GUTE, GOTLANDER, MAINLANDER, SWEDE
Ethnonyms and Identifications in a Changing Island Society

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Abstract

This paper examines how identities are negotiated and articulated in Gotland, Sweden’s biggest island. The yearly interaction between close to a million visitors and the less than 60,000 islanders has cemented an old division between ‘islander’ and ‘mainlander’. For a long time, Gotland residents have felt that ‘belonging’ and ‘islander identity’ have been connected to place and the island condition. In recent years, the old categories of tourist vs. islander have been reshaped in the context of migration and ‘multiculturality’. New categories of islanders have emerged, including ‘Gutars’, presuming an authentic island status, and ‘Gotlanders’, people with multiple origins who are neither islanders nor mainlanders. The concept of multiculturality has also been rearticulated in a radically different way than in most Swedish urban centres and other parts of Northern Europe. This paper argues that these recent changes notwithstanding, the relation to place, to the island and to the island life, is still the core of belonging and identity.

Keywords
Ethnonyms, Gotland, identification, islands, multiculture

Introduction

‘Once unusually homogenous, now it has become multicultural’. Such is the core of a widespread discourse about Sweden that explains much of its development over the last 40 years, whether seen as cause or effect, positive or negative (Ronström, 1989). A simple map has been conceptualized, with Swedes on one hand and immigrants on the other, complicated only by a growing number of Swedes of ‘immigrant origin’, and more recently by a growing Islamophobia that replaces ‘blackheads’ (a pejorative term—svartskallar’ in Swedish—used to refer to workers from Yugoslavia, Turkey and Greece who emigrated to Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s) with Muslims as the most threatening other. The prime locus of this ‘multicultural Sweden’ is ‘the suburb’, a generalized topos used in the singular and located on the outskirts of big city centres. ‘The suburb’ is a marginalized place somehow ‘outside of society’ where Swedish is barely understood and where unemployment and criminal activity is high.

Ethnologists in Sweden have made considerable effort to complicate this map (Ehn, et al., 1993; Daun and Ehn, 1988; Lundberg, Malm and Ronström, 2000). This paper proposes to contribute to this complication from yet another perspective: that of islands and islanders. In the three Baltic island societies I currently research—Gotland, Saaremaa and Åland—ethnic categorizations and relations are differently spelled out than in their respective mainlanders. I argue that this involves the way islands tend to reframe and reformat certain basic assumptions and agreements about social organization, at least in this part of the world. Here, I will reflect on how insiders and outsiders—as well as centres and peripheries—are mapped in Gotland.
Gotland

Gotland is the largest of Sweden’s islands (Map 1). Around 57,000 people live there permanently, about 0.6% of Sweden’s population. Approximately 22,000 live in Visby, a town on the island’s west coast. Once one of the most prosperous places in Northern Europe, Gotland has long been a marginalized part of Sweden. Most Gotlanders have low earnings, and have been firmly fixed at the bottom of the country’s list of per-capita taxed income for quite some time. Unemployment is high, particularly among young people (i.e., under 30). Gotland was a prime agricultural area in the past. Today, farmers and workers are few while the urban middle class is increasing rapidly. The island seems to be especially attractive to the cultural intelligentsia: intellectuals, artists, craftsmen, and musicians. It is likely that there are more expressive specialists in Gotland relative to the population than anywhere else in the country. Statistics tell us that seventy percent of the islanders were born on the island. About twenty-five percent are from the mainland, most of whom were born in Stockholm County. Approximately five percent were born abroad. Meanwhile, around eleven percent have ‘immigrant background’, a description used despite the fact that many have lived on the island their whole lives and are well integrated into island culture.
Map 1. Gotland has approximately 57,000 inhabitants. Most of them live in Visby, the only town. Gotland is connected to the Swedish mainland by two ferry lines.

From the islanders’ perspective the affective presence of the great divider, the sea, has helped to organize the world into a few basic categories arranged on a scale from insiders to outsiders. The main ‘we’ are the ‘Gotlanders’, a primordial ethnic category of islanders genealogically rooted in a past, rural Gotland. Thus, one must be born a Gotlander; one cannot become one. In practice, this means that around a third of the total number of biological Gotlanders do not actually live on the island, and that around thirty percent of the island’s people are excluded from being considered ‘true Gotlanders’. A number of ‘others’ are lumped together as ‘mainlanders’ (more recently also called ‘Stockholmers’ or ‘08s’ after Stockholm’s telephone trunk code). An important category of ‘mainlander’ includes permanent residents of Gotland not born on the island, most of whom are educated urbanites in white-collar professions living in Visby. Also important are the ‘summer-Gotlanders’, a fairly large number of mainlanders commuting to island summer homes. The largest identity category is that of the 600,000 to 800,000 ‘tourists’ who pay an occasional and often short visit to the island during the hectic summer months. To many of them, Gotland is an Eden of sorts, to which they retreat from the anxieties of modern urban—and mainland—life.

Recently, however, the map has changed. In the 1970s, coinciding with the emergence of a mainland ‘multicultural Swedish’ discourse, Gotland saw the emergence of a new category of ‘Gotlanders’: permanent residents who are neither islanders nor mainlanders, occupying a third space or middle position. This, in turn, led to the establishment of a new category of ‘authentic’ islanders, called ‘Gutar’, the ethnonym of the island’s first inhabitants.1 These original Gotlanders, or ‘ur-Gutars’ are often stereotyped as rural, elderly men; islanders of at least three generations; dressed in farmer’s clothes; speaking the old island vernacular language (Gutamål); leading a traditional, old-fashioned life; and enjoying the old Gotlandic traditions.

In effect, this constitutes a double change in attitude to island identity. On the one hand, ‘Gotlander’ changed from an essentialist, primordial category to one of voluntary choice, moving from closed and exclusive to open and inclusive. Today, just about anybody who has lived long enough on the island to be considered part of island society and who is registered as a tax payer in the commune can be considered a Gotlander. On the other hand, the new ‘Gutar’ has become a more exclusive category; it is more authentic, rural, and old-fashioned than previous versions of ‘original’ islanders.

What happened and why?

Why did this happen, and what can we learn about the organization of diversity from this example? The first thing to be noted from an island perspective is the overwhelming number of islands and islets in the Swedish-speaking area, somewhere between 250,000 and 300,000 (Ansén and Justusson, 2001; Depraetere and Dahl, 2007: 71; Källgård, 2005).2 Even though Sweden is most likely second only to Canada as the nation with the most islands in the world, its national narrative and self image is distinctly continental, leaving most islands firmly anchored in the periphery, as leftovers and anomalies.

A second observation is that the very concept of ‘island’ is a cultural phenomenon that defines an island as separate and distinct in time and space from its mainland. A widespread present belief is that modernity, whatever it is, is unevenly distributed. In the urban city centres, where there is more of a modern ideology,
the pace of development is ever-accelerating. By contrast, the more distant and peripheral the place, the less modern and developed—and the more original and authentic—it is (Eriksen, 1993; Gillis, 2001). It follows that cultures are best preserved in places bounded and insulated, like remote rural villages or islands. To travel to places remote and islanded is to travel backwards in time, which is why islanders often are described as especially ‘old-time’ and authentic. Having long been considered remote and ‘islanded’, Gotland is a place existing in the past, or of the past, therefore the perfect place for producing mindscapes of the past. In few places has heritage been produced with the same intensity as in Gotland over the last several decades. If the past is a foreign country (Lowenthal, 1985), Gotland today is certainly foreign.

A third observation is that in places remote and ‘islanded’ like Gotland, diversity is also organized differently. Although there is a high degree of diversity on the island—in terms of expressive forms and styles, and in terms of religious and ethnic groups—there are very few ‘multicultural’ arenas, events, or forms. Any discourse about a postmodern, globalized ‘multiculture’ has little, if any, relevance (Lundberg, Malm and Ronström, 2000: 392ff). Since the most relevant boundary on the island is between ‘islanders’ and ‘mainlanders’, immigrants become relatively invisible, and it is not unusual to find immigrants and Gotlanders on the same side in relation to the many ‘mainlanders’ and ‘tourists’. So, if Sweden at large is described as multicultural, most of its islands are placed in another Sweden: one that is less modern, less multi-, more homogenous and original, and more ‘the way it used to be.’ What is highlighted on islands such as Gotland is that ‘multiculturalty,’ at least for countries like Sweden, is not so much an empirical fact as a political project that organizes diversity in a way not diverse enough to contain the existing diversity.

A fourth observation is that the production of multiculturality in some places, and the radical ‘heritage-isation’ of others, are two sides of the same coin. While on a global level heritage production is about preserving human diversity, on a local level the construction of homogenized cultural reserves has led to a general reduction of publically-displayed cultural diversity, especially in terms of class and ethnicity. The successful worldwide implementation of ‘outstanding universal values’, of which the World Heritage Convention is only one example, is the result of the growth of a new globalised urban middle-class. This group stages its dreams about a more aesthetically and historically authentic life without the fuss and hassle over ethnic groups, class, gender and sexual orientation that have come with the ever-growing diversity of values, forms, styles, cultures, and immigrants of multicultural societies. Heritage is closely tied to ‘islanding’, as both are about producing bounded places with a distinctive and rich history. The heritage-isation of islands happens quickly and is widespread (Ronström, 2007). Islands make up only about 1.5% of the earth’s landmass, but ten percent of UNESCO’s World Heritage sites are located on them (Baldacchino, 2004: 5).

While mainland Sweden has been cast as increasingly multicultural, its islands are simultaneously being framed as ever more remote, authentic, and archaic. In Gotland, as on so many other islands, the interest in local history and heritage has been generated largely by people ‘from away’. Their appreciation of the place they have moved to is constituted through a temporal distance, making them somewhat oblivious to the ‘presentist’ concerns of the locals (Klein, 1997: 21; Lowenthal, 2004: 3). As John Gillis has put it, “when strangers have the power to impose their image of there and then on a place, the local’s sense of living in the here and now is notably heightened” (Gillis, 2001: 6). Among Gotlanders, especially from the countryside, it has been common to mutter about the ‘mainlanders’ in Visby and the preservationism they have brought about. As John Gillis notes, islanders today often find themselves promoting remoteness as vital to the tourist trade, while at the same time struggling against effects that this image brings about (Gillis, 2001: 6).
This is also true of Gotlanders, who, like many other islanders, tend to internalise remoteness as a feeling of inferiority and backwardness, ultimately leading the younger generation to migrate.

With all this in mind, let us now return to the new identity categories and consider why they emerged. In the late 1940s Gotland had almost 60,000 inhabitants. Within just over 10 years, more than ten percent of the population left. Large governmental investments in the 1960s caused the island’s population to increase again. By 1996, the population had reached almost 58,000, after which it again began to decrease again. At the time of the first population decrease, Gotland was among Sweden’s most rural areas. Most of the residents were farmers and workers with limited education who, in the late 1940s, began to leave in search of jobs, education, and better, more modern lives in the mainland’s urban centres. When Gotland’s population began to increase, the growth was fast and consisted mostly of a new urban middle class. The majority of the newcomers from the mainland were educated, urban professionals attracted to the island’s nature and climate, to its rich cultural and historic legacy, as well as by a belief that they would find there a more authentic culture, a warmer and more embracing community, and a slower pace of life. Most of them settled in Visby. A gentrification began that transformed the then somewhat shabby quarters of the medieval town into a habitat for a new aesthetic and intellectual elite, a process completed in 1995 with the declaration of the Hanseatic town of Visby as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

As mainlanders excluded from being ‘Gotlanders’ on primordial grounds, newcomers claimed their place by creating new narratives and cultural representations that did not exclude them and, on the contrary, actually positioned them in the very centre (Ronström, 2007; Ronström 2008). This linking of place to identity, a political choice of self-assertion, made it possible to ‘take place’ and make claims to an identity with rights of belonging asserted in cultural/ethnic terms, and also rights to control representations of the place (Cresswell, 2004: 27-29). This led to an urbanisation of the cultural representations of the island. If ‘true Gotland’ was once situated in the countryside, it had now moved to town.

It is from among these new permanent residents of mainland origin that both the new categories of ‘Gotlanders’ and ‘gutar’ seem to have emerged. With Gotland’s shift from rural to urban came a new understanding of what constitutes a Gotlander: no longer a primordial essence, it was now a voluntary choice. This resulted in a problem with Sweden’s well-established belief in primordial essentialism. If anybody could become a Gotlander, what should one call the islanders of three or more generations? One response was the revival of the archaic and highbrow term ‘gute’, formerly used only rarely and, when used, often used ironically, as in ‘ur-gute’, or ‘primeval Gotlander’. But while ‘Gotlander’ thus became an ethnonym that both indigenous and new islanders could use to refer to themselves, ‘gute’ is almost exclusively used by newcomers to refer to the old established islanders. If at all used by indigenous islanders, it is often used in a joking mode.

Islands

In few places is the association of culture with geography stronger than on islands. ‘Belonging’ and the notion of ‘islander identity’ have been accepted as growing naturally out of the island condition, producing a culture “intimately bound up with place” (Feintuch, 2006). Thus, what concerns me here is not simply ‘pieces of land surrounded by water’, but rather ‘islands of the mind’, a realm of ‘geosophy’ that maps out a vast meta-archipelago of powerful metaphors, myths and ideas (Gillis, 2004: 17).
The idea of islands as microcosms—bounded and remote—has made them epitomes of singularity; gateways to the past; reserves for the original and natural, archaic, endemic and exotically unique. The idea of a natural boundedness makes islands look like property possible to circumscribe, grasp, control, and perhaps own, and it makes islands look like communities or villages, a natural and authentic Gemeinschaft that has been lost in mainland urban centres. With these ideas comes remoteness, a matter of perceived distance from a centre. The remote is always the peripheral. The more remote the area, the less up-to-date and modern it is. As the world becomes more accessible, the remote becomes more rare, attractive, and expensive (Gillis, 2001).

What this example shows, among other things, is that notions of ‘we’ and ‘them’ are, as always, in constant flux. On the other hand, it also shows that essentialist, primordial ideas are still current in places like Sweden and its islands, ideas strikingly similar to the ideas about the ‘folk’ of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It also demonstrates that many of these ideas, as has been the case elsewhere, are fostered and nurtured by people in transit, and projected on certain others cast as static. It is in such a context, I believe, that the changes in the categorisations of ‘us’ and ‘others’ in Gotland are to be understood.

There is a striking connection between ‘island’ and ‘culture’. A case could even be made for the notion of ‘culture’ being originally modelled upon islands and islanders (Ronström, 2012). The idea of the bounded, remote, archaic, and endemic with authentic culture made islands and islanders functional in the modernising world of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and even constitutive of the ‘mythical geography’ of the modern Western world. My argument here is that islands have retained many of these functions in today’s world, contributing to the mythical geography of the late or postmodern world, and to the mapping of its centres and peripheries. The power ascribed to the islands in the Baltic Sea—their agency, if you will—is substantial, shaping the bonds between place and people in specific ways. It formats the organisation of diversity differently from mainlands, producing a repository for a collection of ideas about the primordial, essential, archaic, and endemic in societies otherwise describing themselves as ever more multicultural, global and postmodern.

Endnotes

1 The word is derived from the ancient ethnonym ‘got’, English ‘Goth’.
2 According to one survey, Sweden has 221,800 islands (Ansén and Justusson, 2001; Källgård, 2005). If the many islands in the Swedish speaking areas along the west coast of Finland and in the Åland archipelago, with the world’s highest density of islands (Depraetere and Dahl, 2007: 71) are counted, the number is likely to be around 300,000.

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