



## Mage – Japan’s Island Beyond the Reach of the Law

Gavan McCormack

While a great deal of attention focuses on the chain of islands dividing the East China Sea from the Pacific Ocean between Japan’s Kyushu and Taiwan, it tends to focus heavily on those that are part of Okinawa prefecture and to neglect those in the northern part of the chain that are close to Kyushu and administratively part of Kagoshima rather than Okinawa prefecture. Mage is one such. Mage (literally: Horsehair) island sits well north of the line that separates Kagoshima from Okinawa prefecture. It is not Okinawa but is worthy of attention because it shows the same general trends as does Okinawa – of “remote island” blues (especially depopulation), dependence on whims of the central government, and the insidious workings of a military base mentality (even though not one soldier has yet set foot on it).

Recent events in Mage make for a remarkable story, suggestive of bureaucratic irresponsibility, corruption, and environmental abuse on a grand scale. Furthermore, as in the islands of the Okinawa group, Mage and its adjacent Kagoshima Prefecture islands bear witness now to the gradual awakening of levels of civic responsibility and engagement till recently unimaginable. Compared to Okinawa’s Henoko and Takae, the Mage struggle is at an early stage and remains little known nationally and scarcely at all internationally, but it shares much of the same character.

Mage Island, now a couple of hours by a fast boat (ca. 115 kms) south of the city of Kagoshima, is located about 12 kilometres west of Tanegashima, the island in the East China Sea where in the 16th century Francis Xavier is said to have first landed in Japan, and about 40 kilometres north of the World Heritage island of Yakushima. With a circumference of 16 kms and an area of just over 8 square kms, washed by the “warm current” (*kuroshio*) and enjoying sufficient rainfall to feed no less than 16 rivers, its tiny space is (or perhaps was) home to an astonishing biodiversity on both sea and land, from nesting turtles and giant hermit crabs to several species of killifish (*medaka*), and over 400 of birds including the ruddy kingfisher and the skylark, and known in particular for its own sub-species of deer, the “Mage deer.” Mage was only sporadically populated by groups of fishermen till modern times. The researcher who probably knows the island best, having visited it with his students each year between 1987 and 2000, after which access was closed, describes it as a “Treasure island” of life.<sup>1</sup>



**Mage Island (in red), In the Satsunan Islands just south of Kagoshima**

The vicissitudes that the island has undergone in the post-1945 era make it a window into the failures of regional development policies. From 1951 settlement (or land-clearing, *kaitaku*) was officially encouraged, both as an outlet for rising population and as a source for food production, and Mage came to support 528 people (113 families), with a primary and junior secondary school, who made a living out of cultivation of rice and sugar cane, fishing, and collecting herbs and sea grasses. Especially in season, the adjacent seas “boiled” with the eggs of teeming schools of flying fish.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1960s, however, the state reversed its policy, cutting back especially on rice production and reversing its earlier encouragement to agriculture. In the 1970s, investors, strictly speaking speculators, gradually bought up the land and the residents abandoned the island, the local school closing in 1980, and successive blueprints for profitable development were imagined, adopted, and in due course abandoned: as a tourist development site (“Mage Island Marine Leisure Land”), a Self-Defense Force radar base (1983), an oil storage site (1984), a nuclear waste storage site (ca. 1999), or as a landing site for the Japanese “Hope” space shuttle (late 1990s to ca. 2008). Ownership (over 99 per cent) became concentrated in the Mage Island Development Company and the island was classified as unpopulated, although a small group of company staff continued to be based there. Since about 2007, however, it has been closed off to researchers, journalists, the public, and even, astonishingly, to officials of Kagoshima prefecture or Nishinoomote City in which it is located who want to investigate apparent infractions of laws and regulations. The company took the view that prefectural and city authorities were simply being antagonistic to a project designed to benefit the nation and the local region alike.<sup>3</sup> For the time being, it remains a law unto itself. Not only is Mage in one sense a “treasure island,” it is also a “mystery island.”

In the early 21st century, it seemed that the speculative investment might be about to pay off. After the scrapping of successive blueprints based on agriculture and fisheries, tourism, heavy industry, and the nuclear and space industries, the military path seemed to offer the best prospect. The Department of Defense was identified as the best potential customer to buy (or lease) the land. With that prospect in mind, Taston Airport (which in 1995 took over from Mage Island Development Company) began clearing the pristine landscape and during the first decade of the 21st century constructed two runways, 4,200 metres south-north and 2,400 metres east-west. The 441 hectare forest that existed in 2002 shrank by approximately four tenths, and an airport of a scale comparable to Tokyo’s Narita or Osaka’s Kansai emerged on the uninhabited island.<sup>4</sup>

The development would appear to have been unlicensed and possibly illegal. The island development company (Taston Airport Company) reported having cleared some 170 hectares, while its permits allowed only 60 (and included allowance for a “heliport,” not a massive airport).<sup>5</sup> The very topography of the island would appear to have been altered by flattening its most prominent peak, the 71.7 metre high Gakunokoshi ??????. Officials at local, prefectural, and national level seem to have joined in turning a blind eye to breaches of multiple regulations and laws.

In 2009 the island surfaced briefly as a possible site for the relocation of the US Marine Corps facility from Futenma. It had the attraction, for Prime Minister Hatoyama, of being technically not a part of Okinawa prefecture so that a transfer of the Futenma base there would meet his pledge to move the base “beyond the prefecture.”<sup>6</sup> But, in the face of fierce local opposition, and with dark clouds of suspected corruption gathering around the development company – leading to indictment and (in June 2011) conviction of its president, Tateishi Isao, sentenced to two and a half years imprisonment (suspended for four years) for tax evasion - he dropped the idea.

Set aside for the time being, however, it was not forgotten. As DPJ governments under Kan Naoto and Noda Yoshihiko followed a policy of “strengthening” national defences in the southwest islands and the East China Sea facing China, the owners of Mage saw their chance. In June 2011 the “Two plus Two” meeting of US and Japanese Defence and Foreign Ministers in Washington named it as potential site for construction of a SDF base, which US Navy pilots (from the USS George Washington, homeported at Yokosuka) could also use for night take-off and landing exercises (FCLP, or Field Carrier Landing Practice).<sup>7</sup> It would bring the two armed forces into closer cooperation, provide a much more convenient location for US naval operations than the relatively remote Iwojima Island, roughly 1,000 kilometres to the east where the FCLP was currently conducted, and being an island without people, it was assumed that local opposition would be no match for a determined state, unlike the Henoko project on Okinawa’s main island.

Nishinoomote City, administratively the locus of Mage Island, suffers the same effects of depopulation and decline as other island and mountain districts.



**Photographs by Asahi shimbun showing apparent breach of forest law by unlicensed development From top down, the island in June 2004, November 2006, and July 2011**

Between 1950 and 1965, its population remained steady at somewhat more than 30,000 (peaking in 1959 at 33,593), but thereafter it slowly but relentlessly declined to its current level of about 16,900.<sup>8</sup> It therefore qualifies for the official listing as “kaso” (suffering depopulation, aging and economic decline). A group of Tanegashima businessmen was formed in 2011 to promote the base project and the Vice Minister of Defense made a special visit to Nishinoomote in July 2011 to explain the design and to offer a package of benefits (promising a subsidy of 25 billion yen over 10 years and endeavouring to further sweeten the deal by reference to establishing a regional disaster relief base).<sup>9</sup> Although there are those who believe that, as one hotel keeper put it, “we cannot survive on nature protection and agriculture, and might just have to tolerate the noise [of the US fighter planes],” he was given a cold greeting. Local authorities, from Kagoshima’s Governor to the Nishinoomote mayor and the head of the Kagoshima Prefectural Assembly expressed varying degrees of resentment at the government’s high-handedness and determination to refuse cooperation and resist any attempt to impose the base design. A majority of residents of Nishinoomote City and the three surrounding towns – about 24,700 people - signed a protest petition;<sup>10</sup> the prefecture and four related municipalities refused a Department of Defense offer of special grants to cover the cost of preliminary survey of the island area; and nationwide 100,000 people signed a protest and demand for cancellation of the project.<sup>11</sup>

Late in 2011, the City began to show increasing interest in the remarkably shielded private realm that had grown apparently beyond all authority, taking steps to try to gain physical access in order to levy taxes on works that from aerial inspection seemed to include at least a 6-story office block and several buildings presumed to be staff quarters,<sup>12</sup> keen also to investigate apparent breaches of various laws including the Forest Law and to survey the deer population because of suspicion of its drastic decline.



**“Beyond the Law” Tasuton Airport Buildings, Mage Island February 2010**

Local fishermen in September 2011 launched a suit alleging devastating effects on their catch by marine pollution stemming from the island.<sup>13</sup> Works on the site stopped, and in January 2012 the Prefecture was reported to be taking steps to cancel existing permits to the company.

From Tokyo’s perspective, there would appear to be no good outcomes. The idea that the secretly developed facility could now simply be turned over to the SDF and their American Navy partners seemed improbable, although the state’s ability to divide, manipulate and persuade local communities was not to be underestimated. The island “owner,” Tatsuton president Tateishi Isao, anyway says he does not want to sell, though he obviously very much wants to lease the island to the Department of Defence. He claims to have invested fifteen billion yen in “developing” it.<sup>14</sup> However, the swirling rumours and scandals and the suggestions of possible complicity in high places might not be easily stemmed. Perhaps in a sense the worst imaginable nightmare for the Japanese government might be that its attempt to combine local persuasion with faithfulness to the promises made to Washington in the June 2011 agreement meeting would spur local communities into a second “Henoko”, a source of sustained resistance to US military base expansion.

Mage is even more remote than Henoko. In a sense, it is infinitely remote because of being inaccessible to the outsider and having no (registered) residents. The state of the island could not be known in detail because researchers could not land on it, but the depredations involved in the construction of the huge runways could not be small and the Asahi photographs made a strong prima facie case that the damage is widespread and serious. Some local groups have declared the goal of buying back and restoring the island but that would call for a very substantial sum, probably beyond local resources.

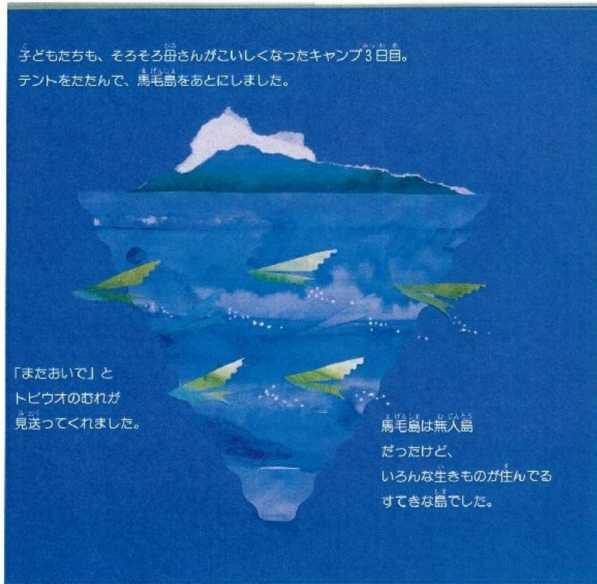
Although the “Tasuton Airfield” affair is shrouded in mystery it remains to now essentially a local issue. However, its implications go deep to the nation state and possibly to the US alliance. Ultimately it was the Japanese state that turned a blind or a conniving eye for so long as this island was subjected to wave after wave of speculative “*ranchiatsu*” (development gone mad) policies and blueprints whose ultimate end – the island flattened and converted to a military base in the interests of the military establishments of Tokyo and Washington – only became evident, at least to the public, from 2007. To restore it as a nature reserve, possibly in association with Yakushima’s World Heritage site, would be one way, perhaps the only way, to acknowledge and attempt to meet that responsibility.

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Recommended citation: Gavan McCormack, “*Mage - Japan’s Island Beyond the Reach of Law*,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol 10, Issue 8, No 3, February 20, 2012.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Tatsuzawa Shiro, "Watakushi no shiten," *Asahi shimbun*, 2 July 2011. See also Mageshima kankyo mondai taisaku henshu iinkai (Tatsuzawa et al.), eds. *Mageshima, takaranojima – yutaka na shizen, rekishi to rankaihatsu*, Kagoshima, Nanpo shinsha, 2010, and his essay "'Mageshima no fushigi na yoru' ni yosete," in Ogawa Misako and Harada Mika, *Mageshima no fushigi na yoru*, Kagoshima, Nanpo shinsha, 2003, pp. 31-33. (I am indebted to Shiba Hiromoto for drawing my attention to this latter exquisite children's book.).

<sup>2</sup> Population figures taken from "Mageshima, matamo tsumazuku kichi mondai,"

Wedge Report, online, 21 July 2011.

<sup>3</sup> "Mageshima kenchikibutsu no kazei Tasutonsha ni ichi mo tsuchijin, Kagoshima ken," *Nishi Nihon shimbun*, 7 December 2011.

<sup>4</sup> "Kichi yuchi e no dai kaihatsu, shinnrin gekigen, Kagoshima, Mageshima, gyosei mokunin," *Asahi shimbun*, 10 August 2011. <http://www.asahi.com/national/update/0810/SEB201108100071.html>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> For details of the Hatoyama matter, Gavan McCormack and Satoko Oka Norimatsu, *Resistant Islands: Okinawa confronts Japan and the United States*, forthcoming, Boulder, Rowman and Littlefield, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> "Mageshima, matamo tsumazuku kichi mondai," Wedge Report, online, 21 July 2011, <http://wedge.ismedia.jp/articles/-/1416/>

<sup>8</sup> Population figures taken from Nishinoomote City home page, February 2012

<sup>9</sup> "Mageshima ga iten kohochi, boei fukudaijin ga jimoto ni seshiki dentatsu," *Asahi shinbun*, 2 July 2011.

<sup>10</sup> "Kagoshima Governor now opposes U.S. carrier drills on Mage Island," Japan Update, 9 December 2011.

<sup>11</sup> *Minami Nihon shimbun*, 22 November 2011 and 28 January 2012 respectively.

<sup>12</sup> "Mageshima kenchikubutsu ni kazei ..." op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> "Tasuton eapoto ga Bei kubo kanzaiki rikujo chakuriku kunren kichi kensetsu chu, Mageshima," JC-Net, 22 November 2011, <http://h-seikei.jp/2011/11/post-3396.html>

<sup>14</sup> "Ima ya 'Mageshima serusuman!' gappuchi no Tateishi kensetsu kogyo shacho no katsuro wa hirakeru no ka?" Weekly Net Magazine, 18 August 2011, <http://polestar.0510.main.jp/?eid=876248>