- DEBATES -

AQUAPELAGOS AND AQUAPELAGIC ASSEMBLAGES

Towards an integrated study of island societies and marine environments[1]

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Abstract

The loose interdisciplinary field known as 'Island Studies' has recently recognised the need to formulate an address to archipelagos in addition to the more atomised or generalised studies that have typified its first two decades of operation. While this is a significant development in itself, it also serves to identify the necessity for a more holistic comprehension and analysis of the interrelation of marine and terrestrial spaces in areas of the planet in which small fragments of land are aggregated in marine spaces. In order to focus on the character and dynamics of the latter, this paper proposes a reconceptualisation of such spaces in terms of their constituting 'aquapelagic assemblages'; a term I propose to emphasise the manner in which the aquatic spaces between and around groups of islands are utilised and navigated in a manner that is fundamentally interconnected with and essential to social groups' habitation of land.

Key words

Archipelago, aquapelago, aquapelagic assemblages, Island Studies

Introduction

Island Studies is addressed to research into island communities – social entities that have both an *insular condition*, being surrounded by sea, and, usually, a *connectivity*, produced by the use of the sea as a means of navigating between islands and/or mainlands. Island communities, and particularly small island communities, are innately linked to and dependent on finite terrestrial resources and constantly react to and work within the transitional zone between land and sea, in the form of the shoreline and adjacent coastal waters and more distant and deeper marine environments. These are the defining aspect of their geographical and geo-social identities.

While this is an important focus, it can be expanded and, indeed, it is possible to argue that Island Studies *needs* to have an expanded project. In a recent issue of the *Island*

Studies Journal (ISJ), for example, a group of writers (Stratford, Baldacchino, McMahon et al, 2011) called for the development of 'Archipelago Studies'. Their article's abstract identified "two common relations of islands in the humanities and social sciences: land and sea, and island and continent/mainland"; and went on to argue, "What remains largely absent or silent are ways of being, knowing and doing—ontologies, epistemologies and methods—that illuminate island spaces as inter-related, mutually constituted and co-constructed" (119). As welcome as this emphasis is, it is significant that the previously quoted phrase ends with the specification that what is referred to is "island and island" relations (ibid), firmly identifying the article's concept of the archipelago as a terrestrial aggregate. The subsequent sentence of the abstract refers to the article's attempts to "(re)inscribe the theoretical, metaphorical, real and empirical power and potential of the archipelago" and offers the examples of "seas studded with islands" and "island chains" and "relations that may embrace equivalence, mutual relation and difference in signification" (ibid). Again, these are laudable ambitions.

The authors' main address to the marine aspect of archipelagos is via an astute and useful consideration of archipelagos as *assemblages*, ie entities that "act in concert [and] actively map out, select, piece together, and allow for the conception and conduct of individual units as members of a group" (ibid: 122). This allows the authors to venture that archipelagos can be conceptualised as "fluid cultural processes, sites of abstract and material relations of movement and rest, dependent on changing conditions of articulation or connection" (ibid). The opening phrase is a particularly useful one, offering a characterisation of the archipelago as constituted by "cultural processes" (rather than just geography). Although the authors tend to default to a more usual geographical frame of reference to their topic as their article progresses, the identification of archipelagos as a human construct is important and will be returned to later in this article. But while the latter is pertinent, the *ISJ* article consistently shies away from any consideration of the integrated terrestrial-marine spaces that can equally well be asserted to comprise (an expanded and expansive) archipelagic identity. In this regard the authors' invocation of Brathwaite's notion of *tidalectics*, "of tossings, across and between seas, of people, things, processes and affects" (ibid: 124), offers an accurate characterisation of the arguments they construct.

In terms of the fluid realm of archipelagos, the authors acknowledge the seminal work of Epeli Hau'ofa and his famous characterisation of the Pacific as a "sea of islands" (1993: 5) but surf past the phrase without attempting to unpack the complexities of that characterisation or consider how it could be further expanded upon. In this regard, another phrase that Hau'ofa uses is just as arresting, that of Pacific communities as "ocean peoples" (ibid: 8) and his specific example of main island Tongans referring to inhabitants of outer regions as *kakai mei tahi* (literally people **from** the sea) (ibid) merits attention. As he goes on to characterise:

> *'Oceania' connotes a sea of islands with their inhabitants. The world of our ancestors was a large sea full of places to explore, to make their homes **in**, to breed generations of seafarers like themselves. People raised **in** this environment were **at home with** the sea. They played **in** it as soon as they could walk steadily, they worked **in** it, they fought on it.* (ibid – my emphases)

The repeated uses of the term "in" here are just as pertinent as the characterisations of Pacific Islanders' navigations *across* oceanic surfaces. Rather than a *tidalectic* model, Hau'ofa offers one in which the immersive marine spaces of the Pacific's "sea of islands" are just as fundamental an element of the assemblage of Oceania as its terrestrial extrusions. Indeed, the less frequently quoted poetic conclusion to his seminal article emphasises that:

> *Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces which we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed place, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves.* (ibid: 16)

This present article, and the concept it proposes, attempts to complement and expand on the aforementioned *ISJ* article by engaging with island and marine relations; and it posits island to island relations in archipelagic contexts as taking place within this broader space. While substantially informed by and cognisant of Hau'ofa's discussions of Oceania, its perspectives principally result from consideration of extensive archipelagic nations, specifically Indonesia and Japan, and of the less autonomous archipelagic region of the Torres Straits.

Introducing the Aquapelago

The term *archipelago*, first recorded in English language use in the late 16th Century, can be defined as an aggregation and/or chain of islands. The name is commonly held to have originated from two previous terms: *archi* from a Latin term meaning 'chief' or 'most prominent' and *pelagos*, from the Greek term for the sea. The expression appears to have entered anglophonic (and, hence, more global) usage from an Italian language term referring to a specific marine region, the Adriatic Sea; but has increasingly come to define the land area of a group of islands *within* a sea. My awareness of the necessity for a reformulation of the word/concept to more accurately represent specific socio-geographical spaces was heightened by my participation in the International Conference on Small Islands and Coral Reefs (ISI-C), which was held in August 2009 in Ambon. The conference was organised with a primary aim of sharing knowledge, information and experiences about the management and study of coral reef ecosystems. Within this, its main focus was on the need to ensure sustainable small island development in balance with ecosystem health and social justice for island communities. An additional objective was to ensure that action plans were established that could respond to the impact of climate change on small islands, a priority identified at the World Ocean Conference in Manado in 2009[3]. During ISI-C, the nature of archipelagos and archipelagic planning arose as key factors in debates. Reflecting these elements of discussion, a concluding statement was drafted during and formally presented at the conclusion of the conference. Item 1 of this stated:

> *Archipelagic regions, consisting of small islands and extensive marine territories including coral reefs, have very specific policy, planning and development requirements.*

Reflecting the above, the Statement's concluding item asserted:

> *There is a need to develop international dialogue between archipelagic states and regions in order to identify and progress global strategies to address the challenges*

The foci of both ISI-C and the earlier Manado conference were substantially informed by the national context. Like many other regional aggregates emerging from colonial administration, Indonesia had to conceptualise and articulate itself in a number of ways. First, it has had to 'imagine' a group of over 18,000 islands as a nation (rather than a residual post-colonial mass of disparate entities), as discussed by Anderson (1983), and – simultaneously – to devise social, economic, legislative and military strategies and mechanisms to establish and maintain national cohesion. Second, it has had to conceptualise the manner in which its marine zones could be configured as elements of an imagined national space and then translate this imagination into marine borders that could be nationally and internationally recognised. As Butcher (2009) has analysed, the process by which the fledgling independent nation slowly established its rights to claim and have various forms of control and jurisdiction over a marine area of 7.9 million square kilometres (in addition to its 1.8 million square kilometres of land) (Cribb and Ford, 2009: 1) has been a long and complex one. Following the Juanda Declaration of 1957, which claimed that "all waters surrounding, between and connecting the islands constituting the Indonesian state… are integral parts of the territory of the Indonesian state" (Butcher, 2009: 39); a series of legal and political manoeuvres and "the creativity and boldness of those most involved in imagining it and making it a reality" (ibid: 47) solidified the declaration as a cornerstone of Indonesian national identity. Reflecting the latter, this article has been formulated with specific reflection on the Indonesian experience and national perceptions of the state's space and 'essence' (and, also, how this national context relates to various local perceptions of access to and rights over specific areas of Indonesian marine areas).

The Indonesian experience of actively imagining and working to deliver a coherent national archipelagic space contrasts with the experience of another prominent archipelagic nation in the Asia-Pacific region, Japan. Secure in its core territorial identity, after centuries of territorial maintenance and isolation that were finally lifted by the Meiji government, installed in 1868; concepts of archipelagality have been less focussed and less consciously deployed in the development of the modern nation state. In this regard it is interesting to note that diversity of terms that equate to the English Language term 'archipelago'. These include *guntou*, *shotou*, *rettou* and *tatoukai.* All the terms include the Japanese designation *tou*, meaning island (rather than *shima*, which also means island). Linguist Danny Long has unpacked the nuances of each in the following terms: *Gun-tou* refers to a 'clump' of islands, *ret-tou* to a 'string' and *sho-tou*, less specifically, to 'various' islands, (p.c February 2012). The fourth term, while somewhat obscure in contemporary usage, is perhaps the most interesting one for the purposes of this discussion. As Long has identified (ibid), *tatoukai* is the closest to the term/concept of the 'aquapelago' that I am proposing. The initial *ta* signifies 'lots

of/many', *tou* = islands and *kai* = sea.[4] In terms of its use to refer to areas such as Japan's 'Inland Sea', Long identifies that "the image of *ta-tou-kai* seems to be a sea with clusters of islands" (ibid). While the term does not imply any profound holistic inter-relation of terrestrial and marine environments it does provide a common reference for both aquatic and terrestrial spaces.

Given centuries of use and the accretions of meanings that calcify a term, it is possible to argue that the word 'archipelago' is now too heavily associated with concepts of islands as land masses to be useful as a designation for regions in which aquatic spaces play a vital constitutive role. In this regard, Indonesia, Japan and similar nations can be regarded less as archipelagic states than as 'aquapelagic' ones. I propose the latter term in order to provide an expanded concept of the territory and human experience of an intermeshed and interactive marine/land environment.

With regard to the above, the aquapelago may be generally defined as:

> **an assemblage of the marine and land spaces of a group of islands and their adjacent waters**

I should acknowledge at this point that while the term 'aquapelago' is a compound of two terms that originally meant water/seas - ie *aqua* and *pelagos* - I have coined it as revision of the contemporary English term 'archipelago', which refers to an aggregation of islands. I utilise the 'aqua' component to refer to aquatic dimensions and 'pelago' as a residual ('grounded') element of the term I oppose it to (ie the archipelago). In this context the latter's etymological derivation (as discussed above) has little relevance to modern English usage.

While my term is essentially an expanded definition of an archipelago that attempts to re-emphasise the significance of waters between and waters encircling and connecting islands, we can produce a more specific definition of an aquapelagic society (or state) as:

> **a social unit existing in a location in which the aquatic spaces between and around a group of islands are utilised and navigated in a manner that is fundamentally interconnected with and essential to the social group's habitation of land and their senses of identity and belonging**

This is a working definition to which particular caveats and/or extensions may be appended but it serves to identify and linguistically demarcate an expanded concept and space beyond that explained by reference to 'an archipelago and its surrounding waters'. Accepting the framework of the term, aquapelagic research, policy and planning can proceed from the 'given' of its land-oceanic continuum. Importantly, it does not simply offer a surface model, it also encompasses the spatial depths of its waters. It provides a framework for understanding the continuum of land and sea resources and human activity and the connections between 'cultural landscapes' created by agriculture and habitation and the sea-surface 'scapes' and underwater 'scapes' created by aquaculture, fisheries and other human interactions. The term

aquapelago is proffered to encompass these senses of place and interaction. Returning to Butcher's previously discussed analysis of the gradual expansion of Indonesia to encompass extensive marine territories which it could claim as integral to its national space (2009), for instance; we could summarise this as the attempt to move from a recognition of the state as archipelagic one (as comprised by its islands) to an aquapelagic one – fundamentally premised on its national marine space.

The emphasis here is on the aquapelago as an entity constituted by human presence in and utilisation of the environment (rather than as an 'objective' geographical entity). In this regard, aquapelagos are assemblages that come into being and wax and wane as climate patterns alter and as human socio-economic organisations, technologies, and/or the resources and trade systems they rely on, change and develop in these contexts. In this sense, aquapelagos are *performed* entities.

Returning to earlier discussions of the nature of *archi*-pelagos, it is significant to note that these are also, to a significant extent, *imagined* entities. This characterisation is particularly evident at the margins of the designation of island groups as archipelagic, where the term may sit somewhat awkwardly. Take Tasmania, for instance. While there are some references to 'the Tasmanian archipelago' in tourism promotional literature, for example,[5] this designation is not in common usage and a more comfortable term has been that of 'Tasmania's islands'. This designation was the title of a book by photographer Richard Bennett, published in 2006 with financial aid from the Tasmanian Premier's Office. It was launched by Tasmanian Premier Paul Lennon with a speech that declared that the book "*Islands of Tasmania* captures the essence of Tasmania – and illustrates our brand" (Premier's Office Press release, 2006). The designation is a deft one, acknowledging the diversity of islands within the state and using a possessive designation to indicate them as areas *of* the state of Tasmania (rather than embracing an archipelagic definition of the state).

Newfoundland, with its massive central island, is similarly difficult to envisage as an archipelago and is rarely identified as such. It is however far easier and far more apt to identify it as an aquapelagic assemblage on account of the historical rationale of its modern settlement and the distribution of its population. The principal factor behind the region's population by European settlers was the existence of The Grand Banks, raised areas of sea-bed to the south east of the main island. Located at the confluence of the cold Labrador Current and warm Gulf Stream (a meeting point that gives rise to an upwelling of nutrients), this area of sea had attracted Western European fishing vessels since (at least) the 15th Century on account of the proliferation of cod, hake and other fish in the fertile waters. Initial European habitation of the coast and fringe islands of Newfoundland was transitory, principally to establish fish drying facilities, and/or seasonal, with small groups of workers left over the winter to maintain facilities until the return of fishing boats in the following spring. European settlement occurred as an extension of this practice, as 'wintering' populations extended the duration of their stay on land. The subsequent settlement pattern of the main island and its outliers reflected this, comprising a scatter of coastal 'outports' reliant on the fishery and connected to each other by sea-lanes (with land based transport systems such as roads and, later, rail being something of an afterthought). Premised on an offshore fishing area and with its settlements connected by the sea, the modern settler society of Newfoundland can be identified as a quintessential aquapelagic assemblage, at least up until

Newfoundland's incorporation into the Canadian federation in 1949. It is particularly notable in the latter regard that soon after incorporation, the administration of the (newly founded) Canadian province of Newfoundland pursued a policy of pressuring the populations of coastal 'outports' (communities primarily connected by sea) to abandon their homes and resettle in inland locations, resulting in a network of ghost towns around the Newfoundland coast and communities traumatised by relocation. This policy was compounded by the effects of the calamitous decline of the cod fishery and the imposition of a moratorium on cod fishing in 1992. Today Newfoundland is markedly less of an aquapelagic society than it was fifty years ago – its socio-economic networks are now innately connected with the continental Canadian state, with Alberta's oil sand deposits now substituting for the Grand Banks as one of the most viable sources of employment and income for Newfoundlanders.

Similar patterns of emergence of the aquapelagic dimension of societies at particular historical moments can also be observed elsewhere. The Torres Strait region, a narrow stretch of island-studded water between Australia's Cape York peninsula, to the south, and the southern coast of Papua New Guinea, to the north, also merits consideration. While meeting all the common criteria for designation as an archipelago, the islands of the region is rarely referred to as such; a more common designation being simply as The Torres Strait Islands. As significantly, the common colloquial designation of the region by its inhabitants, and those of the adjacent state of Queensland, is as 'The Straits' – a term that privileges the sea space between the two larger land masses as the defining element. This is a more complex designation than might at first appear. While it might be argued to simply be the result of colloquial linguistic abbreviation of a term, the particular word contains and retains various connotations. The first, most obviously, is to identify the islands of the Torres Straits as located in between two other land entities – rather than as a discrete entity. For all its cartographical obviousness, this is not however an imagination of place that necessarily preceded western exploration and settlement of the region, when its inter-relation to the southern continent was more limited to contact with a narrow area of the relatively sparsely populated tip of Cape York, which (arguably) was as much part of the archipelagic space as the actual islands; and when its interaction with south coast settlements of Papua occurred relatively freely along the coast and estuaries without the imposition of the arbitrary colonial border between Australia and Papua New Guinea that adheres close to the shore of the latter. In this regard 'the Straits' can be seen as an imaginative colonial impost that defined the region and its people as 'cramped' and transitional (the related English language sense of 'straits' is apparent here [as in 'dire straits'], indicating a problematic and/or vexatious situation).[6]

The second emphasis inherent in reference to the region as 'The Straits' is the emphasis on its aquatic (rather than terrestrial) space; a designation that resembles Hau'ofa's description of Oceania as a sea of islands in a more confined location. For a traditionally highly mobile marine people, who exploited marine resources and traded across the seas between Australia and Papua New Guinea for centuries before western colonisation, this is of course apposite. Indeed, traditions of marine usage were a key element in the landmark Australian legal case that led to the rejection of the concept of *terra nullius*, formerly enshrined in Australian Law as the pretext upon which indigenous peoples were denied land rights due to the assumption that land was not 'owned' in any way prior to European colonisation of the continent. The landmark case was initiated by

members of the Mer island community, led by Eddie Koiki Mabo, in 1982 ('Mabo and Others v Queensland n2'). After initially arguing for land rights on the island itself, Mabo extended his claim to two small reefs ten kilometres to the east of the island. Interviewed about the case for the film *Land Bilong Islanders* (1989, dir: Trevor Graham), Mabo identified the following cultural extension of Mer offshore:

> *There is a stone fish trap that I'm claiming, and beyond that... we have, a lagoon that I call Las Kapar and beyond that again is our home reef called Op Nor. And then, of course, there is a stretch of sea which goes out to the Great Barrier Reef, and I claim that because it has special significance as far as our cultural myths and legends go*.[7]

In all but use of the specific term, Mabo's statement points to an understanding of the Mer community as an aquapelagic society and of Mer itself as an aquapelagic assemblage. The Australian Government opposed the claim, primarily on the grounds that traditional rights to marine areas were not congruent with their (western) concepts of law and ownership.

Following a High Court hearing in 1992, considering the rights of indigenous people within the context of Australian property law, the concept of *terra nullius* was formerly dropped from Australian Law. Native title was subsequently recognised under the terms of the Australian Commonwealth's 'Native Title Act' (1993), which lead to a series of land claims that is still being processed. While the High Court stopped short of acknowledging traditional sea rights for Mer islanders, the Mabo case put the issue on the public agenda and began the momentum that led to the official recognition of indigenous sea rights in 2001 when the Federal Court found in favour of the Croker Island community (located north east of Darwin) and their claim for native title rights over two hundred square kilometres of sea floor to the east of their island ('Commonwealth v Yarmirr; Yarmirr v Northern Territory' [2001]). A subsequent claim mounted by a collection of Torres Strait Island communities for marine rights in an area of 37,800 square kilometres ('Akiba on behalf of the Torres Strait Islanders of the Regional Seas Claim Group v State of Queensland No 2') was finally successful in 2010; when the Federal Court of Australia established a series of rights that "were found to be possessed in aggregate by members of the claim group".[8] While this only represented a small step towards Torres Strait Islander determination over marine access to and usage of Torres Stait waters; the official recognition of the Islanders' rights to an aquapelagic space was a profound one.

Conclusion

The usefulness of any new concept can only be ascertained by subsequent engagements with and/or expositions of it. In this regard, the concept of the aquapelago is floated here as a contribution to the expansion and diversification of Island Studies. As, essentially, a re-envisioning of a range of phenomena that have been addressed to various extents by Island Studies and pre-existing (and now intersecting) fields such as Human Geography, Anthropology and Marine Sciences (etc.); the concept (and its 'vision') necessarily has both antecedents and work that exemplifies it in all but

the use of the specific appellation I propose. Research that addresses various aspects of the relationship of fisheries and societies is perhaps the most obvious area, necessarily involving contemplation of the inter-relation between marine spaces and resources and human engagement with them. In this regard, to cite three recent articles, Nakamura's (2011) analysis of how social harmony is maintained between inhabitants of Lamu, one of the Swahili islands off the East Coast of Africa, through consensual differentiation of uses of the coastal and marine environment (2011); Fleury's analysis of marine use and territorial claims around the Channel Islands (2011); and my own analysis of the impact of salmon aquaculture on the socio-economic and cultural character of Chiloé and its outer islands (Hayward, 2011) can be seen as congruent with and supportive of the propositions and analyses offered in this paper.

New concepts such as that proposed in this paper necessarily gain more traction in particular geographical, disciplinary and/or institutional locations than others. In certain locations the concept of the aquapelago may appear more fanciful (or even 'eccentric') than others. In this regard, it is no accident that the ruminations leading to my formulation of the term and concept have developed from research in and dialogue with researchers and islanders from locations for which it appears most apposite – ie from Indonesia, Japan and Oceania. These regions comprise a particularly rich and complex area of aquapelagic spaces that can allow integrated holistic research on human interactions with island and aquatic environments. The shift of focus involved between archipelagic and aquapelagic imagination and conceptualisation is a subtle but significant one that provides a challenge to researchers and is implicitly interdisciplinary. It is very much a process in its early stages. With regard to Indonesia, and to collaborative research with academics from this 'maritime continent', I can offer one example of an early interdisciplinary study (consciously) informed by the aquapelagic approach. This is one that I collaborated on with Professor Jacobus Mosse, from Pattimura University (in Ambon). Our focus was the *ikan asar* (smoked tuna) trade in Ambon and our research attempted to analyse the historical development of this trade with regard to its marine biomass, the nature of fishing methods, fishing regulation and fisheries organisation alongside a consideration of the socio-economic nature of smoked fish preparation and marketing and how the trade changed during the socio-religious conflict of 1999-2002. In this, our study ranged from the state of the marine waters and habitats of Ambon Bay to the use of fish attraction devices in areas off Seram island. Our considerations of the Ambon trade ranged from studies of family traditions and cooking techniques through to considerations of road routes and security issues. The research was first presented at the (1st) Australasian Regional Food Networks and Cultures Conference, held in Kingscliff in November 2011, and is currently under review with a refereed research journal and, if accepted for publication, will provide the first opportunity to assess the usefulness of the aquapelagic perspective in a specific case study.

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End Notes

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[2] This particular concept of assemblages was first proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1980) and popularised in English language through Brian Massumi's 1987 translation.

[3] See the 'Manado Ocean Declaration', archived online at: www.globelaw.com/LawSea/manado%20declaration.pdf

[4] And, in this regard, it is significant that the term is also used to refer to the Aegean Sea in Japanese (Thanks to Danny Long for this information).

[5] See, for instance, the 'Discover Tasmania' website at: http://www.discovertasmania.com/about_tasmania/general_overview_of_tasmania

[6] Both senses have the same etymology in the Medieval English term *streit* – meaning, tight, close or narrow.

[7] Transcribed online at: http://www.mabonativetitle.com/mabo_09.shtml - accessed March 2012.

[8] See full text of finding online at: http://www.atns.net.au/agreement.asp?EntityID=5060

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