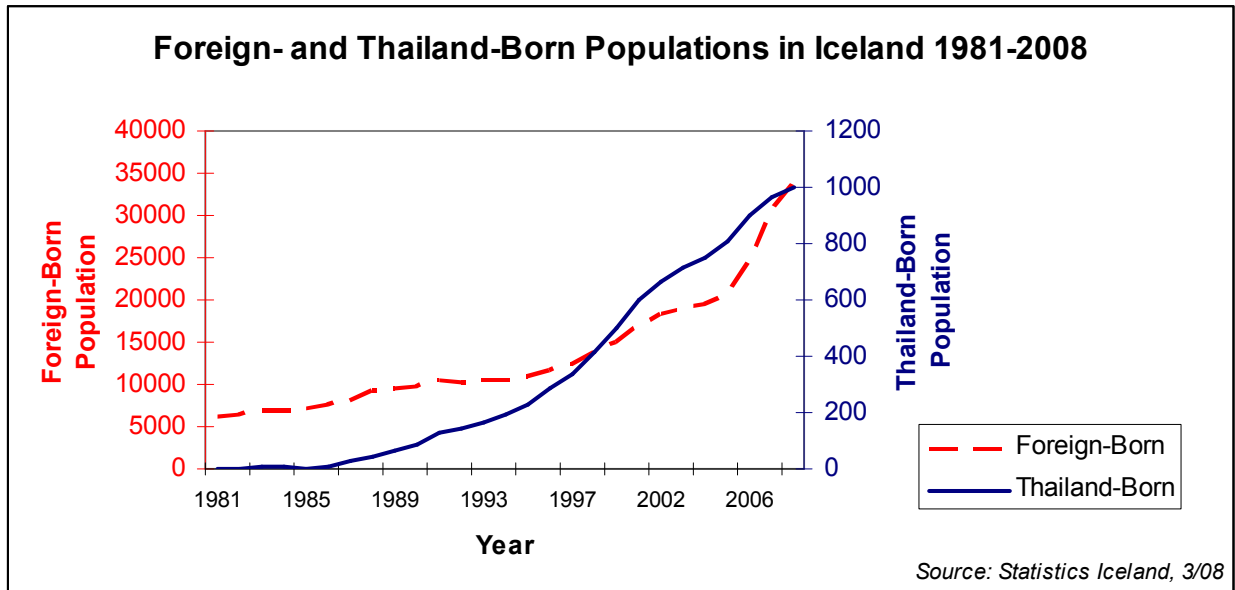


Figure 3. Population pyramid for Thai immigrants in Iceland 2008

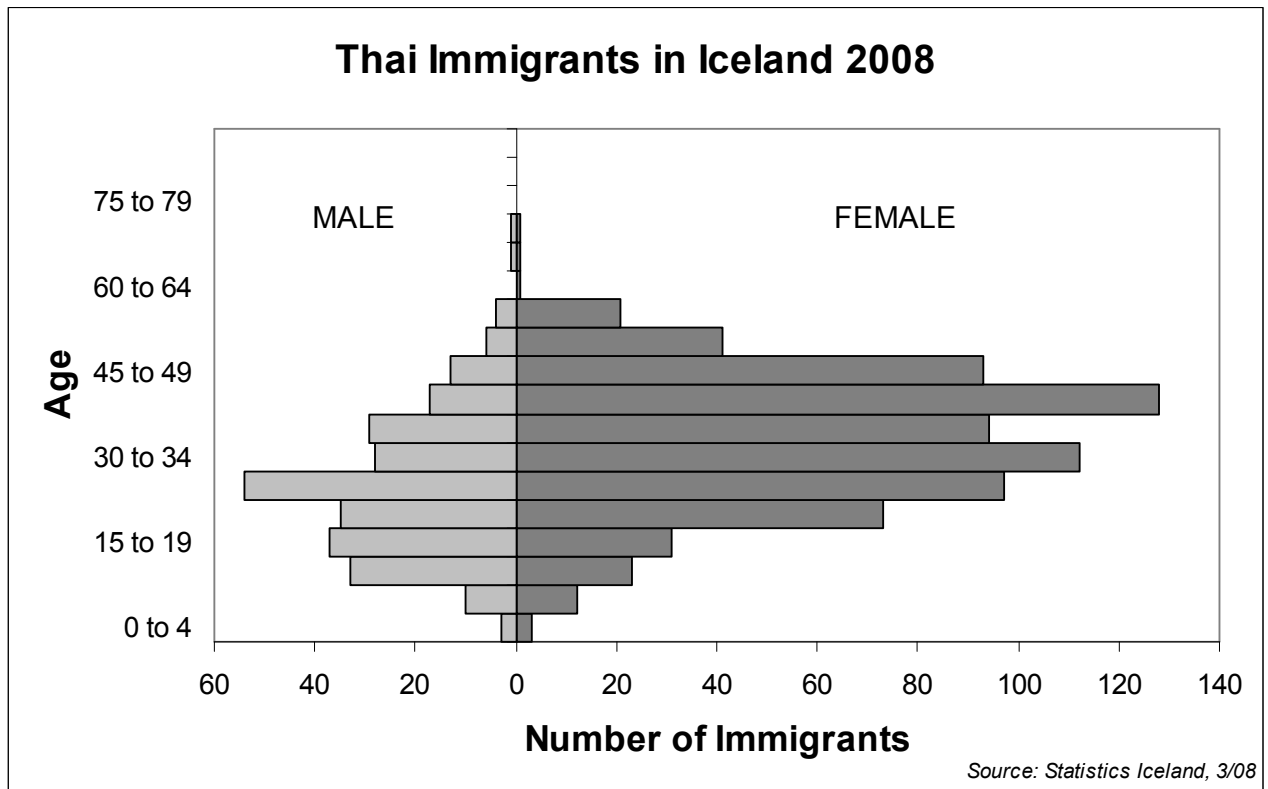


Figure 4. Map of Thailand with Percentage of Survey Respondents from each Province

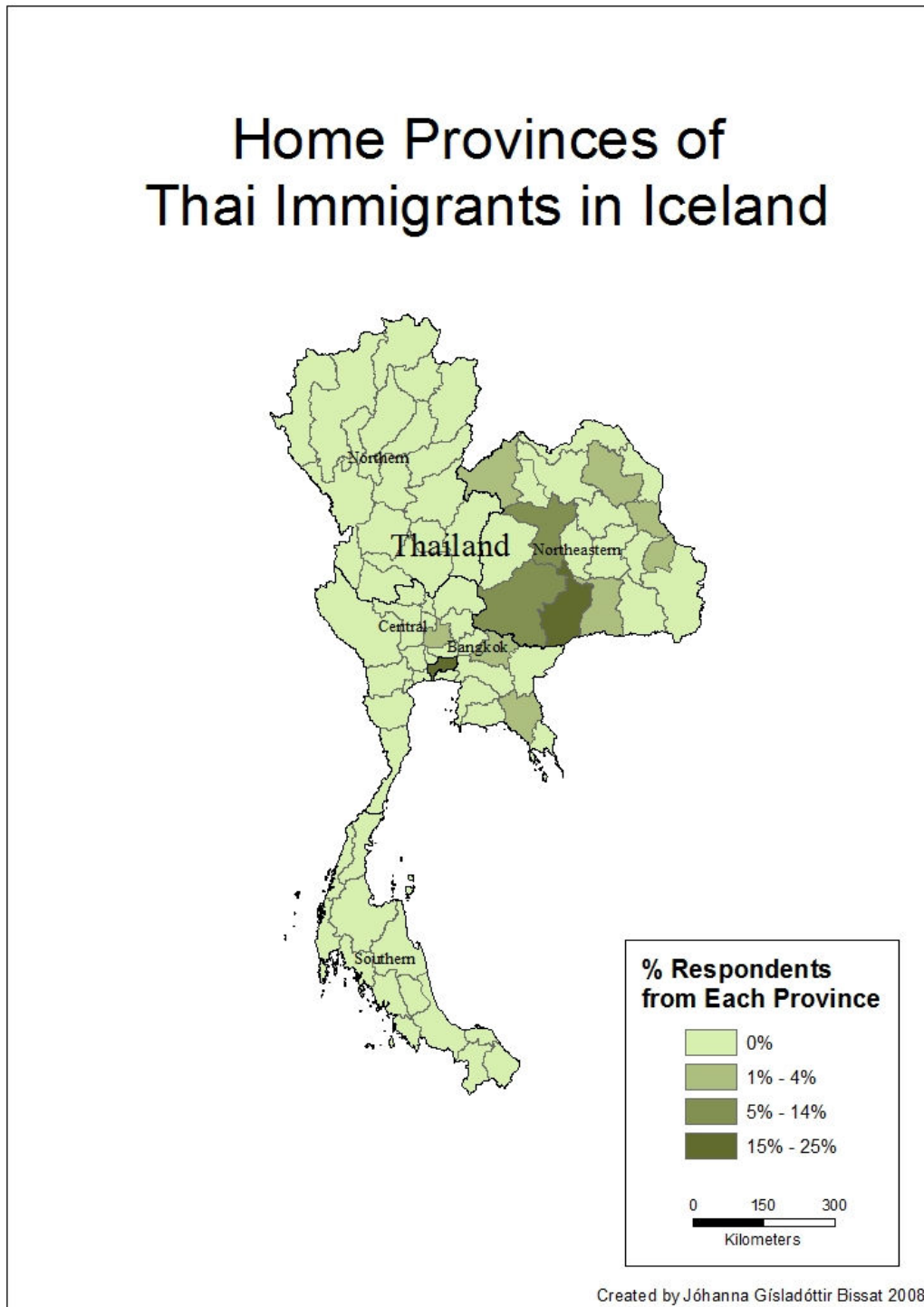


Figure 5. Map of Thailand with Distribution of Type of Immigrants from Each Region.

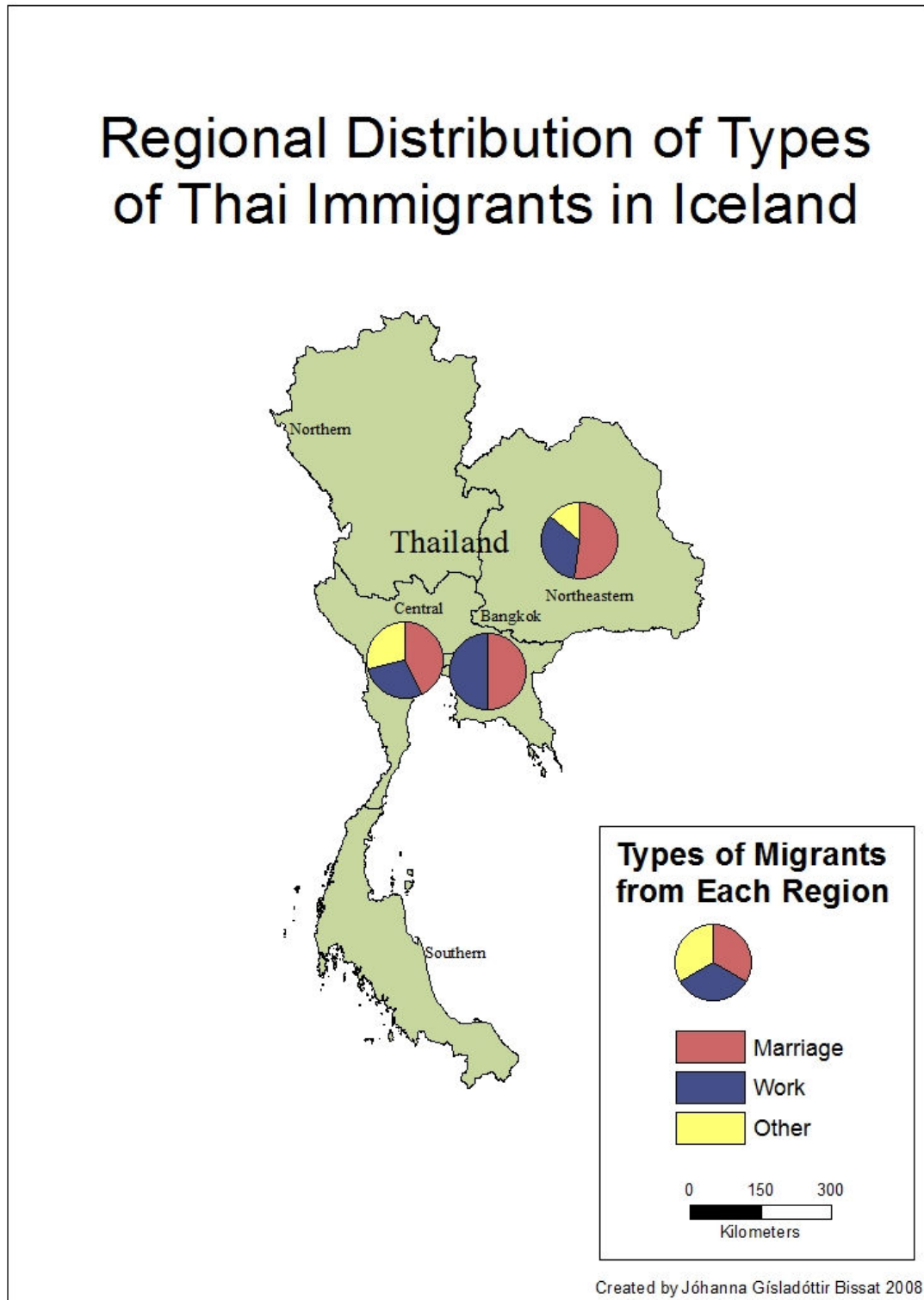


Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

	Reasons for Initial Move to Iceland			
	Marriage (1)	Work (2)	Other (3)	Total (4)
<u>Sex</u> ⁷				
% Female	100.0	72.7	100.0	90.6
<u>Mean Age</u>	38.8	40.9	29.0	38.0
<u>Mean Years Lived in Iceland</u>	9.9	10.0	6.0	9.3
<u>Mean Years of Education</u>	11.8	10.0	9.6	10.8
<u>Mean Number of Siblings</u>	4.3	4.3	4.2	4.3
<u>Migrant Network</u>				
% Had Relatives in Iceland Before Arrival	25.0	63.6	100.0	50.0
<u>Marital Status</u>				
% Currently Married/Cohabiting	87.5	72.7	80.0	81.2
% Currently have an Icelandic Partner	93.3	75.0	100.0	88.9
<u>Location of Children</u>				
% Have Children in Iceland	81.2	45.5	40.0	62.5
<u>Parents' Employment</u>				
% Farming	68.8	50.0	60.0	61.3
<u>Respondent's Employment</u>				
% Low-skill (Janitorial, Factory, or Care Work)	62.5	72.7	60.0	65.6
% Ever Owned/Co-Owned a Business	14.3	10.0	0.0	10.3
<u>Language</u>				
% Speaks Icelandic well or very well	50.0	63.6	40.0	53.1
% Speaks English well or very well	50.0	36.4	20.0	40.6
% Speaks Isaan (Northeastern Thai)	75.0	81.8	60.0	75.0
<u>Citizenship Status</u>				
% Has Icelandic Citizenship	68.8	81.8	40.0	68.8
<u>Political Participation</u>				
% Voted in Icelandic Municipal Elections	56.2	54.5	33.3	53.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
(N – Unweighted)	(16)	(11)	(5)	(32)

Note: All means and percentages are weighted

⁷ “Sex” has been used here instead of “gender” in order to reflect a dichotomous variable, but this distinction is controversial (Mahler and Pessar 2006) and may change in future work with this data. One transgendered person has already appeared among the survey’s small sample size (and chose to classify him/herself using biological sex rather than gender), and it may be inaccurate as well as offensive to classify such individuals under the very gender that they wish to distance themselves from.

Table 2. Composition and size of Thai immigrant friendship networks in Iceland.

Composition and Size of Friendship Networks in Iceland	Reasons for Initial Move to Iceland			Total %
	Marriage % (1)	Work % (2)	Other % (3)	
Have 1-3 Icelandic friends	42.9	18.2	80.0	40.0
Have 1-3 Thai friends	26.7	9.1	40.0	22.6
Have 4+ Icelandic friends	42.9	72.7	20.0	50.0
Have 4+ Thai friends	66.7	90.9	40.0	71.0
Total (N – Unweighted)	100.0 (15)	100.0 (11)	100.0 (5)	100.0 (31)

Note: All means and percentages are weighted