

‘KUBB’

Local identity and global connectedness in a Gotland parish

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Introduction

‘Culture as a resource for regional development’ and ‘culture as a regional growth factor’ are mantras that have spread like wildfire through Europe due to new forms of support from the European Union, the reinforced instrumentalisation and economisation of cultural activities, and the increased popularity of ‘cultural planning’, aimed at new and potentially profitable markets in the so called ‘creative sector’. In particular it is in peripheral, marginalized places, with decreasing populations and weak economies, that the dream about culture as a base for a new economy is fostered as an alternative to decreasing agricultural and industrial production. The idea of a new cultural economy is forged together with the growing tourism and experience industry, in which cultural activities formerly seen as draining are now enthusiastically embraced as nourishing. This development from an industrial/agricultural to a cultural economy is commonly believed to be a last resort for places far from the beaten tracks of postindustrial society, that will eventually bring them back ‘on the map’.

Most European islands have since long been firmly placed in the margins of modern society.¹ In general, islands seem to have little to offer to mainstream society, other than as reserves for bygone days and playgrounds for leisure utopias, alternatives and exceptions. This has made islands easy targets for the ideas about a new cultural economy. Today, all over Europe islands are branded anew, provided with new narratives, images and logos intended to attract a growing number of consumers to the cultural experience market.² Resources for this re-branding of islands are a number of carefully selected artifacts and activities: monuments, memorials, historic places, famous persons, battlegrounds, manors and castles and typified peasant farms, together with customs, games, music and dance.³

Island branding is about producing local distinctiveness. It is a result of effective use of culturally meaningful differences, or more exactly, differences that make a difference.⁴ Carefully produced local distinctiveness can create the visibility necessary to attract attention. Visibility can be sold, and attention can be converted into hard currency or cultural capital at festivals, ‘culture weeks’ and other types of “foreign exchange offices” in the cultural experience market (Lundberg, Malm, Ronström, 2003: 343ff). Attention is a limited resource these days, and a potentially very profitable one (Goldhaber, 1997), which makes local distinctiveness a key to local and regional development, and a way for peripheries to move closer to the centers.

A general problem for most European islands, however, is that they are already since long effectively branded as remote places, in or of the past. They are thus perfect places for old traditions, heritages, and for leisure activities of the ‘no worries man’ type. Thus, the possibilities for islands to enter into the brave new world of ‘culture as a resource for regional development’ is often from the outset restricted to these few areas. This raises questions whether the efforts to counter marginalization through cultural branding will not in effect lead to even stronger marginalization.

In this paper I will discuss intersections between Rone, in the island of Gotland, Sweden, an old lawn game called ‘kubb’, and a number of global issues of the 21st Century, such as islandness, remoteness, tradition and heritage production, cultural branding, entrepreneurship and the quest for new and authentic experiences. My paper is about marginalization, center-periphery relations, and the role of cultural representations in the complex interplay between centers and peripheries. It also raises questions about the possible effects of the creative use of a specific cultural form in the production of local distinctiveness, visibility and attention. The paper is based on interviews and fieldwork in Rone 2004-2008.

Rone

The parish of Rone is situated in Gotland, Sweden's largest island. It is one of the largest of Gotland's 100 parishes, and is located some 60 kilometers the south east of Visby, the island's capital and only city. A century ago Rone was fairly prosperous, with about 1000 inhabitants, who were mostly farmers and fishermen. Today this is a sparsely populated area, as is most of Gotland. Just over 500 people now live in Rone. There are few farmers and almost no fishermen due to over-fishing and fishing restrictions. Instead people commute to jobs in schools or in the service sector, in nearby Hemse or further away in Visby. Once Rone was a regional agricultural, marine and cultural center, due largely to the natural harbour that for centuries has served as south eastern Gotland's main link to the outer world. Being firmly located in the periphery in relation to Hemse, the nearest small town, Visby, Stockholm and the rest of the mainland, Rone today have to face the many negative consequences of remoteness.⁵ The marginalization that comes with such a peripheral position is easily measured by symbolic distance: well-known facts among the islanders is that it is much farther from Stockholm to Rone than the other way around, and that the 60 kilometers from Rone to Visby seems at least the double distance from the towns' perspective.

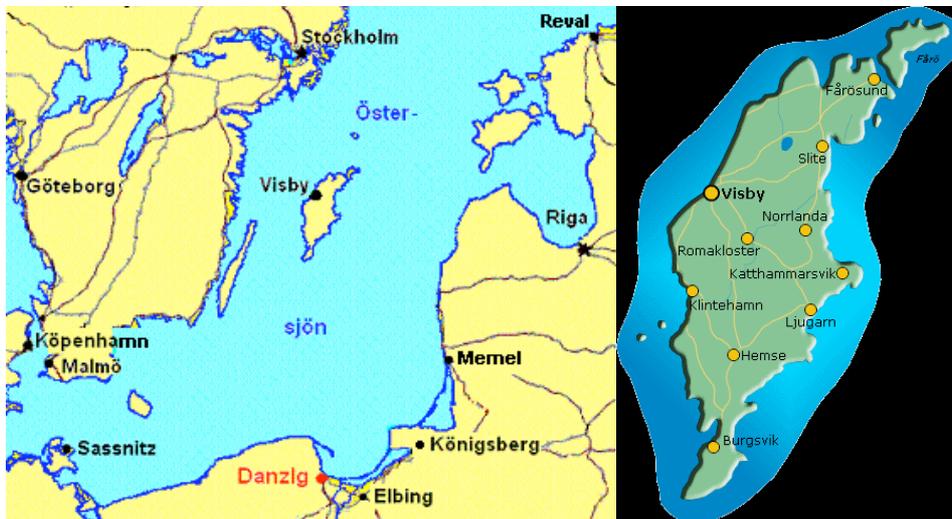


Figure 1. Maps of Gotland.

In Gotland the 'parish' was the main administrative unit from the Middle Ages until the 1970's, when the whole island became a single commune.⁶ Liberated from the administrative burdens of Sweden's well developed bureaucracy, the parishes have not only survived, but in many places become even stronger. They are now regarded as symbolic objects of local cultural identification for the islanders, much in the same way as 'the village' in, say, England, Germany or Poland. In an essay on local identity by an ethnology student of Gotland University, herself from Rone, the parish is described as a mindscape centering around the church, the school, the sports ground and the nearby crossing of two main roads, the harbor, the local community hall and the old farm houses (Pettersson, 2001). In Rone today, as in so many other parts of Gotland, there is a strong sense of communality and belonging among the parishioners, partly based on memories of a past when agriculture stood strong, and when fishermen landed not only cod and herring, but also stories about foreign countries, and occasionally also liqueur, cigarettes and other contraband.⁷ These memories of the old days are well maintained, as are the old farm houses.⁸

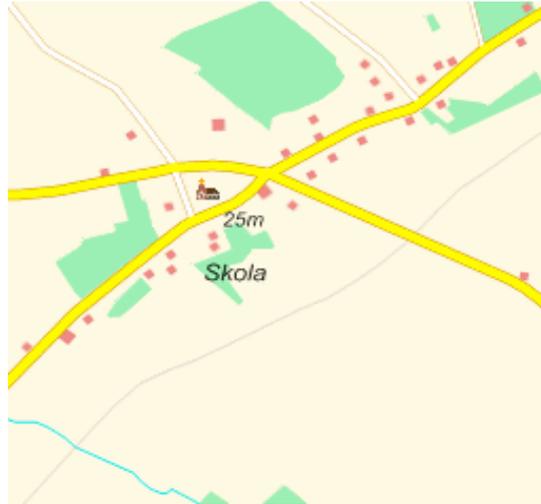


Figure 2. Map of the Rone parish church, school and sports ground

Kubb

Kubb is a modern version of an old and widespread European lawn game. In Wikipedia it is described as “a combination of bowling, horseshoes, and chess.”⁹ The origins of the game are obscure, but the modern version became a craze in Gotland in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, when games began to be produced locally in small numbers and sold in tourist shops. As many visitors got to know this game during summer holidays in Gotland, it soon became known as ‘Gotlandic’, to which in Sweden it is but a small step to an understanding of the game as ‘old’, ‘traditional’ and ‘authentic’.

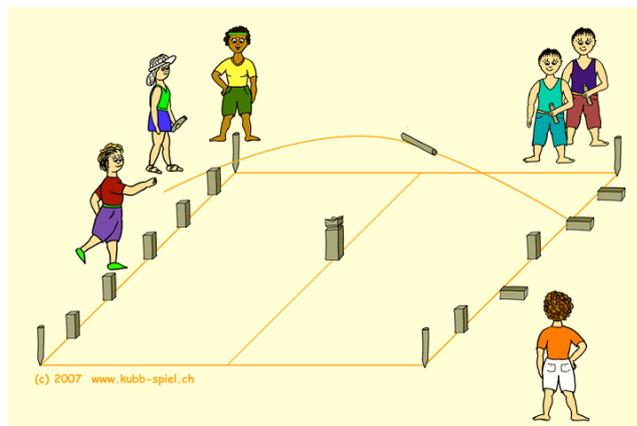


Figure 3. How to play kubb.

The Medieval week, the island’s main tourist magnet since the mid 1980’s, and the appointment of Visby as a medieval World Heritage site in the 1990’s, placed Gotland - already known as a place of the past - firmly in the Middle Ages. Thus, kubb soon became known not only as authentic, traditional and Gotlandic, but also as ‘medieval’ or ‘Viking’. In Europe and the US, kubb today is often marketed as “Viking Chess”, or as an “Old Norse Viking outdoor game”.¹⁰



Figure 3. Viking kubb.

Meanwhile in Rone ...

From the early 1950's Gotland's population dropped drastically. Many left their farms, moved to Visby, and from there to jobs and a better future in Stockholm or other mainland towns. The 1970's saw the birth of a new interest in the 'old peasant society', which halted the depopulation of south east Gotland, as well of some other parts of the island. In Rone in the 1980's, after a baby boom, a number of young educated professionals with personal experiences of modern urban life returned as young parents to their home parish.¹¹ They found a number of local resources and a well developed infrastructure at their disposal: a habit of informal communality; a set of arenas and venues, from the school to the sports ground; and not least, a number of people who knew how to organize and make things happen. Using the local sports association as their hub, they set off to restore the football team, stage popular variety shows, organize bazaars and small festivals. Following the common trend among Gotlanders in the 1980's, they started to play kubb together.

In 1995, at a board meeting in Rone GOIK, the local sports club, there was a proposition to arrange a small kubb tournament for the parishioners.¹² At that time Gotlanders had already started to arrange 'world championships' in a number of local specialties, such as 'pärk' (an old ball game), 'bräus' (a traditional Gotlandic card game) and 'dricke' (a local old style malt drink). They did so not only for the fun of it, but also as ironic commentaries about the widespread discourse on backward Gotlanders and their funny endemic traditions. So it happened that the board of the sports club came up with the idea to arrange no less than a Kubb World Championship in Rone.¹³

In 1995, the first year of the kubb WC, 28 teams showed up, most of them from Gotland. In the next year 59 teams showed up, of which many were from the mainland. The immediate success of the event posed a problem: What will happen if the popularity of kubb continues to rise, and if somebody, say in Germany, decides to arrange another World Championship? The organizers decided that the possible answers could only be negative for Rone, and hurried to register their logo.

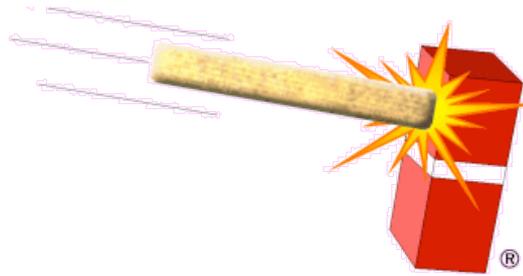


Figure 4. The official logo.

To their surprise they found that copyright laws already protected the official rules of the championship since their publication at the sport association's website the year before. Was the parishioners' fear of having their new invention overtaken by other and more powerful actors justified? Yes. In 1997 a popular Swedish TV series called *Salve*, directed to a growing audience of young Middle Age enthusiasts and live role players, introduced kubb as a funny new medieval game in one of its shows. In 1998 the kubb game had become so popular that it became interesting to a big Swedish toy and game company, Brio, which started to produce cheap factory made sets for the international market. They soon found the website of the kubb WC, with the 'official World Championship rules', and decided to make a deal with the copyright owners, the sports association in Rone, to include the rules with every set against a license fee.



Figure 5. The official WC kubb game

The next year, 1999, 121 teams showed up, two of which were from the Netherlands. In 2002 over 200 teams registered, out of which 11 were from abroad. The organizers now thought that they had hit a limit. Since then there have been between 150 and 200 teams participating. The three day event attracts 3-4000 visitors, who are served by up to a hundred local voluntary officials. After booming in the Nordic countries in the late 1990s, the kubb game has, in the past few years, become increasingly popular in England, Germany, Holland, France, as well as in the US and Canada. There are now several international tournaments in Europe and the US.

Regional development? Glocality and Postmodernity?

From an outsider's perspective, the story up to this point could easily be told as an example of the 'culture as a resource for regional development' trend in Sweden:¹⁴ Islanders produce local distinctiveness and raise their visibility and attention, by inviting the world to take part in their preserved authentic Middle age tradition of kubb-playing. But, as the story here presented already has revealed, this is not exactly the case. So what is this story an example of?

Most importantly, the kubb case shows us how remote islanders and with scant resources can successfully manage to download, make use of and benefit from global structures, formats and trends. In this respect, the kubb world championship is a rather typical example of a 'glocal' phenomenon.¹⁵ To begin with, a part of the explanation to their relative success is the parishioners strategic adopting of an already existing discourse about islands and islanders, remoteness, endemism and a traditional Gotlandic society where history still is a part of present life. Both Rone and kubb fits well into this widespread discourse, which quickly turned kubb into a typical and authentic Gotlandic game and placed Rone in its very center.

Secondly, the parishioners, by chance and the right timing, managed to take advantage of and benefit from globalised technologies. The website played a decisive role in raising the visibility of the Kubb World Championship. Still more important was the publishing of the rules at this website, which according to international copyright legislation and regulations of intellectual property rights, made the Rone sports club the official owners of the World Championship rules. This, in turn, made it possible for them to connect online with a large toy producing company, which gave them not only an economical yield, but also local, national and transnational visibility and credibility.

It is also evident how the organizers have adopted the globalised formats 'folk festival' and 'international sport championship', which they use with humor, distance and irony, to create an event with room both for a few serious competitors and for the much larger number of kubb-players to whom the main attraction seems to be the possibility to poke fun at and play around with the rituals of festivals and commercial sports events.¹⁶ The 'folk festival' part is underlined by the constant drinking and eating that accompanies the competitions; the food tent, where the traditional Swedish pastry called 'kubb' is served; and the social dance and drinking party to live music called 'After kubb' that concludes the event. An ironic and playful stance, so often held to be typical of post modern times, is clearly present in the greeting performances of teams, the cheering calls, the use of webcams to broadcast the games, the instructions about how to send cheers to particular teams over the Internet, the teams' dresses, the many different types of Kubb games for sale, and not least in the names of the teams, such as Elephant droppings, Losers and Scandal.¹⁷ The same playful and ironic attitude is also manifest in the slogan of the event, "Kubb joins people together and creates peace on earth!"¹⁸, and the official strategic goal to establish a local kubb office in Manhattan within the next decade. The officials also assume an ironic, distanced and playful attitude. There are a number of official judges, lead by a 'general' (the local teacher), all of them wearing the small black hat that in Swedish is known as kubb. But the idea is that as long as the teams are in agreement with each other, there is no need for the judges to intervene.

Place and time

The kubb World Championships takes place in Rone in the first weekend of August, the same time as the opening of the Medieval week in Visby. Established in the mid 1980's, this major event attracts around a hundred thousand visitors from many countries. Kubb is played at both these events. In Rone, kubb-playing is part of a local feast or celebration, disguised as a formalized major sports competition; a World Championship. In Visby, kubb is a part of a much larger event, aimed at creating 'the medieval experience'. Both events make use of the same late modern technologies, trends, and structures to become visible and attract attention; both belong to the same late modern experience market that foregrounds fun and pleasure; both events take place in Gotland; and both take advantage of the island as a backdrop for producing the 'historic' and the 'authentic', which, as already noted, casts kubb as medieval (or 'Viking'), authentic, and Gotlandic.

In the Medieval week the supposed medieval origin is underlined. Kubb is framed as being historic; as a part of Gotland's heritage. Here the game is a part of much a larger event aimed at creating temporality: the authentic Middle Age experience. To the Medieval week kubb is substitutable, just one of many tools, or keys, to a specific chronotope or mindscape,¹⁹ the medieval town. In Rone, the historic dimension of kubb is almost totally absent, and in any case irrelevant. Here the game is part of an event that uses its supposed Gotlandicness, together with the formats of the folk festival and the sports competition, to produce locality; a

sense of place. To the local organizers the event is about having fun, and about celebrating the local communality of the parish. As one of the organizers expressed it, arranging Kubb WC is about pride. She was proud of the fact that she and her friends had managed to create such a large and fun event, that made people want to come back to visit them again and again. In noting how, in Rone, kubb is substitutable one of the founders of the event said: "It could have been just anything that is fun to do; it could have been cricket!"²⁰

What the use of kubb in these two contexts exemplifies are two main forms of symbolic representations of the past in Sweden; two types of chronotopes, or mindscapes; or to use more general terms, two forms of producing the absent in the present. 'Tradition' is the older representation, typical and even constitutive of modern European societies of the 19th and 20th Centuries. Tradition are about producing locality, setting up large geographies of attraction and identity. 'Heritage' is a more recent form, typical and constitutive of a Swedish post- or late- modern society. Heritage is more about producing temporality; about setting up historic chronologies of attraction and identity. In important ways, these two types of mindscapes are non-compatible, even when, as here, they build on and make use of the same kind of phenomena.²¹ In one of the first years of the Kubb World Championships, the games were visited by a kubb team from England dressed up in medieval clothes. According to the organizers, they had stumbled on the Kubb game through their membership in a historic society and apparently understood the Kubb WC in Rone to be a typical medieval event, a part of the same Middle Age experience as the Middle Age week in Visby. They soon found themselves to be somewhat alien among the other competitors, with their playful and often ironic dressing code. The same year, the officials from the Medieval week in Visby paid a visit to Rone, only to find the event not medieval enough to be included in the weeks program.

In Gotland, a shift from 'tradition' to 'heritage' took place in the 1980's and 90's, to the effect that the symbolic representations of Gotland and Gotlanders shifted from the rural peasantry of the 18th and 19th Centuries to the urban bourgeoisie of the 12th and 13th Centuries (Ronström, 2007). From being a central part of the tradition mindscape, within a decade Rone was moved to the periphery of the new urban and medievalised heritage mindscape. As already mentioned, it is not difficult to see the World Championships in local expressive forms such as kubb, bräus, park, dricke etc, as ironic reactions to this new situation.

From knowers to doers and marketers

The shift from 'tradition' to 'heritage' is accompanied by a general change in attitude towards the past, which in the words of the American folklorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett can be summarized as "from informative to performative".²² If formerly a main mode of understanding the past was through 'dry facts', the origin and history of things, what actually happened there and then, a main mode of understanding the past in present times is through experience, appeal, feeling. In the Medieval week in Visby a specific past, the Middle Ages, is of course what makes the event meaningful. The Middle Ages is represented not as facts about how things actually were; it is not about words, pictures or artefacts as objects of academic knowledge. Instead, the Middle Ages is enthusiastically greeted as an "exciting and inspiring model, a spicy and mythical taleworld" that you may pay an occasional visit to (Gustafsson, 2002: 181). In Rone, kubb is about 'the performative'. The emphasis is on having fun, here and now, which is why the historic aspect of the game is absent, except of course in the overall frame of kubb as an old Gotlandic or 'Viking' game.

This general shift in attitude towards the past, from informative to performative, corresponds with yet another important general shift in the control of and power over the past. Up until recently, what we can call 'knowers' (for example academicians and researchers) have controlled the access to first-hand sources, and have thus managed the control over the knowledge about distant pasts. The generally available knowledge about the Middle Ages thereby has become marked by the knowers' special interests and filtered through their perspectives.

During the 1990s, however, the knowers' monopoly on knowledge over the Middle Ages has been broken. In the hands of rapidly growing numbers of 'doers', a large number of rare

medieval sources have been published on the Internet, and there rapidly transformed into practical handbooks furnished with simple instructions of a 'do-it-yourself' type. The knowers' reduced control over the definitions of the Middle Ages, its content, meaning and significance, is expressed in the common slogan of the members of the Society for Creative Anachronism, who make up a considerable part of the active medievalists during the medieval week in Visby: "We are not interested in the Middle Ages as they were, but as they ought to have been." In turn, the general growth among doers has led to the opening of new markets. Today a growing number of what I call 'marketers' (entrepreneurs, vendors, distributors) are rapidly taking over much of the control over definitions of the Middle Ages, its content and meaning (Lundberg, Malm and Ronström, 2003).

The kubb case is a rather typical example of these shifts, from tradition to heritage, from knower to doer and marketer, and from knowing to the results and effects of doing and marketing, such as experiences and performances. In the world of kubb, the 'knowers' have had no influence over how the game was to be interpreted or played, even though the game is old, and is framed as old Gotlandic, 'medieval' or even 'viking'. Instead, 'doers' immediately took control over the game, which created room for a large number of practitioners. This, in turn, opened up a market for Brio, the toy company, to produce and sell cheap kubb games, which raised the visibility and attention not only of kubb, but also of Rone. The parishioners were then able to transform this visibility and attention into economical, social and cultural capital.

Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn from this example? Is the kubb WC in Rone, Gotland, Sweden, a case of cultural compensation for deprivation and marginalization in other and more substantial areas of life?²³ Perhaps. Is it a case of local activism, of redrawing cultural maps and influencing important center-periphery relations? Certainly. To the Rone parishioners it is about being proud, of keeping keep the local community alive, and of being able to attract the attention of several thousand visitors. Is it about restoring a feeling of connectedness, of being a part of a larger world? Definitely. The kubb WC is about being local; it is an investigation into what it means to live in a remote islanded place like Gotland and a parish like Rone in the early 21st Century.²⁴ But at the same time it is also an investigation into how the interface between the local and the global can be manipulated and opened up; to make the global present locally, and the local present globally. As an effect of this, Rone has become a hub in the small but growing Internet-based world of kubb. As ambassadors of 'the place of origin', the organizers are constantly invited to play kubb in mainland Sweden, as well as in countries such as Germany, England, the Netherlands and France.

In some ways then, the kubb WC in Rone can be seen as an example of how culture can be used as a resource for regional development. The islanders have developed at least some aspects of their region, both as a cultural and a physical space. As I have tried to show, this was not so much as a result of active, strategic cultural planning as it was of mere chance. The Rone parishioners just happened to get connected, in the right time, to the right trends, networks, phenomena, markets, companies, structures etc. But what the example also shows is that when a marginalized region tries to move towards the centre by strategically using 'culture as a resource for regional development', the result may well be strengthened marginality or peripherality. The strategies that make the centres prosper can have radically different outcomes when applied by peripheries. The result is a kind of labour division between the centres (which are in constant need of new experiences, new markets and places to visit), and the margins (which can only make a living by delivering the products asked for: local distinctiveness based on tradition, history, authenticity, remoteness, and backwardness.) Islands have much to offer to this market. Gotland is a part of a large archipelago of cultural difference, remoteness, foreignness, where the local is disembedded, separated from the local islanders, packaged and branded – 'islanded' if you wish - for immediate consumption in the growing market for local distinctiveness.

Is the Kubb WC in Rone to be considered a success? Yes, in terms of growth human qualities like communality, fun, and pleasure. But in other respects, unfortunately, that answer is no. In

spite of, or as I have suggested here, because of the relative success of the kubb adventure, Rone has become even more stuck in marginality. In the fall of 2008 the local school in Rone is closed down and sold, emigration continues, jobs disappear, as have already most of the fish in the Baltic Sea. And if the interest in kubb continues to grow, and if new and bigger markets open up, it is quite likely that the organisational power of the locals will not suffice to maintain the event, to the effect that the Rone inhabitants will be marginalized also in the world of kubb.

Endnotes

- ¹ See for example Baldacchino 2005, 2007; Edmond & Smith 2003; Gillis 2001, 2003, 2004
- ² Locally much of this work is fuelled by hopes for a restoration of a paradise lost; hopes for increasing population, energy, potential, if only for a couple of days in the summer.
- ³ These belong to a generic repertoire of expressive forms and symbols used also to brand nations, ethnic groups, regions and towns. Please refer to Lundberg, Malm, Ronström 2000.
- ⁴ "A difference that make a difference" is Bateson's definition of 'information' (Bateson, 2000: 457-459).
- ⁵ In many ways Sweden is a very centralized state, economically, culturally, and demographically. Gotland replicates this centralization with Visby as its one and only centre.
- ⁶ In Gotland there are no villages. Farms and settlements are spread out all over the parishes.
- ⁷ Which is why up to recently a coast guard was permanently stationed in Rone.
- ⁸ This is notable not least in the polls. The centre party, formerly the peasants party, has since long been the political home for most people in the parish, and remains so today.
- ⁹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kubb>
- ¹⁰ <http://www.amazon.com/Brio-34003000-Kubb-Game/dp/B0001WGIRQ>
- ¹¹ The few remaining farmers were among the first in Gotland to get access computers and the Internet. When Soviet Union collapsed, the people in Rone were among the first to connect with Ösel, in Estonian Saaremaa, shipping all kinds of agricultural machines, clothes and other equipment to their neighbor islanders.
- ¹² Rone GOIK is an acronym for Rone Gymnastik Och Idrottsklubb
- ¹³ <http://www.vmkubb.com/about/index.asp>
- ¹⁴ A trend supported by EU funds. Please refer to: http://ec.europa.eu/culture/portal/activities/heritage/cultural_heritage_dev_en.htm, and <http://www.eu-upplysningen.se/Amnesomraden/EU-stod-och-bidrag/Regional-utveckling-och-sammanhallning/>. An example of how the discourse about culture as a regional development factor is locally used in Sweden is <http://www.nll.se/hq4.aspx?id=36681>
- ¹⁵ 'Glocal' after Robertson, 1992.
- ¹⁶ I have recorded many examples of such a playful and ironic attitude especially among young men during my fieldwork in Rone during the games.
- ¹⁷ Many teams names are puns that are impossible to translate, such as 'Kubbärs', from 'kubber', home-made English for a person that plays kubb, and 'bärs', Swedish slang for 'beer'. The team 'Mbinu Mashujaa', registered by email from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, turned out to be the favorite winning team from the neighboring parish.
- ¹⁸ Kubb förenar människor och skapar fred på jorden! <http://www.vmkubb.com/index.asp>

- ¹⁹ 'Chronotope' (Bakhtin, 1981); 'mindscape' (Ronström, 2007)
- ²⁰ Interviews with the staff of the Kubb WC in Rone August 2007.
- ²¹ On 'tradition' and 'heritage' in Sweden, see Ronström, 2005, 2007
- ²² Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, lecture in Gotland University, 16/3/1999. See also Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998.
- ²³ Aesthetical or cultural compensation for social deprivation and marginalisation is a common explanation to why gypsies/Roma so often have become musicians.
- ²⁴ All of the officials of the event are from Rone, or have relatives there.

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