

Special Section: The Seychelles in the 21st century

Guest Editorial Introduction

The Seychelles in the 21st century

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Abstract: As an introduction to the themed special section on the Seychelles, this short editorial highlights the significance of small scale in a context of intensified and accelerating globalisation, which creates a new opportunity space as well as new vulnerabilities for small societies. The following articles cover a broad range of topics, from legal practice and linguistic processes to gender relations, politics and cultural identity. The authors, editors of this special section, emphasise that comparisons between small societies may generate interesting theoretical insights owing both to similarities and differences.

Keywords: comparison, globalisation, scale, Seychelles, transnationalism, vulnerability

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Introduction

While small states have always been vulnerable and dependent on the outside world for their survival, the situation in the 21st century has some new elements. The scaling up of the world economy, owing to deregulation, intensified competition, technological developments and reduced costs of transport, produces challenges for industries and economic sectors bound to be small in scale, especially if they rely on exports. Moreover, fast and increasingly accessible internet integrates an increasing number of people in real time, regardless of location, leading to a danger of cultural homogenisation and domination by a few powerful actors.

This thematic section of *Small States and Territories* is about the Seychelles, focusing on the characteristics of small scale and its inherent challenges and potentials, with a special emphasis on the new world of fast global capitalism.

The papers in this section have been developed from presentations at a conference entitled ‘Blessing or curse? Small-scale societies in a globalised world: Lessons from the Seychelles’, organised by the Creole Language and Culture Institute at the University of

Seychelles (Unisey) from 6 to 8 March 2019. Many of the speakers at the conference were academics at Unisey, while some were foreign scholars working on Seychellois or Creole issues. The invited keynote speaker was Godfrey Baldacchino, the founding editor of this journal.

As is usually the case with these events, not all the presentations found their way into this publication. Some of the presenters were unable to submit polished papers in time owing to other commitments, while others had a focus which did not fit this special section, namely small scale and its implications for the Seychelles today.

Context review

As a consequence of our strict criteria, the seven papers which are included here fit well together and cover important aspects of Seychellois society: globalisation (Eriksen, 2020), law (Bar, 2020), education (Persaud, 2020), cultural identity (Choppy, 2020), language (Klymenko, 2020), gender and politics (Ramtohul, 2020) and gender stereotypes (Deutschmann and Steinvall, 2020).

Although the Seychelles share many characteristics, dilemmas and challenges with other small societies, it also has some unique features. The main islands of Mahé, Praslin and La Digue, where nearly the entire population of 90,000 lives, are neither volcanic nor coral islands, but have granite as their foundation: a rare sight in the ocean. Concerns over rising seas, widespread in Pacific islands and neighbouring Maldives, are therefore not on the political agenda. The archipelago is also culturally homogeneous, the vast majority of the population being Creoles, denoting in this area a mix of European, African and Asian origin and cultural heritage. The Seychelles also has a distinctive identity on the international arena, as ‘paradise islands’ of unrivalled natural beauty (e.g. Franda, 2019; Gabbay and Ghosh, 2017). To several of these topics we shall return, in a comparative spirit, for smallness, though relative and relational, is in itself a relevant criterion for comparison in the social sciences.

In the opening paper by Thomas Hylland Eriksen, the main argument is that, contrary to expectations, small societies may in fact be well positioned to retain their autonomy and identity in an increasingly globalised world. They are flexible, often tightly integrated, and need only find niches that favour (or at least tolerate) small scale for their economic survival. This topic is followed up with a more specific focus in Penda Choppy's paper, where the author shows how the notion of the creole travels well and could be a template for understanding culture in many settings around the world. Notably, she shows how discourses about *créolité* in the Caribbean are relevant to the Seychelles, and suggests that recent developments in information technology and reduced costs of travel have facilitated a broader Creole identity than what was feasible before.

A legal scholar, Monika Bar shows in detail how small scale can be detrimental to impartiality in the legal system. The number of barristers in the islands is so low that practically everybody knows everybody else. Few wrongdoings, even blatant ones, are reported, largely – it seems – because of personal ties and mutual knowledge about one another's previous actions. Smallness is not conducive to anonymity, and the downside of strong interpersonal networks based on trust and reciprocity can be a lack of clarity and conformism. One of the participants at the conference casually remarked, during a break, that ‘it is possible that what we are best at in this small place, is gossiping’. Has a deep truth about the structure of Seychellois society – and, indeed, of other small societies – been identified? (e.g. O'Reilly Mizzi, 1994).

Another dimension of small scale is expressed through Olga Klymenko's linguistic analysis of graphic verbs in English and Seychellois Creole (*Kreol seselwa*). By comparing the use of various graphic verbs (to write, to draw, etc.) in the two languages, she concludes that Seychellois Creole reveals itself to be the smaller language by relying on French and English verbs to expand and grow more accurate. These words are nevertheless turned into Creole verbs seemingly effortlessly.

A third, no less important, aspect of smallness is discussed by Indra Persaud, a geographer, who analyses the educational system and especially the teaching of geography. She views this curricular subject critically, through the fundamental dilemma between strengthening one's sense of place and pride in one's own country, on the one hand; and participating confidently in a larger world on the other. Seychellois authorities have consistently used international standards in the educational system, which may have been necessary for students to qualify for higher education abroad. At the same time, the radical socialist ideology emphasising *créolité* dominant during the first decades of independence disdained the kind of cultural imperialism that was readily associated with metropolitan content in the educational system. The situation is such that a geography teacher tells Persaud that their students learn nothing about how Seychelles is connected to other countries. It may therefore not come as a surprise that the local Seychellois generally do not consider themselves Africans.

Ramola Ramtohul, a Mauritian sociologist who has studied women's political mobilisation in Mauritius, offers the only systematically comparative paper in this collection. She compares female political participation and activism in Seychelles and Mauritius. Although Mauritius is an ethnically plural society with a population which is more than ten times that of the Seychelles, Ramtohul finds many similarities and parallels concerning the role of women in politics. A certain conservatism in cultural values, which props up patriarchal practices, may partly be explained through the effects of small island living (e.g. Collins, 2011).

The gender perspective is pursued further in the paper by Mats Deutschmann and Anders Steinvall, Swedish academics working on a gender-based project about Seychellois society. Their paper focuses on what is perceived as a masculinity crisis in the country, of which early indicators have been noticed in education performance. Deutschmann and Steinvall relate this to Seychelles' past as a slave society, and suggest that this is symptomatic of other island creole societies in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean. They hypothesise (and test) that this is a situation whereby the stereotypical Seychellois model of masculinity is set against the 'metropolitan' and comes out as 'inferior', with negative consequences for Seychellois society.

Conclusion: plus ça change ...

The extent and depth of transnational cultural flows are not to be overestimated: certain things change fast, but others may remain stable, and kinship organisation and family values tend to be among the most resilient to change. Not least in islands, which after all remain enclaved in spite of increased global integration. In small (often island) societies, alternative ways of life may be negatively sanctioned and discouraged; and their practitioners shunned and ostracised, possibly to the point of being obliged to leave and seek exile/ ex-isle (Baldacchino, 2012). The kind of networks Bar describes in the legal system – which lead to the cultural cohesiveness emphasised by Choppy, the openness to influences shown by Klymenko, and the provincial dependence on metropolitan perspectives described by Persaud – may also entail the persistence of conservative family values. By way of example, in the

Faroese (a small island society located in a different ocean, the North Atlantic), Scandinavian culture and ways of life predominate, but with some exceptions, one being a widespread animosity to homosexual relations (Hansen, Nest, & Uljala, 2013). This confirms Ramtohl's main argument and may encapsulate some of the insights conveyed in this special section.

This should remind us that, in spite of shifting geopolitical configurations, an increasing acceleration of the global economy and transnational communication, climate change and so on, some features of small island societies are relatively constant, and this is the case no less for the Seychelles than for other societies in a comparable situation.

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