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“Oh ! Island in the Sun”: Telling the Gotlandic Story

“OH, ISLAND IN THE SUN, WILLED TO ME BY MY FATHER'S HAND. ALL my days I will sing in praise, of your forest, waters, your shining sand.” A popular song refrain from the late 1950's, and a main theme of millions of tourists all over the world. Islands are tempting, enticing. To many they are earthly paradises, Edens of a sort, to which it is necessary to retreat from the anxieties of modern everyday mainland life. Gotland, the biggest of Sweden's islands, in the midst of the Baltic Sea, is one of those island paradises, visited by an ever growing number of tourists, praising if not its forests, at least its waters and shining sand. Gotland—a different land, almost abroad, a limestone Hawaii, Sweden's Mallorca, boasts the ads in the tourist brochures. Gotland—where the sun is always shining, where the beaches are all over the place and where the party never stops, the jungle-telegraph goes among the young. Gotland—where the pace of life is slower, and where people live more quietly and relaxed, write the official authorities trying to tempt families and stressed professionals to settle on the island. And then of course the Gotland of the historians, folklorists, archaeologists and antiquarians— the land of ancient sagas and legends, where the medieval is still a part of everyday life, where the old peasant traditions are still alive and where many still speak that ancient, funny-sounding dialect. Last but not least, the Gotland of the islanders themselves, whose songs of praise of the land willed to them by their father's hand mix with other and more blues-like refrains about getting away to mainland places where life is better lead.

There are indeed many ways of telling the Gotlandic story. Here my intention is to dwell upon some of them—an intersection of themes— island narratives, heritage and memory politics, marginalization, production of difference and ambivalence.

For starters, I will relate some of the “basics,” in a rather dry scientific prose. In the second part I turn to a number of short stories as told by Gotlanders about themselves. To end, I will discuss island discourses, heritages and power relations, altering between an ethnologist's and an islander's perspectives.

A Sociological Story: Basics

Gotland is situated approximately 100 km from the Swedish coast, and 180 km from the Estonian coast. The island is 170 km long and 52 km wide, with a total area of 3140 km². Gotland's population is relatively small and stable and has been so for the last decades. Around 58.000 people live here permanently, less than 2% of Sweden's population. Approximately 22.000 live in Visby, the island capital and only city. About as many live in what the population statistics describe as “thinly populated areas,” in vernacular language “country side.” In reality this means that schools, shops, public services and transport are scarce. The depopulation of the countryside

has been rapid and is still going on, except during a couple of months in summer, when the population in some places multiplies 20 times or more (Lundberg, Malm, Ronström 2000).

The population fall into three main categories: Gotlanders, mainlanders and foreigners. 75% of Gotland's population were born on the island. Close to 10% were born in Stockholm County and, again approximately as many are immigrants. The largest group is from Finland, but there are also immigrants from Germany, South America, Estonia, the former Soviet Union, Poland, Bosnia, Iran, and Iraq etc. Many of the immigrants have lived for long on the island and are well integrated socially and culturally.

Most people on Gotland have low earnings. The county of Gotland has for some time been at the bottom of the country's list for taxed income per capita. Increases in pay have been the lowest during the late 1990's. At the same time, food prices are the highest in the country. A consequence of the chronic lack of money is that many accounts are regulated without money, as straightforward favours or through labour exchanges. This rather extensive exchange economy makes local networks strong and creates a high threshold to the mainland, which again reinforces the local networks.

Also levels of education are low. The secondary school in Visby, for many years the only one on the island, is among those with lowest average results in Sweden. The level of education is, however, on the way up, not least thanks to the new Gotland University here in Visby.

The tourists have great importance for life on the island, which makes seasons strongly marked. More than a million people travel to and fro the island every year. It is estimated that more than 100.000 visit Gotland during the annual Medieval week in early August. During the whole summer season the tourists count several hundred thousands. Of these an especially important category is the Summer Gotlanders, or Winter mainlanders as some would like to have it— people who every year spend a large part of the summer vacations on Gotland. It is difficult to ascertain their numbers, but two types play a particularly important role. One consists of more than 21.000 Gotlanders who live on the mainland, of which a large part maintain close connections with their families and friends. Another is the small, but very influential and mainly Stockholm-based political, economic and intellectual elite that every year moves to their summerhouses on the island.

Traditionally Gotland is farming area. Agriculture still has a prominent position, even if the farmers now are few and their numbers declining. In the north and furthest south there has been a labour-intensive stone industry and thus also a population of workers. Cementa, in Slite, is still northern Europe's biggest supplier of lime-stone for cement, but the number of stone workers nowadays is small and declining. Also other industries are few and are constantly under threat of closure. Unemployment has been high for a long time, particularly among young people. If workers and farmers are becoming fewer, there is an ever-increasing intermediate stratum. Gotland seems to exert an especially powerful attraction on expressive specialists—intellectuals, artists, craftsmen, and musicians. It is likely that there are more expressive specialists in relation to population size than anywhere else in the country.

Since olden times there has also been a small but influential merchant class, "the Visby nobility," which together with governors and administrators from the mainland have ruled the island's inhabitants for centuries. Politically Gotland has long been a stronghold for the political

centre and for the social democrats. The right and left parties have traditionally been small, with their strongest base in Visby.

So, in general Gotland's social and cultural geography is easily surveyed. As in Sweden in general, centralisation is strong. Close to 40% of the island's inhabitants live in Visby, and it is here you will find almost all administration, education, health services etc. The core is of course the town within the walls, since 1996 a World Heritage site, the Hanseatic City of Visby. The strong emphasis on the Middle Ages and cultural heritage, mainly by a relocated urban intellectual elite, has resulted in few and vague traces of workers, farmers, and immigrants. The countryside is the periphery, dominated as it is by farmers, craftsmen and workers (except for summers!) Between the centre and the periphery, in a growing belt around the town, are Visby's "suburbs," a zone of trade and residence, mainly populated by a growing middle-class.

Islanders' Stories: Past, Heritage and Tradition

The beginning: genesis. According to the old legend, as narrated in the 14th century saga of Gotland, the first man that found Gotland was Tjelvar. He brought fire to the island. Thereby he broke a curse that had plagued the island, forcing it to sink under water during daylight, to rise again only when darkness fell. Tjelvar had a son called Havde. He married Vita stjärna ("White Star") and together they had three sons. The eldest was Graip, to him was given the northern part of the island. The second was Gute, who got the middle part. The third and youngest, Gunnfjaun, got the southern part. These are the forefathers of all Gotlanders and they are still with us in many ways, the local name for a true Gotlander is "gute," "Gute" and "Tjelvar" are ferries to the mainland, "Gute" and "Graip" are football teams, and "Gunnfjauns kapell" is a well-known folk music band.

Then, the legend continues, the descendants of the first three Gotlanders became so many that the island could not feed them all. Every third person was forced to collect their belongings and leave. They refused and first tried to settle in Torsburgen, on the eastside, then on Fårö in the north, then on Dagö in Estonia. Even there they were not able to stay, so after travelling along the rivers through Russia, they at last found a new home in Greece. There they still live and their language still bear traces of the Gotlandic tongue.

All those early Gotlanders have left their traces. The remnants of this first era are exceptionally rich, which makes Gotland a promised land for archaeologists. Satisfaction guaranteed for excavators, money back if you don't find anything! And of course there is an abundance of stories about hidden treasures, to be found only on Thursday nights, when the moon is full, by a direct descendant of the original owner, and by the use of a white horse without even a single black hair. And of course there are also stories about how such treasures have been found, a folklore about folklore, such as the one about Stavgard in southeast Gotland, where some boys, after having listened to their teacher narrating old stories about hidden treasures, stumbled in a rabbit's hole, and found a large silver treasure. This was in the 1970's and of course it was Thursday and full moon. There was no horse involved, but one of the boys seems to be a descendant of the historic person attributed to the treasure.

Another such story is about how the famous golden necklace from Havor in south Gotland was found in the 1960's, how a decade ago it was stolen from the museum in Visby, and who stole it and why it is not yet found. Yet another almost archetypical Gotlandic story is about

the farmer in Othem, northeastern Gotland, who a few years ago ploughed his fields, when suddenly—plonk!— the plough bill hits something. Not a big stone this time, but instead one of the biggest silver treasures found in this part of the world, today at display in the local museum.

Not all things hit by plough bills end up in museums though. There is a special folklore genre about old valuables found by peasants and then either thrown back into deeper holes, or hidden in drawers and lockers, in order to keep the antiquarians and the excavators out of the fields. In some of these stories the antiquarian authorities from town you should always look out for is personified by an elderly woman riding an old bike.¹ Every respectable farmhouse in the island, these narratives go, are keeping such official secrets, golden or silver objects of olden times.

The focal point of Gotlandic storytelling these days, however, is not prehistoric times, but the Middle Ages. In Gotland the Middle Ages is everything but dark, it is the peak period. Visby was the tiger economy of the time: in only a hundred years or so a whole city was built, an impressive city wall, a dozen churches and monasteries, and almost a hundred churches all over the island. In the 13th century Visby had around 12000 inhabitants and was the trade-centre of the Baltic region. Large ruins remind us of the prosperity, and remnants of toilets with running water and a communal sewage system bear witness of the level of civilisation, at a time when the big cities of today still dwelled in poverty and darkness or were not even founded.

But, alas, then the Danish king Valdemar Atterdag invaded the island. A young maiden from southern Gotland, blinded by her love for the king, gave him the keys to the city. For this treason she was later imprisoned in one of the towers of the wall. There she still can be heard moaning and sighing on Thursday nights, which I myself heard several times as a young boy. The king forced the rich merchants in Visby to pay him to leave town, but in a big storm his boats with all the collected treasures sank just outside Stora Karlsö. After this Gotland was thrown into darkness and oblivion, a depression so deep that nobody really seems to have done anything at all of importance for centuries, which explains, at least partly, why the wall, the ruins and all the churches are still around in the 21st century.

The end of the Medieval story marks the beginning of the next, that of the Old Peasant Society. In its classical period, the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, Gotland is often portrayed, as something of a peasant's republic, never conquered, never enslaved, without noblemen or gentry. The official rulers were the governors from the mainland and the small bourgeoisie in Visby. But in reality the peasants mostly ruled themselves, with nearly 100 parishes as their base of power. If not always so well off economically, the peasants nevertheless developed an extremely rich culture, with narratives, music, dance, costumes, folk art and all kinds of other traditions, known to us through the efforts of 19th century folklore collectors, such as the great Per Arvid Säve. A common representation of the proud, self-reliant peasant is that of the self taught folk fiddler, performing the difficult traditional polska tunes of the island.

Up to this point the Gotland saga as generally told on the island has three main parts. As collective memory, all these different stories are organised in large networks, of interlinked practices, ideas, artefacts, institutions etc., what I like to think about as *domains*. The first part, stories about genesis and the prehistoric era, which is often stretched out far into the Viking period, belongs to a domain that in Swedish is called *fornminnen* ("ancient lore"). To this domain

belong excavations, bones, graves and barrows from all over the island. The second part belongs to a domain called *kulturarv* ("cultural heritage"). Its centre is the Middle Ages, culminating in the 12th and 13th centuries. The stories in this domain revolve around Visby, urbanity, the noble and the bourgeoisie, the international or trans-national, culture and civilisation. These two domains have their strongest proponents among intellectuals and professionals in Visby, with the antiquarian authorities as their official spokesmen. Among the proponents of the Middle Ages however we nowadays also find many young re-enactors and live role players. Many of these are mainlanders, of which not so few have moved here to become a part of the mindscapes set up by these domains.

The third part is the *tradition* domain, which has its strongest base among islanders in the countryside, farmers and craftsmen often organised around the old parish-churches. This domain is geared towards the local and regional, the stories are about the peasants, rurality, and the folk. It begins in the 17th century and ends with modernity and the organised collection of folk traditions in the late 19th century.

The three memory producing domains interact and compete in interesting ways. The two most important competitors today are the heritage domain, which has produced a most vivid mindscape in the form of the World Heritage in Visby, and the tradition domain, which in its most concentrated form displays old folk traditions in the open-air museum in Bunge, northern Gotland. The field of tension between the Bunge museum and the Hanseatic town of Visby coincides with most other important fields of tensions with long history in Gotland: rural-urban, low-high, islanders-mainlanders, peasant-workers, intellectuals-bureaucrats etc. A result of this strongly charged set of relations is that other possible heritage productions, built around for example industries and workers' history or around ethnic groups and "multicultural," have become almost totally irrelevant and invisible. A recent massive heritagization of Gotland has led to a shift in the production of cultural representations from tradition to heritage. The result is an urbanisation of publicly displayed and officially sanctioned memorial sites, the "lieux de memoire" of Gotland. This in turn can be related to a number of social, cultural and economical changes in the 1970's and 80's, as well as to changes in the political structures on the island.

All three domains, the ancient lore, the Hanseatic Town and the Old Peasant Society, are fertilized by the insular position. The American historian John Gillis argues that places like Gotland become remote and islanded by being inscribed in an old and widespread figure of thought that departs islands in time and space from their mainlands. To travel to an island is to travel backwards in time, which is why islanders often are described as especially "old-time" and authentic. If the past is a foreign country, Gotland is certainly foreign, being since long remote and islanded, a place already in the past, or of the past, therefore the perfect place for producing mindscapes of the past (Ronström 2000a).

Together the three domains constitute a prerequisite for the next part, the somewhat ambivalent story of today's Gotland, "the different land— almost abroad." On the one hand the land of tourists, sun, beaches, of non-stop parties, and on the other the land of such rich memories, traditions and heritages, that looking backwards becomes the main means of moving forward. Today heritage has become a major industry, and if heritage will be produced in the same pace as during the last decade, many of the islanders will in the future find themselves employed as a kind

of live role players, playing themselves as islanders in one of the worlds' biggest open-air museums.²

An Ethnologist's Story: Islands and Insularity

The word island captures a widely distributed discourse that populates islands with a particular kind of people and ascribes to them a particular kind of consciousness, a distinctive way of thinking and feeling: an island mentality, and a special way of seeing themselves—an island identity. Distance, marginality and distinctiveness form the core of the discourse. About this revolve two loosely connected packages of perceptions, seemingly opposed but in fact closely related as each other's mirror image.

In one package there is the positive: closeness, warmth, *gemeinschaft*. After seven years of intensive travels to islands all over the world, Anders Källgård, a Swedish traveller and nesomaniac ("island freak"), summarizes his impressions of island people. "Homo insularis," he claims, "is characterized by interest for his fellow human beings, contentment, kindness, dignity and style. Island people are less stressed, cooperate more, show integrity, and are proud and stubborn enough to resist the latest fashionable trends. In short, Homo insularis have a higher life quality than mainlanders" (Källgård 1994).

Even if Gotland is not among the islands visited by Källgård, his quite impressive list of positive adjectives nevertheless fits well into to the discourse about Gotlanders and their island mentality. The point about stubbornness and resistance seems to be especially well developed. We find it condensed form in the anecdote about the old Gotlander who, after having been shown the pyramids and other miracles of the world, is not at all impressed but instead says "*De där, de har vi hemma me de!*" ["Oh that? We have that at home too!"].

The flipside of the coin is the negative: inbreeding, backwater and stagnation. It is commonly believed that Gotlanders practice in-group marriage, endogamy, which has given many of them an extra backbone. They are said to be slow, unwilling to take action, suspicious about changes. The common idea is that nothing ever happens on the island. "It will never work!" is the standard reaction to new ideas and projects. If a new project still becomes a success, you bet it is because it is a mainlander behind it. Even if much of what is produced on the island is of high quality, it is often difficult to convince islanders that this is the case. This is partly the result of the everyday practice of marginalization, which has created a deeply rooted perception of always being behind, that what comes from without and in particular from the big cities is better and classier.

A common archetypical anecdote that summarizes these both sides is about the old man who never left Gotland, never sat his foot on the mainland. Another version is about the man from Fårö, an island north of Gotland, who also never sat his foot on the mainland, which in this case is Gotland. One the one hand there is the positive, his self-reliant attitude, his originality and authenticity and on the other the negative, a man with a hopelessly backwards attitude, without perspectives and future.

Islands attract and repel. The "double discourse" about islands and their inhabitants is in itself a sign of marginalization. A common story about Gotlanders is that they are not only old-fashioned and backwards, they are also, as we already have heard, poorer, less well educated, more often unemployed and live shorter lives than the rest of Sweden's population. But, living on

an island full of beauty, art, history, tradition and heritage, their lives are happier, simpler, more innocent and authentic. This story about esthetical compensation for relative deprivation and marginalization is part of a widespread discourse of subordination of the other (whether being Gotlanders, immigrants, gypsies or savages).

A lot could be said of what this island discourse expresses. More important is that it creates what it describes—a clear boundary with the surrounding world and within this boundary a conception of a fundamental similarity and belonging. There are constant negotiations as to what this similarity is based on and what it means. However, most people seem to agree that it exists. A clear and consistent administrative superstructure not least expresses this. Gotland is a very distinctly bounded unit, an ethnographer's dream in that sense, since all kinds of cultural and administrative borders coincide: it is a landscape, a military area, a commune, a county, a diocese, it has a head councillor, a county governor, a bishop, a distinctive dialect— or language if you wish— and that special island mentality.

The perceived unity and fellowship result in differences being relegated to the background even when they belong to the most prominent aspects. And there are many types of differences and boundaries on the island. ³ The rhetorically prescribed unity is highly conditional. The relevance of the differences depends on the context and situation. Without doubt, the most important boundary is the great watershed that separates islanders from mainlanders, whether they are from Stockholm, Cologne or Madagascar. At Visby airport there once were two mailboxes, one marked "Gotland" and the other "Mainland," which meant the rest of the world. Today the post boxes are gone, but this way of organising the world into two parts, near and far, local and global, is still alive. Many mainlanders who have moved here share an insurmountable feeling of exclusion: "One cannot become a Gotlander, one is born to it." Some say it takes three generations, while others claim seven. At the same time many natives share a feeling of inferiority and subordination. Power has always come from without. Even today the majority of managers in business, regional government, county council and other authorities are from the mainland, most particularly from Stockholm.

However clear-cut and important, boundaries are constantly crossed. People have always moved back and forth across the Baltic Sea, today perhaps more than ever. Many find themselves in a condition of migration: daily commuters, weekly commuters, all of the soldiers, students, conference delegates and Summer Gotlanders. Many islanders have their own experiences of long journeys and stays in foreign countries. Their horizons are often anything but local, such as the farmer selling his produce on markets in Germany, the guitarist whose CD's sell in Beijing, or the medieval enthusiasts in the worldwide Society for Creative Anachronism. The influx from without is and has in fact been a continuous factor in life on Gotland as far back as we can see. It is then important to remember that the boundary with the mainland is symbolic, which is why it is possible to maintain, despite all the traffic. The boundary's function is to create feelings of separateness, distinctiveness and *gemeinschaft*. As mentioned these feelings have two sides. One is a prominent pride for what is ours, with an independent and sometimes self-sufficient attitude. The other is a feeling of being the underdog: they are up there, we are down here. Here we find one of the causes of the prominent ambivalence in the islanders' relationship both to Gotland and the mainland.

This ambivalence is reinforced by a couple of processes connected to two of the main themes of the discussion so far, the boundary between islanders and mainlanders and the marginality that comes with being remote and islanded. As John Gillis notices, in most places largely people "from away" generate the recent wave of interest in genealogy and local history. Their appreciation of the place they have moved to is constituted through a temporal distance, making them oblivious to the presentist concerns of the locals. And, as John Gillis puts it, "when strangers have the power to impose their image of there and then on a place, the local's sense on living in the here and now is notably heightened." This is certainly the case in Gotland. Among islanders it is not uncommon to mutter over the annual invasion of medievalists. There is even a mock-resistance movement among the most daring refuseniks, jokingly called "*Våga vägra medeltiden*" [Dare to refuse the Middle Ages"]. And as Gillis also notices, islanders today often find themselves promoting the image of remoteness as vital to the tourist trade, while at the same time struggling against the notions of backwardness and inferiority that this image brings about. This is also true of Gotlanders, who, as so many other islanders internalise remoteness as a feeling of inferiority and backwardness, ultimately leading the younger generation to migrate.

Finale: Versatility, Surveyability, Overlap

What is it like to live on an island? How does islandness shape islanders' life-worlds and identities? First of all, island life, it seems, is a life among stories, of stories, in stories. The watershed clearly constitutes a major horizon for local understanding of local life. But what does this understanding do to local life? Most importantly, the perceived distance to the mainland means that the islanders often feel forced in the first instance to trust their own resources. This has a number of interesting consequences for the shaping of local identity. Especially three factors characterize social life on Gotland in general. One is *versatility*. Many are polymaths, moving from job to job, project to project, in the most varied professions. Their combined resources are thereby vastly increased and also relatively easily mobilised. Versatility promotes rich networks of contacts across boundaries, but at the same time counteracts specialisation in narrow fields. This does not of course mean that there are not those with specialist knowledge, but they are often specialists in several fields. As much competency as possible must be accessible locally, but there is not room for many specialists of each sort. Specialists therefore easily become alone in their area of expertise. Another striking feature is *surveyability*, or transparency. Many have a good overview of their areas of activity and can therefore easily activate the resources they need for their projects and events. Yet another striking feature is *overlap*. The same people are active in many areas, in many roles and also thereby gain access to many contact surfaces of different sorts.

Taken together these three factors, versatility, surveyability and overlap, make the local structure strong by forging many bonds between people, which together become strong bonds.⁴ As a consequence, people tend to become visible as individuals rather than as group members. Their competency, interest, style or taste tends to be focussed rather than their origin or "culture." Another important quality of Gotlandic cultural life, partly a consequence of the three factors mentioned, is that it is "flat." A critical and evaluation stratum that is able to ascribe or remove cultural capital is missing. The role of the newspapers is mainly that of reporting that something has occurred and to see to it that all participants are included in the photograph and have their name mentioned. This results in most of what happens ending up on the same plane,

that the division between "high" and "low" culture does not have that much relevance. It can in turn have positive effects on the diversity of forms of expression because the thresholds for cultural production, as well as the investments and risks, are low. It does, however, also mean that thresholds with the mainland and beyond are reinforced.

All of this together means that "cultural diversity" on Gotland take on different meaning and form than in cities such as Stockholm, for example, where so much of the public rhetoric of multi-culture and diversity centres on the relationship between Swedes and immigrants. Diversity in Gotland is more dependent on "a few who do many things" than on "many who each do a few things."

Constant crossing of boundaries and constant overlapping make the islanders' pathways intimately linked to each other. But many of these pathways also reach far beyond local contexts. For Gotlanders the local environment is a point of intersection, not a point of departure or destination. Like "island," "local" makes us think of something bounded, limited, with an undertone of communality. But the local need not be the most important arena for local social life. That which appears to be a local concern may at the same time have regional, national or transnational meaning. In such situations the local becomes just one horizon of many that are simultaneously accessible, and for those involved perhaps not at all the most important. There are no clear rules or regulations for how the local islanders pathways are organised. The most apparent thing is the complexity, that they are not only different, but also differently different.

And so, building the grand narrative of Gotland is an ongoing enterprise at different levels, in different domains, referring to different discourses. All these attempts to tell the Gotlandic story also contribute to the larger project of understanding the relationship between islands in narratives, narrated islands, islands experienced and islands imagined.

Notes

1. Most likely, this alludes to "Forn-Greta" Arvidsson, a former director at the museum in Visby.
2. Cf. Staiff, "Contemporary Tourism Issues. Venice: A Case Study .
3. One that is still partially existent separates workers' Gotland, mainly in the northern and southern parts of the island, from rural Gotland, whose seat is in the centre of the island.
4. An argument often repeated about ethnicity.

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