

Maritime Crossroads of Geopolitics in East Asia

A Reexamination of Historic Ocean Perspectives in Japan

By Toru Yamada

Behind the "Island Mentality"

Shimaguni konjo (island-nation mentality) is a Japanese phrase that refers to the inward-looking characteristics of the Japanese. Japanologist Donald Keane translates it as "insularism."¹ It is equivalent to the popular English phrase "island mentality." Both the English and Japanese phrases, whether meant to address metaphorical or literal island communities, are rooted in the notion that islands are isolated in the middle of the sea. In Japan, a core focus of both popular and academic arguments has been that such ecological factors form the basis of national characteristics and Japanese insularity.

However, are islands really remote or isolated places removed from the rest of the world? Does the term "island mentality" correspond with the social history of island communities in Japan? I take a different approach; island communities are not insular but are rather at the crossroads of key international exchanges in Asia and the Pacific. Using ethnographic observations of the communities in Nagasaki's Gotō Archipelago, I present island communities as less insular but more cosmopolitan. It is rather the tendency to see an island as an insular place that limits our ability to interpret its historical background and cultural context.

Japan as an Isolated Archipelago?

The core elements of Japan's unique characteristics are often discussed in terms of the environment. In both Japan's popular and scholarly discourse, natural phenomena such as typhoons, drought, humidity, and heat are often viewed as affecting the culture of the island nation.² In those discourses, the ocean is treated as imposing a natural and conceptual limitation, and it forms the basis for the Japanese to develop their unique cultural characteristics by being physically and culturally isolated from the rest of the world. For example, in his book from 1935 on the ecological effects on Japan's national culture, Japanese philosopher Tetsuro Watsuji argues that a combination of warm and cold climates is the foundation of Japan's unique characteristics.³ The warm air from the Pacific and the cold air from the north/Eurasian continent collide, and this produces the distinctive environment for Japanese society, including the "unique" tradition of their rice cultivation. In Watsuji's argument, the Japanese archipelago is the meeting point of different environmental factors, and the residents of the archipelago adjust their lives to the environmental setting and develop their own lifestyles. Watsuji's and succeeding popular perspectives make it seem that the Japanese are living in a self-contained and isolated archipelago, and he implies that no other place in the world but Japan has such a natural confluence.

Such a perspective is based on the perception in which Japan's modern political boundary is viewed as equivalent to its environmental boundary. In light of such an assumption, the discussion tends to focus on the commonalities within the political boundary, and it often sets aside internal diversity or disregards transborder interactions. As a result, the discussion tends to construct narratives of Japanese national characteristics by isolating Japan within its modern political boundary. As Japan's political boundary is drawn around the archipelago, it seems as if the ocean is the natural force isolating Japan from the rest of the world.

However, Japanese philosopher Yoshihiko Amino challenges the claim that Japan is an isolated nation by focusing on people's connection with water.⁴ According to Amino, both archaeological and historic data indicate that prehistoric and historic settlements around Japan are concentrated along waterways, such as the ocean, lakes, and streams. Moreover, different areas have distinctive regional characteristics based on burial styles, agricultural remains, exchanged commodities, and trade linkages. Importantly, these linkages and connections go in different directions beyond the boundary of modern Japan. For example, while the keyhole tomb shape of the tomb period can be observed around the Yamato court's sphere of the third and seventh centuries, the tomb shapes in southern Kyūshū bear more resemblance to those in Okinawa. Amino also mentions that there are distinctive differences in the archaeological artifacts and historic records in northern and eastern Japan during the Yamato period, as there are closer similarities in the iron and fishing technologies with those of the Okhotsk region than those of western Japan. What Amino argues is that Japan was not an isolated archipelago, but rather consisted of several cultural areas. And the ocean connected these cultural areas with different neighbors rather than blocking outside regional interactions.

Nevertheless, the tendency to view the ocean as a barrier rather than a connector is predominant in contemporary Japan. In my research, this view of the ocean as a barrier was apparent when the officials of the Nagasaki prefectural government started conducting surveys to nominate the Catholic churches and Christian heritage sites around the islands and the peninsulas in the prefecture as prospective World Heritage properties in 2007. The officials initially stated in their draft proposal that the Christian communities were spread around in “inconvenient” and “remote” places so that practitioners could continue their religious practices by going underground during the persecution era between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, because the officials perceived the islands as remote and isolated places, they later struggled to explain how these Christian communities maintained their religious ties across multiple remote islands and peninsulas for almost three centuries. Were the islands really isolated or remote? The Nagasaki government’s survey in the island region, the Gotō Archipelago, turns out to falsify such popular perceptions not only by confirming that the ocean is in actuality a connector of communities, but also by affirming that Gotō is historically more connected to the regional culture of the East China Sea.

At the Western End of Japan

Nagasaki’s Gotō Archipelago is located approximately 600 miles west of Tokyo (and a mere 120 miles away from Korea’s Jeju Island). “Gotō” (五島) in Japanese means “five islands,” as the archipelago consists of five major islands and over 100 smaller islands, with approximately 70,000 residents total. The closest major city and national tourist destination, Nagasaki, is approximately sixty miles away. However, it still takes at least four hours to get from Gotō to Nagasaki by ferry, the most common source of transportation for locals. The islands are often labeled in Japanese as *ritō* (離島)—remote islands—because of their peripheral location in relation to Japan’s geopolitics and the inaccessibility by land transportation.

What’s observable in Nagasaki’s Gotō Archipelago is typical around island communities not only in Japan, but also in East and Southeast Asia. As there have been constant improvements around the world in ground and air transportation, which have made travel much faster, the speed of maritime transportation remains comparatively slower. For those who depend less on maritime transportation, the ocean seems to be more of an obstacle than a highway, and the island communities around the nation’s political periphery have conceptually been viewed as more “remote” than ever.

Gotō was once a hub of key maritime exchanges between China, Korea, and Japan. Between the eighth and ninth centuries, Gotō was the core port of the Japanese official missions to China during the Tang dynasty, *Kentōshi*. These exchanges involved not only political envoys and cultural ambassadors, but also religious leaders who spread Buddhism in Japan. Also, Gotō was the hub for informal political and cultural interactions between China, Korea, and Japan. During China’s Ming dynasty period between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, strict restrictions on maritime activities were implemented; but a Chinese pirate and merchant, Wang Zhi, moved to Gotō in the early 1500s and revitalized unofficial maritime trades between Japan, China, and Portugal. As the Tokugawa shogunate set up an isolationist policy, Nagasaki, remained as Japan’s official gateway to international maritime trade. Conveniently located between China, Korea, and Japan, Gotō received benefits by being at the center of East Asian geopolitics.

While Gotō has played both a formal and informal role in the maritime crossroads of East Asia, the Japanese national government in 2007 showed their interest in another aspect of Gotō’s maritime history. In January 2007, as a part of a national tourism development project, the national government decided that they would nominate the Catholic churches in Gotō and the rest of Nagasaki as prospective World Heritage properties, and officially advised regional authorities and local residents to implement appropriate heritage site preservation measures on the churches and in the surrounding landscapes.⁵

Catholicism reached Japan in the sixteenth century when the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier arrived in Kagoshima from India in 1549. Catholicism spread through western Japan where several *daimyō*, territorial lords, converted, expressing both conviction in the religion and interest in the trades with the Europeans.⁶ However, after Hideyoshi Toyotomi and the succeeding Tokugawa shogunate banned Christianity, some of the Catholics took their religious practices underground by becoming “Hidden Christians.” Gotō and several island communities in western Japan became sites of migration for these Hidden Christians from the main island of Kyūshū in the eighteenth century to escape religious persecution from the authorities of the time. These underground Catholics combined elements of Buddhism or Shintoism into their religious practices to better conceal their beliefs (Figure 1). After the lifting of restrictions on religious beliefs in the late nineteenth century, many of the Hidden Christians converted to Catholicism and built churches.⁷



Figure 1. Maria Kannon (a statue of Mary of the Hidden Christians). Source: The Dozaki Catholic Church in Gotō Nagasaki

Many of these Christian communities in Gotō are located away from island centers and often in areas inaccessible by car. Some of the communities have paths that are too winding and narrow for even small-sized vehicles to pass. The paths are hilly and some of them are not even paved, while others are just trails. Therefore, the communities seem hidden, as they were once the communities of the Hidden Christians (Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. Gorin Catholic community of Hisaka Island (2010). Photo by Toru Yamada



Figure 3. Cultural landscape survey by the government officials from the ocean (June 26, 2008). Photo by Toru Yamada

historic maps. All three maps document the terrains of islands and do not show much of the road networks in Gotō. By comparing the spatial arrangements of the communities in the Inō map and the major maritime networks in the other two maps, it becomes clear that some of the communities of the former are located along maritime networks. Many of those communities are in fact Christian communities.

The historic trace of maritime activities is observable around Gotō. In many communities in Gotō, both Christian and non-Christian, there are piers, fishing boats, and other signs of oceanic interactions. Also, some major local communities are still only accessible by boat, and the ocean is an integral component of local cultural activities. However, recent landscape analyses of the island communities were conducted by prefectural government officials from the vantage point of a hilltop. As a result, they viewed the ocean as the endpoint of community activities. Contrary to the prefectural government's approach, national officials conducted their analyses by observing the communities from the ocean to the hilltop. In this way, the ocean was placed as the hub of islanders' social activities. Such ocean-centric views are shared commonly among scholars and by advocates of cultural revitalization around Asia and the Pacific, as they have shown how the communities around the Pacific are closely connected via maritime routes.⁹

When the officials of Nagasaki's prefectural government initially drafted their version of the narrative for the World Heritage nomination of these Christian communities around Gotō, they presented the following draft in their first committee meeting: "The Hidden and Catholic communities around Gotō and Nagasaki are scattered around in logistically inconvenient, outlying, and remote places."⁸ Those communities seem "logistically inconvenient, outlying, and remote" when viewed from the land. As the term "island mentality" indicates the insular characteristics of island residents, the prefectural government's narrative also portrayed these island communities as physically insular. However, maritime scholars and the national government's landscape specialists suggested that municipal officials consider how the islanders have interacted with the ocean instead of looking into how roads would connect "remote" communities. Their suggestion was markedly different from that of the prefectural government officials. As the ocean has made Gotō a hub of East Asian maritime exchanges, they viewed the ocean as a connector rather than a barrier.

On the Ocean Mind

Historic maps from the 1800s show that the ocean was an integral part of island communities during the feudal Japanese era. Several historic maps show how the island communities around Gotō are closely and dynamically connected with one another over the ocean. Three of the following maps—the Inō map (1822), the Gotō map (year unknown), and the Hizen-Gotō (year unknown)—are stored in the private archives of the former local samurai leader Lord Matsuura (Figures 4, 5, and 6). While these maps present a general overview of Gotō, they also indicate how the ocean was an integral part of the island communities during the feudal Japanese era. The Inō map depicts the names of the communities that primarily face the ocean, and major ports and maritime networks are also described in the two other



Figure 4. Inō map (1822), Source: Matsuura Historical Museum.



Figure 5. Gotō map (year unknown), Source: Matsuura Historical Museum.



Figure 6. Hizen-Gotō (year unknown). Source: Matsuura Historical Museum.

This perspective of the national officials echoes that of Amino and Pacific scholars. A late Fijian scholar, Epeli Hau'ofa, once described the ocean as a highway that connected the islands across the Pacific.¹⁰ Archaeologists and linguists also shared Hau'ofa's sense as they found strong co-relations in the languages and archaeological materials, such as fish hooks and pottery remains, that were spatially distributed across the islands in the Pacific Ocean. Some of these materials can also be found in parts of East Asia, such as Japan, Okinawa, and Taiwan.¹¹ In addition to material data, cultural revitalization practices around the Pacific region have shown how people are also connected over the sea. Members of the Polynesian Voyaging Society famously reconstructed a double-hulled canoe, *Hōkūle'a*, and completed multiple long-distance travels across the Pacific with traditional star navigation techniques, demonstrating how physically connected island communities were across the Pacific.¹² The cultural practices in the Pacific place the ocean at the center of human activities rather than as a barrier between communities in consonance with Amino's argument that came out of his archaeological and historic data examinations.

Technological Development and Cultural Loss

In July 2010, I had a chance to cross the Gotō Channel from Nagasaki City to Fukue Island by tracing the historic maritime route. It had been over two and half years since the prefectural government announced their initial description of the preservation, and some municipal officials were already questioning the prefectural officials' initial narrative. We traveled almost the same route documented in one of the historic maps. The total distance between the two places is approximately seventy miles, and local fishermen and small boat conductors navigated me through the calmest waters. According to the fishermen and the conductors, this route resembles the historic maritime route of the Gotō Channel. As we were crossing the ocean in the middle of the night, the lights from the island communities were so bright that they helped me easily orient myself. The initial government narrative, however, makes the case that many of these same villages do not have convenient road access and seem hidden. But most of these communities were neatly located around the core maritime route of slow-speed boats. The communities hardly seem hidden from the vantage point of ocean transport.

Gotō is often referred to as “remote islands,” as it is surrounded by the ocean. Today, in addition to boat transportation, there is a small airport that links Gotō's Fukue Island to Nagasaki and Fukuoka via commuter propeller planes, but the

major means of transport off-island remains the ferry. The development of modern transportation has ironically strengthened our view of seeing islands as isolated places. Road networks have been developed on the major islands in Gotō, but there are still some island communities in hilly terrain on narrow or unpaved roads that still largely rely on boat transport to go between islands or to travel to other sides of their own islands. In Gotō, the maritime environment still requires boats or airplanes to navigate the landscape.

The Nagasaki government's initial draft of the heritage preservation narrative applied a land-oriented perspective to the cultural landscape of Gotō's island communities instead of including Gotō's history of being a maritime hub of East Asia. This narrative was not just an analytical interpretation, but it could have had legal force by integrating it into the then-projected preservation ordinances. Ironically, the law would not have preserved the cultural landscape of island communities, but instead, it could have imposed the "island mentality" of the mainland residents. As the municipal officials gradually started questioning the land-oriented narratives, Nagasaki's World Heritage project changed its course to a maritime-oriented framework and redirected from being stuck in someone else's island mentality to being reconnected with the maritime highways of the Pacific basin.

NOTES

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