I want to share with you some thoughts on how we might apply the concept of branding to Åland, and in the process I will talk about branding from two different perspectives, and I will focus on how each perspective on branding operates in the context of the connections between Åland and places at other scales, such as Scandinavia, Europe, and even the global scale. In the process I will draw from my current research project investigating the experiences of Ålanders who have moved to Sweden as well as previous research done by ÅSUB, or Statistics and Research Åland, as it is known in English.

In my human geography courses I always stress with my students that it is very important to define your terms clearly and be specific about what you mean with various concepts. As I mentioned, I will be discussing two very different meanings of the term branding: first I'll use the term in the more conventional sense of creating and then marketing an identity associated with a product, and as other presenters have made clear, the product can be a place; second, I will discuss branding as the metaphorical burning of a mark on the body to identify it. The dynamics of globalization that bring the outside world closer and closer to Åland implicate both senses of the term branding.

The first sense of the term branding is its economic meaning, branding as the creation of an identity for the purposes of marketing, and the goal of a marketing strategy is to increase market share and profits along with that, and if you’re talking about a place this involves increasing economic activity and economic growth in that place. Branding Åland as a place may be an important aspect of Åland’s future economic strategy.
We might in fact say that the branding of Åland began in 1954 when Åland got its own flag, which Ålanders continue to fly proudly today. Another important mechanism for the branding of Åland came in 1984 when Åland won the right to make its own stamps. What these symbols and tools do is allow Åland to be signified as different, as unique, but what they don’t do is communicate a particular message about Åland, or brand a particular kind of åländsk identity. I want to consider the possibilities for branding a particular identity for the islands in two industries: tourism and agriculture. Together they account for perhaps as much as 15% of Åland’s gross domestic product (based on 2004 data). Now it is clearly in the interest of the tourism industry to brand Åland in a way that attracts more visitors to not only come to Åland but also to get off the boats and spend their money on Åland. Many visitors to Åland never actually set foot on land, because the passenger ferries stop in Mariehamn primarily to access the right to sell tax free alcohol on the ships and not to transport people to Åland. And in fact, in the course of my interviews with Ålanders who moved to Sweden I have heard over and over that Swedes know Åland primarily through the ferries and cruise ships, and often when they meet an Ålander they will say “oh, you’re from Åland, well I’ve been there, it’s very nice” – but if you ask them for specifics they will usually admit that they have never actually set foot in the place but only seen it from the window of their cabin on one of the ships. If they’re even awake when they dock in Mariehamn or Långnäs, and even when they’re awake they’re often not in any condition to go walking around the town (if you’ve ever taken one of these boats you know what I’m talking about). So there’s certainly the potential to brand Åland in a particular way for the Swedish market that will raise the awareness of Swedes of what Åland has to offer other than tax free shops on the ships. In a sense, for many Swedes (and I am focusing for the moment on Sweden because that is where I am doing my research at the moment) Åland is already branded, and the Åland brand means tax free ferry shops.
So if Ålanders wanted to re-brand Åland to shift the emphasis from the tax-free shops, what are the alternatives? Certainly one could do much with Åland’s physical geography and rural environment – fishing, camping, bicycle tours, renting cottages, sports such as golf, boating, outdoor activities are plentiful. And there are also lots of cultural activities, like the concert series Rockoff and the Ålandia Jazz Festival, lots of museums – there are lots of things going on here on Åland that would be very attractive to many people if they knew about them. Now while Åland is so close to Sweden – around two hours by boat – as I mentioned earlier, there appears to be a fairly sizeable lack of knowledge among Swedes about Åland. In fact, many Swedes are not aware that Åland belongs to Finland, and those that do are often surprised at how well Ålanders speak Swedish. So there is clearly an opportunity for Åland to develop brand awareness in Sweden. And all these activities that I mentioned do get mentioned in advertising, but there is generally not an overarching brand identity that is explicitly created and consistently used.

Well, aside from tourism assets like the beautiful natural surroundings and recreational opportunities, there is the potential to develop a brand identity for Åland through another important industry, which is agriculture. For example, there is a certain amount of sentiment here that all agriculture on Åland should convert to organic production, in which case åländsk potatoes, sugar beets, milk, cheese, bread, and so on would be known as organic. This has the potential, I think, to be a powerful brand identity for Åland that would in fact, to use a term that’s popular in marketing and in the corporate world more generally (and I can’t believe I’m using it), synergize with certain aspects of a tourism brand identity for Åland, as the association with organic would stress the natural environment in the islands and suggest purity and wholesomeness that could be attractive to consumers and visitors to Åland. In fact you could go beyond a conversion to organic agriculture to a much more general strategy to embrace environmentally sustainable
practices throughout all aspects of life on the islands. And this kind of vision has been proposed and is part of the discussion when it comes to envisioning Aland’s future, and it could be a very powerful thing. You can imagine slogans such as “Nature’s Islands” or maybe something more catchy (I’m not a marketing person), and you might even be able to promote eco-tourism on the islands, which appears to be a growing segment of the tourist market, where destinations are selected because of something notable about their environmental characteristics or practices.

Now, I don’t want to suggest that such an all encompassing shift to organic agriculture and environmental sustainability would be an easy thing to do. It is perhaps a promising note that in 2006 about 22% of farmland on Åland was cultivated using organic methods – this is incredibly high compared to the rest of the world. Globally about 2% of total farmland is organic, about 3% of farmland in Europe, and 0.5% farmland in the US is in organic production. On the other hand, there are without question significant obstacles to making Åland organic. Åland had 617 active farms in 2006, and getting all of them to change to organic will not be easy, for a variety of reasons, some dealing with a characteristic that many people I have interviewed have referred to as typical of Ålanders, and that is stubbornness, but also of course because not all farmers accept the notion that organic is better, or perhaps they would like to convert but don’t feel that organic is practical. Furthermore, most of the potatoes grown on Åland are purchased by Chips, the local potato chip and snack food company, and the contract the farmers sign with Chips spells out in detail the conditions under which the potatoes are to be grown, so that is an important part of the reality for many of Åland’s farmers. So whether an organic Åland will remain just an environmentalist’s dream or whether it will become a reality remains to be seen.

But globalization raises the issue not only of market size and the reach of one’s brand, or exports, but also the movement of people from around the world to Åland. And
importantly, there is also the question that many countries in Europe are dealing with, not least Sweden where at least 12% of the population was born outside the country, which is what is the experience of immigrants, to what extent are they feel like they belong and to what extent they are identified as outsiders in society. So let’s consider the picture on Åland. If we look at this graphic, we see that between 1990 and 2006 the percentage of the Åland population that was born on Åland decreased from 74 to 69%. Contributing to this was a very slight increase in the Finnish born population, and a considerable increase of about 50% each in the Swedish born population as well as those from other countries. Taking a closer look at immigration in 2005, 295 immigrants to Åland came from Finland, 408 from Sweden, 13 from other Nordic countries, and 128 from the rest of the world. In 2006 there was a total of 905 people who lived on Åland who were born outside of the Nordic countries. Of 131 people from outside the Nordic countries who immigrated to Åland in 2006, 93 came from other European countries, which means that 38 came from outside Europe. So people are coming to Åland from all over the world (although, in fact, mostly from Europe), as was discussed in this Nya Åland article, the title of which in English would be something like “people from all over the world serve you daily”. So this kind of globalization is happening now on Åland.

And with this aspect of globalization comes the second meaning of branding that I want to discuss, which is the branding of a mark on the body. Ålanders have used this kind of branding to mark which farm animals and other things belong to for hundreds of years, and in this case the mark represents sameness and difference, or put another way, what is in place and out of place, insiderness and outsiderness. By the mark on a cow that strays on to the neighboring farm you can tell that this cow does not belong, and you know where it should go back to. We could say that immigrants to Åland (as they are in any country) are marked in different ways. In the case of Åland, I am going to focus on how immigrants can be marked, or branded, by language and appearance.
Ålanders who immigrate to Sweden do not look different than the majority population there, so they are not marked or branded by appearance, that is, they are not considered racially different. They are, though, marked to some extent by language in that, if we take the Stockholm area as an example, most Swedes notice that Ålanders have a different dialect, but this dialect is not necessarily identified as foreign – so for example Ålanders are thought to come from Gotland, or Dalarna, or Norrland, and not from somewhere outside of Sweden. The fact that Finland is officially a bilingual country while Åland is officially monolingually Swedish creates a very different language context for immigrants here, while immigrants can also be branded as different based on their appearance, especially those from outside of Europe. So I want to talk a little about language and racial branding of people as outsiders on Åland.

And here I will be referring to research conducted by ÅSUB on the extent to which residents of Åland experience discrimination and the basis for this discrimination. Let’s start with language, which is always a sensitive topic on Åland for a few reasons: the declining percentage of Swedish speakers within Finland, the difficulty in being served by the state authorities in Swedish, and the small size of Åland which contributes I think to a feeling of vulnerability, where even small changes can feel very significant. So in their 2007 report on discrimination on Åland, ÅSUB found that language branded one particular group of residents as outsiders, and that was people in the category of “other [non-Swedish] Nordic language”, and it appears that the vast majority of people in that category are Finnish-speakers. People in this group chose as the primary reasons that they were discriminated against language and place of origin, which for Finnish speakers from Finland are very close to being the same thing. So this is not a racial branding, in the sense that Finns differ significantly from most Ålanders in terms of appearance, but rather a kind of ethnic branding that involves language as a key component. As one of the respondents to ÅSUB’s investigation put it, “Jag anser att den vanligaste orsaken till
The experience of Finnish speakers on Åland has to be seen in the context of the history of the relations between Swedish and Finnish speakers in Finland and the special status of Åland within Finland as a monolingually Swedish province.

Now I say that not to excuse this kind of discrimination but to distinguish it from the experiences of immigrants from outside of the Nordic countries, and especially outside of Europe. And let me make a clarification here: the term “immigrant” is not necessarily accurate to describe everyone that would fall into the categories I am discussing here because of course a certain percentage of the people who do not have Swedish or another Nordic language as their mother tongue, or who look very different from the majority population, will actually be born on Åland and thus are not immigrants. But what I want to emphasize in this talk is the current state of openness of the Åland society to people from other parts of the world, in other words what the climate will be like for new immigrants to the islands. Now to get back to people with non-Nordic native language, over 50% of those responding to the survey reported that they have experienced discrimination based on origin, language, name and/or appearance. To quote ÅSUB’s report (and this is my translation), “You experience that you are not considered an equal member of society: that you are not even given a chance when applying for a job, that it is harder to find a place to live and/or a slot in an academic program and that you receive insufficient education. If you’re a man you might hear offensive and insulting comments at a restaurant. You experience that you are treated more strictly. You feel that you are robbed of your identity.” One respondent said in a follow up interview (my translation): “Someone hit me at [the nightclub] Arken the weekend after September 11. He said: ‘I hate Arabs!’ But I’m not Arab. I can’t speak Arabic. I just have dark hair. Why would someone want to hit me?” Another respondent said: “I like my job, I like the people there,
there are no problems, but on Åland it seems like people have it in their bodies that, maybe about 70% don’t think that someone from Asia is capable, or can understand what they mean. One man said to me “Have you seen potatoes?” I mean, there are potatoes all over the world!…When I came here I thought I had come ‘from hell to paradise’, but it turned out to be another, a modern hell here. There is discrimination. The hardest thing is when the authorities discriminate. You can’t anything about it.” Now certainly there is racism on Åland, as there is throughout Europe and of course in the U.S. as well. But the interesting thing is that even white, Swedish speaking residents of Åland sometimes feel themselves to be outsiders. One of the written comments on the ÅSUB survey, under the heading “other” when giving reasons for discrimination, read: “Från Sverige = bortifrån”, or “from Sweden = from somewhere else”. In other words, even if you’re from Sweden, you’re still an outsider, not a real Ålander.

Now the point of my remarks is not to attack Ålanders or argue that Åland society is bad – after all, the problems that exist on Åland can be found elsewhere, and I doubt that discrimination here is worse than other places. But the interesting thing, and this may be in part due to the fact that Åland is an archipelago, and thus is geographically and thereby also cognitively separated from other places, is that there seems to be a strong tendency of many people on Åland to put special emphasis on branding people, on determining who are insiders and who are outsiders.

One of the fascinating things about the interviews I have been doing with Ålanders in Sweden is how many of them describe how they are seen by people on Åland. Quite a few said that they were not considered “true” Ålanders any more, and were treated somewhat different by friends and acquaintances when they visited Åland. They also face a legal determination of their åländkshet through the mechanism by which they lose their “hembygdsrätt,” or their right to buy property on Åland. After living in Sweden for a number of years they lose this right, which was a source of irritation for some of the people I
interviewed. Another issue that came up was the openness of the business climate on Åland to outsiders, especially for the entrepreneurs I interviewed. Some of them complained about the tendency on Åland for business decisions to be made based on whether potential business partners are related to someone in the company, which the people I interviewed found very frustrating.

And again, when we talk about discrimination, this is not necessarily simply a racial or ethnic process – in fact, a sizeable percentage of respondents in the ÅSUB study mentioned “opinion” as the primary reason that they were discriminated against. Some of the respondents were afraid to voice their true opinions because they felt that they would be ostracized, treated differently not because of how they looked or where they came from but for what they thought. In part, this comes back to the notion that on Åland everybody knows everybody, which while it provides an important degree of security and social cohesion, is also experienced by many people as restrictive and suffocating.

So given that immigration to Åland is likely to continue, increasing the diversity of the population, the future growth and development of Åland’s society may depend upon the ability of Åland’s population to increase the effectiveness of its branding in the economic sphere while greatly reducing the tendency to brand Åland’s residents in the social sphere.