

THE SPACE OF SHIMA

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Abstract

Drawing on a discussion of the Japanese/Ryukyuan concept of *shima*, this paper attempts to reconsider a fundamental aspect of Island Studies: the cultural dimensions of islands. The term *shima*, denoting 'island', is interesting in that it embodies a dual meaning - islands as geographical features and islands as small-scale social groups where cultural interactions are densely intermeshed. The Amami Islands of southwestern Japan are marked by their population's deep attachment to their own *shima*, as enacted through various practices and performances of demarcation. Each *shima* is a work of territorial imagination, an extension of personhood and a 'cultural landscape'. In this sense, a *shima* is a sanctuary, in that the natural environment and social space are articulated by the performative in such a way that one imagines them as a totality. Islands are both the ground and product of cultural practices and threats to their viability can thereby be construed as threats to human security more generally.

Keywords

Amami (Japan), landscape, imagination, performance, human security

Introduction

This paper aims to develop the concept of 'island', the very subject of Island Studies, in order to give more focus upon its cultural dimensions. It attempts to articulate the agency of social groups on islands in creating the 'islandness' of their societies and locales in a manner that will illuminate the study of island cultures. In order to accomplish this, the paper will re-address the concept of island established within Anglophone critical discourse through discussion of an example from cultures where the concepts of island and settlements on it are virtually inseparable. Although a number of studies have successfully critiqued static notions of ethnic boundaries (such as homelands and nations) through their address to mobile and transnational peoples, their primary focus has been on the history of global economic and trade networks (see, for instance, Braudel [1996], Polanyi [2002] and Wallerstein [1979]) or the history of social ecology (as in Umesao [1995]). The interaction between the geographical and cultural entities of islands, which is the main subject of this article, has largely fallen outside their scope of address. As I will go on to assert, it is important for Island Studies to conceptualise islands as entities fundamentally interrelated with human conditions and activities.

In the lexicon of Ryukyuan/Japanese languages¹ the word *shima* - which is usually translated into English as 'island' - has a dual meaning: island as a geographical feature and island as a small but densely cultured territory (or other community that is also conceived as insular). The latter expresses the manner in which local people imagine communal space *as if it were* an island and, at the same time, that all communal spaces are mimeses of islands. The idea of *shima*, in this regard, becomes a key for exploring the idea of island as embedded in cultural formations. Islands are, in this regard, 'cultural landscapes' where imagination takes forms of reality. Cultural landscapes are the manifestation of human impact on the environment and manifest themselves visually and through other senses. Islands as works of imagination and as geographical features become a mirror to each other. Islands are an *event*. The concept of *shima* has the potential for formulating alternative ideas of islands as cultural landscapes because of its inherently cultural approach to Island Studies. In this

regard, the characteristics of the idea of *shima* can be taken to reflect the circumstances of the human condition and human security outside the Japanese context from which it originates.

In the discussion that follows the idea of *shima* is developed within a larger perspective of livelihood. While the latter term is often understood reductively – as synonymous with economic subsistence – it also refers to a broad way of life and its etymology carries associations of vitality and energy. Together with imagination, livelihood provides the essence of cultural landscapes. Livelihood marks human presence on islands. It can be expressed as a cultural space in ecology, geography, sociology, ethnology, history, memory and so forth. Livelihood creates island landscapes as works of culture. In this sense, the ‘island’ is a work of imagination derived from lived experience and memory in which the island landscape is a product of natural and human environments interacting with each other.

Taking this further, *shima* can be considered as a subjectivity in which islands are molded into cultural landscapes through interactions between people, the memories of those who are part of islands and the social systems involved. The faculty of imagination can be characterised here as mimetic, since the process of it duplicates or mirrors the landscape of island into personhood. The geographical essence of islands as bounded, discrete entities, similar to cells, makes this mimesis possible. Retaining this focus on the mimetic faculty and broad concept of *shima*, the concept of subjectivity can deliver insights into aspects of human security that have become an important issue for cultural survival: without imagination, *shima* ceases to take the form of an island.

The Concept of ‘Island’ in the Japanese and Ryukyuan archipelagos

In modern Japanese language the word *shima* is predominantly used to denote ‘island’. However, in both mainland Japan and the Ryukyuan archipelago, its meaning also extends to ‘territory’ or ‘community’. In mainland Japan *shima* survives in vernacular and folk terms to describe a sphere of influence. In some urban societies, particularly where kinship has played an important role, the term refers to neighborhood or community. The Hanamatsuri festival of the mountainous Mikawa region, for instance, has a section called *shima-matsuri* (*shima*-worship) that demarcates the domain of the gods (Sakai, 2005: 24). *Shima* also appears in a suffix or prefix to geographical names, many of which, as in Fukushima City, are located inland. Several Japanese family names (that often derive from estates inherited by clans) likewise bear the prefix *-shima* or suffix *-shima* or *-jima*: *Shimada* (‘island rice paddy’), *Nagashima* (‘long island’), and so forth. In Japanese language the idea of *shima* always contains a double image: *shima* as a geographical feature and *shima* as a community. In Okinawa, the territory of the Ryukyu kingdom until its annexation by Japan in 1872, *shima* was a political unit equivalent to a village and the term still retains such connotations there (Takara, 1993).

Prior to the 13th Century, the Amami Islands, located between Okinawa and the southern Japanese island of Kyushu, comprised a collection of semi-autonomous, clan-based communities. These became integrated into a political entity centered on Tokunoshima island that became subject to increasing dominance by the southern Ryukyu Kingdom until 1609 when the area was seized by the Shimazu clan from Kyushu². Senses of this history remain strong in Amami and the idea of *shima* retains many of its traditional aspects. According to Masako Sakai, who has been conducting research on Amami folksongs for more than two decades, each *shima* can be considered as “an ‘independent’ nation, each with distinct sanctuary, rituals, and original myths” (Sakai, 2005:26 - author’s translation). As she goes on to elaborate, with regard to one particular island:

Tokunoshima Island with a population of approximately 30,000 is divided into 45 traditionally defined shima, each of which has formed a microcosm... An old

shima was a self-sufficient community, self-sustainable both in terms of society and native religion. Road connections were not made until 1903, and the only individuals who would commute were peddlers, cattle traders, minstrels and Buddhist disciples. Exogamy outside *shima* was avoided... In the 1970s, still nearly 70% of islanders were endogamous. By and large, people were born and bred, got married, and died within their own *shima*. (ibid: 26-27).

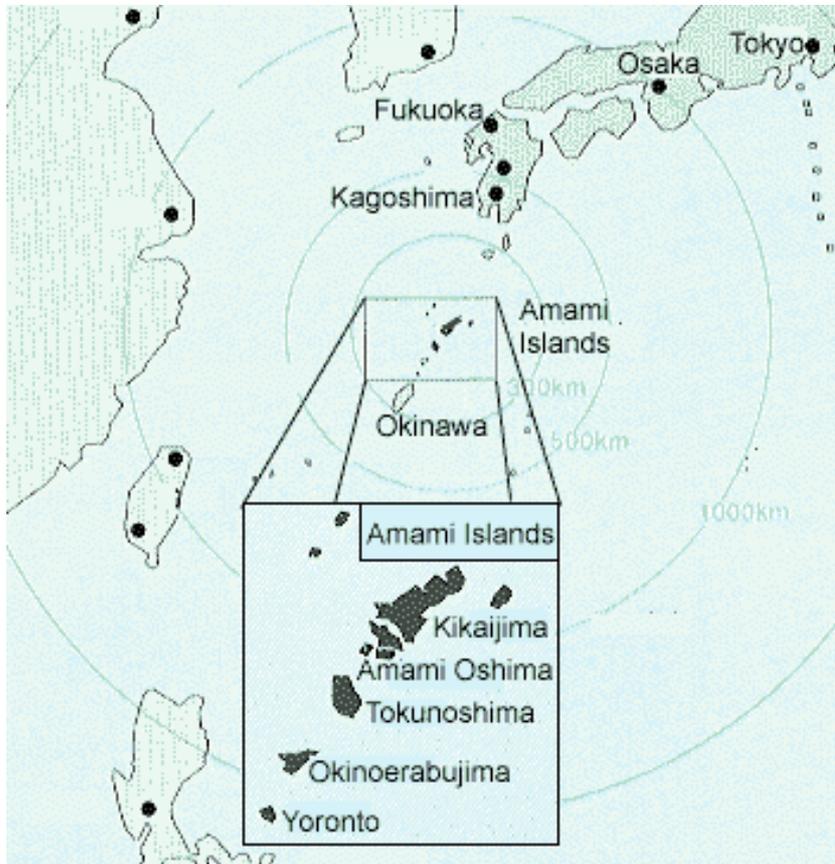


Figure 1 - Map of the Amami Islands³

In Amami, *shima* comprise settlements that occur in non-hierarchical groupings and the region's cultural diversity is premised upon the distinction between *shimas*. People are easily identified through local dialects (which often require interpretation in standard Japanese even among other islanders), physical features, folk songs and attributed characters. The territory has a strong association with the sharing of common water sources and ravines and skirts of hills mark each *shima*. In Amami there are *shima* within *shima*. The meaning of *shima* as community appears to precede the reference to geographical feature and, more importantly, the former has the greatest influence on the construction of culture. Understandings of *shima* as island probably developed after the collective idea of unified polity, under the influence of Ryukyu and Yamato (Japan) in the modern period. When the domains of *shima* overlap with each other, such as in the case of Tokunoshima and its territories, it is always felt in a relative manner: Okinawa or Yamato versus Amami, Tokunoshima versus the rest of the Amami Islands, and small *shima* against each other (etc.). The term *shima uta*, used to refer to folksongs in Amami, bears a double meaning: the songs of Amami islands and songs of a community. In other words, the concept of *shima* is relative: neighborhoods are imagined as if they are separate islands.

The concept of *shima* that has developed in Amami has three main aspects:

1) The geographical basis and the culture associated with it are inseparable. This *modus operandi* of *shima* - which involves the utilisation of geographical features for cultural practice - makes *shima* a sanctuary. In terms of natural resources (and, most pointedly, their scarcity) *shima* is perceived as the giver of shelter and the ground for culture. *Shima* is a sanctuary in that the natural environment and social space are articulated in such a way that one imagines them as a totality. Further, all activity regarding life and death inevitably takes place within it. Territory is thereby strongly associated with the livelihood of communal social spaces and a particular type of territorial imagination, for its boundary consists of landmarks. Waters, coastlines and hills mark *shima*; the territories are imagined and created as a place where the occupants or residents conduct everyday activities. Neighborhoods are produced through boundary marking ravines, reefs, or hills, providing resources for imagination and the drawing of lines and shapes on landscapes.

2) The imagining of *shima* is a cultural practice and is always performative. Rituals, music, beliefs, and other practices take place within the social context of *shima*, evoking and strengthening the imagined landscape. Taking his cue from painter Henri Matisse's statement that "I am unable to distinguish between the feeling I have for life and my way of expressing it" (1983:6), Geertz has argued that the "means of an art and the feeling for life that animates it are inseparable" (ibid: 98). This generative complicity is also evident in the performative nature of *shima*. Islands are indeed recognised through the distinction of performative cultures and, in this regard, the meaning of *shima* approaches what Bourdieu termed *habitus* - a subject that reproduces culture by means of patterns of performances in a wider sense (Bourdieu, 1977). These cultural practices also serve as demarcations of communities. Islands are recognised as separate places through the distinction of performative cultures; they are the living space within a landscape where the presence of residents is ever-present. *Shima* is a sanctuary within which performances produce a psyche that fills the space with spirits, settlements, myths, ancestors, memories, and arts. *Shima* is both a natural and social property where memories about the lived world are stored. Communities form the cultural landscapes of islands, feelings of and about which are embedded within everyday life and shared by members by means of the performances. It is important to emphasise that natural landscapes are inseparably associated with cultural activities on the islands. As Amami people are buried in caves, give offerings to spiritual beings, share food procured from the reefs and sing songs that mourn the loss of kinfolk, cultural conduct and memories are inseparable from the landscape of *shima*. Taboos indicate the existence of spirits residing in numerous places. *Shima* is thereby an amalgamation of natural landscape, human geography and imagination.

3) To identify an island as *shima* entails the marking of productivity, since community is based upon production and reproduction of the social space. *Shima* relies on the productivity of the land (and marine resources). Here, the word 'productivity' signifies not only fertility - or its potential - but also its capability of imagining geographical features as *shima*. Indeed, rituals, sentiments, memories, myths, histories, and so forth, truly take place on the island, meaning that they are products just as much as the food, fuel and building materials that are procured in the waters and on the land. Harvests, general well-being and prosperity are believed to be the fruit of such cultural production. Any landscape of a *shima* is supposed to be a resource for and a result of production. Labour changes the features of the island through cultivation, irrigation, land and marine development, secondary foresting or deforestation, and so forth. Since *shima* is an indication of productivity, it might also mean that such imagination regarding an island, regardless of where it is imagined, creates the property.

While the word *shima* means 'island' it signifies not only a geographical feature, but also a socio-cultural space such as a territory, domain or a sphere of influence. Since referring to *shima* becomes similar to identifying one's roots, any significations attached to it might be said to be an "extension of personhood", as Mauss related in describing the concept of the

gift in the exchange system (1990). Patterns of exchange develop in social networks and accumulate as *shima* and the landscape is thereby ‘woven’ by the life of the island. Indeed, even visitors and observers inevitably enter this landscape through the imagination of others on the island. The imaginations that produce islands as *shima* occupy a space relatively autonomous of geographical borders.

Island as Cultural Landscape

Anthropologists have employed landscape as a useful analogy to delineate aspects of postmodern cultures. Arjun Appadurai has elaborated the concept of ethnoscape to refer to “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live” (1991: 33). He draws on this concept to pursue what he calls “macroethnography”, the ethnography of a globalising “imagined world” in which flows of technology, finance, population, ideas and media facilitated by networking construct social space rather than static social structures (1991). Ethnoscapes produce neighbourhoods that make up social structure (both imagined and real). Their locality is constructed upon the imagination of territory in a global society. But despite the flows and transpositions of a globalising world, cultural practices are still analogised as territorial and it is the geographical imagination of territory that constitutes a ‘cultural landscape’. Cultural landscapes make experiences real yet imagined for the subject. They are solid (in that there is some physical property or reality in the experience) but, at the same time, imagined because the very reality on which the subject stands is an ongoing process of inculcation, dreaming, fantasy, nostalgia, and desire.

Islands are both the ground and product of cultural practices. While they provide spheres of social actions to inhabitants, they are, at the same time, reproduced by them. The inhabitants of islands change landscapes by land tenure and its use, exploitation of natural resources, interactions such trade and warfare, and other kinds of activities. They create landscapes not only in that cultural actions physically affect the natural environment and ecosystems but also since historical imagination and memories let people contextualise landscapes as *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977). Islands are where communications and production take place, at the same time being a subject and the referent of them. The signification process creates island landscapes laden with memories that stretch through time and space and become the originator of cultural transactions⁴. Islands are a work of imagination, laden with memories and histories that, in turn, influence interactions taking place around the territories. Imagination through lived experience is reproduced through cultural production. To borrow Roy Wagner’s term, an island is a symbol that stands for itself (Wagner, 1986); however, islands are *simultaneously* both a source and product of imaginations in which natural and cultural events are historicised. Cultural landscapes contain symbols and properties in a singular time-space.

While Appadurai’s ethnoscape remains a visualisation of social networking, the cultural landscape of *shima* is a reflection of cultural ecology without which imagination cannot play any role. The island as geographical feature is real, even if it is abandoned and lives on in the memory of evacuees, as in the case of a number of small islands off the New Guinea coast during Pacific War and subsequent colonial administration (Suwa, 2005b). The people of Yabob Island on the Madang coast, for instance, who abandoned their islands as a result of WW2 air raids and had to settle on the mainland returned after Papua New Guinea’s independence in 1975 to rebuild their settlements. Although these were, in reality, essentially new homesteads requiring areas to be cleared once again, the imagination of the island, with all the referents of myths, magical and secret place names, as well as memories of historical continuity, enabled the returning islanders to reconstruct the landscape in a manner that they could ‘feel at home’ with. This instance of resettlement and creativity emphasises that territorial imagination is essential to the making of the island landscape. Yabob Islanders were successful in making their home by creating their *shima* (as community) within a *shima* (as island).

The Mimetic Faculty

A cultural landscape is an amalgamation of reality and imagination. It is a reality in the sense that the built landscape of an island (such as harbours, fields, settlements, roads, and so forth) results from technology inspired by the faculty of imagination. According to the concept of *shima*, natural and social environments virtually reflect each other as if they were a mirror, becoming a singular imaginative property in the process. Michael Taussig, inspired by Benjamin (1969), advances “physiognomic knowledge” as the characteristic of mimetic imagination in the performance of magic and rituals (1993).

Taussig takes his idea of mimesis from Benjamin's argument about the "mimetic faculty" which, like photography, duplicates images in the age of mechanical reproduction (Taussig, *ibid*: 19-43). While Benjamin was essentially offering a critique of fine arts, Taussig develops Benjamin's discussion of a specific (Western, modern) mental process into a general discussion of ethnographic practice. Taussig argues that similitude, or the production of the replica, is the primary reaction to whatever powerful entity is encountered. Ethnographic descriptions are therefore a replica of events. Rituals imitate divinities and cargos, and sorcery involves dolls and icons. These mimetic interactions are acts of copying in order to gain the power attributed to the original. The mimetic faculty is imagination, creating the cultural. If cultural landscape is an imagined island, then personhood - which identifies one as *shima* - becomes a part of it, becomes its replica. Similarly, *shima* can be imagined as a life form by its subject. The imagination of *shima* is the work of a mimetic faculty. This is how the cultural landscape appears as amalgamation of community and geography, indeed, as physiognomy: nature and community echo with each other as a result of mimetic faculty. As a consequence, the mimesis of island means the creation of personhood; not only does the person become a part of the landscape, but also, instantaneously, becomes its replica.

Shima as community and *shima* as an island are really two layers of the same consciousness cultured by imagination. However, the distinction between the genuine or original and a copy or replica in this case might not be crucial; in fact, there is no way of knowing, even in the etymology of *shima*, whether island or community existed as the first sense of the term. One might counter by saying that of course the former existed before evolution of humankind; however, what matters here is that optical and verbal faculties - as well as consciousness - are making it 'island' or *shima*. In a fundamental way this mimetic faculty takes place in the process of imagination, catching up all the cultural elements involved in the landscape. This sense of wholeness constitutes experience as a reality, the true sense of being here-and-now, even if it may arise from memory or be delivered from folklore. Therefore, island cultures are mimetic in the sense that the core of imagination rests in the creation of the landscape. People cultivate and develop their property on islands into *shima* so that it suits their way of life in *shima*. The mimetic faculty of island culture requires both the land as material entity as well as the imagination of territory.

The mimesis of the island is the corporeity that created *shima* from geographical features. Since island landscapes are imagined through interaction with social and natural environments, the following assertion from Merleau-Ponty may fit in describing island subjectivity: “My flesh is made of the same flesh as the world” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 248). The subject is s/he who participates in the imagination of island as the environment as well as an extension of their identity. This shows that experience felt on the island can be inseparable from one's surrounding, producing sentiments associated with roots. The signification of *shima* makes the subject (or resident) and the community-island interchangeable (*a chiasm*) with each other. The mimesis of island lies in the making of a subjectivity that might be identified as '*shima* subjectivity'. This subjectivity is not necessarily the sole element making up personality. The mimetic subject of the island - as in the animism core to traditional Amami culture - makes personhood and island landscape inseparable. If there is something that might be called 'islandness', it is a work of

imagination, the mimetic faculty that makes the island as real, lived, and infused with sentiments.

Shima subjectivity is crucial for imaginative regeneration, in which islands are the providers of life through fecundity and, at the same time (by means of performance), enable those people who find their figures in the landscape. The mimetic aspect of islands generates strong sentiments that reproduce a sense of roots and also articulate the imagining of *shima* subjectivity as personhood (as emblematic to those who are involved). Those evacuated from islands as the result of natural disasters and/or enforced relocation, for instance, may feel their sense of roots in nostalgia. The deracination of islands from mainlands or continents might come from such a distinction of places or the feeling of being displaced. This displacement produces a cultural logic that often takes a form of a subaltern, anti-global, or even post-globalist aspect in terms of issues such as the disappearance of small-scale community cultures or the submersion of island states. Indeed, the disappearance of island communities leaves a striking image in that the ground is literally sinking under the waters. Images of rising tides consuming islands, washing away fishing villages and seaside streets as shown in the media provide us with an almost archetypal sense of ending. They vividly emphasise that regardless of living on continent or island, we possess the mimetic faculty as *habitus*. The corporeity of an island may be a human condition that alternately hides or manifests itself depending on environments. The landscape of *shima* is a production of a subject being possessed and possessing: to live on an island, to live as an islander. The disappearance of islands, therefore, immediately and vividly raises issues of human security.

Conclusion

In her 2003 report to the United Nations' Commission on Human Security, Sadako Ogata redefined the concept of security in order to assist the international body's attempts to solve problems of poverty, arms, and human rights within the same broad framework, asserting:

Human security means protecting vital freedoms. It means protecting people from critical and pervasive threats and situations, building on their strengths and aspirations. It also means creating systems that give people the building blocks of survival, dignity and livelihood. Human security connects different types of freedoms - freedom from want, freedom from fear and freedom to take action on one's own behalf. To do this, it offers two general strategies: protection and empowerment. Protection shields people from dangers. It requires concerted effort to develop norms, processes and institutions that systematically address insecurities. Empowerment enables people to develop their potential and become full participants in decision-making. Protection and empowerment are mutually reinforcing, and both are required in most situations. (Ogata, 2003: online).

These emphases are highly relevant to current threats to island cultures and the disappearance of island communities. Awareness of *shima* subjectivity allows us to focus upon such issues with the perspective that island survival is a matter of human security.

Islands are cultural spaces and human conditions. The particular concept of *shima* has been advanced as a useful concept for approaches to the study of island cultures. It constitutes a mentality that is tied to the island and, at the same time, also signifies the island as a geographical feature as well. In this momentum of imagination, *shima* becomes a reality. It is incarnated. It is the 'flesh' of island life. *Shima* as personhood is also mimetic. It does not matter whether there are residents or not, but only the fact that it is a referent of life to whoever imagines or is imagined. While the elaboration of a specific example from Japan might appear overly specific - and while the phenomenological treatment of islands premised on it might appear speculative - the concept in which personhood, livelihood and geography comprises the unified space of *shima* is important to those issues on which

human security is predicated. In order to create valid approaches to the study and analysis of island cultures, it is useful to deepen understandings of how other cultures engage with the concept of 'island' and to acquire inspiration from them. Rather than being a simple case study, my introduction to the idea of *shima* attempts to transpose the conceptual ground for the study of island cultures. Discussion of *shima* subjectivity goes beyond the cultural semiotics of symbols and brings awareness of the problems threatening the existence of island communities through the transposition of imaginations, making them 'ours' instead of just 'theirs'.

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Endnotes:

¹ The languages of the southern Ryukyu archipelago (comprising the Okinawan and Amami chains) and mainland of Japan have a substantial variation from each other but form part of a continuum marked by local differences and transitions.

² The name of this clan combines *shima* (island) with *tsu* (*zu*), an archaic term meaning a boat dock – the combination suggesting the clan's inter-island mobility.

³ Reproduced from *Okinawa Slug Site* http://rfbolland.com/okislugs/m_amami.html

⁴ In some parts of Papua New Guinea, for instance, villagers might bury the body of an islander on an island so that her/his soul may be consoled, revising the landscape with a monument within which memory resides (Suwa, 2005a: 193-230).