

Givaer Island, on the arctic coast of Norway – a multifaceted economy surviving on heritage skills

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ABSTRACT: Givaer is a small community rich in cultural heritage with buildings from the 17th century onward. Life in this community is based on fishing and husbandry traditions. In addition to threats from natural causes like storms and heavy seas, the built heritage is threatened by a lack of understanding for the necessity of zoning, as holiday homes are erected on the island. The Society for the Preservation of Norwegian Ancient Monuments (*Fortidsminneforeningen*) hopes to assist the islanders to continue living on Givaer. This paper points to the necessity of keeping the traditional daily life running to help people continue to live away from more densely built-up areas. In this way the built heritage and the intangible heritage might be protected in the simplest way. The study will provide knowledge of use in supporting similar small scale communities in Norway.

1 INTRODUCTION

Norway has a population of five millions. Bodö is a coastal town of 50 000 inhabitants, and is the administrative, commercial and commuter center of Nordland County. Northern Norway is dominated by fjords and mountains. A good harbor was of importance for settlement. The coast has a variety of smaller islands, with scattered settlements, near the fishing grounds.

The Givaer Islands are 4 nautical miles out at sea west of Bodö, comprising 40 – 50 skerries and islands of which the largest is only 0.1 km². Givaer was from the earliest times a seasonal fishing village for people living inland in the fjords, in the inner part of Salten. To-day there are 20 people living on Givaer.

2 LIVELIHOOD

2.1 Fisheries and agriculture

Traditionally the fishing was done from small open vessels, limiting the possibility of catching fish far out on the open sea. The modern one-man fishing vessel is able to take heavy seas. The fisheries are still the basic mean of income for people living on Givaer, also because the catches can be delivered here. The quay from 1978 for the passenger ferry and

for the modern fishing vessels has the cool-storage facilities necessary to maintain the quality of the fish. The catch is brought here by the fishermen and taken onward from Givaer to Bodö by the daily commuting vessel.

From the Middle Ages, or at least from AD 1400, the summer fisheries for coalfish, were primarily undertaken by the men living in the inner parts of Salten, deep in the fjords. They built small fishermen's cabins to stay in for the weeks when in Givaer. There were as many as 500 men here in 1811 (Gudbrandson 1978:105). (The winter fisheries are in Lofoten and further north.) To-day's fishing is primarily undertaken by men living in Givaer.

The livelihood on the coast of Norway has always been a combination of agriculture and fisheries, so also in Givaer. The women were in charge of the activities on land and the men were in charge of the fisheries. The conditions for agriculture are marginal on Givaer, and on these small islands every small patch of grass is taken care of for the cattle.



Figure 1. Northern Europe. Map drawing Gisle Jakhelln.

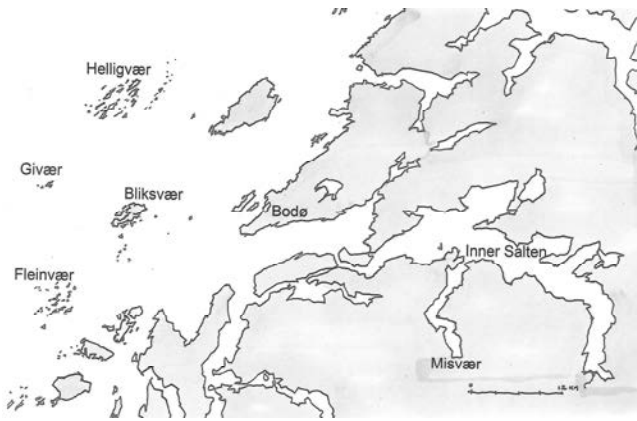


Figure 2. Salten with Givaer out west, Bodø, and Inner Salten to the east. Map drawing Gisle Jakhelln.

2.2 Eider ducks

Part of the income came from seagull's eggs. These were collected and sold. Each family had the rights to specific islands for collecting eggs. This is still the case.

Eggs were collected from the eider ducks as well, but of much greater importance was the eiderdown collected from their nests. The building of sheds for the eider ducks is a living tradition. These sheds might be upturned old boats or specially constructed small houses. This tradition of building sheds probably goes as far back as the Iron Age and the Viking Age, if not further. However, the building of wooden sheds is a tradition some 200 years of age (Suul 2012).

The eiderdown is used for 'downies' (quilts) – for the beds. The price of 1 kg of eiderdown was equivalent to the price of one cow, and this is so even today. To collect 1 kg you need about 80 nests. (Suul 2012). To-day in Givaer 100 birds are being looked after. There is a mutually beneficial relationship between birds and humans. And if the people should



Figure 3. Givaer. The quay from 1978 with the built-up area behind. Photo: Gisle Jakhelln 2009.

leave, the eider ducks will leave too. The work with the eider ducks and the down is the responsibility of the housewife, with assistance from the children. The tradition of keeping the eider ducks' houses is maintained, also the building of new houses. (This is true vernacular architecture.) There might be from six to 20 nests inside one house, or even more.

3 THE BUILT HERITAGE

3.1 Fishermen's cabins

The old fishermen's cabins which remain are mostly on the southwestern part of the island. There are eight cabins here. Earlier there were 50 on the island, as far as we know (Riksantikvaren 1978).

The cabins have not been in use for many years as the fishermen to-day live in houses on Givaer all the year round. Many of the cabins are still owned by people living in the inner parts of the fjord. The important heritage represented by the cabins was understood by one of the locals who in 1975 started doing repair works on some of them. The cabins have log construction for the main room and timber framing for the entrance room. This was a normal way of building up to the beginning of the 20th C. The log construction gives better thermal insulation for the main room. It would have been too hot with the fireplace in the main room. The main room provided sleeping and living facilities for eight people. The Arne cabin, possibly built around 1870, has been rehabilitated (by *Fortidsminneforeningen*) and may be used by visitors to the island.

Some of the cabins have been dated using dendrochronology studies. The Klungset cabin is so far the oldest in Givaer, dating from 1601 (Brekke 2011). Being built before 1650, the building is automatically protected in accordance with the Cultural



Figure 4. Givaer. Fishermen's cabins and eider ducks' houses (Klungset-bua, 1610, to the left). Photo: Gisle Jakhelln 2009.

Heritage Act. The timber joinery is of the same type as is found in the Inner Salten, called *misvær-laft*, named after the locality where this special type of notching was registered for the first time, some ten years ago. (The position and shape of the neck is slightly different from that which is common in Southern Norway from the same period.) The oldest house still standing in Misvær is dated to 1510 (Sjøholt 2006).

The wharf, “*brygga*”, is one of the building types found in a fishing village. It contains rooms for storing equipment, fishing gear, goods etc. The wharf is a one story or two storied building, built on the seashore to handle goods directly from the boats. The boatshed, “*naust*”, is another important building type on the island.



Figure 4. One of the old wharfs. In the background another wharf and boatsheds. Photo: 1912 Unknown. Property of Alf Sivertsen.

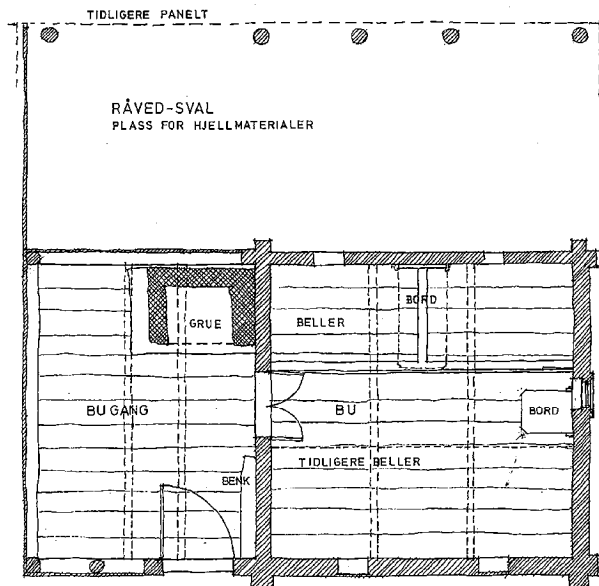


Figure 5. Pe-Nilssobua, 1650 (?). Fishermen’s cabin. Entrance room with the open fireplace to the left. Sleeping/living area to the right. Storage for timber at the back. Drawing: Gisle Jakhelln 1986.

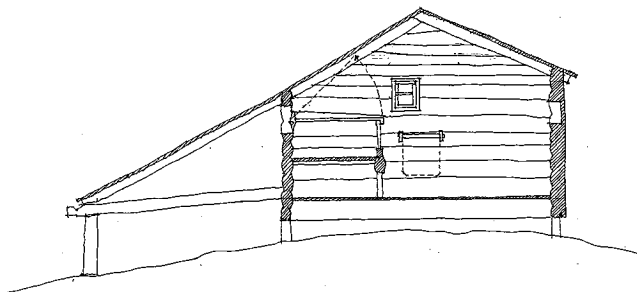


Figure 6. Pe-Nilssobua, 1650 (?). Fishermen’s cabin. Section. Drawing: Gisle Jakhelln 1986.

3.2 Lodgings

The central area on the island is called the Farm – “*Gården*”. Houses for living are in all sizes, both one-family houses and larger houses for several generations. The traditional layout of a house in this northern part of Norway is based on a three-room plan with the building’s axis west-east, following the prevailing winds. A new generation might extend the house lengthwise with a repetition of the layout, leading to quite a long structure. (The Nordland House is a 1½ - 2 story timber construction, fairly narrow and fairly long with the room layout and siting taking into consideration the climatic conditions on the site: the sunlight, the prevailing winds and the snow accumulation.)

The width of the house is c. 5 m, the length of a log. The rooms span the width of the house and have windows on both sides. Smaller rooms are partitioned off from larger rooms. The entrance door is never on the gable wall. In later years the entrance has an added porch.



Figure 7. Eider ducks’ house. Photo: Gisle Jakhelln 2009.

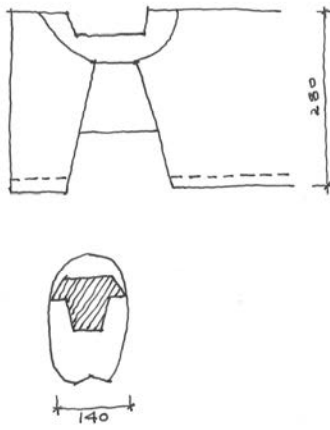


Figure 6. Detail of notching, “*Misvaer-laft*”. Pe-Nilsso-bua, 1650 (?). Fishermen’s cabin. Drawing: Gisle Jakhelln 2009.

The central area on the island is fairly densely built. Buildings for agriculture include the byre, in log construction, with a hay loft upstairs in timber framing. Because of the small patches of grass, the cows were moved between the different islands during summer. Small cowsheds were built on the islands for milking.

There is a building for electricity production and the production for drinking water by osmosis-system. There has been a post office here since 1911.

In later years holiday homes have been built on the northern part of the island. The traditional way of using the landscape might be disrupted should these new buildings be built among the oldest buildings, threatening the historical heritage of the island. However, if kept on the northern part holiday homes could be a positive element for the islanders.



Figure 7. The Farm “*Gården*”. Photo: Gisle Jakhelln 2012.



Figure 8. Principle for extension of a house. From Erling Gjone. (Hage 1984)

4 THE INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

The social bonds are strong on Givaer. The positive attitude towards the fisheries and the way of living on the island is felt when visiting.

The religious community is one of the important social bonds. Another is the gathering every year in July of people who have connection to Givaer. ‘The House’, built in 1932, serves as the community centre, originally a house for the youth, later taken over by the Christian sect.

Singing is important. The 14 member choir, started in 1920, were all from one of the two families in Givaer.



Figure 9. The post office. ‘The House’ behind. Photo: Gisle Jakhelln 2009.



Figure 9. 'The House' - on the highest point on the island. Newly built holiday home on the left. Photo: Gisle Jakhelln 2009

Local food is served with pride. Coalfish, caught during June and July, is laid in barrels with reused salt and some water, and kept like this for between three months and two years. This conservation method was ideal for transporting the fish to the homes in the inner parts of the fjord. The resulting dish, red salted coalfish, cooked and served with boiled potatoes and bacon is a treat. The conservation method 'old salt coalfish' is only found on this part of the Norwegian coast.

5 TO LIVE OUTSIDE MORE CENTRAL AREAS

To continue living on this small island out at sea is however dependent on more elements:

- The possibility of delivering the daily catch of fish
- Communication with the outside world. The quay and harbour are necessary for the passenger ferry and other connections.
- School for the children.

The school building has living quarters for the teacher as well as rooms for teaching. To-day there are 6 children on the island, unfortunately too few to keep the school running. The children attend school at the neighbouring island, Helligvaer, three days a week and have education at home by Skype two days a week.

My point of view is simple: The cultural heritage is better maintained when in use. If the island should be abandoned, the heritage will be in danger of disappearing. This goes for the tangible as well as for the intangible heritage.

The Society for the Preservation of Norwegian Ancient Monuments, *Fortidsminneforeningen*, has taken an initiative and established a working group together with persons from the Givaer community and the University of Nordland. The aim of the working group is to assist the people living on Givaer in strengthening the possibilities for their continued stay on the island. Following this the

working group has concentrated on the following projects:

5.1 Registration

Registration of the built heritage, buildings and other constructions, including the cultural landscape. We have a total of 39 buildings of which eight are old fishermen's cabins. The other structures include quays and many houses for the eider ducks.

- The project covers registration of the built heritage, survey drawings of specific buildings, more detailed drawings for some, only main elements for others (plans, section and elevations). For some of the buildings the survey will include the cost of repair works and maintenance.
- Furthermore the project covers the registration of what is known on the use and the history of the buildings.

The work will be presented in a report as background for the second project, planning.

5.2 Planning

This project involves developing a zoning plan for the island, differentiating between the fully protected areas, i.e. where the old fishermen's cottages are standing, the central built-up area where new additions must follow strict rules, and the northernmost part of the island where new holiday cottages might be permitted.

The people living on Givaer have presented plans for a breakwater and for dredging the sound to improve the harbour. These improvements are of importance for the regularity of the passenger ferry, as the weather conditions sometimes make landing impossible. These plans have not yet been approved by the Bodø City Council, because of insufficient argumentation. *Fortidsminneforeningen* will assist in supporting the on-going efforts to have the plans approved.

The planning process will be accomplished with full participation of the Givaer population. This local plan will also include the new breakwater.

5.3 Cultural history

The University of Nordland will be in charge of studies of the cultural history in general.

Archaeological studies will give a deeper understanding of the earliest settlements, of the fisheries and of the collecting of eiderdown.

Studies of settlements from the Middle Ages onwards compared with the parallel situation on the mainland and compared with the variation in the economy could give an understanding of the variations in the activities on Givaer through the centuries.

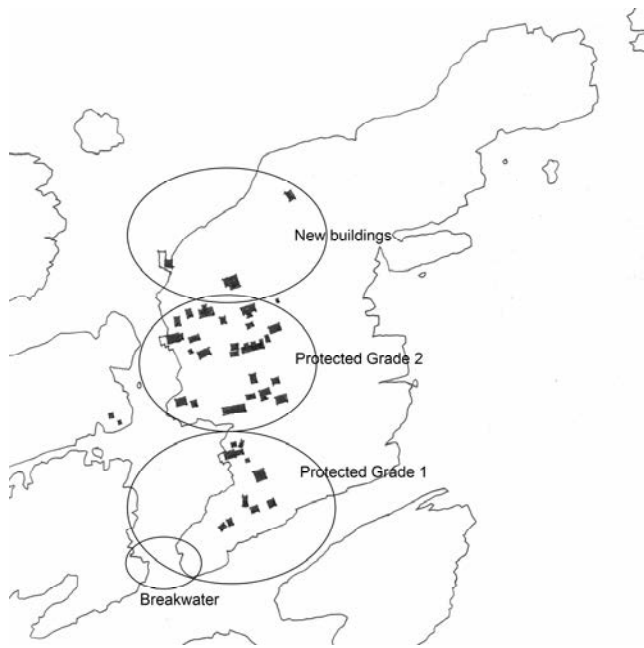


Figure 10. Zoning for planning. Drawing: Gisle Jakhelln 2013.

The very special connection between Givaer and the inner parts of the mainland fjords could give more information on the public rights versus the private rights to the sea fisheries.

Centralisation after 1945 encouraged people to leave the islands along the coast of Norway. This did not happen on Givaer. The reasons why people continued to stay on the island will be studied. One of the hypotheses is that the cultural elements had a profound role on Givaer, particularly the strong social bonds within the Christian sect and the positive attitudes to the qualities of living here.

Central to Givaer is the continued mixed livelihood from eiderdown, salt coalfish, the fisheries and agriculture. The study hopes to find what kind of adjustments have been made on Givaer following the changes in external conditions since 1945.

5.4 Communication – mediation

An important aspect of the project is to present this intangible heritage to the public, and in particular to the younger generation. The project includes activating the schools in Bodø municipality in practical learning on Givaer as part of the topics “Food and Health” (the salt coalfish), “Art and Handicraft” (collecting the eiderdown, building maintenance, building history), “Music” (meetings in the House) and “Religion and Ethics” (on the religious aspects).

6 CONCLUSION

The project aims to support the people living on Givaer through the direct maintenance and rehabili-

tation of the built heritage and through description of what elements are critical to the maintenance of the population of the island:

Tangible elements:

- Distribution of the catches from the fishing
- Additional supplementary income from work on the island, farming, eider ducks
- Good communication facilities with Bodø town
- School for the children
- Health care through frequent service by the passenger ferry

Intangible elements:

- Pride in the local culture – the local heritage
- Transferring the heritage to the younger generation
- The intangible heritage, including the eider ducks and the salt coalfish
- Pride in the tangible heritage

The project aims to find why people have chosen to remain living on Givaer as opposed to other nearby islands, hoping that this knowledge will be of value for other small communities in remote areas.

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