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Okinawa, Japan and Our World of Islands

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Introduction: Quintessentially Archipelagic Japan

As any Japanese would know, Japan is exclusively archipelagic: it consists only of islands, thousands of them. It shares, with Indonesia and the Philippines, the privilege of being one of just three large and heavily populated island countries in the world, with each having over 100 million residents. Of these three countries, all in the Asia-Pacific region, Japan has the unique combination of a sprawling length (over 3,000 km) aligned in an arc that sweeps from north to south. The N-S alignment (unlike the W-E alignment of Indonesia or the more compact alignment of the Philippines) means that the country enjoys multiple climate zones and conditions simultaneously. One could, if the logistics permitted, ski on the snowy slopes of Sapporo, in Hokkaido, in the morning and then dive into the tropical and warm waters among the manta rays of Iriomote that same afternoon.

There are sacred islands, artificial islands, uninhabited islands, industrial islands, resort islands, militarised islands, and islands that are nature reserves in Japan. Since the sprawling Japanese archipelago is strato-volcanic, there are regular volcanic eruptions on land and in the surrounding sea. Various cities and towns lie close to an active volcano that sometimes rains soot and ash on its surroundings: Mount Tarumae, not far from Tomakomai and Chitose, did so most recently in 1978. Moreover, lava transforms islands into sections of adjoining mainlands, as with Kagoshima's Sakurajima, a former island that has been joined to the Osumi peninsula on the Kyushu 'mainland' since 1914 because of lava flows. Other islands, such as Esanbe Hanakita Kojima, erode or collapse back into the very ocean that had spawned them (McCurry, 2018). Meanwhile, yet another group of islands are born *ex novo,* rise, and take shape above the waves, as recently occurred with Nishinoshima (Mortillaro, 2016). Watching serenely over all this lies Mount Fuji, which last erupted in 1707 (Singh, 2018).

The Japanese think of their country as officially comprising four 'mainlands': these are the large islands of (from north to south) Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu. With its 100 million inhabitants, Honshu (where Tokyo is located) shares the privilege of

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being the world's second most heavily populated island after Java, where Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, is located. Additionally, Japan has a huge exclusive economic zone, the eighth largest in the world, thanks to its sprawling island components.

Border Tensions

Nervously, Japan has four unresolved territorial disputes with its three mainland neighbours: Russia, (South) Korea, and China. Of course, they all involve islands, all located at the edge of the presumed territory of Japan, and therefore, imbricated into the national perception of the indivisibility and integrity of the Japanese sovereign state (MOFA, 2019). One dispute deals with the Liancourt Rocks: two islets and surrounding small rocky outcrops with a combined land area of 18.8 hectares (46.3 acres), known as Dokdo (in Korea) and Takeshima (in Japan). Since 1965, Japan has protested that South Korea has unlawfully occupied these islets, while South Korea responds that there is no dispute to be settled with Japan regarding their sovereign status (Bong, 2013; Bukh, 2015; Flamm, 2015). A second dispute, this time with Russia, concerns the larger Southern Kurile Islands (known in Japan as the Northern Territories). The four disputed islands comprise a land area of almost 5,000 km^2, and are thus by far the largest embroiled in Japan's ongoing border issues. The closest is also visible from northeast Hokkaido, so the dispute is painfully visible. These islands were Japanese for seventy years (1875–1945) until they were invaded and occupied by Soviet forces in the final days of WWII and their Japanese residents forcibly evicted. Because of this lingering dispute, Russia and Japan have not yet signed a peace treaty to end WWII (Brown, 2016; Burrett, 2014; Richardson, 2018). A third (and rarely mentioned) dispute, also with (South) Korea, concerns Socotra Rock or Ieodo (to the Koreans) and Suyan Rock (to the Japanese), a submerged rock with a helicopter pad and a Korean research station, and over which China has also lodged claims. To overcome deadlock in maritime boundary delimitation negotiations because of Ieodo, Japan reached an agreement with Korea in 1974 on joint development with respect to the broad area (29,092 square nautical miles) encompassed by their overlapping claims to maritime jurisdiction in the East China Sea (Agreement between Japan and Korea, 1974). The Japan–Korea joint development zone shelved the issue of boundary delimitation and was designed to facilitate the exploration for and exploitation of seabed oil and gas resources over a 50-year period, although so far, without success (Kim, 2012). The fourth and final dispute, still in the East China Sea, deals with a crop of small islets known as Senkaku (in Japanese) but also Daiyou Dao (in Chinese). China has officially claimed these islands since 1971, citing historical records of their inclusion on navigation charts; Japan actually occupied the islets in 1895 and used them as a base for fish and albatross-feather processing facilities (Baldacchino, 2017). The attempt to purchase some of these islets by the then mayor of Tokyo in 2012, thwarted by the Japanese government, led to an escalation of tensions with Beijing, even risking "great power war over small stakes" (O'Hanlon, 2019). Japan officially does not acknowledge a dispute with China over these islets.

Island Prominence in the Japanese Imagination

Given this geographical, cultural and political endowment, we should not be surprised that islands feature prominently in the Japanese psyche, policy, and scholarship. Already in 1953, Japan was the first country in the world to legislate a 'remote islands development act' sensitive to the mass exodus of youth and declining populations from its outer islands and the very real challenges of air/sea connectivity and 'economic backwardness' that they faced (Briguglio, 1994; Kuwahara, 2015). Japan was also one of the first countries to set up a national society for island studies in 1997, examining the demographic, socio-cultural, economic, and environmental characteristics of its own, many islands (Baldacchino, 2006; JSIS, 2019). It was a natural progression to extend this critical but domestic island gaze to other islands beyond Japan. I salute Prof. Hiroshi Kakazu, a pioneering nissologist (island scholar), and the motor and visionary behind the 'Islands of the World' Conference held in Okinawa in 1994: This was the first official conference organised by the International Small Islands Studies Association (ISISA). I commend Prof. Hajime Oshiro, outgoing president of the University of the Ryukyus in Okinawa, former president of the Japan Society for Island Studies (JSIS), and who hosted a successful meeting of the Réseau d'Excellence des Territoires Insulaires (RETI)—the excellence network of island universities—in Okinawa in 2017. I also acknowledge the team of dedicated scientists at the Research Center for the Pacific Islands at Kagoshima University, ably directed by Prof. Kawai Kei (KURCPI, 2019). Vice-president of JSIS Prof. Shunsuke Nagashima, one of the world's most avid island explorers and photographers, and visitor to over 3,600 islands (Nagashima, 2010), also worked at this center. Meanwhile, at the northern end of the country, Prof. Akihiro Iwashita, at Hokkaido University, pioneered the study of the 'border islands' of Japan and documented the human challenges that 'border islanders' must face (Iwashita, 2015).

A further important step in Japanese and international island studies is being taken now, with this *Okinawan Journal of Island Studies* (OJIS) taking over from the former *International Journal of Okinawan Studies*. Again, Japan takes the lead in dedicating material, financial, and human resources to set up a peer reviewed, academic journal that features the study of islands. The initiative is part of an internal reorganisation at the University of the Ryukyus, a public university in Okinawa Prefecture, whereby the Research Institute for Islands and Sustainability (RIIS) takes over from and replaces the International Institute for Okinawan Studies (IIOS). The message is clear: this rebranded journal, like its parent institute, means to serve Okinawa and its people by also looking from the outside in, not simply from the inside out. It reminds us that Okinawa is not just one of the islands of the world, but part of our world of islands.

Going Local, Going Global

This is a powerful lesson in island studies. There is a strong temptation to go local in such endeavours: celebrating local culture, pioneers, food, songs, history, and the local language or dialect, and all this is well and good. But the effect is to essentialise such islands and their people as unique, idiosyncratic, and also exotic in their exceptionality. It celebrates difference rather than the sameness that is manifest in the island condition, one that is implicitly shared by and with some 600 million people around the world, almost one tenth of the world's population (Baldacchino, 2007). The approach is also protectionist: it does not effuse confidence and a spirit of engagement and dialogue with the outside world. Indeed, it lends credence to the gross misunderstanding that islands, and islanders, are insular.

Things could not be further from the truth. One of the powerful lessons of island studies is to establish a common platform for engaging with islandness in its various shapes and forms. It is a potent thing to be able to acknowledge the challenges and opportunities of one's island while at the same time weighing the experiences, lessons, and knowledge of other islanders. This can only happen if we allow ourselves to move beyond "island as *locus*" where the island is an inconsequential place where things just happen to unfold, to "island as *focus*" where one actively grapples with the constitution of islandness and how that may have had a bearing on what occurs there (Ronström, 2013). I will not go so far as to postulate that island geography *causes* anything to island society; others (such as Brunhes, 1910; Semple, 1911) have gone so far and been subsequently discredited as pseudo-scientific. However, nor are we to dismiss the island condition as a trivial and materialist detail of little significance to proper analysis. Instead, we would do well to examine how "islands matter" in "island matters" (Hills, 1996): How does being a (small) piece of land surrounded by water impact on things political, social, economic, and environmental? We do not need to look too far to establish such a proposition. After all, the most powerful principles of biogeography, including the theory of evolution, have been formed in island contexts (Darwin, 1859; Wallace, 1880; MacArthur & Wilson, 1967). And islands still loom large as powerful explanatory objects today, both to assess the ravages of climate change (think sinking islands) (Bruner, 2017) as well as to demonstrate that, at least on a small scale, something can actually be done to wean us human beings off our rich carbon diet (think fossil-fuel free; or better, carbon negative islands) (Behind Energy, 2017).

Moreover, island life is clearly about mobility and the perpetual strategic game of whether to deploy the surrounding sea as a barrier or highway. Islanders are not insular (Gosden and Pavlides, 1994): Theirs is a life imbricated by and with the sea in a permanent conversation (Baldacchino, 2015). No wonder that the definition of an island refers so significantly to its surrounding stretch of water.

A Plea for Ditching Dogma

Writing these words, I cannot help feeling that I may be preaching to the converted. But then, I quickly remind myself that so many islanders still need to undergo apostasy: questioning, and perhaps abandoning, their blind and rigid pursuit of continental recipes for development. They may be amused by, or impervious to, the manner in which these precepts, handed authoritatively top-down, fail to match the realities that they experience daily on the (island) ground. There is a clear mismatch between the dogma handed down and the savviness and street wisdom required to thrive and survive on a small island (Baldacchino, 2008), but ditching (continental) dogma is hard because being 'incontinent' is not a pleasant condition. This dilemma may feel like trying to fit the square pegs of continental knowledge capital into the round holes of small island living, and that the holes are wrong, never the pegs. I beg to differ: the pegs are wrong. A paradigm shift is required. Let me provide a few examples of what I mean, drawn from the social sciences (Baldacchino & Veenendaal, 2018).

In economics, the residents of small islands are taught about and trained in the wonderful balancing act between supply and demand, and quantity and price that occurs in situations of perfect competition. So state the textbooks of introductory economics in most of our schools, colleges, and universities. And yet, small island reality is driven by naturally-occurring oligopolies and monopolies, with many market services offered by single providers: one university, one college, one convenience store, one bank, one internet service provider, one importing agent, one ferry company (Armstrong et al., 1993). Privatisation without liberalisation is riddled with traps: Small island governments may find themselves creating special regulations for (and also granting special concessions to) a private monopoly service provider to assure that a particular service is available, in spite of the absence of economies of scale (Briguglio, 1998). The alternative scenario is not to have such a service at all, and that would not go down well with residents and voters.

In politics, small jurisdictions play out as intensely personalistic democracies. Campaigns may be waged over policies and ideologies, but loyalty and commitment to a particular political tribe, and intimate relationships between voters and the voted, may be just as important; perhaps even more so where ideological differences between parties are simply rhetorical. No wonder small democracies have some of the world's highest voter turnouts: because their citizens are especially mobilised to participate in the democratic process, and they simply cannot afford to be seen not to cast their vote (Baldacchino, 2012; Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018; Hirczy, 1995).

In a small society, "growing up in a straitjacket of community surveillance" (Weale, 1992, p. 9) can be an unavoidable fact of life. Admittedly, the perennial gaze and scrutiny of family, relatives, friends, and neighbours can make for safe communities, the envy of city dwellers. But they can also reduce individual members of a small society to a clutch of *ascribed* criteria–lineage, family, tribe, place of birth; they may continue to be judged

throughout their lives by such traits. What are referred to as "role conflicts" are also common as individuals have dealings and enter into "multiplex" relationships in a range of different roles throughout the life course (Gluckman, 1962). Was it necessary for a US husband-wife couple of social scientists to go to Mauritius and the Seychelles in the 1960s and 'discover' this? (Benedict, 1966; Benedict & Benedict, 1982). (I am reminded of how often teachers and lecturers in small island schools and colleges may have their own children or close relatives as their students in class. Nothing much can be done about this, especially when the teacher or lecturer is effectively a monopoly service provider, the only available educator or subject specialist.) Being yourself is hard with so much baggage to carry. Escaping this societal panopticon may require exile/ex-isle: heading somewhere else where people are not known by virtue of being 'located' in a family, clan, or territory and can therefore be judged by *achieved* criteria (what they know) rather than by how and by whom they are known.

Re-Centering Our Gaze

The world looks different when islands are not automatically dismissed as peripheral and insignificant, but rather central to focus, scholarship, and inquiry (Paci, 2017). Okinawa may look marginalised on most maps of Japan; indeed, it may be placed ignominiously in an inset (e.g. Wikipedia, 2019) or even be forgotten and left out. But when Okinawa becomes the centre of its universe, things look very different. It becomes the heart and hub of a rich region, almost equidistant from China, Korea, Kyushu, and Taiwan, with Luzon not that far away (Kakazu, 2012). It is also easier to imagine Okinawa as the seat of the Kingdom of the Ryūkyūs and under its own jurisdiction until formally annexed by Japan in 1879 (Walker, 2015, p. 217). With this spatial turn, the rich history and cultural diversity, but also strategic value, of Okinawa become more clearly visible.

Okinawa (沖縄県) is the only 'island' prefecture of Japan, meaning that it is the only one of the country's 47 prefectures that is unattached to any of its four 'mainland' islands. It is the 29th largest prefecture by population, with around 1.4 million residents scattered on dozens of islands, but most of whom reside on the main island, also called Okinawa. Additionally, the prefecture is home to some 20,000 US marines, the largest US military contingent in Japan, and plans are in place to transfer some of these to Guam by 2024 (Japan Times, 2019). This is the living irony of post-Second World War Japan: While the rest of the country adopted a pacifist constitution, with its Article 9 stating unequivocally that its armed forces will not maintain the capability for warfare, Okinawa itself is bristling with military kit. Around one fifth of the land area of the island of Okinawa is taken up by military bases, installations, and support facilities. In spite of steady local opposition, including mass protests and the election of 'anti-base' politicians at the local, prefectural, and national level, Japan's central government refuses to reconsider this status quo (O'Shea, 2018). Given this scenario, the question begs itself: What kind of 'self-determinable development' is possible for Okinawa (Ishihara, Hoshino, & Fujita, 2016)? How

to rise to this challenge can be supported by a critical review of how other 'military islands' have fared, from Diego Garcia (British Indian Ocean Territory) to the Big Island of Hawai'i, USA, and from Ascension Island (UK) to Guam (US).

Among other themes of inquiry, I expect the pages of this journal, in this current and in subsequent issues, to grapple intensely with the *problematique* of strategic islands. When University of the Ryūkyūs President Oshiro visited Malta for the annual RETI event in 2016, he and his entourage were invited to consider how the small island state of Malta had transitioned away from its "fortress economy" status after 1957 and subsequently weaned itself off military infrastructure and revenue; the last stationed (British) sailor left Malta in 1979 (Frendo, 2000).

Conclusion

One island, two months, one minicar, sixty crabs, eighty bites and fifty shots of shochu is a 2015 book by French artist Florent Chavouet. It is the story of one summer when the author decides to get to know better the tiny island of Manabeshima (真鍋島) in Okayama Prefecture, also known as Cat Island (Chavouet, 2015). This speck in the Seto Inland Sea off the coast of Osaka has a total population of 300, and the French artist goes about recording everything and everyone he meets there in quirky detail on the pages of his sketchbook, navigating with his rudimentary Japanese. The local island inhabitants are at the heart of this book. Chavouet's sensitive drawings and insightful captions create portraits of incredible literary depth. Against a backdrop of fireworks, summer festivals, fishing expeditions, and the constant hum of cicadas, Chavouet depicts these island characters vividly and sympathetically, describing their rustic way of life in simple and appealing terms. No wonder that Chavouet found it very hard to leave the island at the end of his enchanted summer holiday.

The tourism industry does its best to remind us of this bright allure of island life (Baum, 1997), one of magical encounters and unforgettable experiences, rich and deep enough to affect travellers who spend most of their time in grey, cold, and depressing metropolitan jungles. Okinawa and its islands have their own rich store of beauty and appeal. I trust that the pages of this journal will celebrate this charm while also inviting comparisons and contrasts with other islands across the proverbial seven seas.

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