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# A psychology of islanders?

*Godfrey Baldacchino*

## Introduction

Is it all at possible to conjecture or establish one or more traits that define islanders? The temptation is strong: as strong as it is naïve and simplistic to define an island simply as a piece of land, smaller than a continent, surrounded by water at high tide.

*Eating up Easter* is a 2018 documentary by native Rapanui filmmaker Sergio Mata'u Rapu about Easter Island (or Rapa Nui, in its indigenous Polynesian language). Eating up Easter candidly portrays the beauty of Rapa Nui's culture; but also the garbage, all of which is imported, that threatens to smother it. The documentary tells parallel stories, including the dream of a musician couple, Mahani and Enrique, to build the Toki Rapa Nui School of Music and the Arts, made from recycled material, so as to preserve the threatened cultural practices and oral traditions of their people, while reuniting a fractured community, overwhelmed by globalisation.

Rapa Nui, is meant to be one of the most remote islands in the world. It lies over 3,500 km from mainland Chile, of which it forms part. And yet, some 7,000 islanders must contend with over 70,000 tourist visitations annually. Of the island residents, around half were not born on the island and only speak Spanish, the national language of Chile, rather than the indigenous Polynesian language. Many islanders (also called Rapanui), including documentary protagonists Mahani Teave and her spouse Enrique Icka, shuttle between mainland Chile and the island to sustain decent livelihoods, including pursuing employment, commercial and/or educational and career opportunities.

The Toko Rapa Nui School project is led by the concert pianist Mahani (twice elected Woman of the Year, Cultural Ambassador of Rapa Nui, honorary Vice-President of the World Indigenous Business Forum 2017) and the constructor and musician Enrique Icka (elected among the 100 young leaders in Chile 2016). Mahani is Rapa Nui's only classical musician. She was born on Hawai'i, from a Rapa Nui father and an American mother. She attended the Austral University of Chile (on the mainland) and studied music at the Cleveland Institute of Music, Ohio, USA and the Hanns Eisler Music Academy in Berlin, Germany, where she was the recipient of a Konrad Adenauer Fellowship.

### Islanders are not insular

I wanted to start this chapter in this way to issue a wake-up call. Most islanders today are like Mahani; they are not insular. (I say most because there are

and will always be exceptions, and these can be celebrated or vilified.) "Islands are less 'insular' than are generally perceived": and this observation applies to both human and non-human species.[1] At least, not in any one of the senses that the word 'insular' is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary (2019): "cut off from intercourse with other nations, isolated; self-contained; narrow or prejudiced in feelings, ideas, or manners". They are not even insular in the sense of being self-sufficient and self-sustaining: one of the romantic fallacies of the modern age is that island societies and economies can and should practise sustainability and, for example, join the "slow food" movement by surviving on their own resources. Yet, this could not be further from the truth, and would imperil the survival of island societies, especially those that depend on exporting "cash crops", or welcoming long-haul tourists for economic survival. If islanders are conceptualised or coyly represented as people who are locked and imprisoned on, and in, their own little island world, consuming their own resources, then the truth is shockingly different. The "survival algorithm" of islander life takes in resources, experiences and places from beyond the island; in much the same way that the island economy is invariably sustained by external "inputs": investment, tourists, commodities, immigrants (Baldacchino & Bertram, 2009). This practice becomes increasingly inevitable, the smaller the island, and the smaller its resident population. Cuba is currently the only island state that meets the World Wildlife Fund criteria for sustainability premised on self-sufficiency and a low carbon footprint: but this is a predicament Cuba enjoys not so much out of its own choosing, but thanks to a long oil and trade embargo by the United States (Lane, 2012). Moreover, it has the size, heft and resourcefulness to make it possible for itself to survive in relative isolation (e.g. Cabello et al., 2012; Fanelli, 2007; Rossett, 2000).

## More and less insularity

At the same time, it would be pertinent to state that Easter Islanders have been both more and less insular in other times of their history. Their Polynesian (and possibly also native American) ancestors would have boasted some impressive navigational skills to make the journey to Rapa Nui from the Central Pacific in the first place, at around 1200 AD (Thorsby, 2016). Then, with the passage of time, they apparently lost – deliberately or otherwise – these same navigational skills, which marooned them on their small island world for decades. It was in this state that they were "discovered", by a Dutch sea captain, on Easter Sunday 1722. With their re-incorporation into the rest of the world came periods of the islanders being carried away as slaves and indentured servants in the 1860s; and migration to other islands, including Tahiti, in the 1870s. Meanwhile, between 1890 and 1950, the island was transformed into an open sheep farm and the remaining islanders were dispossessed of their lands and corralled in Hanga Roa, the only urban settlement. Nowadays, tourism offers an economic lifeline: visitors are especially attracted to the island by virtue of its unique *moai* statues and its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

1 M.D. Rose & G.A. Polis, "On the insularity of islands", p. 697; also Gosden & Pavlides, 1994.

The same airport runway at Mataveri that brings in planeloads of tourists daily was also extended in 1987 by NASA by 430 metres to the 3,370 metre length required for a potential space shuttle landing and its eventual piggy-back retrieval by a Boeing 747. NASA planned to use Easter Island as a contingency landing site for its shuttle program after polar orbit flights were launched in 1991 over the Pacific from Vandenberg Air Base in California (Boadle, 1987). The shuttle programme was terminated in 2011; and, out of its 135 missions, not one landed on Rapa Nui.[2]

**An uncertain isolation**

What this means is that the Rapanui have not just been more or less isolated throughout their thousand-year history; the extent of their isolation is also affected by an indeterminacy, rather than an inevitability, of outcomes. And this insight does not just apply to one remote island. Being enisled, or islanded, is as much about technology, geography and history as it is about possibility, chance and serendipity. The material and physical conditions of "being an island" must be combined and entangled with the unfolding, or thwarting, of actual events. In such a situation, islandness – the condition of being an island – is as much about what *is* as about what *could be*. The most sophisticated transport infrastructures – from airports and Space Shuttle encounters to internet connections – must be assessed in relation to their actual use (and non-use).

At any point in time, island life has, of course, its own domestic goings on. This is the fabric expected of all societies at all times. But: island life is also about acknowledging the significant role of exogenous factors, and as a combination of what is happening and what could or should, now or in the future. Waiting excitedly for the next flight or ferry to arrive; dreadingly anticipating the landfall of the next typhoon; wary of the next pirate raid; regretting the closure of an enterprise, fuelled by foreign investment, and the concomitant loss of jobs … these, and more, are also an intimate part of island life. The result is an idiosyncratic combination of actuality and possibility:[3]

> … a period of undisturbed seclusion or exclusion may suddenly be followed by one of extensive intercourse, receptivity or expansion. Recall the contrast in the early and later history of the Canaries, Azores, Malta, England, Mauritius and Hawai'i: now a lonely, half-inhabited waste, now a busy mart or teeming way-station.[4]

This argument becomes an extension of the Heisenberg Principle, bred from quantum physics, into island studies. If, according to this principle,

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2 Ironically, the only time a US Space Shuttle does make an emergency landing on Easter Island is in a science fiction text: Correy (1981).

3 The vulnerability index is flawed, also because it tries to quantify the indeterminate, while loading it with negative features: it claims that openness is inherently very bad for islands and islanders.

4 E Churchill Semple, *Influences of the Geographic Environment*, chapter 13.

everything in the universe behaves as both a particle and a wave; then, (small) island societies suffer the same, with the added proviso that the unfolding predicament from such an entanglement of point and potential involves many *external* actors and artefacts (e.g. Gilbert, 1980).

**A welcome departure from earlier exhortations of island specificity**

This argument takes us away from the sterile debates about islands and islanders that have been conceptualised as binary opposites: open versus closed, roots versus routes, isolated versus connected, peripheral versus mainstream. It also indicates a gap and clear rupture arising since the heyday of functionalism and cultural relativism. We recognize the urgency to steer clear of redactive and fallacious exhortations of island specificity. Here are four of the most common exemplars of this trend

*Firstly*, sabre-rattling narratives of brave and stoic island communities (Eriksen, 1991), perhaps best epitomised by UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's invocation to the affinity of "island race" for justifying the war with Argentina over the Falkland Islands (Dodds, 2003):

> The people of the Falkland Islands, like the people of the United Kingdom, are an island race. Their way of life is British; their allegiance is to the Crown. They are few in number, but they have the right to live in peace, to choose their own way of life and to determine their own allegiance. Their way of life is British; their allegiance is to the Crown. It is the wish of the British people and the duty of Her Majesty's Government to do everything that we can to uphold that right. *Prime Minister Thatcher in the House of Commons, 3rd April 1982*.

*Secondly*, generalised profiles of island peoples:

> Consider the pronounced insular [and Brexit disposed?] mind of the globe-trotting Englishman, the deep-seated local conservatism characterising that world-colonising nation, at once the most provincial and cosmopolitan on earth.[5]

*Thirdly*, throwing up one lush description after another of exceptional individuals in such communities. Take Tomas O'Crohan, who was born on Irish-speaking Great Blasket Island, off the west coast of Ireland, in 1865 and died there in 1937; author of *An t-Oileánach* (*The Islandman*), completed in 1923 and published in 1929 (O'Crohan, 1977). The book is described as offering readers an account of "the life and spirit of a now vanished traditional remnant oral culture through the voice of one of its most engaging and articulate members".

And *fourthly*, the provision of island character sketches that become more complicated when dealing with archipelagos, each island component of which of course, must distinguish itself from the rest, and as marketing policies

5 Ibid.

would dictate. Consider the following attempt from the pamphlet *A profile of the Azorean,* with references to islanders from São Miguel, in the Portuguese Azores, on the east end of the chain, to those from the island of Pico, on the west end:

> The Micaelense is the hardest worker of the archipelago and is also the most different from the mainlander: rough, industrious, sturdy, and tenacious; while the Azorean from the Central and Western Islands is affable, somewhat cunning, fond of festivities, indolent; and finally, the Picaroto, dividing his [*sic*] time between land and sea, is vigorous, wholesome, sometimes heroic, and always takes life seriously.[6]

**Island(er)s versus mainland(er)s**

Ideo-typical notions of islander qualities are often extrapolated on the basis of two inter-related and often fallacious assumptions. The first is that there is a *fairly homogenous island population*. It is quite ironic that island movements and political parties agitating against immigration are led and championed by individual island "natives" who would themselves be descendants of immigrants. With contemporary globalisation and neoliberalism, this "era of enhanced and diversified mobility",[7] many island societies are even more diverse genetically and culturally than they may have ever been.[8] Indeed, it becomes important to acknowledge both the presence of resident "islanders" who would not have been born on the island, as much as the presence of a vibrant diaspora, islanders who live elsewhere. The latter have been recognised more often than the former.

The second assumption is that of an *antagonistic mainland*: a detached territory and people with whom islanders must endure a "love-hate" relationship. This is the "Other" onto which islanders heap their stereotypical prejudices and bias, against which they launch their regrets and concerns, and towards which they address their hopes and aspirations. In the case of archipelagos, the mainland could be another, larger island (La Flamme, 1983): indeed, and for example, in the Orkney and Shetland archipelagos (in the British Isles), the largest island itself is called "Mainland". The space of the mainland, and its natives, becomes a *heterotopia*: a space that serves as a constructed foil against which islanders can proudly assert their own commendable and superior characteristics… even though the islanders themselves, when and if they could, would nevertheless rush unwaveringly to the same mainland for education, employment, health or adventure.

The dual notions of a fairly homogenous island populace and an antagonistic mainland are more easily articulated and become mainstream when the island that we are dealing with is a *jurisdiction*: a sovereign state or a

6 Almeida, 1980.

7 R King, "Geography, islands and migration in an era of global mobility", p. 53.

8 One of the last island states to hold out against wholesale immigration to stave off the consequences of a declining population and an ageing society is Japan; but it too now has a controlled immigration programme.

subnational unit with some level of autonomous governance. This political status creates the infrastructure for a political class and a media network who have every interest and excuse to peddle such notions of "us, the islanders" in contradistinction to "them, the mainlanders". The identitarian ambivalence can also be extended, articulated and fanned in relation to recent arrivals/ immigrants, raising tensions within the domestic population.

**Small island syndrome**

Given all these caveats, is there anything that can be said about (small) island life? As I have argued elsewhere, the methodological rule is that "islandness is an intervening variable that does not determine, but contours and conditions physical and social events in distinct, and distinctly relevant ways".[9] Put differently, islandness, in and of itself, does not cause anything; however, it can contour and nudge behaviours and systems in particular ways and directions. Hence, the dispositions towards economic monopoly, societal intimacy and political totality in small, often island, systems. Such an "ecology of smallness" was first proposed in Baldacchino (1997) and most recently elaborated upon in Baldacchino & Veenendaal (2018).

What these dispositions suggest is that, *grosso modo*, the citizens of small islands navigate their socio-politico-economic lives is particular ways, ways which are often shared by the citizens of small states. (Most sovereign states with a population of less than one million are islands and archipelagos anyway.) It behoves such citizens to grow up and become astute and wary of: the ease with which intimacy is eroded and what is otherwise private information is circulated and rendered public in a tightly networked, deep surveillance society where the 'maximum of one degree of separation' rule applies (Boissevain, 1974); the capillaries and ramifications of state power and political party involvement, also in civil society (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018); and the monopolistic and oligopolistic positions occupied by individuals or corporations, which erode the mechanics of 'free markets' and competition (e.g. Weisser, 2004). To escape such a syndrome of intimacy, totality and monopoly (Puniani Austin, 2002), the only plausible route is exile / ex-isle (Bongie, 1998). Hence, the contradictory dynamic which concerned Edward Dommen (1980, p. 929) whereby many mainlanders flock to visit islands; and yet many islanders jostle to leave…

There is one other, almost self-evident feature of island life which needs to be acknowledged. And that is the sea. Hay (2013, p. 209) argues that, if there is something coherent to island studies … "it must be that to be girt by sea creates distinctive island psychologies". If islands are pieces of land surrounded by water; then islanders are people whose lives are also imbued by the significance of the water around them. It is with the connectivities across this ominous stretch of liquid in mind that they plan their lives, short term to long term: from how am I going to get to hospital today, and on time; to how and if I should work, study or settle somewhere else, or at least afford and have a second home or apartment off island. The sea separates and hinders; but it also protects and shields; a natural choke point or bottleneck to all sorts of movements to and from the island. No

9 G Baldacchino, "The coming of age of island studies", p. 278.

wonder that bridges, tunnels and causeways that link islands to mainlands are such contentious infrastructures (Baldacchino, 2008a). Hay (2013, p. 209) states that a psychology that simultaneously assimilates containment with remoteness and isolation (the latter not to be equated with disconnectedness) is integral to any coherent notion of islandness. Perhaps we can state this differently: an island is only an island – and an islander is only an islander – as long as the sea, and what it stands for, is a lingering and nagging consideration; the absolute, pesky, intervening variable.

The sea is a complicated medium. It has been and continues to be interpreted from various lenses, each of which tells just part of the rich story: source of protein; fount of environmental catastrophe; conveyor of flotsam and booty; harbinger of death; road to adventure, exile or the unknown; source of mineral wealth; protector from epidemics and invasive species; the herald of pirates, settlers, traders, missionaries, military naval units, tourists, investors, immigrants. Far from simply a vast and empty medium, the surrounding sea is a rich millenary repository for islanders:

> Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
> Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
> in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
> has locked them up. The sea is History.
> (Walcott, 1948).

My own life, and that of my family, has been a continuous, never dull affair with the sea. Here are a few episodes: the many experiences of swimming, and some fishing; the close shaves with drowning; the many jellyfish bites and sea urchin stings; the many trips – some for business, many for pleasure, including for our honeymoon in 1985 – to the sister islands of Gozo and Comino; my mother's adventures a Red Cross Volunteer, tending to a Russian sailor after he fell into the sea during the Bush Sr – Gorbachev Summit in Malta in December 1989; my two aunts and their families leaving Malta by ship to start a new life in Australia in the 1960s; and my father 'missing in action' after fighting the fires raging on the aircraft carrier *HMS Illustrious* during the German Luftwaffe attacks in Malta's Grand Harbour in January 1941 (Baldacchino, 2015); the drowning of two sailors and the loss of their fishing trawler during a gregale storm in Marsaskala Bay, Malta, where I live (Sansone, 2019), barely six weeks before I was drafting this paper.

## Conclusion

In summary, what we have here is an intensity of place – keenly felt in idiosyncratic political, social and economic ways – cut off from any other place in a self-evident, often natural way; surrounded by a distinct aquatic medium which does not simply envelop passively but nuances what happens on land. Here is a place 'articulated by compression' – the ABC of island living (Brinklow, 2013) – with multiple, thick layers of meaning for its inhabitants. Thus is the island and its people: a microcosm that however is <u>not</u> a scaled down version of larger tracts and territories. A *topos* – sometimes loved, sometimes hated, often both – and often looked at by others, and thus described in evocative terms; which is yet

differently experienced by its (less enthused) locals, who are often complicit in specific marketing drives and coy representations of their home (Baldacchino, 2008b).

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**Filmography**

*Eating Up Easter* (2018): Producer: Sergio M. Rapu. Kartemquin Films in co-production with Pacific Islanders in Communication. The trailer is available at: https://eatingupeaster.com/trailer-1