

CONCEPTS, THEORIES, & INTRODUCTIONS

Beyond Autarky: Discourses of Islandness-As-Heritage in Islands' Energy Transitions

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Keywords: agency, energy transition, islandness, islands, heritage narratives

<https://doi.org/10.24043/001c.87733>

Island Studies JournalVol. 18, Issue 2, 2023

This article employs heritage as a lens through which to research the roles of islandness in energy transition processes. Both in cases of islanders' initiatives toward renewable energy projects and in cases of resistance against such projects, memories and imaginaries of islandness are evoked. The heritage of islandness is constructed discursively in response to threats and opportunities represented by the energy transition. Through an analysis of narratives in academic literature, national and local media, branding campaigns, and interview transcripts from islands in the North Sea and the Mediterranean, three common themes of islandness-as-heritage emerge across geographical difference: the island as self-sufficient ground, as laboratory of innovation, and as exploited territory. These uses of heritage are contextualized with critical counter-narratives from island studies literature, showing that the insistence on legacies of autarky, innovation, and exploitation might be contrary to the long-term interests of island communities. Instead, the activation of the heritage of interconnectedness that has historically characterized islands, islanders, and islandness, would highlight the necessary interdependence between places and could lead to an energy transition more aligned with the potentials and challenges facing the different island landscapes and their communities.

Introduction

The energy transition is becoming an increasingly impactful process for island landscapes and island communities. The ubiquity of natural resources such as sun, wind, and water, the bounded territory and low urban density, and the need for energy security and job provision render islands subject to renewable energy aims, projects, and strategies. However, the energy transition unfolds in diverse ways across individual islands. In some cases, island authorities and communities embrace the opportunity to play central roles in renewable energy innovation. In others, they seem reluctant to undertake action in this direction. Lastly, there are cases where renewable energy projects are imposed top-down, resulting in minimal benefits for local communities and sparking intense controversies. These attitudes depend on the differences in governance systems, financial conditions, land use patterns, and social relationships. In almost all cases, islands' energy transitions interact with values, identities, and imaginaries along with memories of the past and intentions for the future (Devine-Wright, 2009; Watts, 2019).

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In this article, I propose heritage as a common ground among islands dealing with energy transition processes. Discursive uses of heritage point toward shared understandings of island pasts, which play significant roles in the conceptualizations of futures. Islandness – the state of being an island – is a shared heritage amongst islanders on different islands. Critical heritage studies show how heritage can be used by actors in different positions to establish power hierarchies and pursue desired futures (Smith, 2006). This is often manifested in the energy transition process, with specific representations of the past appropriated as persuasion strategies to attract support for projects or invite to protest against them. In this sense, heritage, like islandness, is prone to generalizations and stereotypical representations. A critical overview of dominant heritage discourses can help draw attention to issues of power and conflict. At the same time, shared heritage values have the potential to unite community members toward collective claims. These two aspects of heritage are crucial in any attempt to assess the energy transition in relation to justice and sustainability (Sovacool et al., 2023). Indeed, sustainability is understood here as a holistic state that transcends the focus on nature and climate, and refers to justice, inclusion, care, and coexistence in governance and cultural dynamics (Soini & Birkeland, 2014).

Under these premises, the present article observes how heritage narratives about the past of geographically distant islands emerge in the face of the energy transition, follow patterns, accumulate, and gradually consolidate as natural aspects of islandness. Heritage narratives are present in various sources, including newspaper articles, branding or protest campaigns, policy documents, and social media groups. Scholars involved with islands, energy landscapes, or the intersection of the two, have already identified the emphasis that such narratives put on at least three aspects of islandness: self-sufficiency and autonomy (van Dam & van der Windt, 2022), ingenuity and innovation (Grydehøj & Kelman, 2017; Kallis et al., 2021), and expansion and exploitation (Argenti & Knight, 2015; Kelman, 2018). Based on these insights from the literature, this article examines the wide geographical range of these three distinct clusters of heritage narratives through an analysis of textual material about the energy transitions of ten European islands. Counter-narratives outline the potential adverse impacts that the reproduction of these narratives can have for the long-term well-being of island communities. Lastly, in line with island studies theory, this article searches for the silenced island heritage of maritime interconnectedness and discusses its potential relevance to energy transition processes.

Acknowledging that it becomes part of the articulated discourse on the energy transition, islandness, and heritage, the aspired contributions of this article are twofold. Firstly, by increasing visibility to the way narratives “transform history into nature” (Barthes, 1972, p. 128), often evading the aims of those who employ them, it intends to inform their use by critical researchers, decision-makers, activists, members of island communities, and other actors concerned with sustainability and justice around the energy transition.

Secondly, by examining the emergence or silencing of heritage narratives in different islands around Europe, this article aims to highlight hidden similarities between places and advocate for increased collaboration among those who share struggles and opportunities through the activation of discursive or material networks.

Section two looks at recent scholarship on the energy transition of islands and the division of attention between positive and negative attitudes of local communities. Section three explores the relationships between the concepts of islandness and heritage, and discusses the ways these concepts can be appropriated and reconstructed in response to change. Section four describes the design of the research and the employed methods of data collection and interpretation. Section five expands on the three clusters of heritage narratives that are often used, and the one that is silenced. Section six concludes with lessons for the use of heritage towards the mutually supported well-being of communities on islands lying in distant seas.

Energy projects: initiative and resistance

In this section, I examine islands' energy transitions, touching upon the discourses generated by national and transnational institutions and the media, and discussing the variety and diversity of local attitudes. I interrelate these with the scientific literature on community engagement and inclusion in relation to the energy transition.

Sustainable and renewable energy projects are frequently associated with islands. At a European level, the 2017 Valetta Declaration highlights the potential synergies between island environments and clean energy, and the 2020 Split Memorandum takes this to a more applied level by promising to support islands in implementing their energy transition (European Commission & Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden, 2017; European Commission & Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Portugal, The Kingdom of Spain, Sweden, 2020). At national levels, strategies, policies, and recommendations stress the relationship between islands and renewable energy. Examples are the National Plan for Scotland's islands which "recognizes the transformational role that renewable energy and storage could play for islands." (Scottish Government, 2018), and the Report Isole Sostenibili (tr: Sustainable Islands) by the Italian environmental organization Legambiente, which sees islands as "laboratories of innovation for an ecological transition" (Legambiente, 2021). The projection of islands as hubs of sustainability plays well in the news, with many major outlets publishing articles on how islands lead the way to the future (Baraniuk, 2022; Ellsmoor, 2019).

But to accept this hopeful image as a homogeneous expression of the energy transition on islands would mean adhering to a long genealogy of stereotyping and romanticizing islands and their communities (Baldacchino, 2005; Blaikie, 2001; Grydehøj & Kelman, 2017). Instead, island energy stories are multiple

and diverse, as islands become places of friction between global imaginaries and local agency (Tsing, 2005). In some cases, projects are initiated while in others fiercely contested, depending on economic and sociopolitical conditions. These two processes of initiative towards and resistance against renewable energy projects are rarely examined in parallel.

For many islands, there are evident benefits in initiating projects and collaborations aligned with the goal of the energy transition. Decentralized, carbon-neutral systems of energy can indeed favor peripheralized regions by helping combat energy poverty, generating income, and drawing the attention of other industries. Samsø, in Denmark, Eigg and Orkney in Scotland, Ameland in the Netherlands, and Tilos in Greece are among the islands claiming the title of the frontrunner in energy self-sufficiency (Backhaus, 2022; Baraniuk, 2022; Papazu, 2016; Sperling, 2017). The motivations for pursuing renewable energy projects range from material necessity to clever entrepreneurship (Watts, 2019). Beyond the practical benefits of on-site energy generation, the energy transition can empower island communities to work towards more inclusive forms of governance and citizenship (Howe & Boyer, 2016; Kallis et al., 2021). Research on islander-initiated sustainability and energy projects emphasizes the creativity, agency, and collaboration of island communities, their struggles to overcome obstacles created by governance and peripheralization, and their hopes to create viable and sustainable futures (Papazu, 2016; Watts, 2019).

In parallel, as anthropologists Howe and Boyer point out, the reliance of the energy transition on the rules of the neoliberal market often leads to the reproduction of the spatial and social injustices of carbon economies (2016). In many islands, renewable energy projects are perceived as imposed in a top-down way to reach national energy targets and facilitate investments by energy companies (Argenti & Knight, 2015). Site selection is largely left to private initiative and often bypasses the importance of the natural and cultural values of the landscape. For island communities, this can mean further marginalization and removal of agency. Examples from the Greek and the Scottish islands are multiple (Carell, 2008; Mela, 2023). Protesting actors often base their arguments on landscape protection and the failures of decision-making processes. Cases of protest and negation have been extensively researched, with a focus on social acceptance (Batel & Rudolph, 2021; Stephanides et al., 2019), and, lately, on protesting behaviors as positive expressions of agency and participation (Devine-Wright, 2009; McClymont & O'hare, 2008; Wolsink, 2007).

Research around the two processes of initiative and resistance in response to renewable energy features significant differences in focus, vocabulary, and aims. This division obscures the commonalities of the two as expressions of bottom-up agency in response to shared challenges and opportunities. These commonalities might include energy poverty, landscape abandonment, lack of employment opportunities, and remoteness from decision-making centers. At the same time, island studies have shown that value systems, place identities,

and conceptualizations of the past and the future are shared across different islands. In the next section, I propose that these attributes can provide the common ground for an integrated understanding of islands' energy transition processes.

Islandness as heritage

This section discusses how heritage and critical heritage studies can provide a conceptual framework to investigate the production of islandness within the energy transition. Islandness is defined as the shared condition, experience, and memory of being an island (Kallis et al., 2021). Islandness is shared across islands; in its temporal dimension, it can be seen as a collective heritage of islanders.

The concept of heritage has gradually transcended the focus on monuments and designations, and it is increasingly concerned with values and meanings connected to wider territories (G. J. Fairclough et al., 2008). Landscapes are seen as heritage for communities that attribute values and derive identities from their relationships with them (Renes, 2011). In this sense, tangible heritage on islands does not only refer to officially designated and demarcated natural or cultural heritage sites. Taking into account the emphasis on community and intergenerational continuity that characterizes island places (Abrams, 2005), the entire island landscape can be understood as heritage for islanders. The expectation of inheritance is strong in this proposition: islanders are aware that landscapes carry traces of the lives of previous generations (Tim Ingold, 1993) and that they are responsible for the livability of this same landscape in the future.

Ontologically, critical heritage scholars see heritage not only as a tangible asset but also as a process. For David C. Harvey and Jim Perry, heritage “involves a present-centred and future-orientated tangible and intangible sense of the past” (2015, p. 3). This intangible sense of the past makes heritage relevant to stories, representations, and imaginaries (Riesto et al., 2022). In a similar manner, island studies scholars highlight the discursive and processual nature of the concept of islandness. As Hache writes, “islanders are not necessarily people who are geographically surrounded by the sea, but people who say that they are geographically surrounded by the sea, or that they belong to a human group which is so” (1998, 47). Islandness as heritage is then the shared consciousness and memory of the island. This memory includes a particular set of relationships to other places, as produced through the consecutive and alternating configuration of maritime networks. If in its tangible dimension, islandness-as-heritage refers to the landscapes of individual islands, in its intangible or discursive dimension islandness can be seen as a collective heritage of islanders across different geographies. This islandness comes along with a sense of place that is not defined in a strictly geographical, but in a topological way including the consciousness of islands' links to the outer world (Massey, 1991).

Critical heritage studies also demonstrate that heritage as a discourse can be used toward future aims. In her influential *Uses of Heritage*, Laurajane Smith traces the development of what she calls the Authorized Heritage Discourse – a construction of historically constituted heritage understandings absorbed into heritage policy and management in ways that sidelined alternative approaches and practices (2006). Therefore, heritage is intrinsically linked to power. Smith sees heritage as a discursive construction with material consequences to emphasize how discourses impact the shaping of material reality. In islands, this has often resulted in imbalances between powerful heritage representations brought from the outside and vernacular life inside, which amounts to a removal of islanders' agency (Baldacchino, 2005). However, heritage is not only used in top-down ways. At a local level, uses of heritage are constantly present in everyday practices. Döring and Ratter demonstrate how in coastal environments of the Wadden Sea, the sense of place is permeated by “historical features, traditions, intangible values, social practices, and local knowledge” (2018). A shared appreciation of such subaltern heritages has the potential to act as a cohesive factor or an impetus for positive change for island communities, contribute to building a place identity, and, perhaps, mobilize towards common claims.

Islandness-as-heritage is therefore a discourse that is constructed, appropriated, and used to different ends. In the face of the significant changes brought about by the energy transition, stakeholders involved with local decision-making, nature and landscape protection, technology and engineering, or affected economic activities in different islands put forward episodes and memories from the past to justify, support, or negate decisions about the future. In other words, selective narratives about the past of islands become presented as constitutive of island identity, in response to threats and opportunities. Despite the geographical distance and distinct national and geopolitical contexts of European islands, patterns can be observed in these uses of heritage in different geographies, demonstrating the value of comparative research in island studies (Baldacchino, 2004).

Research design, materials, and methods

The impetus for this article was born in the course of my doctoral research on spatial planning, heritage, and renewable energy in Greece, Italy, Scotland, and the Netherlands. Through my ongoing involvement with energy transition discourses, it became evident that narratives depicting what it historically means to be an island are frequently employed to either endorse or oppose renewable energy projects. I also found that while social science and humanities research has often drawn attention to the relationship of the energy transition to cultural dynamics in individual places, no comparative research had been performed with regards to wider constructions and uses of islandness in relation to islands' pasts and futures. In light of these observations, the research design for this article encompassed the following interconnected steps.

Firstly, an examination of academic publications investigating energy transitions on islands allowed the initial identification of persistent discourses surrounding islandness during energy-related transformations. Authors that research geographically distant islands, though not explicitly investigating heritage, articulate insights on values, identities, local histories, and collective claims. I synthesized these in three distinct narrative clusters. First, the emphasis on historic self-sufficiency, autarky, and autonomy of islands was often described as a common persuasive strategy and factor of cohesion in response to renewable energy (Kallis et al., 2021; van Dam & van der Windt, 2022). Second, other authors insisted on the acquired ingenuity of islanders and the suitability of islands for innovation (Skjølsvold et al., 2020; Watts, 2019). Third, in cases of resistance to renewable energy projects, these seemed to align with memories of colonization and exploitation of the island territory (Argenti & Knight, 2015). To these three, and in line with island studies, I added a fourth cluster: the historical maritime interconnectedness of islands, which was not explicitly connected to islands' energy transitions. The literature synthesis processes that identified these four narrative lines informed the basic structure of this article.

The next step was to collect single narratives that would illustrate, complement, nuance, or disprove these already identified narrative clusters, and investigate the extent to which these remain relevant across geographical difference. I did this by targeting discourses around the energy transitions of islands I was familiar with, selected under two criteria: their geographical dispersal both in the North and the South of Europe; and their representability of a range of different dominant attitudes to energy and sustainability projects. For example, some of the discussed islands are branded as frontrunners in the energy transition. Others are loci of conflict and contestation. Finally, on some islands, renewable energy projects are still scarce. Based on these criteria, I analyzed materials pertaining to the energy transitions of the following islands or archipelagos: Tinos, Tilos, and Astipalea in Greece; the Aeolian islands in Italy; Ameland in the Netherlands; Orkney, Shetland, Lewis, and Eigg in Scotland; and Samsø in Denmark. An outline of the unique energy transition processes in each island is out of the scope of this article, the focus of which is on the wide diffusion of discourses of islandness-as-heritage and not on the context that produces them.

Textual materials from the different islands were deemed relevant to the extent that they presented some representation of the island's past as relevant to its future. Thus, materials are heterogeneous, produced by authors deriving from different institutional and cultural contexts and with different motives. While a broad range of materials was inspected, this analysis was far from exhaustive or equally representative of the different islands. Instead, the search and selection process aimed to identify individual narratives that would exemplify patterns, nuances, and variations related to the predefined four-part structure. The selected excerpts are cited throughout the article, and come from the following types of materials:

- Articles published in the local or national press
- Campaigns by energy companies, energy cooperatives, or protest groups
- Social media pages (usually created by protest groups)
- Transcripts of five semi-structured interviews around renewable energy that I conducted with stakeholders from the sectors of archaeology, tourism management, public administration, and environmental activism; interviews are used as complementary materials to contextualize local situations

Thirdly, I clustered these excerpts under the four aforementioned narrative lines. The first one centers on the historical self-sufficiency, autonomy, and autarky of islands. The second one presents islands as laboratories of innovation. The third one remembers islands as zones of exploitation and colonization. Finally, the important heritage of island interconnectedness remained an absent category. The overall design draws upon critical discourse analysis, which Norman Fairclough describes as a methodology that focuses on the analysis of language use and how it reflects power relations and ideologies (2003). Martin Nonhoff argues that discourse analyses are critical interventions in fields of existing knowledge:

because they scrutinize how such knowledge came into being in the first place, how it manifests in very concrete social contexts as effective social meaning, which conditions of existence and which consequences are attached to it, and by which norms and demands it is accompanied (Nonhoff, 2017, p. 7)

In line with these methodological insights, each of the four subsections links heritage narratives to historical processes, discusses their discursive uses, and then proposes critical counter-narratives that recognize pitfalls and opportunities in their use. I acknowledge that my subjectivity and stance vis-à-vis what constitutes a just transition – one that emancipates communities instead of perpetuating marginalization and structural injustice (Sovacool et al., 2023) – plays out in the interpretation of the materials. I rely on research propositions from like-minded scholars to contextualize findings and propose potential gaps and opportunities in the uses of heritage in islands' energy transitions.

Clusters of heritage narratives: autarky, innovation, exploitation

This section examines the three clusters of narratives of islandness-as-heritage, often used in the process of the energy transition in islands. The analysis is tripartite. I present the narrative and its links to island pasts; I trace its use, instrumentalization, and potential impact in islands' energy transitions; finally, I contextualize with literature from island studies and discuss counter-narratives.

Autarky and autonomy

Islandness as heritage

Perhaps the most commonly used narrative around the energy transition remembers islands of the past as characterized by autarky, self-reliance, and wise management of resources. It often entails the memory of the end of the subsistence economy and vernacular practices during the 20th century, a shared experience amongst many islands. In the Aeolian islands off the north of Sicily, one interviewee connected sustainability to memories of circular economy on the island of his childhood. Another interviewee stated:

For me, this is an important thing, that you can be autonomous. Here it is understood better than on the mainland, it becomes clearer. The time when we were autonomous until the early 30s is not far off. And so this memory is still very much alive, the elderly talk about it.

In Ameland, in the Dutch Wadden Sea the self-sufficiency narrative was used to appeal “to the sense of locality and responsibility of Amelanders” (van Dam & van der Windt, 2022). The sustainability covenant of the island, led by the municipality in collaboration with private companies, states on its website:

Islanders grew their own food, caught their own fish, and provided their own energy and water....

Sustainability and self-sufficiency go hand in hand" (Duurzaam Ameland, n.d.)

The past in the future

The narrative of self-sufficiency does not merely link to the past but makes vague promises for a future of increased autonomy. Island studies scholars describe the imaginary and memory of independence as key to the ideal good island life (Skjølsvold et al., 2020). This resonates with the energy transition, described by Linde Egberts and Hans Renes as “a contemporary opportunity to recharge the historic isolation and strong sense of self-governance that characterized many island cultures” (2020, p. 778). In Orkney, where multiple energy projects coexist, a local guide interviewed for a newspaper article points out how islanders have always relied on themselves:

The thing about social history here is how we take what is the next thing and we make the most of that... Of course now it's renewable energy. From Skara Brae onwards we deal with what there is (Cook, 2019).

In Ameland, early discussions around energy entailed the ambition to “cut the cable” that connects the island to the electricity grid of the mainland (van Dam & van der Windt, 2022). An interviewed member of the island government explicitly links sustainability projects and imaginaries of autonomy:

So it's good to be sustainable on one hand, but also to be independent in the future, and I think that's the long-term benefit. And people see that very well and also are maybe a little bit proud that we are making good steps in the direction of sustainability on one hand, but also independence on the other hand.

The heritage of autarky and self-reliance is also evoked in processes of resistance to renewable energy projects. In the Greek islands, plans for large commercial wind farms are generally perceived as bringing no benefits to local populations. Environmentalist Thodoris Tsimpidis describes how tourism converted the islands into a monoculture “that gave the final shot to the tradition of autarky and wise management of natural resources,” and how the new, industrially-scaled wind power infrastructures are “an offense to the history of place” (2020). Wind energy becomes one more chapter in the tale of dependence, peripheralization, and loss of autonomy.

Despite their diverse points of departure, in all cases the imaginary of autonomy and self-reliance that is embedded in renewable energy initiatives or in their negation refers to a shared identity that connects generations of the past to the ones of the future. Based on this identity, the use of the narrative has been successful in garnering support for (or against) renewable energy projects.

Counter-narratives

The sustainable past of islands has much to teach and the narrative has proved successful in many instances in inviting action and in reviving local knowledge. Some small islands, such as Eigg in Scotland, have indeed managed to become electrically independent by using the natural resources of wind and sun, employing an independent grid, and developing solutions for heating and energy storage (Gardiner, 2017). In such cases, self-sufficiency takes literal and material forms. But in most instances, as Van Dam and van der Windt argue, complete autarky and self-sufficiency of an island “is very difficult because of the strong interaction with other areas and spatial units, such as through economic connections with large-scale industries and national economies” (2022, p. 22). In other cases, complete energy self-sufficiency might not be desired by local actors. As Kallis et. al. discuss, in islands the ideal of self-sufficiency coexists with the need for energy security, often achieved through reliable connections (2021). A focus on connections and interdependences reveals the romanticizing attitude of most discourses around energy autonomy.

As a heritage narrative, self-sufficiency is mainly used as a persuasive strategy, or to achieve goals altogether different from energy, such as the attraction of funds and tourism through the production of a green image (Skjølsvold et al., 2020). Indeed, islands are prone to generalization and romanticizing. The

insistence on the heritage of autarky and autonomy might nostalgically point towards what Kelman describes as “an iconized trope of idyllic paradises where the people have long lived in stable harmony and hence were resilient” (2018, p. 152). Such an imaginary not only sidelines the improvements brought by infrastructures of connectivity, but overlooks the fact that islandness has never been entirely about self-sufficiency, but has been constituted in the interaction of islands with the outer world (Renes, 2014).

Laboratories of innovation

Islandness as heritage

The metaphor of the island as a laboratory is increasingly being appropriated in relation to energy transition processes, with the narrative linking back to specific geographical, cultural, and historical characteristics of islanders and islandness. An article in *Forbes* describes how:

The limitations of island life mean islanders have long been innovative, making do with resources available locally. While often deemed peripheral to modern life, for environmental issues, island communities are at the forefront (Ellsmoor, 2019).

The connections of cultural history to innovative solutions are not only conceptual. Ethnographic and anthropological research emphasizes the long tradition of “modest innovations” on islands, and the development of ingenuity and creativity as key attitudes of island populations (Papazu, 2016; Watts, 2019).

The metaphor of the laboratory also points back to environmental and historical processes beyond the directly traceable agency of islanders. The understanding of islands as laboratories dates back at least to the work of Charles Darwin and has since been used in many research areas, including biology, anthropology, and cultural history. Examples are abundant: from traces of now-extinct dwarf elephants on the island of Tilos (Theodorou et al., 2007) to the unique stone prehistoric settlement Skara Brae in Orkney, to mention two diverse cases from islands that are now at the forefront of energy transition innovations. It might seem a long way from dwarf elephants and stone furniture to solar panels and tidal kites. However, we can assume that the premise that isolation and unique conditions can lead to novel configurations in natural and human history is deeply embedded in the consciousness of islanders (Baldacchino, 2004; Skjølsvold et al., 2020).

The past in the future

The historical ability of islanders to engineer solutions, along with a shared image of islands as “sites of novelty” (Baldacchino, 2007) plays out in practical and discursive ways in islands' energy transitions. Research in Orkney and Samsø shows that local knowledge and expertise contribute significantly to the initiation and success of renewable energy projects (Papazu, 2016; Watts, 2019). In such cases, the heritage of successful projects fosters continued innovation, rendering islands what Papazu calls “factories of hope” when

islanders function as a group, led by the belief that new ideas are possible and will have a direct positive impact on their lives (2016). When governance systems support meaningful involvement, novel island-specific solutions can stem from local needs and skillsets, as a continuation of local practices.

The image of the island as a testbed is frequently capitalized upon by various stakeholders situated inside and outside the islands (Grydehøj & Kelman, 2017). These range from local project initiators that seek to attract investments (such as municipalities and energy cooperatives) to policymakers and energy companies. Seen within a national or international context, the image of the island as a laboratory or a testbed implies that innovations are a sort of experiment to be tested here (Kallis et al., 2021; Skjølsvold et al., 2020). The promotional video of the Dutch research institute EnTrance argues:

The solution can be applied in the microenvironment of the island, before being transferred to larger communities, like cities and regions... An island is an ideal starting point for change (En-tran-ce.org, n.d.)

An example of experimental innovation that has given a central role to islands in a global market is the European Marine Energy Center in Orkney, where marine energy devices are being tested, making the islands an international hub for energy companies (Watts, 2019). But the laboratory narrative is used more frequently as a branding strategy. One of many examples is the Greek island of Astypalea, where a collaboration between the Greek government and Volkswagen aims to make the island (in the words of the Greek prime minister) “the experimental field for a green transition” and “a window into a cleaner and greener future” (Diamantis, 2021).

Beyond technoscientific process, innovation in relation to energy is happening in some islands in ways that contribute to “recovering the substantive nature of landscape” (Olwig, 1996). Kallis et al. claim that out of the energy transition, hopeful governance structures might emerge, based on community collaboration and landscape commons (2021). Examples of this can be observed in the synergies between community energy ownership and community land ownership in the Scottish Hebrides, which contribute to the reconstitution of the community into “a collective subject,” and provide a counter-discourse to neoliberal norms of privatization and enclosure (Mackenzie, 2010). Such processes can serve as models of substantial innovation in other places that share geographical, historical, or social characteristics.

Overall, the use of the narrative of innovation might have been successful as a vector of local pride, in the mobilization of community members, in the attraction of investments and experimentation from the energy sector, and ultimately in making changes in governance and decision-making appear plausible, graspable, and worth pursuing.

Critical counter-narratives

Still, the insistence on using the metaphor of laboratory, as a naturalization of the innovation potential on islands, has potentially harmful implications both for island communities and for the wider pursuit of sustainability.

From a technical perspective, the scalability of successful sustainability models to other places is contested by island studies researchers, as changes in geographical or social parameters might yield different results (Baldacchino & Kelman, 2014). Additionally, Grydehøj and Kelman (2017) argue that this label, often used as a branding strategy, can prioritize reputational goods over substantial goods and warn against the “eco-island trap,” which may lead to a focus on branding and superficial successes at the expense of addressing real challenges that impact islanders' life. The eco-island trap can also result in competitive sustainability, with islands acting as “islands of entrepreneurship” in the pursuit of funds and green tourism (Brenner, 2004; Grydehøj & Kelman, 2017). Instead, attention to spatial and governance structures of the past might produce energy solutions more tailored to the needs of the individual islands, even if they do not fit to the wider global paradigm of sustainable development. Lastly the perpetuation of metaphors such as ‘living laboratory’ has been criticized from a decolonial perspective. For Laura Watts the term “carries with it the idea of exploitation and colonization of the island territory” and “describes, allowing others, who are not islanders, to assert control over their laboratory test site” (2019, p. 111).

Exploitation zones

Islandness as heritage

Contested renewable energy projects are often perceived as episodes in island histories of oppression, exploitation, and loss. Heritage narratives remember periods when powerful external actors took control and advantage of island resources, hurting landscapes and exploiting local populations. In this genealogy of legacies, islands become what Bresnihan and Brodie describe as sacrifice zones, extractive frontiers, or *terrae nullius*: territories that are used for private interests and profit (2021). The plethora of memories and stories of island exploitation often renders shared painful pasts into a common aspect of islandness (Baldacchino, 2004).

Memories of exploitation and loss account for the development of collective identities and for a general distrust amongst islanders against central and regional governments that manage their territories. In the Scottish islands, the feudal system of land ownership put islanders in the roles of tenants, with landowners deciding on their fate; the 18th and 19th centuries are remembered as a time of expulsion, exclusion, and poverty. In Shetland, where Norse settlement preceded Scottish land ownership, heritage scholars trace how the history of feudal oppression contributed to a collective appropriation of the Norse identity on part of the Shetlanders (Abrams, 2005), and a collective claim for independent governance systems (Jennings, 2017). Distrust against central governments is widespread in the Greek and Southern Italian islands,

pointing back to periods of poverty, abandonment, and loss of productive structures in the first half of the 20th century (Terkenli, 2022), connected with the effects of uneven geographical development in Southern Europe (Hadjimichalis, 1987).

The past in the present

Heritages of loss and exploitation are activated in the face of the energy transition, mainly in cases of contestation against big-scale projects. Wind power has been the most contested renewable energy form, bringing forward issues of land ownership, land use, environmental degradation, and landscape rights, thus leading islanders to relate it to past episodes of oppression. In the recent polarizing debate about the implementation of a nationally significant wind farm in the Shetland islands, social media comments and readers' opinions in local press parallelize the implementation of the wind farm to the period of Scottish landowners, by claiming that "the lairds are back" (Tumblr post, 2022). Such discourses aim to appeal to a collective trauma as motivation to mobilize against the project, one that is increasingly perceived as bringing no benefit to local populations.

Similarly, in Greece the strategy of the Greek government to encourage renewable energy investments led to top-down plans for big-scale windfarms on the islands, bypassing environmental regulations and without meaningful participation by local communities. Metaphors of the islands as 'the batteries of Europe' link to a distrust cultivated after the EU imposed austerity measures after the 2008 financial crisis. Anthropologists Knight and Argenti found that this lack of trust in the state and the EU makes renewable energy projects appear as "a rebirth of extractive economies" (2015).

As a response to this distrust, fierce protests by locals and environmentalists rediscover and put forward the heritage qualities of the landscape. In this case, the landscape is seen as a collective heritage of the islanders that needs to be preserved. On the island of Tinos, an interviewed protester said:

I see that in the nationwide anti-wind struggle, (the concept of landscape) has started to be used very much, which makes me very happy.... For the landscape of Tinos to take its present form, this process has started maybe since prehistoric times... it is a continuous process that lasted until 1960, when the rural past of Tinos ended, and it is a process that led to today's image of the island.

The dangers facing the island landscape became internationally relevant when the fierce local and environmental anti-wind protests resulted in a Europa Nostra nomination of five islands as heritage at risk, with the nomination text pointing out that renewable energy projects put under threat their unique cultural heritage assets (Vitti & Christofidis, 2022). Such nominations might have a direct impact on constituting protection regulations.

Conflict and contestation give visibility to the heritage qualities of landscapes. As a heritage discourse, the narrative of exploitation relates to the suspiciousness of island populations against externally brought change, but also to the complex relationship of dependence of islands on central governments and global economies. Painful as these stories are, in some cases they contribute to a reinforcement of collective place identities (Terlouw, 2009), stirring local populations to reconfigure the boundaries of their power and agency (Aitken et al., 2008).

Critical counter-narratives

The activation of the narrative of exploitation in the energy transitions of islands can help strengthen collective claims about landscape protection or fair decision-making. At the same time, its uses depend largely on the diverse balances between spatial and economic activities on the different islands. Activities regarded as extractive, exploitative, or unsustainable in the context of literature or international environmental activism, such as oil and gas extraction or the expansion of tourism infrastructures, are generally well-accepted by island populations as they are crucial to local revenue. The heritage of these activities interacts in various ways with planned energy infrastructures. With regard to tourism, renewable energy projects can be seen as continuators in the process of the commodification of the landscape (Tsimpidis, 2020), as opportunities for a green turn in the tourism narrative, or as threats to the attractiveness of the landscape, a significant touristic good. In other words, narratives of exploitation might be simplifying the various interests and agencies of islanders in the energy transition process.

Furthermore, such narratives might contribute to the victimization of island communities, reinforced by stereotypes of threat and vulnerability. Baldacchino argues:

islanders are often portrayed in the metropolitan press as victims of tragic circumstances beyond their control, fitting easily into stereotypes of dehistoricized vulnerability and 'paradise in peril' (2008, p. 46)

Research in contestations around energy requires a more nuanced mapping of the – often conflicting – agencies of different actors, based on different values attributed to the island landscape, different heritages of dependency and exploitation, and different understandings of islandness.

Interconnectedness: a silent heritage

This section highlights a key aspect of islandness that remains relatively absent in energy transition debates: the historical interconnectedness of islands. Following the structure established in the previous section, I first discuss the formative effect of maritime connectivity on island landscapes and identities. Secondly, I illustrate its relevance to energy transition processes.

Finally, I propose how the embracing of this narrative by scholars, policymakers, and island communities in the context of the energy transition might be in the interests of sustainable island futures.

Islandness as heritage

A focus on the long genealogy of interconnectedness can shed light on almost any expression of island history, as well as on the formation of the island landscape. Maritime commerce, geopolitical strategies, and cultural exchanges are all definitive parameters that have shaped the current heritage and identity of islands. Geographers and cultural historians caution against the stereotypical understanding of islands as backward, insular places, describing an island life historically based on travel and the confrontation with new ideas (Hau'ofa, 1994; Olwig, 2019). Ultimately – and contrary to stereotypical images of remoteness – islands were at times central in strategic maritime networks of the past. This constitutes a key element of the collective memory and identity. An interviewed archaeologist in Shetland states:

So I mean, Shetland, because of where it is, there's a lot of shipping coming and going. And so rather than being remote and at the end of the UK, which is kind of how people in the UK see it, you know, Shetland is at the end. But actually, we're kind of quite cosmopolitan and in the middle of the seaways.

An emphasis on interconnections can explain wider world-shaping processes by tracing chains of agency between individual places in their natural and cultural diversity (Mela, 2020). Seminal early examples come from the historiography and archaeology of the Mediterranean. Scholars, including Braudel (1949/2017), Horden and Purcell (2000), and Broodbank (2013), engage with maritime connections at different temporalities, scales, and directions. In terms of heritage and cultural history, islands have been nodes in networks of dependence; when connections stopped, the impacts on island populations were often devastating (Renes, 2014). It is in all of the above senses that Baldacchino urges the use of the term “islandness” instead of “insularity” (2004) to highlight how interconnectedness (and thus dependence) has been a historical-geographic condition equally important to isolation (and thus autarky).

No past in the future

There are many ways in which the historical interconnectedness of islands is relevant to energy transitions, however, it remains a silent heritage, yet to be activated, instrumentalized, and appropriated on either side of the renewable energy debate.

Energy in islands has always engaged with geographical materialities and interconnections through the sea. In Shetland, their proximity to oil- and gas-rich sea beds meant that infrastructures and supply chain networks were quickly developed for the transfer of resources to the mainland, something that is now assisting the development of the nascent marine renewables industry. At

the same time, all islands remain in positions of relative dependency when it comes to covering their own energy needs and are often affected by challenging weather conditions. The absence or frequent failure of electricity grids becomes important elements in narratives of vulnerability and abandonment of islands by their respective central governments.

The grid, an infrastructure that remains out of mainlanders' sight and mind, in islands becomes an "actionable object," a thought-of and engaged-with apparatus (Papazu, 2016). Renewable energy projects in islands affect and are affected by the configuration of grids. Orkney, which is connected to mainland Scotland, produces energy far exceeding the capacity of the grid, resulting in conflicts and claims around its improvement (Watts, 2019). In Shetland, which remains unconnected to the grid, the construction of large wind farms comes with the promise to realize these connections, thus allowing the transfer of the generated electricity to the mainland, and vice versa. In Greek islands, connection projects and renewable energy projects also go hand-in-hand (*Καλωσορίζουμε, Μαζί Με Την Τοπική Κοινωνία Της Σύρου, Την Ενεργειακή Σύνδεση Των Κυκλάδων Με Την Ηπειρωτική Χώρα*, 2018).

The discourse of interconnectedness is present both in cases of acceptance of renewable energy, with arguments pointing out their contribution to stability and wellbeing, and in cases of negation or protest, with arguments denouncing the associated landscape destruction. Still, these discourses do not interact with heritage narratives. In some ways, grids are perceived as a necessary evil, essential infrastructures over which islanders have little agency. This absence of agency might be exactly what places grids outside the heritage of maritime connectivity, rendering them something alien to island histories.

Embracing the narrative

Indeed, electricity grids and cargo ships are very different from historic maritime flows, mainly because they evade the control of islanders. Yet, to be an island means to be interconnected, and it has always been so. Historical and geographical conditions that affected maritime connectivity of the past remain relevant. Weather conditions have always caused challenges in supply. Island resources have always been transferred outside. Life has always revolved around the need and opportunity for exchange. The globalization of the economy and the standards of modern life mean that new types of interconnections are born. In the *longue durée* of maritime history, grids too can form part of the heritage of connectivity. It might be in the interest of island communities to embrace this heritage of islandness in response to the energy transition.

In fact, island interconnectedness is already present in the energy transition. At institutional levels, European consortia engage with different islands as their case studies, aiming to spread expertise and policy adaptations (*Islander Project*, n.d.; *Islands of Innovation*, n.d.). At local levels, project initiators create semi-formal networks of visits and exchanges. For example, in its early stages, the covenant Sustainable Ameland visited Samsø in Denmark to learn from its acquired expertise in sustainability. In cases of protest, too, interconnectedness plays crucial roles. In a highly symbolic trip that builds on heritages of sea

travel, the group of activists Movement for the Protection of Aegean Islets sailed with a sailboat to several Greek islands, spreading awareness against the effects of wind-power projects (Sarantis, 2021). The networking between protesters in different places reinforces their action. Social media plays a big part with groups on different islands across national boundaries connecting to share practices and insights.

While the heritage narrative of interconnectedness is not consciously employed as a discourse in the energy debate, the historic experiences and memories of exchange, interdependence, knowledge sharing, and mutual help play their roles as substantive elements of islanders' identities (Hau'ofa, 1994).

Discussion: Reconnecting island heritages

This study aimed to understand how narratives of islandness-as-heritage exert agencies in energy transition debates by synthesizing existing literature on islands' energy transitions and analyzing various materials related to ten islands or archipelagos in the North Sea and the Mediterranean. This study identified three prevalent clusters of heritage narratives of islandness frequently employed to endorse or oppose renewable energy projects: the island as a self-sufficient ground, the island as a laboratory of innovation, and the island as an exploited zone. It also explored the silent narrative of the island as an interconnected node. These were then connected to historical memories and contemporary realities and assessed critically to shed light on pitfalls and opportunities in their use. Next, I summarize the article's findings on the uses of the four heritage narratives. I integrate those with the theoretical framework of heritage and conclude with notes on the limitations and contributions of the article.

Firstly, the heritage of autarky evokes historical periods characterized by autonomy and self-sufficiency. The narrative is frequently used in renewable energy initiatives, which promise to increase autonomy by relying on local resources, while resisted top-down projects are perceived as further threatening island autonomy. Its use might romanticize the past and sideline the benefits of connectivity. Secondly, the narrative of innovation perceives ingenuity as a historically acquired characteristic of islanders and is broadly used to suggest that islands are appropriate testbeds for energy-related innovations. While it contributes to economic development, this narrative focuses on reputation and competition and is often appropriated by external actors, perhaps sidelining the interests of island communities. Thirdly, the narrative of exploitation is based on shared painful pasts and is often employed in protests against top-down energy projects. While it evokes place-protective action and reinforces collective identities, it might reproduce stereotypes of victimization of island communities and undermine the attention on their agency. Finally, interconnectedness, a timeless aspect of islandness, is relatively absent as a heritage narrative. As island actors engage in networks of mutual help, a conscious activation of the heritage of interconnectedness on the part of researchers, activists, and the affected communities, could reinforce this course of action.

Heritage proves to be a valuable conceptual framework, allowing us to interrelate processes that evolve in distant geographies. In terms of tangible heritage, the examined discourses show how the energy transition evokes place stewardship and protection of the island and its future. In parallel, the complex and diverse pasts of islands are being reconfigured as shared aspects of islandness. Autarky, innovation, exploitation, and exchange all correspond to historical experiences and memories that bind islands together. The patterns of examined narratives seem to transcend the geographical division between Northern and Southern Europe. Rather, the division between the island and the outside world remains prevalent. In other words, the similarity of heritage discourses illustrates islandness as a shared intangible heritage of islanders of different islands. It is in response to the globally relevant change brought by the energy transition that this shared intangible heritage comes to the surface and can be perceived as such.

As critical heritage studies scholars argue, heritage discourses can be used to different ends (Smith, 2006). It also demonstrates how, during times of change, heritage is reconstructed in contradicting ways and towards competing interests. For example, the discourse of self-sufficiency and self-reliance is employed by project initiators including energy companies that have little interest in contributing to reinforcing autonomous decision-making, to appeal to islanders' sense of community and identity, ensuring their support and collaboration in energy projects (van Dam & van der Windt, 2022). The same discourse is used by protesters to contest external projects that bypass local autonomy and decision-making (Tsimpidis, 2020). In both cases, stakeholders have no intention of reviving historical paradigms of subsistence economies, yet the discourses they articulate derive meaning from islands' shared pasts and convey meaning about their futures. A central goal of this article was to make these uses of heritage and their potential accumulated impacts more explicit and visible.

Governance systems, the design of the planning process, and the extent of community participation collectively determine which heritage narratives will be activated and how they will manifest. In this dynamic situation, narratives and energy developments constantly exert their agency on each other. For example, in the case of the nationally significant Viking wind farm in Shetland, the narratives of autonomy and innovation were employed in the early stages to garner support for the project (Robertson, 2009). As it gradually became clear that it would bring little benefit to locals, and as the decision-making process allowed little room for meaningful consultation, the narrative of exploitation became prevalent (Sustainable Shetland, n.d.). The legacies of this project - the discourses created around it - will potentially impact future projects. In its aftermath, more islanders are prone to view islandness as related to heritages of exploitation.

Further research is needed to shed light on the diversity of heritage discourses around islands in their interactions with energy projects and their respective governance frameworks. The nature of this study does not allow

for accurate results in this area of governance and decision-making. Due to its comparative nature and its reliance on single narratives, it is unable to precisely link the use of heritage discourses to the underlying interests of stakeholders of the different projects. To this end, it would be essential to conduct thorough case-study research shedding light on economic agreements, patterns of land use and ownership, geopolitical interests, and national or regional political aims.

Still, this article advocates for a politically informed understanding of the uses of islandness-as-heritage. Fairclough argues that discourses “have causal effects upon, and contribute to changes in, people (beliefs, attitudes, etc.), actions, social relations, and the material world” (2003, p. 8). Building on this, the article casts a plea for an increased consciousness of the use and agency of heritage narratives. In the face of the energy transition, heritage has the productive potential to contribute to the use of dormant local knowledge; to innovation towards sustainable practices; to the constitution of governance systems of increased autonomy; to mobilization against unjust power hierarchies; and, overall, to claims for fairer and more sustainable futures.

Yet the uses of heritage are not without wider, non-intended consequences for islands and islandness. This article illustrated how narratives evade the control of actors that articulate them and fit within wider genealogies that tend to romanticize and simplify island realities and victimize island communities. The energy transition is presented as a natural continuation of the historical autonomy of islands, of the acquired ingenuity of islanders, or of the long exploitation of island territories. The use of the image of the island as an isolated or peripheral place, implied in all three heritage narratives of autonomy, innovation, and exploitation, diverts attention away from the necessary interdependence between places. But any larger claim to sustainability can only be achieved in collaboration, emerging from local conditions, and engaging with issues of governance and democracy (T. Ingold, 2021). The energy transition is a means to this goal, and islands, with their collective experience, can play important roles in achieving it.

Greater awareness of how the past of islandness is being used and for whose desired future can support claims for ownership, autonomy, and resilience by prioritizing links and connections over isolation and competitiveness. Islanders, visitors, activists, researchers, decision-makers, and all those working towards just and sustainable island futures, could find opportunities for creative synergies within the connective qualities of the energy transition, perceived as a continuation of the long, networked, outward-looking heritage of islands.

Submitted: April 01, 2023 CST, Accepted: July 01, 2023 CST



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Καλωσορίζουμε, μαζί με την τοπική κοινωνία της Σύρου, την ενεργειακή σύνδεση των Κυκλάδων με την ηπειρωτική χώρα. (2018, March 19). Greek Government. <https://government.gov.gr/kalosorizoume-mazi-me-tin-topiki-kinonia-tis-sirou-tin-energiakisindesi-ton-kikladon-me-tin-ipirotiki-chora/>