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The Norwegian Term ‘Coastal Culture’ and the Movement Associated with It

In this paper I will discuss the Norwegian term *kystkultur* (*‘coastal culture’*), which has been frequently used in Norway in recent decades. The perspective is a historiographical and programmatic one. At the end of the paper I will discuss whether it is fruitful to use this term in an academic context today.

The term *kystkultur* has been defined as ‘culture which is specific to people or the population living near the shore’.¹ *Kystkultur* is often translated as ‘*coastal culture*’, but I believe this is not a very common expression in English. To test this, I conducted a small, unpretentious internet survey based on Google in which I googled the term *coastal culture*.²

Country	Hits	
Norway	49	
USA	16	
the Baltic States	7	
Oceania	5	
Canada	5	
the Far East	4	
Latin America	4	
Denmark	3	
the Middle East	2	Googling the term <i>coastal culture</i> – the first 100 hits sorted geographically (Source: www.google.com)
Africa	2	
Iceland	1	

Of the first 100 hits, 49 were on Norwegian web pages – nearly 50 per cent! This confirms my suspicions – *coastal culture* is indeed a characteristically Norwegian expression. I also had three Danish hits, one Icelandic one and seven in the Baltic states (some of which may have been written by Norwegians or Danes). I did not get any hits in the United Kingdom, which indicates that the term is not common in British English. I had five hits in Canada and 16 in the USA, where the majority were on web pages from North and South Carolina and Georgia. In these states on the south-east coast of the USA, it seems that the term *coastal culture* is becoming increasingly popular, and is being actively used in the process of constructing a regional identity. The other hits were five in Oceania, four in the Far East, four in Latin America, two in the Middle East and two in Africa. The instances of use of the expression in Africa and Asia are perhaps direct translations of native idiomatic expressions, as in Norway. It would certainly be interesting to hear other points of view on this little survey.

What, then, is the meaning of *coastal culture*? If you ask an average Norwegian, the term will perhaps first bring to mind the conservation of old sailing ships. Due to the efforts of the move-

ment called 'The Coast', or *Kysten* in Norwegian, most Norwegians associate the term *coastal culture* with the conservation of material reminders of the 'old days'. The *Kysten* movement was established in 1979 and in its early years was closely linked with the 'survivors' of the 1968 movement and the eco-philosophically oriented so-called *green wave* of the 1970s.³ In the 1980s and 1990s the movement was reaching out to broad segments of the population, and *Kysten* now has influence on Norway's highest administrative and political organs. Today *Kysten* has over 100 local organizations with a total of about 9,000 members. The movement owns over 4,000 vessels, runs 15 so-called coastal cultural centres and has the use of 25 larger properties and eleven lighthouses. The members' magazine has over 20,000 readers.⁴ Today the term *coastal culture* is also used by the authorities, and every year the Directorate for Cultural Heritage of Norway arranges a coastal culture conference.⁵

In an academic context, the term *coastal culture* was first used by Norwegian ethnologists in the 1960s and 1970s. Marine ethnology was then a popular trend, inspired by a Swede, the late Olof Hasslöf.⁶ In the 1970s another Swede, Orvar Löfgren, became the leading marine ethnologist, with his classic study of Bua in Halland in Sweden.⁷ Löfgren was inspired by so-called ecological functionalism, but there were several different approaches in the varied field of maritime ethnology.⁸ The Swedish and Danish marine ethnologists, however, scarcely used the term *coastal culture*, and after the 1970s most of the Scandinavian ethnologists moved on to other topics. In Norway, however, the term was frequently used, for instance at the Norwegian Maritime Museum. In 1985 a curator at this museum, Svein Molaug, published a book called *Vår gamle kystkultur* ('Our old coastal culture').⁹

One may use the method of deconstruction to criticize the title of Molaug's book. The word *our* and the use of the word *coastal culture* in the singular, suggests that the Norwegians have a common past. This does not adequately reflect the regional, local, social and ethnical variations along the country's long coastline. During the nineteenth century, Norway saw several different coastal adaptations to the sea, which created different economic cultures: these included the adaptation to seafaring in the south and the east, the adaptation to the herring fisheries in the south-west and different adaptations to cod fisheries in the north-west and the north. The country also had the seafaring Romany people in the south, who lived in old fishing vessels, and the Saami people in the north. The word *our* also excludes the foreign impulses which the coastal culture receives through fisheries and seafaring. Ports of all kinds are arenas of cultural exchange. The fact that the social environment in the ports and in the fisheries is going through continuous and rapid change gives them a labile character and increases the speed of the process of cultural diffusion.¹⁰ The word *old* points to a static, possibly even an ahistoric view of the past. The word is also associated with the expression *the good old days*, and, as the Danish historian Poul Holm has pointed out, the title implies that the era of a coastal culture is over.¹¹

The title *Vår gamle kystkultur* is a variation on *Vår gamle bondekultur* ('Our old peasant culture'), which was published in 1908.¹² The idolizing of the old peasant culture was essential to the rebuilding of Norway's national identity during the nationalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Folklore and national costumes created 'frozen' stereotypes of the glorious rural past. Compared to this, the coast was too strongly associated with foreign influences to fit into the stereotype of a pure 'untouched' nation. This was reflected, for instance, in the language. The creator of the so-called *New Norwegian*, Ivar Aasen, considered the dialects in the coastal areas in the south to be severely damaged because they were influenced by foreign languages such as Danish and Dutch. It was the free Norwegian peasant and land-owner who was the symbol of the young nation, not the coastal dweller who often worked for others and perhaps did not even own the ground on which his house stood. People overlooked the fact that some of the most typical national symbols of Norway, like the rose-painting and the old

wooden stave churches, were originally introduced from foreign countries. The foreign impulses spread to the distant valleys and inner parts of the country through the coastal villages and cities, which functioned as catalysts in the process of cultural diffusion.

The fact that the free farmer was the symbol of national identity was of course also reflected in Norwegian historiography. In 1963 there was a survey of the profile of articles published in the national academic journal for local history, *Heimen*. During the 41 years of the journal's existence, only three short articles on seafaring and two on fisheries history had been printed.¹³ In short, the maritime heritage did not play an important part in the process of building a national identity in Norway, in contrast to other countries such as Portugal.

The ethnologist Johan Kloster, who is a former curator of the Norwegian Maritime Museum, thinks that the term *coastal culture* and the movement associated with it is a new way of building nationalistic stereotypes, just as folklore was in the early twentieth century.¹⁴ I think he is right, but I also think that Norway, a country where four out of five people live in close proximity to the sea, does actually deserve stereotypes in which the coastal culture plays a more important part. People cannot live without stereotypes, but the stereotypes should be as representative as possible. People living around the coastline of south Norway a hundred years ago were, for instance, sailors and pilots who lived by the sea, and yet the regional costume of the counties in the south is based wholly on costumes from 100 kilometres inland. In recent years new national costumes have been introduced, based on the costumes of sailors and fishermen.¹⁵

Let us return to the academic use of the term *coastal culture*. Most Norwegian historians prefer the terms *maritime history* or *marine history*. Perhaps they do not choose to use the expression *coastal culture* because it is considered rather vague, or perhaps because it has become too much associated with the amateurism of the popular movement *Kysten*. Ethnologists and the museum industry, however, have not distanced themselves from the popular movement and have continued to use the term *coastal culture*. Some ethnologists have, however, spoken against it. Johan Kloster considers that the term should be confined to the sphere of political campaigning, where it has proved successful.¹⁶ It could be added that the term also seems effective when it comes to attracting visitors to the museums. The authorities are giving away large amounts of money to build so-called coastal cultural centres and to restore old vessels.

Johan Kloster believes that if the term *coastal culture* is to be used in an academic context at all, then variations in time and space need to be emphasized more. Kloster's definition of the term reflects the ethnological point of view. He defines *culture* as 'the techniques, both material and non-material, which human beings have learned in order to achieve development and adapt to changing conditions of life.'¹⁷ This 'broad' way of defining culture has roots that go back to the nineteenth century.

In the last twenty years cultural studies have been more concerned with semiotics. Many researchers prefer to approach culture through signs (*the linguistic turn*), and interpret these signs. Studies of culture are associated with shared beliefs, values and habits and with the history of mentalities and micro-history. That does not fit in with the broad definition of culture which is used in the term *coastal culture*, and this can cause confusion. Several researchers who deal with 'coastal culture' are in fact writing economic history, which is far from the narrower meaning of the word *culture*.

One may discuss whether it is fruitful to talk about *cultures* in the plural. Does this create artificial boundaries? The broad definition of culture could perhaps be replaced by the term *way of life*. Do we, on the whole, need the term *coastal culture* (or *coastal cultures*)? My answer to this is, subject to some modifications, 'yes'. The use of the term could be advocated because:

- 1) *Coastal culture* is a forceful and popular term that has proved effective in political campaigning, and this has resulted in the release of considerable funds to preserve the material legacy of the coastal heritage, which in turn fosters a greater interest in the history of the coast.
- 2) *Coastal culture* is a useful umbrella term to cover such research fields as seafaring history, fisheries history, navigation and piloting history, oil history and the history of lighthouses and other material symbols of the cultural heritage. The research fields just mentioned are very closely linked, but perhaps too often the researchers have not cooperated adequately, and we therefore lose a potential synergetic effect. The term *coastal culture* emphasizes the whole community of the coast and the things that coastal dwellers share, not just the separate industries and societies.
- 3) The word *culture* is in itself charged with associations and encourages us to work more across the academic disciplines and to cooperate more with the social and cultural sciences, not just with other historians.¹⁸

However, I would also suggest some modifications regarding the use of this term:

- 1) Researchers should work on injecting more history into the term *coastal culture*, and should focus on the people, not only on the material legacy of the coastal culture. The main focus in maritime history, as in history in general, is supposed to be on people, not vessels.
- 2) We should also focus more on the semiotics and the history of mentalities, which means coastal culture in the narrow sense of the word *culture*. To interpret culture through signs (such as art, fiction, costumes, different kinds of boats and shanties) can be very useful, and I would postulate that we need more hermeneutics in the field of maritime history. The hermeneutic angle brings the research on coastal culture into closer connection with the current paradigms in other research fields, both in history and in other academic disciplines. Of course we also need traditional economic history, which is the backbone of the research field. The combination of economic history and the new cultural history could prove most fruitful.
- 3) We must not use the expression *coastal culture* to create an artificial division between the inland regions and the coast or between agriculture and the coastal adaptations. The connections between the different landscapes and cultures must not be neglected, and we should not be 'coastal cultural fundamentalists'. In the western part of Norway, for instance, the fiords create gradual transitions between the coastal and the inland landscape. This in turn creates gradual transitions between the coastal and the inland culture, which also result in complex mental landscapes. Such examples are common.
- 4) As Johan Kloster and Poul Holm point out, the term *coastal culture* must not be tied to a static view of the past. The ethnic, regional and local variations and the changes through time must be emphasized more. This can be done through active and reflective use of the expression. In addition we need a stronger focus on how we pass on the coastal cultural heritage. Both this and the term *coastal culture* have, from time to time, to be examined through the application of a metaperspective.

Notes:

- 1 Trygve Knudsen and Alf Sommerfelt (eds.), *Norsk riksmålsordbok*, volume II (Bærum, 1991): 2830.
- 2 www.google.com.
- 3 Nini Fritzner, *Lyngør. Lokalsamfunn eller fritidsby?*, MA thesis (University of Oslo, 1983): 102–104.
- 4 www.kysten.no/document.asp?uid=760; www.kysten.no/document.asp?uid=168; www.kysten.no/document.asp?uid=129.
- 5 www.rbl.no/nyheter.asp?NyhetId=4576.

- 6 Olof Hasslöf, Henning Henningsen and Arne Emil Christensen (eds.), *Sømand, fisker, skib og værft: introduktion til maritim etnologi* (København, 1970); Orvar Löfgren, 'Etnologisk kulturanalys från sextiotial till nittiotial,' in: Anders Gustavsson (ed.), *Nordisk etnologi och folkloristik under 1980-talet* (Uppsala, 1990).
- 7 Orvar Löfgren, *Fångstmän i industrisamhället. En halländsk kustbygds omvandling 1800–1970* (Lund, 1977).
- 8 Poul Holm, *Kystfolk. Kontakter og sammenhænge over Kattegat og Skagerrak ca. 1550–1914* (Esbjerg, 1991): 15–17.
- 9 Svein Molaug, *Vår gamle kystkultur*, volume I–II (Oslo, 1985).
- 10 Dag Hundstad, *Sørlandske uthavnssamfunn – fra maritime monokulturer til fritidssamfunn*, MA thesis (University of Bergen, 2004).
- 11 Poul Holm, 'Kystkultur som forskningsemne,' in: *Kystsamfunnets materielle kultur*, Museumsnettverket 5 (Norges Forskningsråd, Oslo, 1995): 7–8.
- 12 Kristoffer Visted, *Vor gamle bondekultur* (Kristiania 1908).
- 13 Lars Reinton, 'Sjøfarts-, fiske- og fangst historie,' *Heimen*, volume 12 (1961–1963): 529.
- 14 Johan Kloster, 'Kystkultur – en begrepsdrøfting,' *Norsk Sjøfartsmuseum Årsberetning* (Oslo, 1997): 70, 76.
- 15 See for instance: www.kystdrakten.no/KD/Kystdrakten.nsf/VisDrakt?OpenForm&D=H.
- 16 Bente Foldvik, 'Sagt på stevnet: Fartøyer som framtidssjessurs', *Kysten*, no. 4 (2002): 39.
- 17 Kloster, *Kystkultur*: 70, 76.
- 18 Brynjulv Gjerdåker, 'Kultur – ein inngangsdør til kysthistoria?', *Heimen*, no. 4 (1992): 215.

Der norwegische Begriff der »Küstenkultur« und die mit ihr verbundene Bewegung

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Aufsatz wird der Begriff der »Küstenkultur« diskutiert. Hierbei handelt es sich um die Übersetzung des idiomatischen norwegischen Ausdrucks *kystkultur*, und eine einfache Internetrecherche zeigt, dass dieser Ausdruck noch immer häufig in Norwegen verwendet wird. Die Verwendung des Begriffs steht meist in Verbindung mit der Erhaltung alter Segelschiffe und anderen Memoiren aus der maritimen Vergangenheit, beeinflusst durch die volkstümliche Bewegung Kysten (»Die Küste«). In mancher Hinsicht könnte man argumentieren, dass die Bewegung der »Küstenkultur« ein neuer Weg sei, um nationale romantische Stereotypen herauszubilden, und zwar in Hinblick auf die Verherrlichung der alten bäuerlichen Kultur während des Nationalismus des 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhunderts. Einige behaupteten sogar, dass der Begriff möglicherweise zu einem allzu statischen Blick auf die maritime Vergangenheit führen könne, in der Abweichungen und Veränderungen in Zeit und Raum ungenügend weitervermittelt wurden. In der Welt der Wissenschaft wurde der Begriff »Küstenkultur« nicht häufig verwendet, möglicherweise weil er als unklar galt oder weil er mit der Stümperhaftigkeit der Volksbewegung assoziiert wurde.

Die Verwendung des Ausdrucks »Küstenkultur« könnte aus verschiedenen Gründen dennoch befürwortet werden. Es handelt sich um einen beliebten und machtvollen Begriff, der in politi-

scher Agitation einen Erfolg gezeitigt hat und ein wertvoller Ausdruck dafür ist, unterschiedlichste Bereiche der maritimen Geschichte miteinander zu vereinen. Weiterhin ist das Wort »Kultur« selbst angefüllt mit Assoziationen und lädt Historiker zu interdisziplinärem Arbeiten ein. In jedem Fall sollte betont werden, dass die Geschichte der »Küstenkultur«, ebenso wie Geschichte im Allgemeinen, sich auf Menschen konzentrieren sollte und nicht so sehr auf das Material an sich. Der Begriff sollte weder gebraucht werden, um künstlich eine Trennung von Inland und Küste herbeizuführen, noch um einen statischen Blick auf die Vergangenheit zu kreieren. Vielmehr sollte es einen stärkeren Zusammenhang zwischen der Forschung an der »Küstenkultur« und neuer Kulturgeschichte geben, wodurch maritime Geschichte und gegenwärtige Paradigmen anderer Forschungsfelder enger verbunden werden könnten.

Le terme norvégien de «culture côtière» et le mouvement qui lui est lié

Résumé

Dans cet article, c'est le terme norvégien de «culture côtière» qui sera discuté. Il s'agit ici de la traduction de l'expression idiomatique *kystkultur*, et une simple recherche lancée sur Internet montre à quel point ce terme est toujours employé en Norvège, souvent en rapport avec la conservation d'anciens voiliers et d'autres souvenirs maritimes du passé, et l'influence du mouvement nationaliste-populiste *Kysten* («La côte») se fait ressentir. À certains égards, on pourrait argumenter que ce mouvement de la «culture côtière» est une nouvelle manière de procéder pour cristalliser des stéréotypes nationaux et romantiques et cela en vue de glorifier l'ancienne culture paysanne que prônait le courant de nationalisme au XIX^e et au début du XX^e siècles. Certaines personnes affirment même que le terme pourrait mener à porter un regard trop statique sur le passé maritime, en transmettant de manière insuffisante des écarts et des changements dans le temps et l'espace. Dans le monde de la science, le terme de «culture côtière» n'a pas été très souvent employé, probablement parce qu'il semblait peu clair ou bien parce qu'il était associé à l'étroitesse d'esprit du mouvement national-populiste.

On pourrait toutefois, pour différentes raisons, plaider malgré tout pour l'emploi de l'expression «culture côtière», car il s'agit d'une expression appréciée et lourde de pouvoir, qui a obtenu un résultat au cours d'une période d'agitation politique, et d'une expression précieuse lorsqu'il s'agit de réunir les domaines les plus différents qui soient de l'histoire maritime. En outre, le mot «culture» est lui-même chargé d'associations et invite les historiens à mener des travaux interdisciplinaires. En tout cas, il faudrait souligner que l'histoire de la «culture côtière», tout comme l'histoire en général, devrait davantage se concentrer sur les personnes et moins sur le matériel. Le terme ne devrait être utilisé ni pour effectuer une séparation artificielle entre les terres et la côte ni pour jeter un regard statique sur le passé. Il s'agit bien plus de créer un contexte plus étroit entre la recherche sur la «culture côtière» et la nouvelle histoire culturelle, l'histoire maritime et les paradigmes actuels d'autres champs de recherche pourraient alors être plus intimement liés.