

## **Implications of runaway globalisation in the Seychelles**

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**Abstract:** At a time of rampant globalisation, large-scale operations are favoured over small-scale production in the main domains of the economy. This has political effects: domination by the big over the small is sought in both old and new ways; and cultural effects that influence from outside – such as Netflix, tourism and travel abroad – are intensified in the globally integrated information society. This in turn affects the media, language and self-identity, as well as being decisive for strategies in diplomacy, human security, planning and domestic politics. This article analyses the situation of the Seychelles in the 21st century: a small state, dependent on inputs from the outside world, and victim of a new form of colonialism. The country may still have potential to ‘punch above its weight’ and to hold its own, in spite of the disembedded, abstract economy of scale dominating this integrated, networked, accelerated, globalised world. For this to happen, a recognition and analysis of current changes are needed.

**Keywords:** colonialism, globalisation, resilience, Seychelles, small scale, small state

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### **Introduction**

The current high-speed, comprehensive and multifaceted globalisation that is shaping and re-shaping the human world raises particular challenges to small states. In this paper, I consider and analyse the implications of small scale in a world where boundaries are fluid, time and space are being compressed, and there seems to be a systemic preference for large-scale operations, not least in the production and distribution of goods, services and symbols. It is in some ways a new situation, epitomised by the rise of China as a global power, the fast growth in global trade and travel, the ubiquity of the Internet and the smartphone, and the loss of a shared narrative of progress and development (Eriksen, 2016).

A few clarifications at the outset seem appropriate. First, the kind of small societies I have in mind are not the quintessential and partly apocryphal isolated or at least self-sustaining societies typically studied in early- to mid-20th century anthropology (Eriksen & Nielsen, 2012). The remnants of these societies, be they in the Amazon or Melanesia, face their own set of problems and challenges in the 21st century, which are not under scrutiny here. Rather, we are talking about small societies which are integrated into the global system of exchange and communication, comprising production, distribution, mobility, consumption, technology and media. It is the world of the container ship and the smartphone into which these societies – from the Faroe Islands to the Seychelles, from Dominica to Samoa – have been swallowed.

Secondly, scale is not just about size, although that is a key aspect (Barth, 1978; Eriksen, 2016; Carr & Lempert, 2016). Scale also denotes complexity: it can be defined as the total number of roles or functions, necessary to reproduce a system. In a society with a limited division of labour, its scale is thus smaller than in a more differentiated society of equal size.

Like other SIDS (Small Island Developing States), the Seychelles has a complex division of labour. It is a small scale society (90,000 inhabitants) with a great number of tasks to be undertaken, from waste management and foreign language teaching, to land use planning and manning overseas diplomatic missions. The balance between the demands for specialised knowledge and the number of available people is precarious. Typically, efforts are made to mitigate some of the problems, such as via state support for the Seychellois language *Kreol Seselwa* (Choppy, 2020), importing both cheap and expensive labour (Thompson, Wissink & Siwisa, 2019; Bar, 2020; Bueger & Wivel, 2015), or ensuring options for higher education overseas, on the assumption that graduates will eventually return.

In general, large-scale phenomena are standardised and thrive on economies of scale, while small-scale phenomena are unique and crave specific niches to survive in a world dominated by mass production. A *clash of scales* occurs when the intersection of two or several scales leads to a contradiction, conflict or friction. For example, most policies are decided at local or national level, whereas climate change is a global problem, and all countries are interlinked through international trade, mobility and communication networks. At the same time, since political decisions are taken at a state or even transnational level, local resistance can result from a sense of alienation and disenfranchisement. Seen from the perspective of individual cognition, knowledge systems underpinning policy are based on abstract scientific methods, which may contradict local knowledge. It is a typical outcome of globalisation that the economies of scale favouring large operations make formerly viable, small-scale activities unprofitable. Many of today's conflicts can be understood through the lens of clashing scales.

### **The Seychelles in comparative perspective**

A small cog in an imperial world-system since it was first settled in the 18th century, the Seychelles has no pre-modern history and has socially evolved under the bright lights of modernity. Connectivity to metropolitan centres and integration into the world economy have thus always been taken for granted there, since the time of colonialism, when the islands supplied copra and vanilla and Victoria (the capital) served as a trading port for colonial vessels, until the present age, beginning in earnest with the opening of the international airport on the main island of Mahé in 1972. Today, the Seychellois economy relies heavily on tourism and tuna fishing, although the significance of offshore banking seems to be growing. A comparison with other small-scale island societies shows relevant similarities and differences.

First, the Seychelles as a human society was created by colonialism. This produces a different social dynamics from what is the case in Vanuatu, Malta, Kiribati, the Comoros and other small island states with a pre-colonial history and an indigenous population. It also differs from the Caribbean situation, where large indigenous populations went extinct owing to enslavement, massacres and diseases brought by the colonisers.

Second, Trinidad & Tobago, Jamaica and Mauritius are also considered small-scale island states. But Seychelles is much smaller, qualifying as a micro-state, whether the limit is set at a million or 300,000 (both have been proposed). The former trio, with populations of a million or more, have a domestic market large enough to make many industries profitable; often established as import substitution enterprises during colonialism, factories producing consumer goods ranging from soap to biscuits have proved viable in these larger societies. This is generally not an option in the Seychelles (although, to be fair, it has a brewery and a domestic beer brand, Seybrew). There are thresholds in areas such as book publishing, production of consumer goods, international football (with decent results) and media, although there are

exceptions: Iceland (population: 330,000) has a lively publishing industry and a decent football team. Seychelles lies below the threshold in most of these areas. It is important to be clear about this. Gingrich & Hannerz (2018) deal with the “small countries” of Austria, Singapore and Norway; but each of these has several million citizens. The smallness in question here is qualitatively different. Seychellois must travel to South Africa, Kenya or Mauritius to shop in a fully-fledged mall; they have to tune in to the BBC to view a TV channel with mainly locally produced content; and ambitious young scholars must finish their education overseas.

Third, the landowner class in Seychelles was modest in size and prosperity, unlike in such places as Barbados; nor are there ranked clans, as is the case in most of Polynesia. There are inklings of a pigmentocracy (all four presidents of independent Seychelles have been relatively light-skinned), but the significance of inherited rank and property is less pronounced in Seychelles than in most other societies, even those of similar small scale. In spite of gender issues (which are also more complex than what meets the eye), Seychelles has a relatively egalitarian and relaxed, informal style of public communication. Its Gini coefficient nevertheless reveals considerable economic inequality: according to the World Bank, it is 46.8 and rising, while the world average is 38 (Trading Economics, 2020). This is largely due to contemporary developments rather than historical legacies.

Fourth, politics in the Seychelles is in some respects similar to that of other small-scale societies. Following 26 years of one-party rule, multi-party democracy was introduced in 1992. The outcome has nevertheless been something resembling traditional moiety systems described by anthropologists, where two blocs of roughly the same size compete for positions of power. As Veenendaal (2015) points out, there is no intrinsic reason to assume that small-scale societies should be more democratic than larger ones, although the social proximity of elites and commoners might suggest this (also Srebrnik, 2004; Baldacchino, 2012). Rather, factions and dichotomous political identities tend to arise, and patronage based on personal acquaintance can be rampant (Richards, 1982). Veenendaal (2015, p. 95) refers to research from small states in the Eastern Caribbean which describes “oppression, social exclusion, victimisation and highly antagonistic and polarised forms of competition as defining features of politics in this region,” adding that the civil service in São Tomé and Príncipe is filled with government supporters and that the politics of patronage riddles Pacific island politics. Even in tiny societies like the Pacific atoll of Tokelau (population: 1,500), a dependency of New Zealand, mutually exclusive group allegiances tend to arise, more often based on place, kinship or personal interests than on ideological differences, exacerbated by personal histories and informal networks (Hoëm, 2015). Mauritius is above the threshold in this respect (Eriksen & Ramtohul, 2018; Ramtohul, 2020), being able to host a plurality of political parties and movements representing more than two factions or interest groups.

Although resilience is sometimes posited as a contrast and alternative to vulnerability in the study of small island states (Philpot et al., 2015), vulnerability in the realms of livelihood and security remains endemic to small-scale societies, which lack the diversity and robustness of more differentiated societies. This concerns endogenous factors such as the likely overdependence on one or a few economic pursuits; but, in the contemporary world of transnational integration, events in the outside world have an even more pronounced influence,

The smaller the state or territory, the greater the likelihood that its domestic, internal affairs will be dominated, responsive to and driven by exogenous factors (including terms of trade, tourism trends and receipts, migration flows, remittances, aid flows and other rentier income) rather than endogenous ones (Baldacchino, 2019, p. 41).

Having set the stage, we now move to the main subject of this essay: the options available for small-scale societies like the Seychelles in the current situation of runaway globalisation.

Since the islands declared independence from the UK in 1976, the world of communication, production and consumption has changed dramatically. The rise of the East Asian and in particular Chinese economy is reconfiguring global economic power rapidly; seven of the ten busiest ports worldwide are now in China, and the phenomenal growth in tourism since the mid-1970s, from 200 million international tourist arrivals to 1.2 billion in 2017, is partly attributable to the growth of the East Asian middle classes. World trade has increased tenfold since Seychellois independence, from US\$ 2 trillion in 1980 to US\$ 20 trillion in 2018. Owing to the containerisation of shipping and more recently automation in certain ports, the cost of transport has decreased by more than 90 per cent since the 1970s. The logic of the comparative advantage, initially developed by David Ricardo (1817) on the eve of British world domination), dictates that any product should be grown or manufactured where it can be obtained and shipped at the lowest cost. With the decline in transportation costs, this logic, underpinning the ideology and practice of the current era of global deregulated markets, usually implies that cheap labour and large-scale operations outcompete the smaller and more expensive enterprises regardless of geographical location. In Seychellois groceries, accordingly, it is common to find imported fruit which could have been grown locally, but at a higher cost. The advantages of economies of scale are given free rein. It should be added that the growth in global trade has by far exceeded growth in global GDP (Eriksen, 2016).

The principle of economies of scale has, interestingly, been formulated in comparative physiology as well. Kleiber's law, discovered by biologist Max Kleiber in the 1930s, states that in a mammal, if mass increases by a factor of 100, metabolic rate increases by a factor of 32. This means that a cat which weighs 100 times more than a mouse needs only 32 times as much energy to sustain itself (West, 2018). Put differently: imagine two circles, one large, one small. The 'border-to-area' ratio is less in the larger circle than in the smaller one. The inevitable conclusion is that it is expensive to run a small state, which needs many of the same functions and institutions as larger states, but without reaping the benefits of economies of scale.

The accelerated integration of human activities worldwide produces prosperity, vulnerability and dependency, and closes the gap between places in the sense that local events may have transnational causes and global effects. For example, the logging and burning of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil that made world headline news in autumn 2019 (e.g. BBC, 2019), defended by President Bolsonaro as a domestic matter, are directly linked to the taste for hamburgers in Sweden. The forests are removed in order to create pastures for cattle or cleared land for soya plantations, and the soybeans are in turn transformed into animal fodder exported to cold countries where cattle have to be kept in the barn most of the year. The sense in which people in communities may feel overwhelmed and disempowered by their involuntary integration into large-scale economic, demographic, political or cultural configurations is a key factor for an understanding of the rise of the new populist and anti-elitist political movements in many places. Seychellois may, perhaps paradoxically, find itself in a better position than most to cope with the new situation, since they have always been entangled with larger systems in most respects; so isolationism has never been an option.

To sum up so far: at a time of runaway globalisation, large-scale operations are favoured over small-scale production in the main domains of the economy. This has political effects in that dominion by the big over the small is sought in both old and new ways; and cultural effects that influence from outside – Netflix, tourism, travel abroad ... – are intensified and magnified

in the globally integrated information society. This in turn affects the media, language and people's self-understanding, as well as being decisive for strategies in diplomacy, human security (including food security and protection from invasion), planning and domestic politics.

Now what, Seychelles? A speck in the ocean it is, but one which has the potential to shine a little more brightly than others. Perhaps.

### **Colonisation and decolonisation of the mind**

There is a mural in the capital Victoria depicting a few young people and the legend *Mofyer mo lidantite*: I am proud of my identity. What exactly does this mean, and why is it important for the authorities to make the point in such a public way?

Labouring under the illusion that one is something that one is not, or perhaps pretending to be someone else, is not unfamiliar in contemporary societies, where the impulses and influences from a seemingly more attractive setting can be irresistible. In the realm of cultural life, small countries may be particularly vulnerable to being overrun and transformed from outside influence, having little by way of domestic production of literature, film and music. It is therefore a matter of some interest that Kreol Seselwa continues to be used across many social settings, including parliamentary debates and television news, and that there are even signs of it being vitalised through its wide usage on Facebook and other social media.

During the first decade or so of independence, self-determination was high on the agenda. Although ties with other socialist countries were strong, bolstering the official narrative linking tiny Seychelles to the great forces of universal history, so was the emphasis on the local and the glorification of the common people. Unlike in the other French-lexicon creole speaking territories, Seychelles made Seychellois Creole, *Kreol Seselwa*, a national language, admittedly along with English and French. In the 1980s, agriculture was still thriving, and tourist developments were modest. By 2016, the position of Kreol has been weakened, American popular music has all but eclipsed the traditional *moutya* music, the blues of the Seychelles, and even Jamaican reggae in popularity; postcolonial *tiersmondisme*, influential in the 1980s, has faded from view, and there is a marked preference for imported commodities rather than locally produced goods such as fruit wine and traditional dishes like *kat kat banann*, based on salt fish and plantains. Many prefer to buy frozen fish from a supermarket, making life difficult for fishers selling their catch from the roadside. As one Seychellois puts it,

Young people around here no longer want to be Seychellois. They'd rather be Americans.

This is a setting where structural amnesia of a peculiar kind sets in. When your identity is defined through consumption rather than production, and ties to the production regimes of the previous generations have been severed, producing a credible historical narrative shedding light on and making the present day meaningful does not only become problematic – as in so many cases of creative appropriations of the past studied by anthropologists – but irrelevant. Presentism sets in. The past becomes a “foreign country” (Lowenthal, 2015): a scarce resource for some, worthless rubbish for others. This collective amnesia liberates people from the burdens of an African past of which they are ashamed and a history of oppression which they would rather prefer to forget; but, it also prevents them from understanding the causes of their present ailments, limiting the extent of self-knowledge (Choppy, 2020). As O'Brien famously says to Winston Smith in Orwell's *1984*, ‘he who controls the past controls the present’.

The post-slavery population of the Seychelles has experienced three distinct waves of attempted cultural standardisation from outside: the colonial, the socialist, and in this century, that of global neoliberalism and deterritorialised communication society. Contemporary Seychelles is subjected to multiple pressures and sometimes contradictory influences. In the last decades, its incorporation in systems of larger scale has intensified, creating forms of dependence different from those that the ‘revolutionary period’ of the late 1970s and 1980s sought to sever. Intensified contact with the outside world, through electronic networks and increased mobility – Internet and cable television are widespread, and half the Seychellois population make at least one trip abroad annually – has led to a growing pressure on local customs, mores and notions which in practice may be stronger and more difficult to resist than anything hitherto experienced, even during colonialism (Eriksen, 2019).

### **The imperialism of the 21st century**

Seychelles is the smallest country in the world, by population, with its own currency, the Seychellois Rupee. This does not detract from a heavy dependency on the outside world for sustenance.

Along with fishing, plantation agriculture on a modest scale was the main economic activity for most of the 20th century, copra, vanilla, sugar and cinnamon being the most important export crops. By the early 21st century, this is all but gone. In a neoliberal world of deregulated markets and decreased costs of transportation, the small scale of Seychellois agriculture could not compete with transnational economies of scale. Today, one of the old sugar estates on the main island of Mahé has been turned into a tourist-focused rum distillery with an upmarket restaurant and guided tours highlighting the charms of the colonial era, and the largest coconut plantation on nearby La Digue has been converted into an outdoor museum. Fish and some produce is sold in outdoor markets, but nearly everything in the shops has been imported, down to the apples and onions from South Africa.

In spite of former socialist president René's disdain for the most glaring forms of what he saw as neocolonial dependence, upmarket tourism has grown steadily since the 1980s, and along with processed fish, mainly tuna, revenue is mainly drawn from foreign-owned hotels and tour operators. After 40 years of independence, with the socialist *Parti Lepep* – People's Party – in power until 2016 (in spite of losing the election, it still holds the president, Danny Faure, in 2020), Seychelles present an intriguing mix of state socialism, global capitalism plus offshore banking, luxury resorts and bureaucratic red-tape, with a social and cultural substratum of creole informality.

There is considerable awareness of the vulnerability entailed by dependence on continuous interaction with the outside world. Food security is limited, and the freshwater supply, while usually adequate, is vulnerable to droughts. Construction of every kind of infrastructure, from roads to fibre optic cables, is expensive for the obvious reasons. In order to ensure some control of land and domestic wealth, restrictions on foreign ownership in the tourist industry dictate that establishments of 15 keys (or rooms) or fewer are reserved for Seychellois only; for establishments between 16 and 24 keys, a non-Seychellois may own up to 80 percent of the shareholding; and for establishments with 25 keys or more, non-Seychellois may own 100 percent, but they are encouraged to have Seychellois partners/shareholders. Although the rules encourage proxy ownership, they indicate that there is a real concern and anxiety that the most valuable chunks of land may end up being foreign owned. Since citizenship can be obtained at a premium, like in several other small island states, land grabbing

is becoming an issue in the Seychelles as elsewhere. Pressure from the outside world is growing as foreigners buy property and competition skews the Seychellois economy towards services and experiences which cannot easily be outsourced or provided elsewhere. This is a recipe for an economy dependent on tourism and offshore banking; although, as Baldacchino (2019) reminds us, small countries may find specialised niches and thrive by exploiting them.

As alluded to above, there is currently a discernible tendency towards a new form of cultural colonisation owing to overheated globalisation. A Seychellois intellectual said, during a conversation – aware that she was paraphrasing the Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) – that the socialists had been successful in nationalising much of the land, and had successfully decolonised central institutions, but that they had failed to decolonise the mind. In her view, they were like V. S. Naipaul's mimic men (and women, Naipaul 1967) who would rather be somewhere else, or – if at all possible – somebody else. Most Seychellois, she added, wanted to be global citizens, not descendants of Africans reproducing a mongrel, impure and imperfect culture developed in a miserable past that they would prefer to forget. The relative prosperity and high level of connectedness in the Seychelles makes this option feasible in practice. In other words, old inequalities are being superseded by new ones; although the old class structure was also transnational, the new one is transnational in new ways; and any quest for local uniqueness and rootedness is superseded by consumer dreams and the desire to partake fully in the kind of global modernity seen in the tourist areas and on television. This configuration differs from those debated among *créolistes* and others in the last century; although the 'double consciousness' is still evident, it is no longer the former colonial powers that serve as magnets and yardsticks, but the leisured and consumption-intensive worlds of tourism and cyberspace.

The physical boundaries of the Seychelles are not contested. Nearly all Seychellois live on three islands that are connected by ferry and light aircraft, and they have a shared collective identity as Seychellois, notwithstanding the persistence of hierarchies of race and class. Unlike the case of societies such as Trinidad and Mauritius (Eriksen, 1992), the Seychelles are relatively homogeneous in terms of collective identification, the vast majority being of African or mixed African–European origin. (Interestingly, the small Chinese minority are considered Creoles and intermarry with other Seychellois, which the slightly larger Indian minority do not, and they are so also not generally considered Creoles or even always as fully Seychellois.) This is complicated by a practice, common among Seychellois Indians, of importing labour from India. And so, a substantial proportion of the labour force in Seychelles does not speak Creole (Thompson et al., 2019) and does not fully participate in Seychellois society.

Territorial and ethnic boundaries thus do not present problems relating to social cohesion. At the same time, questions to do with identity are at the forefront of public discourse. The acceleration of communication, trade and mobility characteristic of the early 21st century (Eriksen, 2016), has simultaneously strengthened the transnational connectedness of Seychellois and their sense of isolation and marginality.

### **The fragility of small networks**

Smallness entails short social distances and encourages informality. In a small-scale society, you run into the same people throughout your life, and the extent of networks is limited. If you fall out with them, they can still be hard to avoid, and there may be few others to associate with. In larger countries, there would be many alternatives. Say, you work at a university and have a strained relationship with your dean; in a larger country, you could move to another university; while in the Seychelles, with its single university, this is not possible. So: if your

career plans are halted by personal conflict, you cannot just find other associates to work with. And you cannot escape your reputation unless you leave the country (Baldacchino, 1997).

Unlike in Mauritius, anonymity is in practice impossible in the Seychelles. In this respect, the archipelago is more directly comparable with the Faroe Islands, a North Atlantic dependency of Denmark with a population of less than 50,000. Yet the Faroese have their own language (which is, linguistically, intermediate between Icelandic and Norwegian) and a few local mass media. Some Faroese may proudly declare that they have no homosexuals, prostitutes or drug addicts. The explanation is simple; it is because they are all in Denmark, mainly Copenhagen, which is big enough for anonymity to be possible. You cannot be a burglar in the Faroes, since everybody knows who you are. Not least, they know your mother, so by becoming a deviant from the norm, you bring shame not only over yourself, but also over your family. It is also a fact that, if you are Faroese and suffer from a chronic disease, you have to move to Denmark. Here, the critical threshold has been surpassed in a country like Mauritius, but not in the Seychelles, which may send patients to Mauritius or elsewhere for treatment which requires specialist interventions.

The range of options for an individual living in a small society is narrower in some respects, but actually wider in other respects. A Norwegian friend of mine, a fellow academic who works in the USA, fears that he would become lazy were he to return to provincial, small Norway. This view is a version of Marx and Engels' rather debatable concept of rural idiocy: by living in a small, rural place, you acquire a limited horizon and a narrow range of experience (Marx & Engels, 2004 [1848], p. 17). This view may have been true when it was first formulated; but, modern education, media and cyberspace reshuffle the cards. Moreover, people who live in big countries can be shockingly naïve of the world outside, and those who live in small countries are often extremely interested in the outside world, often to the point of obsession. And so, many Seychellois may know more about Emmanuel Macron's politics than many French nationals, or more about English football than many English nationals. In this sense, runaway globalisation has made the Seychellois less provincial and better connected.

In the public sphere, smallness implies a lack of diversity, just as it leads to a lack of specialisation in the labour market. As a result, networks tend to come without an escape clause. There are obvious constraints resulting from the lack of anonymity, impeding the free exchange of ideas and the creation of civil society organisations or cross-cutting ties, since everybody knows who everybody else is: there are more multiplex (multi-pronged) than uniplex (single-pronged) relationships (Benedict, 1967). As suggested by legal scholar Bar (2020), intimate familiarity with other people's whereabouts inhibits the neutrality of the judiciary system, and this concerns the entire legal ecology, from clients to barristers and judges. On the other hand, smallness can be liberating in that it enables, indeed forces, people to wear several hats. Government ministers may have several portfolios, and a psychiatrist may double as a literature critic.

This lack of specialisation may yet prove advantageous: people are not constrained by a single role, but are allowed to flourish as generalists. Yet, they may also have "issue-specific capabilities that may be used as a tool for niche influence" (Bueger & Wivel, 2018, p. 175).

At a time when digital communication is deterritorialised and disembedded, the disjuncture between spatial and virtual communities may be difficult to relate to. In a small public sphere like that in the Seychelles, the gap is less wide and perhaps less problematic than in a larger country, where a message or image going viral can reach millions. In the case of



Seychellois society, most of the people active online know, or are aware of, each other IRL (in real life) as well. Spreading rumours online, accordingly, may be almost congruent with spreading the same rumours in the workplace or the schoolyard, unlike in the less orderly and more sprawling online communities in larger countries.

By the same token, the public sphere in the Seychelles suffers from small scale. There is little by way of diversity and pluralism of opinion in the media. This may also partly be a result of not quite having recovered from a time, officially ending in 1992, when the freedom of expression was very limited.

### **Seven advantages of small scale**

Seychelles is exempt from overheated globalisation when it comes to competing for market share in international trade, setting agendas in global politics or dominating world culture. But being a small fish in a sea of whales presents advantages. Seven are noted below.

First, the importance of a single individual in a small-scale society is disproportionate to the size of the society. There is no reason to assume that an Icelander is any less autonomous or influential than a Briton. On the contrary, in a globalised world, individuals in small countries tend to punch above their weight.

Second, this holds true for the countries themselves as well. Although the international influence of Seychelles is bound to be less than that of Brazil or the USA, it accounts for more than its 90,000 strong population might indicate. It is a full member of international organisations with its own strategic and territorial interests in the Indian Ocean, which it demands to be taken seriously even in the face of regional interest from major powers such as China and India. As noted about a 'great power' by Thorhallsson (2018, p. 26),

[it] will be able to achieve status and be noticed regardless of what it does. Small states, on the other hand, will not be noticed unless they purposely seek out to be noticed.

He adds that small polities may exploit niches left vacant by others and mediate between other actors, precisely by virtue of being non-threatening and without vested interests worldwide. As analysed by Bueger and Wivel (2018, p. 170), securing the Chair of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia (CGPCS) – which includes major maritime powers such as Japan and Singapore – in 2015 is no small diplomatic achievement for a small state.

Third, smallness entails flexibility. A small-scale society can change course far more easily than a large one. While an oil tanker on its way to crash into a coral reef cannot possibly turn around in time to avoid disaster, a small sailboat can change direction in a matter of seconds. This quality is not to be scoffed at when the world is increasingly talking about the post-fossil fuel transition. The Seychelles can, for example, specialise in producing exclusive, unique niche goods based on craftsmanship rather than mass production (Baldacchino, 2019).

Fourth, small-scale societies may be more amenable to general trust in institutions than large-scale ones, owing to the short network distance between elites and masses. This precludes the need for expensive lawyers ahead of transactions, unlike in countries like the USA, where people spend a great amount of time and money (to use a favourite adjective of the current president) on not trusting each other. On the other hand, the idea that small societies are likely to be democratic, is a myth, and indeed, the opposite is often the case (Veenendaal, 2015).

Fifth, small scale can – again perhaps paradoxically – serve as an efficient bulwark against being overwhelmed by foreign cultural influence. Although English loanwords are entering Seychellois Creole, the language remains vital and vibrant. It is a community clearly delineated by its speakers and continues to be used. More pertinent to the present theme, typical ways of life are affected less by foreign influence than one might expect. The matrifocal family, a legacy from slavery, remains common, and lacking big cities, which are always attract external influence (and internal diversity), Seychelles remain relatively uninteresting and irrelevant to many large corporations. There is no Starbucks, no KFC, no IKEA. Seen from this perspective, small scale can in fact function as an inoculation against being overrun by large actors, just as insects are never attacked by lions.

Sixth, tasks can be accomplished more quickly and efficiently in a smaller than in a larger society. Consider walking into a large supermarket in search of a particular item, compared to going into a small corner shop with the same mission. Limited choice means not falling victim to the debilitating syndrome known as the tyranny of choice (Schwarz, 2004), and improves focus while increasing efficiency. A major work on the decline of empires (Tainter, 1988) argues that increasing costs of administration are a main cause for imperial fatigue and eventual collapse, and that this is largely caused by growth and increased distance between centres and peripheries. Although no large trucks are to be seen in Seychelles, transport is generally quick and flexible within the islands. Traffic exists, but nothing compared to the jams of major cities, and nobody spends hours commuting unless they live in one island and work in another.

Seventh and lastly, the flexibility entailed by small scale can be utilised to mobilise individual creativity and collective vision more easily than in larger societies, which are by default more conflict-ridden and fragmented. While redefining its niches in a world where its comparative advantages lie in services and location rather than the production of goods, Seychelles may also, at the same time, take the opportunity to negotiate its future in a carbon-neutral world. A society of this scale may be better placed to change focus and direction than a larger one bogged down by heavy conventions and powerful corporate interests. Precisely by virtue of its scale and location, Seychelles may lead, dependent on collective decisions taken.

## **Conclusion**

Always vulnerable, precarious and dependent on the outside world for sustenance and impulses, the Seychelles are, like other small island-states, currently subjected to a new form of dependence, owing to the acceleration of trade and transnational communication, the deregulation and subsequent upscaling of the global economy, and growing scalar gaps between the centres of power and the less powerful. I have argued that paradoxically, The Seychelles may be in a better position than many larger countries in counteracting some of the disempowering effects of 21st century globalisation.

The Seychelles are used to negotiating their autonomy and destiny in a sea of dependencies and relationships. The creole character of Seychellois society bears witness to centuries of mixing, flexibility and adaptation to new impulses and changing circumstances. The country can develop and refine niches that cannot be scaled up because they are inherently local, notably in the realm of tourism; and the islands can also be branded through other products aimed at niche markets overseas, such as vanilla and handicrafts. The small scale of the country and the cultural homogeneity of its population make it feasible for it to change direction in its economic and environmental policies, should circumstances so demand. Moreover, the linguistic and cultural identity of the population remains resilient in spite of

pressure from global media and tourism. Young Seychellois who try to behave like African-Americans do so in a distinctly local way, communicating their rap, ghetto or Rasta identity in *kreol seselwa*, which is also the most widely used language locally on the social media.

This is not to say that there are no problems or challenges ahead. In future research, a critical topic will be the growing influence of China economically, culturally and politically. Another subject will be migratory patterns to and from the islands: The fear of losing talent is about as strong as that of migrant labour upsetting the demographic balance and social cohesion, but foreign purchase of property and citizenship is no less a concern. A third burning issue for Seychelles will be the balance between sustainability and dependence on tourism. Finally, an issue of continued but increasing importance concerns international alliances and cooperation, in the light of geopolitical and economic interests not so much in the islands as such, but the vast oceanic area surrounding them.

The conclusion is nevertheless that, counterintuitively and paradoxically, a small state, or a micro-state, like the Seychelles, is in a better position to retain autonomy and self-determination in a seamlessly globalised, accelerated world than many larger states.

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