

AN INTRODUCTION TO ISLAND CULTURE STUDIES

Over the past two decades islands have been subject to an increasing amount of research and, to a lesser extent, theorisation. Their study was pioneered by a loose coalition of scholars and activists involved in locally-orientated research and development initiatives (such as Maine's Island Institute, established in 1983) and more internationally focused entities, such as the University of Malta's Islands and Small States Institute, established in 1989¹.

There have been two strands to the emergent field. One has been concerned with ecologies, environment and heritage as perceived and researched by scientists. The leading body in this regard has been the International Scientific Council for Island Development (INSULA) established in 1989 with the aim of contributing "to the economic, social and cultural progress of islands throughout the world, as well as to the protection of their environment and to the sustainable development". The organisation's publication, *The International Journal of Island Affairs*, was established in 1992 and has featured a range of articles on aspects of island cultures, such as tourism and protected areas, and, most recently, a year of theme issues on cultural heritage (in 2007). Similar concerns have also informed the development of specific initiatives, such as the Island Vulnerability project dedicated to identifying risks to island environments and developing strategies to protect against them.

The academic field now commonly referred to as 'Island Studies' has developed in an attempt to understand and account for the nature, dynamics and diversities of islands and islanders (and their relation to non-island entities). One of the most significant early initiatives in the field was the 'Islands of the World Conference' held in 1986 on Vancouver Island. This stimulated sufficient interest and networking to prompt follow-up events in Tasmania in 1988 and The Bahamas in 1992. The latter event also hosted the establishing session for the International Small Islands Studies Association (ISISA), which has organised subsequent biennial conferences². ISISA has provided a platform for economic, infra-structural, political, social and environmental research into island societies. McCall (1994) marshalled elements of these interdisciplinary endeavours in his call for the creation of an Island Studies project that he termed 'Nissology'. While the appellation has not established itself as a standard one for the field, his call for continuing debate and reflective analysis amongst island researchers remains a significant one.

In the absence of a dedicated publication outlet in the 1980s and 1990s, researchers active in the Island Studies field principally published in niche disciplinary publications or, occasionally, in the form of special issues of journals³. The establishment of the biannual online *Island Studies Journal* (ISJ - www.islandstudies.ca) in 2006 has been significant in giving a dedicated publication focus to the field. Based at the Institute for Island Studies at the University of Prince Edward Island, the journal's contents, orientation and contributors are closely linked to ISISA's project. Hay's discussion of the phenomenology of islands in the first issue (2006) provides a pertinent overview and critique of the aggregated project of Island Studies (as it has developed over the past two decades).

In addition to ISISA's international enterprise, Japan has also produced a substantial research initiative in the form of the Nihon Tōsho Gakkai (NTG) - the 'Japanese Society of Island Studies' established in 1997. The NTG is primarily addressed to the study of the nation's smaller islands, holds an annual conference and, since 2000, has published the (Japanese language) *Tōsho Kenkyū* - 'The Journal of Island Studies'. Japan's main research centre for Island Studies is Kagoshima University's Tatōken Center - 'The Research Centre for the Pacific Islands' (KURCPI) which has a close association with the NTG and also publishes monographs and papers.

As might be expected from a 'sea of islands' (Hau'ofa, 1993), the Pacific has attracted scholarly attention and has been served by a variety of interdisciplinary publications. These include such long-established organs as the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, founded in 1892, the *Bulletin de la Société des Études Océaniques*⁴, established in 1917, *Oceania* established in 1930, and the *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, founded in 1945. More recent ventures include the (English Language) Japanese publication *People and Culture in Oceania*, established in 1985 and published by The Japanese Society for Oceanic Studies, and *The Contemporary Pacific: A Journal of Island Affairs*, established in 1989 and published by the University of Hawai'i Press. The vibrant cultures of the Caribbean have also stimulated the production of publications such as the *Journal of Caribbean Studies*, which commenced in 1980 and includes material in English, Spanish and French, and more recent publications such as *Small Axe: a journal of criticism*, founded in 1997, and *Anthurium*, founded in 2003. While these journals – and many books and monographs on Caribbean and Pacific topics – have not identified themselves as concerned with 'Island Studies' as such, they also constitute a substantial de facto regional body of work in the field.

The ever-growing interest in island cultures has seen a corresponding rising awareness in the importance of understanding their historical development, as reflected by recent advances in the archaeological study of island societies⁵. The long-term temporal perspective afforded by archaeology has a significant role to play in our appreciation of island cultures in the present. Equally, contemporary communities can shed light on the dynamics of past societies. These realisations have led a new generation of archaeologists to establish interdisciplinary links in order to better understand the development of island societies and their relation to mainland cultures⁶. To this end, island archaeology has begun to engage with fields such as cultural development, human ecology and environmental change, language and cultural landscapes. The establishment of the biannual *Journal of Island and Coastal Archaeology* in 2006 is one significant expression of this development.

Specific research, networking and comparative analysis of island cultures within a field that identifies itself as Island Studies is a more recent phenomenon. Its aggregation as a research sector was substantially advanced through the establishment of The Small Island Cultures Research Initiative (SICRI) in 2004. The organisation's website (www.sicri.org/) identifies its project in the following terms:

SICRI's principal aim is to research and assist the maintenance and development of the language, literature, music, dance, folkloric and media cultures of small island communities. It aims to identify potential research partners and appropriate strategies and funding sources to benefit small island cultures and those researching them.

Key to SICRI's activities is the principle that external researchers should develop their projects in consultation with island communities and should reciprocate such co-operation with appropriate assistance and facilitation of local cultural initiatives.

*SICRI operates with reference to broader concepts of cultural heritage [see UNESCO, 2003: *What is Cultural Heritage and Types of Cultural Heritage*]; consideration of island communities as (simultaneously) isolated and connected; and is concerned to address the impacts and potentials offered by tourism. (ibid)*

SICRI organised the 1st International Conference on Small Island Cultures at Kagoshima University (in collaboration with KURCPI) in July 2005 and the 2nd conference on Norfolk Island in February 2006 (with the 3rd scheduled for the University of Prince Edward Island in July 2007). Refereed conference proceedings from these events have been published online (free access) and in print form (Evans [ed] 2006 and Johnson [ed] 2007), available through the SICRI website. Rather than simply representing a subset of Island Studies researchers active in ISISA, SICRI has acted as a focus for a distinct body of researchers interested to pursue

collaboration and dialogue in a more specifically focused context.

Shima: the International Journal of Research into Island Cultures (www.shimajournal.org) has been established to serve as a publication platform for researchers and activists concerned with various aspects of island cultures. The 'Cultures' in the journal's subtitle refer not only to arts, crafts, language, folklore, media etc. but also to aspects of local or inter-local tourism, development politics and/or belief systems and how these relate to island and maritime environments and ecologies. Similarly to SICRI, *Shima* recognises the dynamic – and *connected* – nature of cultural heritage emphasised in documents published to accompany UNESCO's 'Year of Cultural Heritage' in 2002 (and archived online) and is committed to active engagement with island communities.

As Jun'ichirô Suwa details in this issue, the term 'Shima' used as the journal's headline refers to a particular concept of island and place in Japanese culture that is pertinent to the project of Island Studies more generally. The choice of a non-English language headline title for the journal is also strategic, indicating the publication's international project and its intent to engage with research and scholarship beyond the anglophone hegemony that has characterised much Island Studies research to date.

Shima has been established to publish material addressing one or more of the following areas:

- Theoretical and/or comparative studies of island cultures (and/or diasporic island communities)
- Case studies of island cultures
- Accounts of collaborative research and development projects in island cultures
- Fictional representations of islands and 'islandness'

Two aspects of these categories merit discussion within the history of the field sketched in the earlier part of this introduction. The first concerns the identification of diasporic island communities as a subject. While not entirely excluded, this area has been marginal to Island Studies research to date – perhaps due to the recurrent emphasis on the physicality of island locations. The identification of this aspect in this initial editorial statement emphasises the extent to which island cultures can be considered as much a product of affective and imaginative engagements with both past and present as they can products of location alone. The journal thereby operates with a broad notion of where island cultures can reside and develop.

The final category is also problematic for Island Studies as it has become established. Indeed, Hay (2006: 30) has specifically cautioned against the consideration of imaginations of 'islandness' within Island Studies, viewing the reduction of islands' essential circumstances to a metaphor for mainlanders as a form of oppression. While acknowledging the validity of this perspective, *Shima's* project encompasses the cultural and imaginative rendition of islands and islandness within an interactive, inter-locational context on the premise that analysis of (internal and external) imaginative paradigms of island essence and identity are pertinent for islands, islanders (wherever they may be) and the broader global communities and agencies that interact with them.

Reflecting the diverse field of cultural consideration identified in the four-point schema (above), members of the editorial board are drawn from various fields, including anthropology, archaeology, climatology, development studies, folklore, geography, history, indigenous studies, linguistics, literary studies, musicology, politics and tourism studies. A panel of academic referees from these – and other – disciplines also provide specialist evaluations of

article submissions.

Shima publishes material in several categories: refereed research articles (4000-8000 words), refereed photographic essays and reviews and reports. All research and photographic articles are peer refereed by two or more assessors and reviews and reports by one or more assessor.

Individual issues of *Shima* are published online twice a year (in April and October) on a free access basis. This is so as to ensure maximum exposure to published material amongst various communities (academic and general). An annual collated print version is also available for purchase via the *Shima* website (www.shimajournal.org).

Shima is supported and facilitated by the Island Cultures Research Centre (ICRC) at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. The Centre was established in November 2006 with a brief to research and analyse the nature of island cultures in a manner intended to assist activists, researchers and island organisations through development and networking. Suitably in this regard, the ICRC is also the current institutional host for SICRI - and the journal, organisation and Centre comprise complementary and interactive facets of an emergent international research field.

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The *Shima* Editorial Board – April 2007

Endnotes:

¹ Initially as the University of Malta Foundation for International Studies' Islands and Small States Programme with the Institute being formally established in 1993.

² Subsequent events being held in Okinawa (1994), Mauritius (1998), the Isle of Skye (2000), Prince Edward Island (2002), Taiwan (2004) and Hawai'i (2006).

³ See Baldacchino (2006: 6) for an overview of these.

⁴ Website address unavailable at time of writing.

⁵ Eg Fitzpatrick (ed) (2004) and the 'Global Perspectives on the Archaeology of Islands' conference held at the University of Auckland in December 2004.

⁶ As reflected by the ongoing meetings hosted by the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, under the auspices of the Forum for Island Research and Experience (<http://www.fireonline.org>).

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