- DEBATES -

SHIMA AND AQUAPELAGIC ASSEMBLAGES

A Commentary from Japan

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Introduction

This commentary is a response to Hayward's article about aquapelagos elsewhere in this issue (2012), mainly elaborating on his passages concerning Japan by providing a response from that national context and adding some theoretical considerations pertinent to his concept of 'aquapelagic assemblages'. In order to bridge the two parts, I re-introduce and re-characterise the spatial idea of *shima*, which I initially proposed in an earlier article in this journal (Suwa, 2005), as a type of aquapelagic assemblage.

Keywords

Archipelago, aquapelago, aquapelagic assemblage, shima, Japan

The idea of Japan as an island nation is a relatively recent one. The ancient Japanese state, constituted 2000 years ago, was modelled on the centralised feudal systems of mainland Asian nations such as China and Korea. Inspired by these continental entities, Japan imagined itself in similar terms and overlooked its archipelagic composition. As a result, the names of Japan's four main islands, being the domain of political centres, do not contain the suffixes –*shima* (-*jima*) or –*tou* to indicate their islandness[1]. Such designations were reserved for the margins. In the north of the archipelago, Hokkaido was formally called Ezogashima ("The island of the Ezo") and in the south, the Amami islands were called Michinoshima ("The trail of islands"). This sense of the outer islands' peripherality led them to be used as places of exile for internal dissidents, resulting in the terms *shima okuri* or *shima nagashi* (literally 'throwing away to an island') being used to refer to political exile. Traditional Japanese art also reflected the idea of islands as isolated and detached from the cultural and political centre. A *noh* theatre masterpiece entitled' 'Shunkan', for instance, attributed to Zeami Motokyo, was inspired by an episode in the 'Heike Monogatari' ('Tale of the Heike clan') about the exile of the monk Shunkan to Kikaijima. Shunkan's story inspired many subsequent versions and was also adapted into a *joruri* (puppet play) as well as a *kabuki* text. As these examples illustrate, small islands played their part in the territorial imagination of pre-modern state centres such as Kyoto and Edo.

After Japan's contact with the Jesuits in the 17th Century, old maps introduced from the Mongolian empire became updated and widely available and people discovered the location and proportion of their island nation. As a result, Japan's internal image as a political centre was offset by its representation as an insular periphery. The well-known aphorism attributed to 18th Century intellectual and military scholar Hayashi Shihei that 'between Nihonbashi Bridge [in Tokyo] and Europe, there is only one waterway' exemplified debate around Japan's isolationist policy in the period and the country's surrounding waters were subsequently recognised as an important aspect of national security.[4] The consciousness of the Japanese state as a *shimaguni* (island nation) was one that implicitly recognised the negative connotations that might accrue to it in terms of its potential to be regarded (by the West, for instance) as insular, reclusive, inward, backwards, primitive, narrow-minded, over-crowded, resource-scarce and so on. Continental Asia on the other hand was often abbreviated as *tairiku* ('the continent') and was regarded as a region ripe with opportunity. In the early 20th Century the media romanticised lonesome *tairiku-ronin*[5] who sought their fortunes in China, as Japan's national interest turned to colonial expansion. The geopolitical consciousness of feudal era Japan was reversed in imperialist Japan as its focus turned outwards. The *naichi,* the 'inner (is)lands' of Japan became the central point, and continental Asia became its *gaichi* ('outer lands')[6].

After World War Two, the term and concept of *ritou* ("remote islands") has served as a key trope in the imagination of islands, especially as depopulation became a serious issue in the 1950s. A number of programs were planned to 'de-*ritou*-nise' islands and law and policy makers and the majority of the public continued to conceive the islands within established mainland-satellite or centre-periphery dichotomies[7]. One manifestation of this was the use of central Japanese funds to connect islands via bridges, thereby modifying their status *as* islands. However, some intellectuals and activists attempted to approach the *ritou* issue from a different perspective. Miyamoto Tsuneichi, for example, who hailed from Suou Oshima Island himself, visited dozens of remote islands to record folklore and called for public and political attention to promote their cultural survival (Miyamoto, 1960); while novelist Shimao Toshio, a long-time resident of Amami, originated the term 'Japonesia'[8] in an attempt to decentralise the power relationship between the (notional) centre and periphery and to stimulate related post-colonial critiques of the national entity (Shimao, 1977).

In contemporary Japan, the national self-image as a *shimaguni* ('island country') is premised on a mixture of political and indigenous images of territory. In fact, *tou*, a loan word from classical Chinese, only appears as prefix or suffix, often deployed in order to compose academic jargon. The indigenous idea of *shima*, which would sound more natural in everyday conversation, connotes the island as a <u>lived</u> world; it signifies not simply a piece of land but a space generated by livelihood or cultural conduct. A community or neighbourhood can also be called a *shima*, and not as a metaphor. For instance, to call an area of a city a *shima*, which is possible, is to emphasise that the place is one's hometown, neighbourhood or territory. In this regard, *shima* is livelihood or a sphere of influence. It is fractal since the centre of livelihood activity produces concentric circles from a household to the globe. *Shima* is a spatio-temporal concept and a work of imagination where landmarks generate a sense of reality (Suwa, 2005). A *shima*-nesque archipelago forms concentric circles with others, and the centre can be collective or individual, or human or non-human in as far as the concentric circles may be imagined to weave cultural, ecological, climatic and geophysical interactions. The concentric circles of *shima* in this regard form an assemblage or rhizome (Deleuze and

Guattari 1987). In an assemblage, there is no absolute centre that dominates the rest rather, everything participates with and/or comprises the other. There is no distinction between parts and the whole, or any centre-periphery dichotomy. In such assemblages, concentric circles are effectively decentralised because there will be multiple centres with all sorts of behaviours, movements, perspectives and vanishing points. One's centre is simultaneously someone else's periphery, or one's centre is also someone else's within a different frame of meaning and significance.

The concepts of the 'aquapelago' and 'aquapelagic assemblages' that Hayward (2012) proposes are interesting for introducing the idea of assemblage to the consideration of island regions. If the assemblages are regarded in terms of the inseparability of water and land, such areas can be visualised as rhizomes. In this sense, an aquapelago is also a fractal because land and water are merging to emerge as a whole. In aquapelagos, islands are not groups of isolates but rather assemblages concentrated by the waters. The relationship between islands, islands and continental mainlands, land and water, etc., are inseparable, as they are linked with each other in ways that that can only be grasped via an invertible or intersubjective concept that 'sea is land and land is sea'. Although this might sound somewhat oxymoronic, the distinction between the land and sea is merely a product of imagination. There are types of livelihood that do not see them separately. To the Bajau of the Sulu Sea, the Moken of the Andaman Sea and the residents of *ebune* houseboats who pursue a traditional lifestyle in some parts of coastal Japan - to name but a few examples; aquapelagic assemblages are an everyday reality where the distinction between land and sea becomes nonsensical. Similarly, among communities around Madang (Papua New Guinea), for instance, commuting between islands and the mainland by canoe has become so common that it can be compared with driving a vehicle (indeed, in the local Bel languages the term *wag* initially meant a small canoe but today refers to any form of transport such as a car or a bus).

With regard to the idea of aquapelagic assemblages, the concept of 'assemblage', as discussed by Deleuze and Guattari, merits further attention. The assemblage of (human) livelihood provides a mediating process between land and marine environments and it constructs cultural landscapes with diversity as well as complexity. People hunt, gather or grow products from the sea as well as from the land, and when their 'commons' are open, wildernesses and grasslands can be understood as a 'sea'. In discussing aquapelagic assemblages, therefore, the process by which cultural landscapes are generated turns out to be a central issue; they are assemblages and the distinction between sea and land evaporates in the reality of everyday life. Aquapelagic assemblages therefore cannot be discussed as a single mode of production.

One of the possible ways of grasping the nature of aquapelagic assemblages might be to focus on locations where fractal concentric circles initiate activities. This point might be regarded as a 'sanctuary', using an expanded definition of that term that includes its complementary characterisations of a holy/spiritual centre, a place of refuge and safety and a reserve where flora and fauna are protected. This concept is similar to *kami no commons*, the notion of 'commons' conceived by Tomoya Akimichi (2004) that derives from the sanctuary offered by Shinto shrines. These shrines are *open* commons in the sense that almost anyone can enter into their domain but at the same time they can also be regarded as *restricted* since spiritual beings rule over and imbue the space and determine the environment. The closure involved is conceptual/spiritual and is manifest in the conservation of trees, mountains, rocks, water sources (and, sometimes, even an island) intrinsic to the shrine. Conceived in this way, sanctuary comprises a local commons where concentric circles interact with degrees of inaccessibility; as in the way

that religious sites and monuments form a centre in a neighbourhood. In aquapelagic assemblages, various levels, from local ecosystems to belief systems, are relevant and ownership adds complexity in forming assemblages that range from collective to private property.

Aquapelagic assemblages can be conceived as sanctuaries with regard to either real or imagined spaces; in fact, whether they are imagined or real is relatively insignificant. In some Shinto rituals, a sacred float called *mikoshi* is carried from shrines to the sea in order to rejuvenate the spirit. Here, the god on the float is imagined but the procession of the float is real, and the movement of the float to the coast reflects the imagined sanctuary of aquapelagic assemblage through its ability to maintain the environment. In Okinawan mythology, *Nirai Kanai*, the domain of gods, from which all life originates, is located over the western horizon and community religious sites such as *utaki* are plexuses of divine and human activities. The ideas of sanctuary explicated here can also be extended beyond traditional or religious beliefs and include contemporary concepts such as the conservation of the natural environment or heritage and/or sustainable development programs. Key to the imagination of sanctuary is a shared idea that constructs cultural reality and thereby becomes crucial to any such project. Sanctuary therefore is a type of spatio-temporal space where things take place, operate and interact within a particular framework. Likewise, aquapelagic assemblages can be conceived of as spaces where landscape and personhood merge and where nature, culture and society connect in a plane of interactions.

The constitution of aquapelagic assemblages involves the appropriation and sharing of cultural land/seascapes; therefore, occupancy of space is a primary consideration. Aquapelagic assemblages – and/or the sanctuaries they comprise – are not necessarily self-contained, self-sufficient and/or self-sustainable. They are not bounded, ahistorical 'utopias' that exemplify the notion of what Williams (1973) characterised as the stereotypical 'idyllic' or 'pastoral' landscape of the metropolitan imagination (as critiqued by Clifford and Marcus [1986] in relation to ethnography). Aquapelagic assemblages are, rather, specific products of ongoing processes in actual locations; and the resource uses, finances, identities and alliances involved in constituting them are fluid, transient and sometimes elusive. Aquapelagos are sanctuaries manifested in land/seascapes, their are occupied with sacred, untouchable, memorised and/or identified elements that are shared through and as common knowledge, skill, consciousness, desire and ideology, whatever the direction they take. Understanding *shima* as aquapelagic assemblages depends on the sharing of sanctuary. What appears to be collective or communal ownership is in fact the reverse; *shima* are not the *subject* of ownership but the *product* of sanctuary in practice.

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End Notes

[1] They are Honshu ('The main provinces'), Shikoku (Four countries'), Kyushu ('Nine provinces') and Hokkaido ('The northern sea circuit'). This naming might be an indication that aquapelagic assemblages were presumably conceived by the 7th Century, because the mainlands were collectively identified as a subject of Yamato kingdom connected by waters, and they were imagined as homeland more than islands; therefore, the identity of individual islands was not of concern.

[2] Whether the *Ezo*, a generic term to signify non-Japanese populace at the northern border, represented today's Ainu still remains uncertain. *Akaezo* (Red Ezo) for instance was a former name for the Russians in Hokkaido, the Kurils and Sakhalin.

[3] Ironically, Zeami himself was ordered exile to Sado in 1434 and died there in 1443.

[4] The Nihonbashi Bridge, which is near Tokyo Station today, was used as the milestone in Edo period.

[5] A *ronin* is an unemployed samurai.

[6] The South Pacific islands that were granted as mandated territory by the League of Nations in 1920 were also *gaichi*.

[7] The initial law concerning *ritou* was passed as 'Ritou-shinkou Hou' in 1953 and has been updated five times until today. The Amami and Okinawan islands are under different aid programs.

[8] The pronunciation is 'yaponeshia' after Latin.