- **Response** -

BETWEEN INTERIOR AQUAPELAGOS – THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE

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Introduction

This short article is a response to Hayward and Visentin's (2025) proposal of the concept of 'interior aquapelagos' and their invitation to other researchers to reflect upon it. My contribution presents arguments in a brief and somewhat liberal manner. However, this is not intended to sideline the aforementioned authors' treatise but rather aims to highlight its own perspectives one issues of interior aquapelagicity. The following passages, although somewhat sketchy and 'raw,' attempt to develop issues arising from aspects of Japanese culture. Along with various states of water, interior aquapelagos involve earth and soil, architecture, flora and fauna and various types of knowledge. In what follows, two aspects of the proposed interior aquapelago are subject to particular scrutiny. Firstly, this article focuses on the fact that these forms can be considered as parts of a geo-physical continuum such as among waterways, rivers, inlets, ponds, lakes, swamps, glaciers etc.; therefore, the term can cover a wide range of phenomena. In fact, interior aquapelagicity can also extend to various more temporal or transient qualities and phenomena such as the moisture of soil, rainwater, snowfall etc. Secondly, interior aquapelagicity inevitably involves an earth-water assemblage where the soil and water are inseparably interrelated when generate particular characteristics: subterranean waters, colloid, mud, sewerage, sluices, wetlands, caves, hot springs etc. can all be included in this. I introduce these aspects not so much as geomorphological or chemical typologies but, rather, to assert that their embeddedness in the contents of landscape and other types of place-ness and spaces needs to be acknowledged.

In addition, the concept of interior aquapelagicity involves the idea of the visible and invisible, to borrow a concept from Merleau-Ponty (1968). Merleau-Ponty sees the two as reversible in that neither of them is paradigmatically dominant. In the context of this discussion, while the surface water makes waterways visible, underground water and drains, the invisible, are the other side of the same token. Whereas the matter of visibility and invisibility is not limited to material plane, there seems to be an epistemological plane to mediate the conceptual and material in-/visibility. In Kaaristo and Visentin (2023), the author's interesting discussion of the canals in Manchester, with multi-faceted examples from aquatic trafficking and waste management, allows them to propose grasping absence as *affordance* of water (Kaaristo and Visentin, 2023). The inland waters are characteristic in that 'what is there or not there' affords the actants to be involved in interior aquapelago. The water in flux, the boats finding a navigable space, beer bottles sinking beneath the mud, and so on, all involve a lived experience of water. In this regard, the actants' epistemological and perceptive knowledge of something being there and not being there provides a key element in the following discussion. Also, Kaaristo and Visentin discusses historicity as an affordance,

which is another intriguing point. 'What is there and not there' affords perceptive and effectual aspects, especially when multiethnic complexity is present, as it will be introduced as in the case of Ainu culture in northern Japan.

In developing these points, this article provides three separate groups of vignettes from the Japanese archipelago. Therefore, this is not an attempt to accommodate the concept within Japanology or area studies and, occasionally, non-Japanese topics are inserted whenever it seems appropriate. While the tripartite passages have no necessary connection, they show aspects of interior aquapelagicity in a kaleidoscopic manner. The first part introduces the Japanese term *suido*, which literally means 'water-earth', in discussing how interior aquapelagicity can be considered an assemblage of corporeal nature. The second part will centre around river systems by referring to Ainu toponyms and livelihoods with regard to several issues in the Japanese nation-state. The third part will focus on the folklore of the *kappa*, a mysterious creature that generates the place-ness of interior aquapelagicity.

Suido: The water-earth assemblage

The term *suido* literally means 'water' (*sui*) and earth/soil (*do*) in the Japanese lexicon[1]. The term might be derived from classical Chinese vocabulary, but it has been used to signify landscape in general[2]. The water included in the term is primarily imagined as inland waters, while *suido* can be anywhere in the world. However, just as the word *shima* encompasses the island and a sphere of activity synonymously (Suwa, 2007), *suido* also implicitly refers to habitable land, or at least the condition that is expected and presupposed. Therefore, the idea of *suido* can be applied to a variety of studies from civil engineering to ethnology and philosophy. Ogawa Naoya found the word in a collection of Chinese classical poetry by the monk Kūkai (774-835), which seems to be the earliest surviving case of the word used in text. Interestingly, Kūkai describes *suido* as a metaphor of perishable human body, as the corpse turns into the soil and, therefore, back to nature (Ogawa, 2005). In his article for *Doboku Gakkaishi*, the long-running Japanese Society of Irrigation, Drainage and Rural Engineering newsletter, Ogawa as an ethnologist, emphasises that even in modern Japan, with advanced civil engineering technology, the sustainability and development of *suido* involves polythetic, animistic or mythical beliefs that are conducted in ritual, just as the ancient monk-poet found a worldview from the water-earth. The notion of *suido* extends to the realm of folk beliefs, as Kūkai inserted the word into his poetry of a religious nature.

The livelihood of aquapelagicity is performed in, by, on, through or over the water, inasmuch as it takes place on, under, across or all over the earth. Terraced rice paddies in rural, monsoon Asia are, overall, a prototype for how *suido* is registered. The rainwater is collected on the top and is carried down to the skirt of the hill as it flows, filling out the paddies in the process. As the rainy season comes close to end, the ground is dried by drainage and the crops are ready to harvest. In the monsoon area, this cycle is managed twice a year. These terraced rice paddies circulate water, allowing reptiles, amphibians, insects and waterfowl to flourish in a sustainable manner. Fertiliser is not used, since nitrogen circulates in the ecosystem readily thanks to the flow of the water. While *suido* is a neutral concept in civil engineering, it should be emphasised that it should involve human activity in aquapelagic

[1] This is not to be confused with *suidō*, meaning water supply.

[2] In an everyday context *suido* is used somewhat less than *fūdo* ('air/wind-earth'). The latter, however, refers more strongly to a populace or inhabitants, since the word *fū* connotes fashion, culture or habit, as in *fūdobyō* ('endemic').

settings designed to be sustainable. This combination of the idea of corporeality in Kūkai's poetry and modern civil engineering is interesting in that there is a genuine possibility of discussing waterways as if blood vessels, lymph circulation or neural networks, and viewing *suido* as an enormous entity-place. But this is not to be taken as a parable, as in the way fungi connect individual trees or each other with mycelium (Kohn, 2013). The aquapelagicity of waterways depend on the idea that something is flowing (with water) in connecting with entities organically, forming assemblages. Waterways are literally entities that can be considered as alive.

Since the idea of *suido* envelops consensual realms, as has been pointed out, it can be contended that *suido* characterises a becoming of assemblage, as well as a non-static one, as a human body being turned into the earth. Discussions drawing from traditional and local practices can tend to delineate their long-durée subjects as static entities, such as in Clifford Geertz's historical ethnography of irrigation system of terraced paddies in the Balinese kingdom (1980). However, such sustainability hardly necessitates a status quo, since in the case of inland water bodies there are broadly two layers: underground waters and surface waterways, which influence each other. In other words, the waters flowing underground do not have a discourse of their own. The latter, by contrast, are showy and eloquent, even producing various watery sounds evaporates and precipitates. This also means that the surface waterway of *suido* is embedded in its underground water system. These two forms interrelate a mirror relationship between the visible and invisible. The interior aquapelago inevitably seems to exist between what is present, clear and obvious and what is nebulous, unpredicted and deeply hidden.

Institutional forces can also affect the whole situation. The invisible here forms an assemblage of transient, unpredictable nature that plays a particular role in the condition of *suido*. Things take place unseen until it finally breaks out. This bilayered aspect of *suido* can emerge in a catastrophic manner, often as a consequence of human activity. In the very early morning of January 28, 2025, for instance a pothole appeared on an intersection in Yashio City, Saitama and swallowed a 4-ton truck. The 74-year-old driver was left deep down in the truck cabin and ceased to answer the rescue squad in several hours, and then the entire truck was buried by sandy dirt. Within ten days, the cavity became over 40 metres in diameter with a depth of more than 17m, sinking the entire intersection and the buildings nearby. Experts have identified that a decayed sewage system that collects used water from several municipalities in eastern Saitama must have collapsed, taking the soil into the concrete cavity to cause the pothole, and spewing the polluted water down. The sulphuric acid produced from sulphurated hydrogen in the rotting water is likely to have spoiled the concrete pipe gradually over some 40 years and water and sewerage coming from broken rainwater drains and connecting with Nakagawa River pushed upstream during hightide worsened the erosion. An excavator accidentally dug into the subsurface water, and it has been spouting additional water since then. As an emergency measure, for a week some 1.2 million residents were asked not to use tap water between 14.00 and 17.00. Perhaps, this sheer quagmire caused by expired underground water system could have been predicted, had the policy makers taken an appropriate consideration of Shiodome (the old name of Yashio City) which means 'the end of upstream brine' (*shio*: tide + [*d*]*tome* -stop).

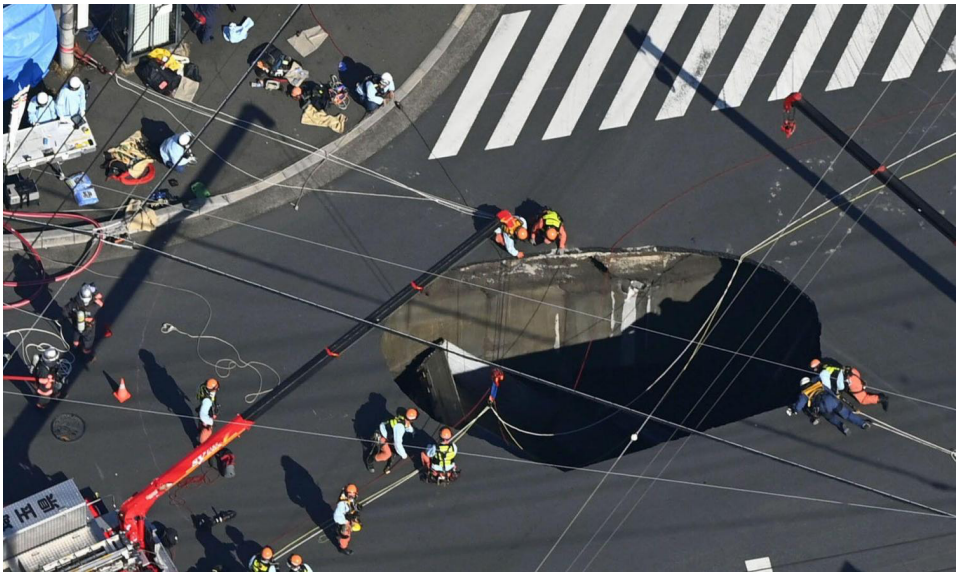

Figure 1 - An early phase of the Yashio pothole incident (January 2025).

Suido is an assemblage that has corporeality, and this corporeality is not a metaphor or mere personification. Humans might build waterways and keep the environment sustainable, but there might be other builders with other ways to realise aquapelagicity. Therefore, with regard to interior aquapelagos, the idea of *suido* must develop multiple perspectives beyond humanity that, in some cases, can be found more easily outside Japan. The remote upper Vltava area in the Brdy mountain, for instance has been relatively untouched by humans and its wetlands ecosystem has been designated as a protected site. In order to protect the swamp area, the Czech government planned a seven-year construction project to create a reservoir. The budget ran to an estimated one million US dollars. Later, the project was suspended because within a year beavers had built a large enough dam to maintain the swamp for their own sake (AOPK ČR, 2025). Of course, not every beaver can do such favours for human interests, but this episode conveys an important aspect of *suido* that it should be grasped in a multispecies perspective.

Rivers as living organisms, waterway intersubjectivity and heterotopias

Ainu toponyms such as *pet* (a river), *nay* (a stream or gorge), *to* (a lake/pond) and *ya* (a bank)[3] have remained long after the people disappeared from the mainland Japan. In Hokkaido, which retains an Ainu population, a great number of such names indicate an Ainu

[3] Some identify modified versions of *yat* ('swamp') as appearing in Japanese toponyms such as Tokyo's Shibuya or Setagaya, suggesting Ainu influence in these regions. They relate the Ainu word *yat* with Japanese *yato* or *yachi*. However, the former hardly appears in Ainu toponyms, and the latter specifically describes frequent narrows on the skirt of upland volcanic ash deposits. Also, Hokkaido, traditionally the most populated region by the Ainu, records no instances of *yat* as a toponym (Hokkaido government website). *Yato* or *yachi* toponyms are concentrated in eastern Japan (roughly from Nagoya to Aomori), and the same landform is called *tani* (meaning a 'valley' in general) in western Japan, so here is a hint of prehistoric cultural or even ethnic diversity.

origin. Wakkanai, the northernmost township in Hokkaido, originally had an Ainu name, *Yam wakkanay*, meaning the 'cold water source stream'. The Ainu tend to be more descriptive about inland waters than other landforms such as hills, mountains, islands and coastlines, which might reflect their worldview. Etymological research into Ainu toponyms in the mainland Japan is a complex matter, despite the fact that many Ainu must have been present, especially in the northern provinces. Due to the scarcity of historical records, the traditional territories of the Ainu are unclear except for a few maritime villages, which were perhaps trading posts or fishing settlements, that existed by the Tsugaru Strait until the 1800s. The name of the Mabechi river that flows through northern mainland from Iwate to the city of Hachinohe seems to derive from the Ainu phrase *ma pet*, meaning the 'big river.'[4]

According to Chiri Mashiho (1956), one of the first generation of native Ainu ethnologists, in Ainu cosmology any rivers are conceived as living organisms and not a mere landform. Throughout much of the historical era until modernity, the Ainu people mainly relied on hunting and gathering combined with occasional horticulture and trading of various goods. The English phrase 'body of water' would be appreciated verbatim by Ainu aesthetics. The Ainu practice of naming a river is an act of animistic beliefs. Here is a point in which aquapelagicity of waterways becomes an entity. A waterway with a life property of its own, as if it was an animal, is a fascinating concept indeed, and this 'waterway subjectivity', so to speak, provides a valuable to grasp issues of inland water's aquapelagicity. Or, more precisely, since the relationships between with the Ainu and inlands waters are mutually interactive as an ecosystem, water subjectivity is really intersubjective. For example, the Ainu would pick nutritious nuts from aquatic plant called *pekampe* or *bekambe* (*Trapa jeholensis*), which floats robustly on the swampy ponds. In the Kushiro River area, *bekambe kamuynomi*, (which literally meaning 'praying for the god of bekambe'), is an annual ritual to celebrate the harvest of the hard fruits, which the people relied on as a staple food.

Waterway intersubjectivity can be obstructed by external and often institutional forces, which is reminiscent of Foucault's argument about heterotopia. Foucault defines heterotopias as resulting when "[t]hey present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but, in any case, these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces" (1984, p.3). Foucault is not really grasping utopias in a Platonic idealist sense, since heterotopias are the material image of utopias. Utopias are the mirror image of heterotopias, and heterotopias inculcate utopias, in a sense. Heterotopias are juxtaposed in real space with utopias. Utopia is experienced through heterotopia by the latter realising the former, as in a make-believe scheme of relationship between the imaginary and the material. Therefore, heterotopia's embodiment of utopia, as it can be drawn from Foucault's argument, is naturally situational and effectual. Similarly, interior aquapelagos can be heterotopias whenever the mirroring interaction with utopia plays any role. Therefore, aquapelagicity in modern Ainu customs involves a heterotopia reflecting utopia in contemporary Japanese political landscape. Here, waterways play an indispensable role, a heterotopic mirror to the utopia.

On April 18, 2024, Sapporo Regional Court denied an Ainu group the right to fish the salmon swimming upstream of the Urahorotokachi River. The river was separated from the newly

[4] Some Japanese surnames also derive from clan's original territory and the Suwas, for instance, most likely spread from the Lake Suwa area in central Honshu and were adherents of the Shinto sect of the same name. Some surnames in northern also Japan share Ainu origin.

channelled Tokachi River and connected by an aqueduct, but in fact the Urahorotokachi takes the course of the old Tokachi River, which is sacred to the Ainu. The Ainu refer to salmon as *kamuycep*, the godly fish in ritual context, and also as *si ipe,* or the 'true food.' This articulation of the salmon expresses the fact that the fish is an indispensable element of their spiritual and material lives. Because of this, traditional rituals and the right to fish it in the customary areas is not supposed to be disputed in order to allow the Ainu to sustain their way of life with dignity. The court, however, ruled that the Ainu should only be allowed to catch a small number of salmon in order to serve the ritual. Fishing over the prescribed quota would thereby violate a number of related regulations. Those regarding construction of riverbanks and aqueducts fall under the authority of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism. Fisheries are regulated by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. Fishing as cultural property is guided by Agency of Cultural Affairs. The Ainu in Urahorotokachi are protected by none of them as far as *kamuycep* is concerned. The puzzle is that the court separates fishing of *kamuycep* for the native ritual from other sociocultural conducts. The Ainu traditionally fished to live. The salmon might be preserved for trade, and a portion of their catch is made for offerings. There was no specifically purposed fishing for the ritual. Whether the Ainu still follow a subsistent pattern of salmon fishing or not, the idea of rivers as living organisms should inform notions of aquapelagicity (interior or otherwise). Utopian experience in the Ainu heterotopia has been denied by shuttering the Ainu's mirror through the court decision and turning the Ainu utopia into a dystopia.

Waterways and mythical reality

Waterways can be characterised as flowing bodies of water. The river flow, tidal upstream, or a wake affords the body of water. The flow marks ups and downs, here and there, and the time past, present and future. The Buddhist introspection by Medieval author Kamono Chōmei compares the transient, floating world with the flowing water:

> *Of the flowing river the flood ever changeth, on the still pool the foam gathering, vanishing, stayeth not. Such too is the lot of men and of the dwellings of men in this world of ours.* (Minakata and Dickins, 1905, page?).

Here the pessimistic literate laments the ephemeral sublimity of *mujō*, the core aesthetics that nothing is stable but subject to change, despite its unchanging appearance. Chōmei's disappointment is a general reflection of his contemporary circumstance, as the decaying imperial court's rulership based in Kyoto was about to be taken over by the new samurai's power rooted in the eastern provinces. Chōmei's sorrowful, brilliant flow of syllables perfectly parallels the social environment that undermines his foundation.

However, Chōmei's envisioning utterances does not limit the flow affordance. As the following will show, flowing water has provided abundant oral traditions that enhances the flow affordance. The Hachimangū Shrine in Goshogawara, Aomori, records a legend about its etymology. The legend is thought to be a folk etymology[5] and to local people it is a fantasy that provides a certain kind of reality. The folktale says that a *goshintai*, or figurine of Shinto divinity enshrined in the Gosho district of then Soma Village (now part of Hirosaki City), was washed away three times due to flooding of the Goshogawara riverbank. After the third time,

[5] This is combination of *gosho* ('five-places') and *kawara* (river banks) and the term first appeared in a document written in the 1600s.

a ritual was conducted and the riverbank was named Goshogawara, after Gosho. Some accounts relate that the *goshintai* embodied the soul of medieval Emperor Chōkei (who reigned 1368-1383), whose myth tells that he wandered around northern provinces after his political defeat in Kyoto. This appears to derive from the accidental similarity of the name Gosho, which probably meant *goso* or *koso* (an ancient onomatopoeia for massive objects colliding) and might have been used to caution about fragile ground. Interestingly, today's Gosho district and Goshogawara are not directly connected by a single waterway, but Kamisukizawa, an adjacent district is. In Kamisukizawa, the river Soma flows into the Iwaki, which flows into Goshogawara for more than 30km. Until the first half of last century, the Iwaki River, along other major rivers such as the Hirakawa, Togawa and Asaseishi, was an important water transportation route for crops, logs, stones and other goods. Folksongs and folklore were also likely to have been transmitted by this network. Therefore, the fictional movement of the figurine inculcates a reality of life histories of and about the waters, and the figurine itself is materialisation of myth. The power of interior aquapelagos, manifest in waterborne transportation, flood and the spread of occult beliefs, are manifest in a body, a figurine, to believe in. The figurine is today stored in the shrine as a sacred object and cannot be seen, and the Emperor himself apparently never travelled to Aomori. Still, the legend generates a kind of reality, a mythical reality, to realise the materiality of river and its related object[6].

Yōkai, the general term to describe paranormal entities, has attracted academic attention. Ethnologist Yanagita Kunio recorded folktales from the Tōno region of Iwate collected from his friend Sasaki Kizen and local informants in the early 20th century (Yanagita, 1910). According to his account, a type of *yōkai* known as *kappa* had been spotted in the streams around Tōno. Kappa are often humanoid in form, although very ugly, and their feet and hands are webbed. They commonly appeared in narrow, bushy streams. In some of the tales collected by Yanagita, they stealthily have intercourse with female humans and impregnate them, and some others tells that they try to drown horses in streams. The *kappa* has innumerable names around Japan and is also portrayed in various other forms, from an otter or ape to a humanoid. Some are known to appear in the rivers during summer and to hibernate in the mountains during winter. Some others lend their houseware, like to play sumo with farmers, drown children, like to eat cucumbers, and so forth. This wide variety of *kappas* indicates a strong presence of the interior aquapelago in the cultural imaginary in that river water provides a nexus of human activity, including for horses and other livestock that make use of the water, especially during the summer. *Kappa* also connect with another strain of folktale concerning a *kakurezato* ('hidden settlement') or *mayoiga* ('lost house'), a mysteriously vacated manor or homestead located by a mountainous stream. Sometimes one might see finely lacquered chopsticks or tableware flowing down from upstream where no settlements are known to exist. If so, they are gift from *kakurezato* and anyone who picks them up receives a fortune. Some folktales depict such houseware as belonging to a friendly *kappa*. Both the figurine of Goshogawara and *kappa* of Tōno are not simply a matter of imagination of some premodern mind. The fact that the legend has been introduced in the Shinto shrine and the Tōno *kappa* sites attracting tourists means that they construct a reality that makes the interior aquapelago a unique place.

[6] Also, see discussions about the mummified *ningyo*/mermaids that are claimed to have been fished from inland waters in western Japan (Suwa, 2018).

Conclusion

Interior aquapelagos can be understood in terms of land either floating or lying on a cushion of water with or without the human disturbance of *suido*. The Shibuya River in Tokyo flows just outside the eponymous mega train station. Commuters are, however, unable to see it, since it was processed into a drain, connected with other sewage, and buried underground completely. Mount Fuji is surrounded by innumerable cold springs, some of which are the lakes known as Fujigoko ('five lakes of Mt. Fuji'). The Kakitagawa clear springs flows from the outskirts, providing optimum condition for growing wasabi, and into Suruga Bay. This water system originates from the volcano's gravels, forming an enormous body of underground water, as if the whole mountain is, in a sense, floating on it. Likewise, Teshima's enshrined spring is an open-air space for sculptor Aoki Noe's work, and its water flows underground from the pond on top of the mountain (Suwa, 2020). Therefore, the entire ground is floating upon the water. The three fragments that have been discussed above present individual but relating aspects and are tendered as elements that might inform further discussion of the nature of interior aquapelagos. The envisioning of flow, which is a type of affordance, as well as a material, spiritual and imaginary quality, is what epistemologically realises the interior aquapelago, and this envisioning is something in between the visible and invisible, as the flow of the river can be transient.

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