

EASA Media Anthropology Network
E-Seminars Series
<http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm>
28th E-Seminar Discussion

"Media and belonging to the nation in Sabah, East Malaysia"

Dr. Fausto Barlocco

Discussant Dr. Arvind Rajagopal,
New York University

September 8 – September 22 2009

Abstract

Starting from the thesis that Malaysia has successfully been 'built' as a nation by the state as well as 'materialized' by other means, this paper attempts to define the extent to which the state has become a source of identity for a minority indigenous group, the Kadazandusun of the Bornean State of Sabah. The analysis of various cases showing the reaction of Kadazan villagers to the development propaganda and the discourses present in the media demonstrates that, while Malaysia has indeed materialised among the Kadazandusun through the involvement in the national educational and political system and mediascape, the government propaganda is rejected on the basis of its perceived Malayising agenda, imposing to indigenous peoples to either become like the majority or be marginalised. On the other hand, consumption practices, and the media messages encouraging them, constitute a national community of consumers, but on the other encourage identification with a global consumer culture and of novel practices and subjectivities.

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Tue Sep 8 01:09:15 PDT 2009

Dear all,

The e-seminar season starts with Dr. Fausto Barlocco paper called "Media and belonging to the nation in Sabah, East Malaysia".

You can find the paper at our website at:

<http://media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm>

The seminar closes September 22.

How it works:

Discussant is Dr. Arvind Rajagopal (New York University). He will post his comments to the list today (Tuesday) or tomorrow (Wednesday).

Fausto Barlocco will then respond to Rajagopal's comments.

After their response I will invite further postings from the floor.

Please keep in mind that these sessions can only work if we have wide and sustained participation, so all contributions (long and short comments or questions) are very welcome. To post, please write directly to [medianthro at easaonline.org](mailto:medianthro@easaonline.org).

All the best, Sigurjon.

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Wed Sep 9 13:21:04 PDT 2009

Dear all,

Please, find enclosed the response by Arvind Rajagopal to Barlocco's working paper:

This is an interesting paper, one that seems to press against the limits of media anthropology, and demands engagement with questions more properly belonging to political theory, but as well, with questions pertaining to globalization, about which there is no single set of theories. The paper would also be illuminated by a historical account of what seems to be a thwarted Kadazan nationalist movement (as I understand it from Barlocco's paper), as well as more extensive anthropological exploration into the frustrations of an identity that has little prospect at present of actualizing its structuring aspirations, given the strength of the Malaysian state.

Unlike the Iban of Sarawak, Barlocco indicates, the Kadazan of Penampang in Sabah have not become enfolded into the dominant Malay culture, despite exposure to mass media - a factor that John Postill (2006) has indicated was important in the successful integration of the Iban into the Malaysian nation.

Note that Barlocco does not regard the ethnic Kadazan identity that mass media consumers in Penampang prefer, as in any sense natural. Rather, Barlocco argues, it was the product of the interventions of Kadazan intellectuals, and of political mobilization in the expectation of achieving nationhood. The failure to achieve nationhood suggests that

Kadazan may wish to imagine their identity as politically sovereign, and distinct from the Malaysian nation. If this is true, they would not fit within a liberal conception of minority, or in a pluralist conception of multiple cultures accommodated within a single polity. Hence when Kadazan invoke the idea of the nation in their responses to mass media, it may involve the idea of a sovereign nation distinct from the Malaysian. What is clear, and Barlocco is right to stress this point, is that when cultural difference is refused recognition socially, it seeks expression in political terms, i.e. as nationality. Nationalism is thus the modular form for the expression of identity in such a context. Here we should recollect the intertwined histories of nation formation and subject formation in 18th and 19th C. Europe, where national self-realization acquired the same degree of self-evident right that individual self-realization had achieved.

Barlocco's essay makes us sharply aware of the limits of mass media reception study in contexts where socialization is being mediated through historical experiences that are systematically suppressed by institutional media forms.

The author states that he finds no causal correlation between media and identity (p. 3). But causation and correlation are not the same thing - if we grant that the media do not cause identity, the subsequent sentences in the text suggests the author is prepared to find correlation where causation is absent.

For example, Bartolocco cites Madianou (2005), who argues "that the media contribute to shifts from open discourses of identity to closed ones, characterised by the essentialist idea of a homogeneous culture and identity, and to the erection of boundaries around it excluding outsiders and stereotyping minorities." (p. 3). This is to argue that the work of the media correlate with shifts in identity formation, moving from fluid to fixed identity discourses. With modern state formation, and attendant technologies of government, demographic measurement and societal surveillance coming together, multiple and overlapping identities appear to be relegated to a strictly informal status, while singular and sharply defined identities become the basis for such social and political rights as are granted by the state. From Barlocco's account, mass media discourses in Malaysia tend to reflect statist preferences in mapping national identity, and are used to confirm the minority status of those like the Kadazan in Sabah. Thus even if the Kadazan were a recently mobilized group, riven with internal differences, they are increasingly united in their criticism of, or opposition to the dominant Malay discourse.

For Kadazan to appear as an ethnic identity (as the author suggests), i.e., as primordial, suggests that in modern mass-mediated contexts, new identities are produced, that are recognized however only on the condition that they are believed to be archaic. I am reminded of Walter Benjamin, who was clearly adept at media ethnography, and who argued that the auratic power of past traditions resurfaced in modernity, albeit in new forms that we need to recognize and rework for our own purposes.

Towards the end of his paper, the author meditates on the acceptance of satellite television imagery by the same Kadazan who rejected Malaysian state television, and by the interest such viewers displayed in globalized forms of consumption and behavior, including bourgeois forms of domesticity not available within extant Kadazan practices. Barlocco writes:

In one of the adverts that Foster cites as an example, the image presented power as allowing individuals at the same time to make their body more

self-controlled and in control of the world as well as allowing them to choose what to incorporate by choosing what products to buy (2002: 95).

This modernity, however, is not sweeping all the discursive space, but rather is confronted with ambiguity and a bifocal approach: on the one hand an inward-looking perspective, looking at locality and local values and practices, on the other an outward-looking one, looking at the world as a global place. (p. 20)

Barlocco seems to suggest that this "bifocal" modernity might characterize the Kadazan, one that is ambiguous, and puts the local and the global in their proper places. Perhaps. But I am not sure who is speaking here, and why we should assume that we know what "local" and "global" are - or, for that matter, assume that these are not co-produced, and thoroughly interpenetrating terms. More interesting for me would be to inquire how different parochial conceptions of the global abut each other, and what comes out of such interactions. I hope Barlocco will consider this a worthwhile question. But I thank him for a rich and provocative paper.

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Wed Sep 9 13:23:31 PDT 2009

Dear all,

Many thanks to Arvind Rajagopal for his response to Barlocco's paper.

It's over to Barlocco now!

All the best, Sigurjon.

fausto barlocco [fbarlocco at yahoo.it](mailto:fbarlocco@yahoo.it)

Fri Sep 11 04:17:45 PDT 2009

First of all an apology for the late reply - I have had some personal as well as technical problems in the past couple of days - and a great thank you to Rajagopal for his thoughtful comment.

Going to the comments in detail, first of all I agree that the paper 'would be illuminated by a historical account of what seems to be a thwarted Kadazan nationalist movement': this is exactly what I have done in the third chapter of my thesis (the present paper is adapted from the fourth), where I present the movement of creation of a modern 'Kadazan culture' and identity (which, following a constructionist approach made popular, among other, by Hobsbawm and Ranger already in 1983, I consider not to be natural) starting from the 1950s and the associated political movement, called 'Kadazan nationalism' by Roff (1969), whose 'demise' (again, see Roff, 1969) took place in the late 1960s.

I also agree that the paper would need a 'more extensive anthropological exploration into the frustrations of an identity that has little prospect at present of actualizing its structuring aspirations, given the strength of the Malaysian state'. That is in fact the main issue I consider from different points of view (one of which is media reception) in my whole thesis. Unfortunately, the extent to which I can discuss the subject is limited in a single paper, but I am happy to discuss the issue further in this seminar if anybody is interested.

As far as the idea of the political sovereignty of identity is concerned, I do not believe many Kadazan believe in - or are particularly interested in - the possibility of a sovereign Kadazan nation, but rather they are interested in 'being treated with respect' and in not being asked by the

State to stop being what they are', as aptly expressed by Rosaldo (2003). Or maybe they might like the idea of an independent Sabah...??

On the other hand, as rightly pointed out by Rajagopal, it is true that when cultural difference is refused recognition socially, it seeks expression in political terms, i.e. as nationality. Nationalism is thus the modular form for the expression of identity in such a context.

As far as the final point is concerned, I am not sure about what "local" and "global" are or assume that they are not co-produced, I just spoke in a way that contraposed near with far and the world of everyday, physical life (the 'local' or 'the village', the unit of analysis I used in another chapter) and the 'far away' world of which experience is only possible through the media.

This said, I am not sure I have used the most appropriate expressions and I am very happy to discuss the issue further.

For this reason, I thank all the participants who have read my paper and hope that many will be happy to take part in the debate.

Many thanks again to Arvind Rajagopal and to Sigurjon.

Fausto Barlocco

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Fri Sep 11 04:56:50 PDT 2009

Dear all,

Thanks to Fausto for his reply to Arvind.

The floor is now open to all to participate with: short questions, long questions, comments and/or critique.

Please keep in mind that these sessions can only work if we have wide and sustained participation, so all contributions are very welcome.

You can find the paper at:

<http://media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm>

All the best, Sigurjon.

Julian Hopkins [j at julianhopkins.net](mailto:j@julianhopkins.net)

Fri Sep 11 21:06:46 PDT 2009

Dear all,

Thanks to Fausto and Arvind for an interesting discussion. I'd like to add some thoughts, based on my experience of living in Malaysia - though I have never been to Sabah, and only once to Sarawak. This is not uncommon for people living in West Malaysia (or 'Semenanjung'), and highlights the first of the multiple intersecting boundaries that exist in Malaysia - geographical, ethnic, linguistic and class.

It's interesting also to point out that there are still restrictions on West Malaysians moving to East Malaysia to live or work (e.g. <http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/112731>); as a nation, it is unusual to have such internal barriers to movement.

Like Lindai, I'd also like to bring up the category of 'Bumiputra', which I'm surprised Fausto did not mention. Although the indigenous peoples of East Malaysia (or 'Orang Asal') are included in the Bumiputra category

(which translates into various advantages accruing from positive discrimination policies), it is my impression that the Malay majority tends to appropriate it for itself. Anecdotally, I heard of Christian orang asal being refused the prescribed discount on housing (in West Malaysia) because they did not have a Muslim name.

In spite of much discontent with the long-lasting Malay dominated ruling coalition, it is rare to find Malaysians expressing a desire for secession of any kind. It is my feeling that the 'Malaysian nation' is successful as an aspiration, although in practice many people reject it in its current form.

I wonder if this is in part due to the many significant minorities in Malaysia? The Malays are about 60% of the population, but the rest is composed of different groups: perhaps the shared experience of the 40% remaining is sufficient to imagine a different, multicultural and democratic, nation that dovetails with the official discourse of 'muhibbah' (unity, harmony amongst races)? In addition, there are also many Malays who are uncomfortable with the racialised discourse of the ruling UMNO party.

Regarding Astro, the satellite television: it would perhaps be useful to point out that most people don't access the full 68 channels, but rather buy packages depending on their tastes. Relevant to the discussion is that some packages are specifically tailored to a Chinese or Indian audience (I'm not sure about Malay) - which package do the Kadazan tend to prefer? Do they discuss this ethnicised commercial strategy?

Regards,

Julian

+++++++

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Lindai Schwarz msia2001@gmx.net

Fri Sep 11 12:22:37 PDT 2009

Thank you for this interesting paper and stimulating ideas! This paper caught my interest as i am writing my thesis about Malaysia and new media, but also because i am half Kadazan and most of my family lives in Penampang, the region subject to Barlocco's research. I would like to provide some personal thoughts but also feedback from a media scholar's perspective.

As Fausto indicates in his reply, the Kadazan are not interested in a sovereign Kadazan nation or an independent Sabah. On the one hand, they are aware of the economical benefits that Malaysia with its 13 states provide, on the other hand, they do get along with the other ethnic tribes fine. However, their identity as Kadazan and its recognition is very important for them. The yearly harvest festival for example is used to celebrate and preserve their own distinct culture and rituals, but also in relation to all the other tribes from each region in Sabah and Sarawak taking part in the festivities. The difference Kadazan's see is rather between the bumiputras (the "sons of the soil" who originally inhabited the land) and the "other Malays", and not between the different tribes.

In regard to their consumption of media with preference of satellite television as opposed to national Malaysian television, it is not ambiguous to me at all. The Kadazan (as other tribes) are very well

aware of Malaysia's media being censored and tailored to the needs of the ruling government with which many Kadazan's do not agree with (I know this is a bold statement but I dare say from personal observations but do not have data at hand to back up this claim). This, for me, is the main reason they prefer to watch global television delivering more diverse perspectives than local, limited views (and here I mean Government filtered). When talking about nationalism and identity in Malaysia, one also has to keep in mind that most Kadazan's are Christians as opposed to about 60% Muslims in Malaysia (compared to less than 10% Christians overall).

Thank you again!

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Katherine Martineau [kbmartin at umich.edu](mailto:kbmartin@umich.edu)

Wed Sep 16 06:12:02 PDT 2009

Dear Medianthro participants,

Thank you, Dr. Barlocco, for an interesting paper. I always feel that it is difficult to read a single chapter out of a dissertation because each chapter can be so special-purpose, even more so than in a book. Perhaps, if you're going to circulate this paper independently, it would be useful to have a few paragraphs introducing the overall argument of the dissertation and the place of this chapter within it. Indeed, my comments may be a result of this chapter-dissertation relationship. And they are certainly a result of my complete ignorance with regards to anything Malaysian, for which I apologize in advance.

I find it quite easy to accept the overall argument of the chapter, that perceptions of political exclusion would lead to negative talk about media forms perceived as representing the dominant/dominating group. I think its interesting that there seem to be styles of talk about political exclusion that have become rather entrenched on their own, and I would like to know more about those styles/genres. I'd also like to know more about the pervasiveness of that opposition beyond talk, especially in aesthetic forms and pleasure. For example, Dr. Barlocco mentions briefly that young women have a tendency to enjoy forms of entertainment outside of the house and to order the house in increasingly cosmopolitan ways (p. 19). Are they emulating Malay styles of comportment and dress which emulate global styles of comportment and dress, or are they behaving in opposition to perceived Malay styles of emulation? Or is there some alternative? I found quite interesting Dr. Barlocco's suggestion that international media might serve as an alternative to Malay modernism -- a transcendent cosmopolitanism that gives one access to both styling oneself as Kadazan and modern/global/cool (or whatever the right qualifier is), which Malay-ness does not seem to allow. I'd like to read more about specific qualities that are perceived as Kadazan, Malay, non-Malay, etc. (found to some degree on p. 12-13). It is often through the process of interpreting certain qualities as indexing a certain identity that an understanding of an identity takes shape or is reshaped historically. I wonder then, to what degree the understanding of Malayness -- from the perspective of the village in which Dr. Barlocco worked -- is different now than it was 5, 10 or 20 years ago.

I find it quite fascinating that, despite all of this opposition and feelings of exclusion, there is not a secession or sovereignty

movement. I actually think that might deserve some explaining beyond "Kadazan understand the benefits they receive." The perception and social organization of benefits is, of course, also cultural and historical. This makes me want to know more about the political groups Dr. Barlocco mentioned.

Methodologically, perhaps one way to tease these issues out in a way that recognizes their complexity would be to provide an in depth analysis of a single event -- perhaps a single evening watching TV -- with a great deal of context. That might allow Dr. Barlocco to show exactly how or when negative talk about Malaysian media arises, as well as when it doesn't. Are there things that are actually Malaysian that don't raise Kadazan ire? Perhaps that would help us better understand the opposition to and simultaneous acceptance of (resignation to?) the Malaysian state.

Finally, not to be contentious, but I wonder about the analytical usefulness of "identity" for this material. Dr. Barlocco, perhaps you could explain why precisely you feel this concept is useful to you in this chapter? What would your analysis look like if you didn't use the concept of identity, but instead employed multiple terms? I was especially interested in Madianou's distinction between closed and open discourses of identity (p.4); the discussion of memory and feeling (ex. p. 17); Dr. Barlocco's use of the word "stance" (p. 21); the concern with life experiences and proximity (p.13); and the clearly important role of relations/oppositions in group characterization throughout the text. I'm not questioning identity's importance for people in the world historically, and I'm not saying that it shouldn't be, I'm merely wondering if the word "identity" might not lump together too many things to be especially illuminating of this material. In other words, precisely because identity is the historical issue at stake, maybe some theoretical juxtaposition or elaboration would be productive.

Thanks to everyone for this discussion, and to Dr. Barlocco and Professor Rajagopal especially.

All best,

Katherine

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Sat Sep 12 10:23:47 PDT 2009

First of all I would like to thank Lindai and Julian for breaking the ice as well as for their thoughtful comments.

Again, some of the aspects mentioned in the comments are considered in another part of my thesis, as is the case with the issue of the meaning of being bumiputera and the issue of religion, or the Kadazan Harvest Festival (Kaamatan), which was subject of a chapter of my thesis and of a presentation at the latest EASA conference in Ljubljana. I agree with Lindai that the Festival is important as the foremost symbol and expression of Kadazan culture as well as for the fact that it 'puts the Kadazan - so

to say - on the calendar', by being a public holiday that in a way puts them on par with the main ethno-religious groups - Malay, Chinese, Hindu Indian, but also the ban of Sarawak - who have their own holidays - Hari Raya (Eid), Chinese New Year, Deepavali, Gawai Dayak, etc. The most important things for the Kadazan is, according to my experience, to be recognised in their own terms rather than in those imposed by the State.

The issues of religion and 'bumiputeraism' (bumiputera is an official term meaning 'son of the soil' in Malay and used to designate the people indigenous to the territories forming Malaysia - Malays and indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak such as the Kadazan and Iban- with the notable exception of the Orag Asli: as far as I know they are not officially considered as bumiputera), rightly mentioned by Lindai and Julian, are the most problematic ones. The State promotes - and in Sabah has often imposed in the late 1960s and early 1970s - a concept of bumiputera corresponding to its majority, the Malays; the bumiputera who are not Muslim, such as the majority of the Dusunic peoples (or Kadazandusun) or the Iban, are treated as 'second class bumiputera' (as already discussed by Boulanger, 2000, 2002) and strongly resent this second class status imposed on them by the Malay-controlled government. I have heard many stories about Christian bumiputera having to convert to Islam to access grants, scholarships or jobs and the fact is documented (see for example Loh, 1992) beyond the anecdotal, at least in Sabah.

Nevertheless, I agree with Lindai and Julian that the Kadazan are aware of the economical benefits provided by Malaysia, especially in terms of infrastructure development and international standing (see the comments about the Singapore bridge). I agree with Julian that it is rare to find Malaysians expressing a desire for secession and possibly that 'the 'Malaysian nation' is successful as an aspiration, although in practice many people reject it in its current form', even though the things in Sabah and Sarawak - as my informants liked to stress all the time - are very different from Semenanjung, where there are only Malay, Chinese and Indian and the only bumiputera (with the exception of the tiny orang asli population) are the Muslim Malays. I can guarantee that Kuala Lumpur viewed from Sabah often feels like a foreign country.

Moreover, Malaysia is an ambiguously imagined community, in which the national identity, as well explained by Nagata already in 1979, has been created by the government through four possible strategies: assimilation to Malayness; the creation of a hybrid Malaysian culture comprising elements deriving from different ethnic groups; a pluralistic arrangement in which the main communities retain their cultural distinctiveness or assimilation to a 'neutral' Westernised culture transcending ethnic identities. Moreover, Malaysia is differently imagined by members of different ethnic groups or by Christians, Muslims or Buddhists or in Sabah, Sarawak or Semenanjung.

In regards more specifically to the media consumption, I agree with Lindai that the Kadazan are very well aware of Malaysia's media being censored and tailored to the needs of the ruling government, and I think my paper and whole thesis gives some evidence to prove that many Kadazan do not agree with the government. That is definitely, as I think I have shown in the paper, one of the reasons why they prefer to watch global television delivering more diverse perspectives than those of the national TV informed by the government's agendas. In terms of Astro packages, I am not aware of any ethnically-tailored one being favoured, or even mentioned, by the Kadazan, and as far as I know they tend to choose packages with films, documentaries and sport.

Best,

Fausto

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Postill, John [J.Postill at shu.ac.uk](http://shu.ac.uk)
Sat Sep 12 12:17:46 PDT 2009

Hello Fausto and all

It's interesting that the conversation seems to be moving in the direction of 'the Kadazan' vs. 'the State', when the evidence presented by Fausto here (and in the rest of the thesis) strongly suggests that there is no sharp demarcation between the two. Both state and non-state agents in Sabah are caught up in the same historical processes, and presumably many Kadazan are employed and/or dependant on the state for their livelihood, from politicians and government servants to academics, teachers and journalists. The very notion of 'Kadazan' is inextricable from state policy and practice.

My question is about new media and political activism. What are the prospects, do you think, of renewed Kadazan activism via the Internet and mobile phones? For example, the Dayak political blogosphere in neighbouring Sarawak really took off in 2008; did the same happen in Sabah? The way you describe them, there appears to be quite a lot of apathy and lack of hope for change (at least among suburbanised Kadazan 'villagers').

John

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Sun Sep 13 01:16:26 PDT 2009

PS. On second thoughts, I think what I'm getting at, if I may adapt recent work I've done on suburban politics in Peninsular Malaysia, is that

presumably there is a 'field' (Bourdieu) of Kadazan politics in which various positioned Kadazan and non-Kadazan agents (politicians, government servants, journalists, intellectuals, etc) compete and cooperate over the Kadazan 'mindset' (to use a Cold war phrase still current in Malaysia) through a range of practices and media. Would this be a more precise description than the 'Kadazan vs. the State' rubric? What part do the various media organisations and technologies play in such a field?

An example closer to home would be politics in the Spanish side of the Basque Country. Saying that 'the Basque people' are fighting 'the Spanish state' is a romantic caricature. In reality, there is a field of regional politics in which two broad subfields are clearly distinguished: pro-Spain (PP, PSOE) vs. pro-Basque (PNV, etc) parties, with a pro-Spain coalition having recently won the regional elections for the first time since democracy was reestablished in the mid-1970s.

What was one of the first things the new regional government did? They changed the weather maps shown on the regional, government-controlled TV station from the Greater Basque Country of the nationalists' weather maps (which included the French provinces and Spanish Navarre) to a 'constitutional' map clearly showing the Spanish Basque Country proper. A wonderful example of banal nationalism (Billig) at work, only here the change didn't go unnoticed.

John

Daniel Taghioff [danieltaghioff at yahoo.com](mailto:danieltaghioff@yahoo.com)
Sun Sep 13 07:25:36 PDT 2009

I would like to expand on John's comments and questions somewhat.

I am studying activism here in India, and it is clear that the idea of the activist vs the State or the activists vs big business is untenable.

It is also clear that the demarcation of political activist and Media is not clear, since so many activist journalists exist here.

Finally in India the legal system has been through a process of radicalisation and then liberalisation that has created very interesting dynamics between legal professionals and activists, including a certain amount of legal activism. Indeed the environmental activists handbook, is a compendium of laws and case precedents here.

>From this point of view the public sphere (if one can consider there being such an arena of coherence, this seems very contingent on circumstances) is constituted (or disarticulated...) in the relations between various professional groups (which might be seen as communities of practice, but not necessarily so). In India, lawyers, journalists, business groups, buerocrats, politicians NGOs and activists tend to stand out, and local and regional politics seems to play out in their dynamic relations.

Is there evidence of this amongst and around the Khadazan? Have their been key legal cases for them, do they have reporters who push their cause, do they have lawyers they turn to, intellectuals? What is the relationship with NGOs? Who is politically active in the community and on what issues?

Often this form of "public" politics is not public in the way the media is, and "public" debate may be dislocated from or driven by these kinds of hidden transcripts between such groups. Which may actually serve to define very strongly how public life operates in practice. So how does one

approach such a field, and how does the "public" power of media fit into these relations?

Activists in India forever complain of the dislocation between media discourses, especially elite English Media ones, and what they see as the issues that really change the course of events.

Are such gaps evident amongst and around the Kadazan? Does this challenge how we understand the relationships between media (tion) and identification?

Daniel

Daniel Taghioff

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Mon Sep 14 08:11:55 PDT 2009

Dear all,

We are now one week into the e-seminar discussing the paper "Media and belonging to the nation in Sabah, East Malaysia" by Fausto Barlocco.

You can find the paper at our website at:
<http://media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm>

Please, send to the list your questions and/or comments. The seminar closes September 22.

All the best, Sigurjon.

fausto barlocco [fbarlocco at yahoo.it](mailto:fbarlocco@yahoo.it)

Tue Sep 15 01:31:07 PDT 2009

Thanks John and Daniel for pointing out the limitations and problems inherent to the 'Kadazan vs. the State' reading. While the idea can be considered to be untenable, I have partly used it - while trying to put it in a critical perspective - because it is exactly the point of view often expressed by my informants. Therefore, while it might have a lower degree of coherence and theoretical sophistication, I think this perspective must be taken into account seriously to avoid making theoretical elaborations that are formally perfect but way removed from the experienced life of those we are talking about.

As far as John's comment is concerned, the one he proposes might well be a more adequate theoretical approach to the phenomena I have described, I must admit I don't have such an in-depth knowledge of Bourdieu's field theory. However, what seems problematic to me is that, as far as I remember, Bourdieu considers a field as an arena that is separated, or can be considered as separated, from others. I don't think we can really consider the existence of a 'field of Kadazan politics' separated from the wider Malaysian politics. Also, it is not clear to me what John intend by competing over the Kadazan 'mindset'?

The approach I have used in my thesis is rather to look at various practices and comments about practices enacted by Kadazan individuals through various theoretical lenses, while taking seriously also their face value. An approach I have found useful is that of considering the media consumption practices of the villagers of Kituau as part of a larger set of everyday practices that make them a community of practice (Wenger, 1998),

sharing common practices, understandings, a common history and ethos. The wider (mostly Malaysian) political and discursive framework in which these practices take place and are made meaningful is what Wenger calls an 'economy of meaning'.

Another approach that seemed very useful at times was to follow de Certeau (1984) and to consider certain practices as 'tactics' of Kadazan individuals who act within a certain system to find their own space. As far as the questions asked by Daniel are concerned, I think they offer the possibility for an important clarification, and possibly comparison with the Indian case. The Kadazan I am talking about are a suburban 'community' as they live in a village that is rural but is only around 15 kilometres from the State capital and less than 10 from the nearest town; most of the inhabitants work in the city or towns and none lives by agriculture. They have no problems with land titles and their problems are not those of many indigenous groups around the world. Their main problem is that they feel they do not benefit enough of the privileges granted by the law to indigenous peoples, they resent what they feel is a pro-Islamic bend of the government and the fact that their voice is not heard in the mainstream media. The situation is different for other Dusun people who live in interior regions: some of them have issues with land ownership, which are dealt with by a couple of Malaysian NGOs (I don't know of any foreign one being involved) from Sabah itself or from neighbouring Sarawak, where the issue is much bigger. Unfortunately I am not so knowledgeable about these issues in Sabah and, as they are not important in the area where I carried out my fieldwork, I did not pay attention to them in my thesis. Maybe Lindai could tell us more about this, or John or somebody else about Sarawak.

In Penampang (the area I consider) the only important political players are political parties, primarily PBS, the Christian-, Kadazan-led Sabahan party that ruled the State government between 1985 and 1994, and the Kadazandusun Cultural Association (KDCA), which is strongly politicised and in the hands of the PBS leaders. However, as I have argued in my paper, the villagers I talked with had mostly lost trust in both.

Hope I have answered the questions and comments satisfactorily,
All the best,

Fausto

References cited

Certeau, M. de (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press
Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Daniel Taghioff [danieltaghioff at yahoo.com](mailto:danieltaghioff@yahoo.com)

Tue Sep 15 03:33:43 PDT 2009

Ok thanks Fausto, that really raises some interesting issues:

1) Re State vs Kadazan and ideas located in "the field":

Fausto: "I think this perspective must be taken into account seriously to avoid making theoretical elaborations that are formally perfect but way removed from the experienced life of those we are talking about."

Hmm this is a key issue teased out in debates on practice. However, I think this is a bit tricky. Whilst this idea may be obvious due to its simplicity

(it seems to me that simple ideas circulate more easily, especially in "public" arenas, maybe this is a bad assumption) it does not mean that other constructions are not present. Presumably political actors within the Khadazan arena will have a series of constructions of these tensions and conflicts. And if they are in any way engaged with these tensions, they will have praxis, i.e. theories about these tensions that they embody in how they deal with them. Indeed I would agree that everyday ways of dealing with things are awfully telling, though rather hard to open up to analysis in practice.

So even within your case you can probably take a simple idea and problematise it from within the case, a sort of in-field deconstruction. Maybe you have done this to some extent, I don't want to misrepresent you...

2) The field and a mindset.

I know that John uses these terms somewhat in scare quotes. This is what motivated me to approach things in terms of networks. This is hardly an original idea, multi-sited ethnography has been around for a while. I like the idea of using the linkages between professional communities of practice to trace out the way a "field site" is mediated in practice this is the approach I chose. Now this is not the same as approaching political organisations. A community of practice may or may not have a formal status as a grouping.

But, within a community there will be arenas of opinion formation, some of them Elite. This is what Hobart's idea of "commentary" seems to me to point out, I see it as not just a media studies object, but a point about how practices come to be organised.

So my question is, is there evidence of such formations in and around (in a discursive network sense) your site? Yes the formal politics may be dead and deadening, but where then do people draw their opinion-making from? Or is this a very flat society indeed (to use a series of much abused terms...) ?

My instinct is that the individual tends not to be the primary mediating layer in terms of how identity formation in relation to the "media" is itself mediated, and that to be sociological about this, we need to account for this, both at a domestic level (households, e.g. Moreley's work on TV and the home) but also through a wider consideration of how "publics" operate in practice.

Is there evidence of a variety of arenas of identity and opinion formation to be found in this case? Are there a variety of constructions of how those arenas (and thus identities) line up across these various arenas (a contested picture within the picture), something that amounts perhaps to a contested scale of forms? (This references Arvind's comments on Globalisation also). Or is there a high degree of consensus on such issues?

Daniel

References:

Commentary:

Hobart, M. (1999), 'Just talk? Anthropological reflections on the object of media studies in Indonesia.', *Media, Practice, Antagonisms: Rethinking the Role of Mass Communication Researchers in Asia*,

Scale of Forms:

Inden, Ronald B. (1990), *Imagining India*, (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Basil Blackwell) vii, 299 p.

Formality of Practice and Communities their of:

Wenger, Etienne (1991), 'Towards a theory of cultural transparency: elements of a social discourse on the visible and invisible',

Home and Mediation:

Morley, David (2000), *Home territories : media, mobility and identity*, (Comedia, London ; New York: Routledge) xix, 340 p.

Multi-sited ethnography:

Marcus, George E (1998), 'Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography', *Ethnography through thick and thin* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press), x, 275 p.

Scale of forms again in Multi-Sited Ethnography context:

Marcus, George E (1998), 'Imagining the Whole: Ethnography's Contemporary Efforts to Situate Itself', *Ethnography through thick and thin* (Princeton, N..J: Princeton University Press), x, 275 p.

Lindai Schwarz [msia2001 at gmx.net](mailto:msia2001@gmx.net)

Tue Sep 15 07:56:07 PDT 2009

To Fausto concerning the issues Sabah/Sarawak"

I'm not familiar with the NGO's but I know that land titles and land ownership is much more of an issue in Sarawak. If, for example, a Kadazan (from Sabah) and an Iban (from Sarawak) are married, their child is only entitled to inherit property in Sarawak if it was born there. However, it does not have any influence on the inheritance in Sabah.

"In Penampang (the area I consider) the only important political players are political parties, primarily PBS, the Christian-, Kadazan-led Sabahan party that ruled the State government between 1985 and 1994, and the Kadazandusun Cultural Association (KDCA), which is strongly politicised and in the hands of the PBS leaders. However, as I have argued in my paper, the villagers I talked with had mostly lost trust in both."

Even if the villagers have lost trust in these two political parties, many still prefer to give them their voice than a party that does not represent their interest at all, or too much the interest of Muslim Malays. Also, the feeling of loyalty to their own race is very strong, meaning that many feel obliged to vote for someone "of their kind" (not sure if I am using the right expression here, but I try to refer to a feeling and obligation of kinship).

To Daniel

"So my question is, is there evidence of such formations in and around (in a discursive network sense) your site? Yes the formal politics may be dead and deadening, but where then do people draw their opinion-making from? Or is this a very flat society indeed (to use a series of much abused terms...)"

According to my knowledge people draw their opinion from three main sources; of course from the media which rather reinforces their stance and dislike to UMNO and Muslim politics, through the politics implemented in Penampang and wider Sabah, but also from the villager's

interaction with politicians (the local politicians try to maintain a somewhat close relationship to the locals in the sense of "I'm one of you and I will represent our common needs and interests").

Lindai

Postill, John [J.Postill at shu.ac.uk](mailto:J.Postill@shu.ac.uk)

Wed Sep 16 15:10:06 PDT 2009

Fausto wrote:

"As far as John's comment is concerned, the one he proposes might well be a more adequate theoretical approach to the phenomena I have described, I must admit I don't have such an in-depth knowledge of Bourdieu's field theory. However, what seems problematic to me is that, as far as I remember, Bourdieu considers a field as an arena that is separated, or can be considered as separated, from others. I don't think we can really consider the existence of a 'field of Kadazan politics' separated from the wider Malaysian politics. Also, it is not clear to me what John intend by competing over the Kadazan 'mindset'?"

1. For Bourdieu, fields will vary greatly over time in the degree and quality of their autonomy from neighbouring fields, especially from the mighty fields of power and the economy. In his monograph *The Rules of Art* he describes the process of gradual (and uneven) autonomisation of the field of art in C19 France from the commercial and political fields under the maxim of 'art for art's sake'. To return to the Basque example, I would argue that the field of Basque politics is indeed autonomous from that of Spanish politics as a whole, but it far from independent, especially now that two Madrid-based parties run the regional government. So in the context of Sabah, instead of a field of Kadazan politics can we speak then of a *Sabahan* field of politics that has gone through periods of more and less autonomy from the central government?

2. I used the term 'mindset' as a folk media and political notion of wide currency in Malaysia, particularly as part of the developmentalist rhetoric. People regarded as being backward, for instance indigenous groups, must 'change their mindset' so that they can 'catch up' with the more advanced urban residents. The question I was trying to ask was not so much about political rhetoric, though, but about who the key agents and agencies across the field of Sabahan politics are, and in what ways they compete and cooperate (e.g. via electoral alliances) over Kadazan votes and other forms of Kadazan support through different media.

John

Postill, John [J.Postill at shu.ac.uk](mailto:J.Postill@shu.ac.uk)

Tue Sep 15 01:40:09 PDT 2009

This comment about Fausto Barlocco's PhD thesis abstract has just come in via my blog, *media/anthropology*, from one Joel Kadazan:

Fausto wrote:

"The official discourse and practice of ethnic and religious differentiation has been deeply internalised by the Kadazan and has become a primary reason for their opposition to the state, as they feel treated as second-class citizens."

Joel Kadazan's comment:

"- this is an understatement! Any one who has lived long enough in East Malaysia knows the "hidden agenda" of the UMNO's [the ruling Malay party] Muslim dominated BN [the ruling coalition in Malaysia] government: to steal, kill and destroy. (John 10:10a)Period!"

John

Peterson, Mark Allen Dr. [petersm2 at muohio.edu](mailto:petersm2@muohio.edu)

Tue Sep 15 07:46:46 PDT 2009

Several of the comments lately, and especially Joel Kadazan's, forwarded from John Postill, speak to the larger epistemological and ontological questions of anthropological knowledge and truth in ethnographic representation.

To what extent, in our writing do we privilege a particular account as "true"--the hidden agenda of the UMNO, for example, over countervailing official and nationalist discourses? And to what extent do we just keep juxtaposing multiple discourses while exposing (as good ethnographers) the social fields in which these emerge and are circulated?

The knowledge that "Any one who has lived long enough in East Malaysia knows" is precisely the kind of knowledge I privileged as a journalist; it is the kind of knowledge privileged by political science.

My own inspiration in this direction in grad school came from Victor Turner's admonition that when we make claims in the anthropology of religion about what is "really" going on we are engaged in theology. I've always held the same thing true of studying political representations and media representations, even though I've often felt I "know" certain things. Nearly all of us write in this way, it is a normative style in ethnographic representation.

A political scientist friend of mine once said that the thing he most admired about anthropology was its "radical skepticism" toward all representations of what was "really" going on. And yet, this is also what makes anthropology seem so irrelevant to so many people.

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Fri Sep 18 02:50:10 PDT 2009

Dear members of the list, good morning and thanks for the interest in my paper and for your comments and suggestions. First of all I would like to reply to Daniel's comments, which I think raised very important issues that might be worth - if other people are interested - talking about more in the rest of the seminar, and which seem might lead to some very fruitful possible re-elaboration of my approach and material. In answering to Daniel, I also answer to Lindai's latest comment. I will reply separately to the others very soon.

I will reply the two points Daniel made one by one:

1) Re State vs Kadazan and ideas located in "the field":

I agree with Daniel that the issue of ideas 'located in the field' is tricky and that other constructions must be present beyond the 'State vs. Kadazan' one, which, however, seems predominant in informing Kadazan villager's positioning towards the news, as I think the paper shows - at least to a certain extent.

My paper and thesis does not deal with political actors in the strict sense, but rather with 'ordinary villagers' who have strong political opinions, but are not directly involved in political parties, associations, advocacy groups or NGOs.

As rightly observed by Daniel, 'everyday ways of dealing with things are awfully telling' and what I have tried to do - whether successfully or not is to be judged by the readers - is exactly to 'open them up to analysis in practice', an objective that, as pointed out by Daniel, is rather hard to reach.

It is what I have tried to do in the analysis of the comments about the three cases in the press. In the one about the Singapore bridge I showed how people, no matter if they expressed 'pro-' or 'anti-government' positions, positioned themselves as Malaysian opposed to non-Malaysian in the international arena and implicitly accepted the political status quo as natural. In the case of the Danish cartoons they accepted some 'rules' imposed by the governmental rhetoric, those of not 'touching sensitive issues' and accepted the official imagining of Malaysia as a multi-ethnic community, however, they positioned themselves as members of a minority, marginalised group who need to help each other and 'work extra hard' to overcome their 'second-class' status and to keep pride in what they are. Finally, in the case of the Sipadan incident, they showed these more general ideas about their position in Malaysia are coupled with a more practical awareness of how things work hic et nunc: local politics is a replica of national politics on a smaller scale, dominated by patron-client relationships, economic interests and money-grabbing. The acting of Kadazan villagers is informed by these constructions (is this what Daniel refers to?), which inform the way they might go for obtaining favours from local (and generally Kadazan) politicians or the way in which they decide to keep as far as possible from politics. Obviously these constructions would influence also their positioning towards public expressions of 'Kadazan culture' made by various organisation, as is the example of the yearly Harvest Festival I analyse in another chapter of my thesis.

2) The field and a mindset.

It's the first time I am introduced to Hobart's concept of 'commentary', I would be grateful if Daniel could explain its meaning and how it relates to my material a bit better.

In my case, I have focused my ethnographic analysis on a group of people constituted by the inhabitants of a village together with some of their friends and relatives residing in nearby villages. Basically, I have followed a 'traditional' approach, which was justified by various considerations. One of them was the fact that the villagers (in fact a portion of them) considered themselves as members of a community, the village, characterised by being Kadazan and by certain customs and values, primarily cooperation and mutual accountability. One of the ways in which I approached the village was to consider these villagers - those actively

involved in the village affairs, regularly interacting and proposing an ethos of community and participation - as a community of practice. I have not focussed on political actors directly and I have mostly looked at the way in which non-elite 'ordinary villagers' generate and express the sense of belonging to various categories, in the previous chapter through everyday face-to-face sociality and participating in life-cycle celebrations and in the one on which this paper is based by positioning themselves in response to media messages, particularly important as the media have, as argued by Postill (2006) been the main means of nation-building.

As I have briefly argued in the paper, the opinion-making of my informants was based on the media - and more precisely on a reading of the media informed by various constructions, among which is the 'the State is against us', I agree with Lindai that the media reinforce the villagers' stance and dislike of UMNO and Muslim politics - and on direct experience. The latter, as argued by Lindai, involves the villager's interaction with politicians - who try to maintain a somewhat close relationship to the locals - a situation that is particularly true in the case of the village I considered, as two very prominent political figures of the past reside there. These figures, whose participation in village life is limited, had and to some extent still have patron-client ties with many villagers, and are often described as examples of a 'good' and a 'bad politician': one near the people, approachable, modest, generous, religious, the other unapproachable, 'putting himself on a higher level', fond of money and power, corrupt. The latter is considered to be the typical example, while the former is considered an unusually 'clean' politician.

As far as the position of the Kadazan vis-à-vis the political parties is concerned, to respond to Lindai, I agree that they prefer to vote for a Kadazan-led political party (there are a handful, all splinters separated from PBS after it lost the control of the State government in 1994), ruled by 'one of our kind' and that they mostly see voting for UMNO as a betraying of their ethnic belonging (which they ascribe to putting interests first), but they also see politics as a very dirty matter in which all parties, including Kadazan-led ones, are moved by the personal interests of their leaders, with very few notable exceptions.

All these opinions seem widely shared among the group I have studied in-depth - and according to more limited experiences more widely around Sabah - and I would argue there are not arenas of conflict over these opinions, apart from the reading of single events (for example the 'pro-' vs. 'anti-government' position in relation to the Singapore bridge issue).

Finally, I am very intrigued by Daniel's argument that 'the individual tends not to be the primary mediating layer in terms of how identity formation in relation to the "media" is itself mediated, and that to be sociological about this, we need to account for this, both at a domestic level (households, e.g. Moreley's work on TV and the home) but also through a wider consideration of how "publics" operate in practice': how do you think I could, in practice (this word again..) go on about it?

fausto barlocco [fbarlocco at yahoo.it](mailto:fbarlocco@yahoo.it)

Fri Sep 18 06:21:03 PDT 2009

I completely agree with Dr. Peterson when he contrasts the approach, typical of journalism and political science, privileging a particular account as 'true', with the purely anthropological one, 'juxtaposing multiple discourses while exposing the social fields in which these emerge and are circulated'. Often anthropologists dispense with the 'radical skepticism' and end up privileging a certain account, and that is especially the case, I would argue, with regional specialists, such as for example the 'Borneanist clique'. Often I have privileged a certain account, if not as true at least as 'more plausible', myself for a series of

reasons: because I was influenced by my informants (being instrumentalised by them? Feeling the duty to 'give them something back' by 'giving them a voice'? Going partially native?), because I immersed myself so much in 'the field' that I started looking at it from a less detached point of view, and finally, I think, because I was dealing with issues that had, broadly speaking, a political aspect. The explanation that makes most sense is that local specialists tend often to draw closer to political science and journalism, but could it also be that they tend to draw closer to the point of view and interest (the 'being relevant' mentioned by Mark) of the local? Is there a dilemma in this?

In reply to Katherine, yes, it is difficult to read a single chapter out of a dissertation because each chapter can be so special-purpose, as demonstrated by many of the questions I have been asked so far. Even more it is demonstrated by your doubts about the way in which I use the concept of identity. The thesis from which this paper is taken is a thesis about identity, so the usage of the concept is justified if not by anything else, by the internal coherence of the thesis, which obviously is alien to the material I present here in the moment in which it is made into a 'stand-alone' paper. As I have explained in my reply to Daniel, my thesis deals with the way in which Kadazan individuals generate and express the sense of belonging to various collective categories - nation, ethnic group, village - and in the chapter on which this paper is based I look at the way in which they express a sense of belonging by positioning themselves in response to media messages, particularly important as the media have been the main means of nation-building. While I agree that the paper could possibly do without using the concept of identity, I think that what Katherine is getting at by proposing the usage of multiple terms is a theoretical issue about the usefulness of the concept of identity in general (please correct me if I am mistaken). Personally, I am not sure using multiple terms would be a better option. Katherine seems to be taking a position similar to that of Brubaker and Cooper (2000), who single out five main senses in which the term is used: 1) to conceptualise non-instrumental modes of social and political action 2) as a subjective or objective 'sameness' among members of a group or category 3) as the core aspect of individual or group 'selfhood' 4) as an effect of, and a basis, for solidarity and collective action 5) as the 'evanescent product of multiple and competing discourses', highlighting the 'unstable, multiple, fluctuating and fragmented nature of the contemporary self' (2000: 8). Differently from them, I believe that the different phenomena referred to through the notion of identity are so intertwined with each other in their manifestation in the real world that they cannot be considered separately.

My approach is to focus on discourses of collective identification, while considering their significance to individuals in creating a sense of belonging to these categories and the way in which this belonging is used by individuals who define who they are. Following Wenger (1998), I understand identity formation as consisting in two processes: identification, defined by Wenger as 'providing material for building identities through an investment of the self in relations of association and differentiation' (1998: 188) and 'negotiability', 'the ability, facility, and legitimacy to contribute to, take responsibility for, and shape the meanings that matter in a social configuration' (1998: 197). Identification consists of both a process of reification, of 'identifying as' (self-ascription) and 'being identified as' (ascription by others) someone, and one of participation, of 'identifying with' something or someone, by 'developing an association whose experience is constitutive of whom we are' (1998: 191).

So, from my point of view, identity seems a concept that, despite its ambiguity, is still useful, both for my thesis as a whole and for this

paper. I also agree with Katherine that identity must be looked at historically. I am not sure I have been able to explain my approach adequately and convincingly in this reply, so, for those interested, I attach a copy of the first few pages of my thesis, which can clarify doubts about what I mean by identity, ethnicity and nation and about the way in which I look at the relationship between the Kadazan and the State.

Coming to the subject of the way in which the opposition to the perceived status of marginality and to the ruling Malays is expressed, aesthetic forms and pleasure are also important, as you rightly point out. Just a few examples I consider in my thesis are the penchant for drinking copious amounts of alcohol in most social occasions, which differentiates the Kadazan from the Muslim Malays; the ease and readiness in mixing with other ethnic groups and in particular with the Chinese, from which certain customs and tastes have been borrowed; the liking of gambling, another un-Muslim activity; the practice of sumazau, a traditional dance synonymous with Kadazan-ness; the spending of great amount of time and money in participating in a great number of parties organised in occasion of life-cycle events. In regards to the tendency of young women to enjoy forms of entertainment outside of the house and to order the house in increasingly cosmopolitan ways, I

would argue that these are partly common with Malay styles of comportment and dress emulating global styles, but partly different and more similar to the Western 'original'. This derives, if not for anything else, from the fact that Kadazan women are not limited by Islamic values in the way they dress, eat, drink and go out in public. What my informant told me, even if mostly implicitly, was that they felt they followed to a certain degree a certain form of modernism - a 'transcendent cosmopolitanism' - which they prefer to the Malay modernism and that being Kadazan and Christian allows them to follow it better, as Kadazan culture is more 'open' than Malay culture (cf. the discussion about Danish cartoons vs. Da Vinci Code). The Kadazan like to think of themselves as modern and tolerant but attached to their traditions, which showed a good way of living in harmony with other people and with nature. They often present the Malays, primarily those of the Peninsula, in a stereotypical way, even though there is more to them than that. I don't know about their understanding of Malayness 5, 10 or 20 years ago: I think it would be very interesting to know and that it would have been influenced by the political climate of the time.

As far as the secession movement is concerned, while there are rumours circulating about a prominent Kadazan leader, who has been in jail for some years, preparing a plot for the independence of Sabah, I think it all remains at the level of urban legends. The reasons for the fact that the Kadazan and other Sabahans and Sarawakians are many and complex, however I would summarise them in two: 1) the advantages of being part of Malaysia and the doubts about the possibility of actually being able to constitute an independent Sabahan country 2) the fact that, as demonstrated by Postill (2006), Malaysian nation-building has indeed worked, the government puts into practice the promises made by the propaganda, Malaysia is a relatively prosperous and peaceful country and a national culture has been made. Finally, the idea of providing an in depth analysis of a single event -- perhaps a single evening watching TV -- with a great deal of context sounds like a good idea, something I haven't done but that seems worth trying.

Sorry for the rather long reply,
all the best,

Fausto

Reference cited

Brubaker, R. and F. Cooper (2000) 'Beyond "identity"', Theory and Society, 29, pp. 1-47

Piero Vereni [piero.vereni at gmail.com](mailto:piero.vereni@gmail.com)

Fri Sep 18 07:06:23 PDT 2009

Dear all,

I've read with great interest Fausto Barlocco's paper, and knowing nothing about Malaysia I've had a great opportunity to reflect on still another perspective on reception and interpretation of televised stuff, which is at present my main interest. Since the ongoing discussion has moved quite rapidly to a rather philosophical level that makes me feel uneasy because of my ineptness with Aristotelism, I'd like to ask Fausto a quite empirical and simple question.

In the section about Akademi Fantasia you say that "it must be acknowledged that AF is a particularly Malaysian phenomenon in which, despite their opposition, Kadazan are still situated.."

I'm wondering in what sense AF is "particularly Malaysian", since the way you describe it suggests it is just another game show based on the global format "Pop Idol", "Fame Academy" and the like, that have been cast for a whole decade all over the world. While it is obvious that similar reality shows must be indigenized in order to be successful (see for instance the Lebanon and Kuwait cases [1]), from your paper it's not clear to me if the "ethnicist" reading of Kazadan is a legitimate or forced interpretation of AF authors' purposes. As Kazadan seem to have a rather sophisticated knowledge of international TV, do they have any acquaintance of other game shows broadcast from non Malay TV stations? I mean, is AF perceived as an internal national programme, or is it viewed on the backdrop of its global circulation as a format? I think that an answer to that question may shed light on the way Kazadan perceive and create "locality and globality" (to go back to Rajogopal's first point) and set their own political agenda. To vote your favorite (ethnic?) singer because she's performing in a (national?) Malay show is one thing. A complete different one is, I suppose, to vote the same singer if you believe she's taking part to a much larger-than-life experiment with international modernity.

Thank you very much for your attention and my congratulation for the very stimulating paper,

Pv

NOTE [1] Marwan M. Kraidy. (2007). Idioms of Contention: Star Academy in Lebanon and Kuwait. IN Naomi Sakr (ed.). Arab Media and Political Renewal. Community, Legitimacy and Public Life. London-New York. I.B. Taurus. pp. 44-55.

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Fri Sep 18 11:30:36 PDT 2009

Dear members of the list,

John Postill wrote me saying he didn't get the attachment to my latest e-mail: I am not sure about the others, so I send the attachment again, just in case.

Best,

Fausto

Daniel Taghioff [danieltaghioff at yahoo.com](mailto:danieltaghioff@yahoo.com)

Fri Sep 18 22:40:55 PDT 2009

Hi Fausto

I try below to give some useful responses to the points you highlight, and to tie it in a little with the rest of the debate.

1) Finally, in the case of the Sipadan incident, they showed these more general ideas about their position in Malaysia are coupled with a more practical awareness of how things work hic et nunc: local politics is a replica of national politics on a smaller scale, dominated by patron-client relationships, economic interests and money-grabbing. The acting of Kadazan villagers is informed by these constructions (is this what Daniel refers to?), which inform the way they might go for obtaining favours from local (and generally Kadazan) politicians or the way in which they decide to keep as far as possible from politics

Whilst I am not clear what I am going for in your field context, yes, I am going for some sense of relation between associational life in an area and how people identify in discussions, such as around media. This sounds like an example of that. Clearly the linkages are not going to be straightforward, but there will be assumptions and ways of speaking about the world that will crop up from one to the other, or if not, why not? Maybe these worlds are kept apart, but if so, how?

2) The field and a mindset... It's the first time I am introduced to Hobart's concept of 'commentary', I would be grateful if Daniel could explain its meaning and how it relates to my material a bit better.

In the "Just Talk" paper (and he lurks on this list so I choose my words carefully) Hobart advances the idea of "commentary" as an alternative to an idea of "text" or "context" (text and its surrounding - though I draw a bit on his other work here) in order to look at how an object (text) and its context are actively "articulated" (in the Laclauian sense) in practice.

The idea of commentary hinges on a sense of collectively practiced reflexivity. People do not necessarily reflect on their circumstances alone, but often do so in groups, and sometimes "outsource" this activity to "commentators" somewhat who may [attempt to] take on opinion formation as a socially-recognised role (err rather like we do...)

What seems neat about this is that avoids the traps of an ontology assuming a social order grounded in "text" (which amounts to a single ordered explanatory account of the social) but rather looks at it as an order which is partly organised through various arenas of commentary, where people and groups of people actively identify objects as they bring them in relation to one another, including relations of one "contextualising" the

other. Hobart gives the example of a group of influential older males having a discussion of the news, but clearly this is a much wider approach to how practice is ordered within practice.

How this applies to you? Well we have discussed various influential arenas, from domestic discussions of how people identify in relation to goods etc as well as mention of the various formal and informal processes in and around your field site. These can all be seen as sites of commentary, with people reflecting in some degree or kind on their social situation. This is perhaps where the day-to-day and the more formalised sense of identity may come into contact. This is certainly not easily answered, but I am personally looking at how people see themselves as positioned, in terms of their senses of interests, and how they talk of others, how they map their social world. This may not be the right starting point for you, but I imagine there are likely to be sets of basic arguments or outright assumptions that are called into play as people reflect on their situation.

In my case, I have focused my ethnographic analysis on a group of people constituted by the inhabitants of a village together with some of their friends and relatives residing in nearby villages. Basically, I have followed a 'traditional' approach, which was justified by various considerations. One of them was the fact that the villagers (in fact a portion of them) considered themselves as members of a community, the village, characterised by being Kadazan and by certain customs and values, primarily cooperation and mutual accountability. One of the ways in which I approached the village was to consider these villagers - those actively involved in the village affairs, regularly interacting and proposing an ethos of community and participation - as a community of practice.

Well, yes, that also sounds very much like commentary. although "community of practice" also orientates you towards looking at getting things done and the skills seen as important in achieving a set of more-or-less articulated aims, and how people's attribution of ability to achieve those aims affects membership of groups and the articulation of participation in it. This is crucial in studies of activism here in India, for instance.

What are the conditions of possibility of bringing these various images of community out as articulated and somewhat alienated objects? Are there key contentions that underpin various competing notions of "community" and "participation" perhaps unvoiced and assumed ones? I readily admit, none of this is particularly easy to research, though I personally enjoy trying to do so...

I have not focussed on political actors directly and I have mostly looked at the way in which non-elite 'ordinary villagers' generate and express the sense of belonging to various categories, in the previous chapter through everyday face-to-face sociality and participating in life-cycle celebrations and in the one on which this paper is based by positioning themselves in response to media messages, particularly important as the media have, as argued by Postill (2006) been the main means of nation-building.

I would only say that a community of practice approach and oddly enough a commentary / articulation approach would posit the activity as primary, as the substance of identification, and the abstraction following on from this, even if as an activity. I suppose this is an "actions speak louder than words" bias, but also a sense that solidarity is something done rather than something that "exists" in ideal form. This means that the idea of "Media as a main means of Nation building in Malaysia" needs to be looked at in terms of how media practices (journalism) [were] meshed [by whom?]

with non-media activities: Simply because the message itself cannot build a nation. Sorry, this is not very specific, but it maybe clarifies the problem.

Finally, I am very intrigued by Daniel's argument that 'the individual tends not to be the primary mediating layer in terms of how identity formation in relation to the "media" is itself mediated, and that to be sociological about this, we need to account for this, both at a domestic level (households, e.g. Moreley's work on TV and the home) but also through a wider consideration of how "publics" operate in practice': how do you think I could, in practice (this word again..) go on about it?

By seeking out those influential sites of commentary ;-)

By the way "influence" can be seen as a weasel word for when people suspect causality but can't pin it down. In other words this is slippery stuff. I have tried to start at the other end and see how "media" crop up in practices that seem likely to be oriented towards mediation (e.g. activism) to see if it makes sense to put practice first and media second (i.e. Practice-related-media). I am approaching "publics" as if they are constituted in the relations between various communities of practice (Lawyers, Media People, Bureaucrats, Politicians, NGOs etc...) There is a formal bias in this that reflects a liberal sense of "private" as opposed to public, something you might traverse and transgress in this study...

I guess the key issue is that when people get together to discuss their situation, they are also [perhaps implicitly] having a discussion about who they are in relation to that situation. Maybe that gives a way in to this.

I completely agree with Dr. Peterson when he contrasts the approach, typical of journalism and political science, privileging a particular account as 'true', with the purely anthropological one, 'juxtaposing multiple discourses while exposing the social fields in which these emerge and are circulated'. Often anthropologists dispense with the 'radical skepticism' and end up privileging a certain account, and that is especially the case, I would argue, with regional specialists, such as for example the 'Borneanist clique'. Often I have privileged a certain account, if not as true at least as 'more plausible', myself for a series of reasons: because I was influenced by my informants (being instrumentalised by them? Feeling the duty to 'give them something back' by 'giving them a voice'? Going partially native?), because I immersed myself so much in 'the field' that I started looking at it from a less detached point of view, and finally, I think, because I was dealing with issues that had, broadly speaking, a political aspect. The explanation that makes most sense is that local specialists tend often to draw closer to political science and journalism, but could it also be that they tend to draw closer to the point of view and interest (the 'being relevant' mentioned by Mark) of the local? Is there a dilemma in this?

I have experienced a dilemma between a local wish to get things done and solve problems (something implied in a community of practice approach, perhaps that can be seen as "productivist") and the more existential approach of Anthropology as uncovering the roots of social understanding and action. I experience this as an aporia (an irreducible or ultimately un-resolvable tension) between the need to have more or less fixed objects as the targets of activity, and the basic under-determination of social practice.

This seems to be one of the aporia that people create / find themselves (identify themselves) within [collectively] by traversing it back and forth, which seems to be one way of reading the communities of practice literature. As such, fixed positions in relation to this aporia are

probably somewhat unbalancing in character, it strikes me that these issues of determination are something that need to be navigated and traversed, not nailed down. That is how I ended up reading the debate on anchoring between Hobart and Couldry, that we had earlier on the list.

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Dilley, Roy (1999), *The problem of context, (Methodology and history in anthropology ; v. 4, New York ; Oxford: Berghahn Books) xiv, 242 p.*

Hobart, M. (1999), 'Just talk? Anthropological reflections on the object of media studies in Indonesia.', *Media, Practice, Antagonisms: Rethinking the Role of Mass Communication Researchers in Asia,*

Part of the Couldry - Hobart Debate can be found at Criticalia.org and also in the book: *Understanding Media Practices*

Daniel Taghioff

fausto barlocco [fbarlocco at yahoo.it](mailto:fbarlocco@yahoo.it)

Fri Sep 18 14:38:44 PDT 2009

I don't know why I seem to be unable to send the attachment to the whole list.. I copied and pasted it as a body of the e-mail.. If somebody is able to explain me what's the problem (Philip??) I'll try to send it as an attached Word document again later.

Sorry again for the problem,
cheers,
Fausto

Introduction

This research originated as an enquiry into the effects of the state-led process of creating a national culture on a 'tribal' Bornean people, the Kadazan of the Malaysian State of Sabah. Early findings suggested that, similarly to what was concluded by Postill (2006) for another Bornean people, the Iban of Sarawak, the Kadazan have become deeply 'Malaysianised'. I also observed, however, a marked contrast between, on the one hand, the relatively successful establishment of a national culture and, on the other, the fact that the Kadazan showed a much stronger sense of belonging to their ethnic group and locality than to Malaysia. This empirical observation echoes Geertz's (1973 [1963]) point that in post-colonial states conflict arises between the modernising state and the 'primordial sentiments' of attachment to language, culture, religion and blood of their population.

This thesis aims to clarify the reasons for the apparent contradiction between the involvement of the Kadazan in the 'integrated system of cultural institutions and practices' (Postill, 2006: 15) of Malaysia and the evidence showing an enduring strength of alternative forms of identification apparently at odds with the Malaysian nation-building process. In order to do so it looks at how the Kadazan form and express their sense of belonging to the nation, ethnic group and locality through discourses and practices. By investigating these aspects, this thesis attempts to provide an account of nation-building that 'break[s] out of the teleological and mono-directional narrative that informs the predominant understandings of nation building', which only allows to conclude that it either succeeds or fails (Mihelj, 2007).

In agreement with Geertz (1973 [1963]), I consider the attachment to alternative forms of belonging demonstrated by the Kadazan to be a reaction to the processes of modernisation and consolidation of state power. This

process mostly coincided with the nation-building project carried out by the Malaysian government, involving the formation of a national set of institutions and practices, but also the establishment of control over the discursive space through the circulation of dominant discourses spread by state-controlled media. These discourses promoted at the same time a narrative and ideology based on the notion of modernity, requiring members of minorities to change their 'mindsets' and become 'modern', and a social arrangement distinguishing citizens on the basis of ethnicity and religion. My argument is that the attachment of the Kadazan to forms of collective identification alternative to the nation derives from their marginality, a status described by Wenger as a restricted form of participation dominated by non-participation (1998: 164-66) in relation to the Malaysian state. The notion of marginality has been used by various anthropologists (Tsing, 1993; Winzeler, 1997a; Rosaldo, 2003) to describe the condition of hinterland minorities in island South-East Asia. While the conditions generated by the Malaysian state make it possible for the Kadazan and other minority groups to imagine themselves as members of the national 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991), at the same time the lack of power to define the role they can play in it and the lack of participation afforded lead them to identify more strongly with groups over whose definition and destiny they feel they have more control.

In order to understand fully the effects of the conditions brought into being by the inclusion in the Malaysian state and its nation-building project on the formation of collective belonging among the Kadazan, this thesis provides an empirical analysis of the different ways in which the Kadazan position themselves as Kadazan, Malaysian, Sabahan or members of their village in relation to the practices they carry out or the discourses they encounter or produce. In order to do so, I follow two main lines of enquiry: a historical reconstruction of the 'trajectories' of the processes, primarily the elaboration of a modern Kadazan and Malaysian culture, through which the generation of a sense of belonging to the ethnic group and the nation has been made possible, and an ethnographic analysis of the way in which individuals situate themselves as belonging to such categories in their everyday life. Such a research project requires the integration of a Malaysian frame of reference with the consideration of other levels of analysis, including the sub-national and local, but also following regional or global connections.

The next sections of this introductory chapter present the theoretical foundations of this research, situating it within debates about the nation and nationalism, nation-building, ethnicity, the relationship between indigenous peoples and the state, and proposing an approach to identity and collective identification based on the work of Richard Jenkins (2008) and Etienne Wenger (1998). The final part of the chapter provides a discussion of the method used in the research and of the status of knowledge generated through it.

The nation, nationalism and nation-building

The origin and definition of the idea of nation is the object of the debate on nationalism, whose participants follow two main approaches, labelled as primordialist and modernist. The former is currently dominated by ethno-symbolists, who, like the sociologist Anthony Smith (1986, 1995), argue that, while nationalism is a modern ideology, at least some nations have a root in pre-modern cultural groups, which have a primarily subjective persistence, based on things such as memory, values, sentiments and symbols.

The proponents of the modernist approach include Ernest Gellner (1983), Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Anderson (1991), all of whom share the idea

that nations are modern creations of the ideology of nationalism. Gellner (1983) defined the nation as a group whose members share the same culture and recognise themselves and each other as members. However, he argued that these characteristics define a nation only in the 'age of nationalism', when 'general conditions make for standardized, homogenous, centrally sustained high cultures, pervading entire populations' (1983: 55). Gellner's definition of nation depends on the concomitant definition of nationalism as 'a political principle', but also 'a sentiment' and a 'movement' associated with it, 'which holds that the political and the national [read ethnic] unit should be congruent' (1983: 1).

Some of the strengths of Gellner's (1983) theories lie in the convincing way in which they clarify the modernity of the idea of nation, the political aspects of nationalism and the importance of the creation of a widely-shared 'high culture' for the existence of the nation, an essential goal in the nation-building agenda of all states (see below). A problem of applicability which is of relevance here, however, is that Gellner's (1983) idea that the national unit corresponds to an ethnic unit does not apply well to the form of nationalism promoted by states that have the coexistence of different ethnic groups as one of their defining characters, as is the case of Malaysia and other South-East Asian and post-colonial states. In order to account for such cases, some scholars have made a distinction between 'ethnic nationalism' and other forms, referred to as 'civic' (e.g. Smith, 1986: 134-40; see Reid, 2001 for a full discussion), 'patriotic' (Taylor, 1998, cited in Case, 2000: 132) or 'supra-ethnic' (Eriksen, 1993: 118), based on the principle of belonging to the nation by virtue of being citizens of a state, and not members of an ethnic group.

The theories of Benedict Anderson (1991) have the advantage of explaining the way in which the nation emerged as a meaningful and relevant entity allowing people to identify with it. Anderson (1991) defined nations as imagined political communities, imagined as 'deep, horizontal comradeships', commanding a sense of fraternity among its members, most of whom will never meet or interact or even hear of each other (1991: 6-7). The notion of imagined communities is useful in its bringing the constructed character of the nation, and similarly of the ethnic group, to the fore, showing how the historical development of certain conditions and sensibilities, such as the development of print capitalism and the establishment of 'empty homogenous time' through clocks and calendars, generated the possibility for people to imagine themselves as being part of a community whose existence was not supported by direct experience.

Anderson's (1991) definition of the national community as being imagined does not imply denying its reality but rather stressing that its existence implies an effort of imagination that transforms it from an abstract concept into a significant experiential reality, as in the famous example of a newspaper reader imagining a community of millions reading the same newspaper at the same time. In this thesis I am therefore subscribing to Anderson's idea that nations and all communities, with the possible exception of 'primordial villages of face-to-face contact' (1991: 6), are imagined, and that they are to be distinguished by the style in which they are imagined and by the conditions making such imagination possible and appealing.

One of the most difficult tasks faced by the governments of newly established countries is that of 'making Italians' after they have 'made Italy' or, as expressed by Postill, to 'build nations within their allocated territories' (2006: 1). This task is generally referred to as 'nation-building', a term partially contested within academic circles (see Postill, 2006: 5), but which aptly captures 'the built nature of modern state and nation formation' (Postill, 2006: 6, emphasis in original). An alternative notion to that of nation-building, which I think can be used to complement the former, is that of 'nation making' brought forward by Foster (2002) to stress the importance of processes not led by the state - and in certain instances even going against it - such as commercial culture and

other initiatives of the private sector and the wider population in 'materializing the nation'.

Ethnic groups and ethnicity

The term 'ethnic group' was first used in the period following the Second World War as the main way to refer to human populations with a common origin and culture, including both small-scale societies, previously mostly referred to as 'tribes', and larger groups constituting significant components of a state population, previously referred to as 'peoples', or sometimes 'races' or 'nations'. According to Eriksen, while the new conceptualisation did not challenge the discrete character of groupings so defined, it implied that their members were 'aware' and 'in contact with' members of other groups (1993: 9).

The problematic status of considering ethnic groups as bounded entities sharing a common culture was firstly put into relief by Edmund Leach, who, through his study of highland Burma (1970 [1954]), demonstrated the inadequacy of the presupposition that members of an ethnic group or a society necessarily share a set of distinctive cultural traits. Leach's (1970 [1954]) argument that societies emerge out of subjective processes of ascription became the basis of the situational notion of ethnicity that established itself through a collection edited by Fredrik Barth in 1969 (Bentley, 1987: 25). Barth defined ethnic categories as 'organisational vessels that may be given varying amounts and forms of content in different sociocultural systems' (1969: 14), and identified the boundaries of the ethnic groups, which he considered to be permeable to passage of people or cultural traits, as the essential element of their existence. Moreover, he emphasised the idea that the concept of boundaries makes sense only when at least two groups are considered, and that bounded groups cannot exist in isolation. As already mentioned, the approach of Barth and colleagues (1969) also stressed self-ascription as the most important element in the definition of ethnic groups.

In its early stage, the anthropological debate on ethnicity was dominated by discussions about the origin and objective grounding of subjective claims to ethnic belonging. Scholars dealing with these issues mostly followed two main approaches, referred to as primordialism and instrumentalism. The former, under which the position of Barth (1969) is often subsumed (see Cohen, 1974: xii-xv), viewed ethnicity as a more or less immutable category to which people resort to find solutions to the disruption of conventional ways of understanding and acting in the world caused by social changes (Bentley, 1987: 26). Instrumentalists, on the other hand, considered ethnic groups as being generated under specific circumstances and for specific purposes, either to provide a sort of 'cognitive map' needed by recent rural migrants to orient themselves in a novel multi-ethnic setting (Mitchell, 1956) or for obtaining political and economic gains within situations of struggle over resources (Cohen, 1969, 1974). Bentley (1987: 26) criticised both approaches for not standing up well to empirical scrutiny and for not being able to clarify the processes by which collectivities of interests and sentiments come into existence. Moreover, he argued that instrumentalist theories did not deal adequately with the individual level, 'where ethnic identity formation and manipulation presumably take place' (Bentley, 1987: 26), therefore not being able to explain why belonging to an ethnic group should constitute an essential element of people's sense of who they are and how that takes place.

These issues are an essential element in Jenkin's (2008) 'rethinking' of what he calls 'the basic anthropological model of ethnicity', which he mostly attributes to the views of Barth (1969). Jenkins presents this model

as being based on a series of loosely linked propositions defining ethnicity as: 1) being 'about' cultural differentiation 2) being concerned with culture but also 'rooted in, and the outcome of, social interaction' 3) not being fixed 4) being collective and individual (2008: 165). Among the elements of 'rethinking' of the 'basic anthropological model' proposed by Jenkins (2008), some are of particular relevance to the present thesis. The first of them is the shift from an excessive emphasis on self-ascription present in many previous anthropological notions of ethnicity reached through the appreciation of both processes of 'internal definition', the individual or collective self-ascription to an ethnic group, and 'external definition', the ascription by others. On the basis of these two forms of definition, Jenkins distinguishes between 'self-identification', which takes place both at the individual and group level, and 'social categorization', the 'identification of others as a collectivity' (2008: 56). The understanding of the latter involves the consideration of the power and authority embedded within active social relationships (2008: 55), which have the capacity to influence categorisation in the specific contexts in which it takes place.

Following Jenkins, I therefore consider that a full understanding of ethnicity is possible only through the consideration of the specific 'contexts and processes of social categorization' (Jenkins, 2008: 65) - what Cornell and Hartmann (1998, cited in Jenkins, 2008: 65) called the 'construction sites of ethnicity' - in which identification and categorisation take place. Jenkins (2008) situates these contexts along a continuum going from the most 'informal', including primary socialisation, face-to-face interaction and sexual relationships, to the most 'formal', such as market relationships, employment, administrative allocation, social control, organised politics, social policy.

The importance of primary socialisation in the formation of categories has been influentially considered by Bourdieu through his concept of habitus, 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, [...] principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations [...] objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them' (1977: 72, emphasis in original). Developing Bourdieu's (1977) insights, Bentley (1987) has emphasised the connection between primary socialisation and ethnicity, considering the habitus developed within primary socialisation to be the source of the recognition of ethnic commonality. While he recognises the importance of primary socialisation as 'the realm par excellence of categorization, setting a template for our receptivity to being categorized in later life' (2008: 66), Jenkins considers it to be just one of the 'construction sites of ethnicity'.

Other contexts of ethnic categorisation that, as I will show in the next chapters, are as important as primary socialisation are what Jenkins calls 'routine public interaction', the face-to-face interaction involving the use of verbal and non-verbal cues, including both explicit markers and unconscious and involuntary elements, used to assign unknown others to an ethnic category, and communal relationships, 'the more or less tightly knit networks that evolve over time in residentially shared localities, and membership of informal groups (2008: 66-67).

Among the formal contexts and processes of social categorisation, official classification is particularly significant in Malaysia, where the state officially distinguishes its citizens in terms of their ethnicity, a distinction that has among its consequences different access to certain rights and specific policies aimed at specific groups, which determine a

form of ethnic categorisation that is significant in many aspects of the life of Malaysian citizens.

Another essential point made by Jenkins (2008) is that ethnicity is fundamentally similar to other forms of identification and social categorisation, including the nation and locality, which he refers to as 'allotropes of ethnicity', as they share the same basic features (2008: 42-45). Jenkins argues forms of identification and categorisation should be distinguished between each other on the basis of what he calls the 'virtual' aspect, 'the consequences of name and label, what the nominal means in terms of experience' (2008: 43, emphasis in original), as opposed to the 'nominal' identification, constituted by name and classification. While 'nominal' identification has a hierarchical and segmentary organisation, being constituted by a series of nested categories, these should be understood, at least in part, in terms of their virtuality, in the way in which, for example, national identification can be distinguished from local

identification for the different consequences it has in the real world. The nominal and the virtual, moreover, do not necessarily correspond with one another and their relationship is always to be understood empirically (2008: 171).

In the next section, I consider the notion of identity, clarifying the different concepts it expresses and the different usages of the term. The author then presents views on identity, primarily in the forms of processes of identification, which derives from complementing Jenkins' (2008) elaboration of the 'basic anthropological model of ethnicity' with the ideas of Etienne Wenger (1998).

Identity and identification

The notion of 'identity' was introduced in the social sciences and in public discourse in the 1960s in the United States, being separated from its original psychoanalytical context and linked to ethnicity and sociological role theory. The term soon diffused to other disciplines and regions, establishing itself in social and political practice and analysis (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 2-3). The usage of the term in the social sciences is frequent but ambiguous (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Byron, 2002), and it is difficult to find a precise definition of the term[1]. Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 6-8) single out five main senses in which the term is used: 1) to conceptualise non-instrumental modes of social and political action 2) as a subjective or objective 'sameness' among members of a group or category 3) as the core aspect of individual or group 'selfhood' 4) as an effect of, and a basis, for solidarity and collective action 5) as the

'evanescent product of multiple and competing discourses', highlighting the 'unstable, multiple, fluctuating and fragmented nature of the contemporary self' (2000: 8).

My discussion of identification and sense of belonging to collective categories among the Kadazan deals primarily with identity as the basis and effect of collective action and as the product of discourses. These notions are based on a constructivist perspective, mostly belong to what Brubaker and Cooper consider as 'weak understandings of identity' (2000: 10-11), opposing themselves to the essentialist and reified 'strong' understandings. However, contra Brubaker and Cooper (2000), I believe that the different phenomena referred to through the notion of identity are so intertwined with each other in their manifestation in the real world that they cannot be considered separately. An analytical distinction between them, therefore, while it is tight and elegant in principle, is not adequate in practice. As a result, while focusing on discourses of

collective identification, this thesis considers at the same time their significance to individuals in

creating a sense of belonging to these categories and the way in which this belonging is used by individuals who define who they are.

A first essential aspect of my understanding of identity takes the lead from Brubaker and Cooper's distinction between 'commonality', 'the sharing of some common attribute', 'connectedness', 'the relational ties that link people' and 'groupness', 'the sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded, solidary or group' (2000: 20). According to them, 'commonality' is a necessary prerequisite for 'groupness', whereas 'connectedness' is not. Another element they consider to be an essential prerequisite is the presence of a feeling of belonging together, which depends on the degrees of commonality and connectedness, but also on other factors such as events, narratives and discursive frames (2000: 20).

The way in which a sense of belonging at the basis of a sense of groupness is formed is usefully clarified by Wenger (1998) through the distinction between three 'modes of belonging': engagement, imagination and alignment. Wenger (1998) defines engagement as a mode of belonging, and therefore a source of identity, consisting in the direct participation in social practices and in the constant negotiation of their meaning among their practitioners. Imagination, a concept he derived from Anderson (1991), consists in 'creating images of the world and seeing connections through time and space by extrapolating from our own experience' (1998: 173). Similarly to what was described by Anderson (1991), imagination can provide identity by enabling individuals to feel they belong to an 'imagined community' of people sharing some common characteristics or practices, even without being involved in the joint development of a shared practice (Wenger, 1998: 181-83).

Alignment is a mode of belonging involving 'bridg[ing] time and space to form broader enterprises so that participants become connected through the coordination of their energies, actions and practices' (1998: 178-79). The main characteristic that differentiates alignment from imagination is that it entails a coordination of action, which constitutes its primary *raison d'être*. Examples of alignment provided by Wenger include institutions, religions, political and social movements, but also fashions, artistic genres and educational standards (Wenger, 1998: 181). The theorisation proposed by Wenger (1998) is useful in distinguishing between ways in which the sense of belonging to a group - a 'community' as Wenger and Anderson (1991) call it - is formed and sustained. Both the nation and the ethnic group can be considered, according to this typology, as communities of imagination but also, when they become the basis for any corporate form of action, as communities of alignment. The communities based on engagement, on the other hand, are entities of a smaller scale characterised by direct interaction between their members. As I will describe in chapter 5, I consider the residents of the village in which I carried out my fieldwork to be, in certain respects, such a form of community.

While Wenger does not consider any form of hierarchy between these modes of belonging, I follow Vered Amit (2002) in considering communities as being conceptualised primarily in terms of what is held in common among their members, rather than as oppositional categories distinguishing between insiders and outsiders, and as being constituted through the shared experience of participation in particular association and events. Amit argues that, even in the case of ascribed categorical identities, conceptualised as being anterior to actual social relationships that might be attributed to them, and it is actual relationships of intimacy that give them consistency (2002: 60). In a similar vein, Anthony Cohen argued that 'it is the level nearer to the experience of the individual [...] that most

commonly provides referents to one's identity and that do 'most of the work of identity'' (1996: 804).

Another essential aspect of identity brought to the fore by Cohen (1994, 1996) is the relationship between collective forms of identification such as the nation and the individual. While I agree with Cohen (1996) that the nation can be viable as a source of identity only if it gives individuals a reference that makes sense to their experience, that does not imply subscribing to his conclusion that nationalism or ethnicity can work only as an expression of self-identity. Instead, this thesis follows Jenkins's idea that 'any social identity [...] must mean something to individuals before it can be said to 'exist' in the social world' (2008: 166), and that ethnicity is at the same time collective and individual, 'externalized in social interaction and the categorization of others, and internalized in personal self-identification' (2008: 14). In agreement with Wenger, I think the concept of identity can be used 'to focus on the person without assuming the individual self as a point of departure' (1998: 145), taking a perspective that is neither individualistic nor societal but uses the concept of identity 'as a pivot between the social and the individual, so that each can be talked about in terms of the other' (1998: 145). This point is further clarified by considering identity as an experience of meaning, a process that involves language, but is not limited to it, and involves social relations even when there is no direct interaction. This process involves, according to Wenger (1998), 'participation', taking part with others in a community of practice through active involvement, and 'reification', 'the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into "thinginess"' (1998: 58). The term is used by Wenger also to refer to the product of such process as, he argues, the process and the product are the same in terms of meaning (1998: 60).

Identity formation, considered as an experience of meaning, involves the process of identification, defined by Wenger as 'providing material for building identities through an investment of the self in relations of association and differentiation' (1998: 188) and 'negotiability', 'the ability, facility, and legitimacy to contribute to, take responsibility for, and shape the meanings that matter in a social configuration' (1998: 197). Identification consists of both a process of reification, of 'identifying as' (self-ascription) and 'being identified as' (ascription by others) someone, and one of participation, of 'identifying with' something or someone, by 'developing an association whose experience is constitutive of whom we are' (1998: 191). Wenger's (1998) notion of identification largely overlaps with those of 'self-identification' and 'social categorization' brought forward by Jenkins (2008), the former corresponding to the 'identifying with' a reified category and the participatory 'identifying with', and the second with the reified 'being identified as' and 'identifying others as'.

Negotiability, on the other hand, is shaped by relations of 'ownership of meaning', a social process in which individuals appropriate their identity by giving it a meaning that becomes part of who they are (1998: 201). Ownership of meaning is defined within the broader structure of what Wenger calls 'economies of meaning', the system determining the relative value of specific meanings within which they struggle for the power to define events, actions or artefacts (1998: 198-200). Identification and negotiability are in a state of tension, which can take the form of a struggle for the ownership of meaning within a common form of identification, or, on the opposite, that of identification in a group constraining the negotiability of meanings by imposing some 'orthodox' ones. These considerations led Wenger to consider the issue of relationship

between identity and power, arguing that power has a dual structure that reflects the interplay

between identification and negotiability', as it 'derives from belonging as well as from exercising control over what we belong to' (1998: 207). The concept of negotiability can be paralleled with the dynamics of social categorisation, and their implication with relationships of power and authority in specific contexts, considered by Jenkins (2008)..

Following the emphasis on the importance of an explicit understanding of the role of discourse in producing and maintaining broader social relations, especially ones of inequality remarked upon various critiques of Wenger's (1998) approach (e.g. Barton and Hamilton, 2005; Barton and Tusting, 2005; Tusting, 2005), and the consideration of the importance of power relationships in social categorisation brought forward by Jenkins (2008), this thesis proposes an in-depth analysis of the broader context of the relationships of power and the discourses sustaining them. Such an analysis is possible only through a historical understanding of the processes through which these relationships of power have come into being and the discourses sustaining them have been generated and circulated. Such an approach is in line with the constructivist position of authors (e.g. Barnard, 2004; Benjamin and Chou, 2003; Kahn, 1993, 1998, 2006; Lan, 1998; Reid, 2001; Schrauer, 1998) which Chua defines as locating ethnicity in the process by which fixed entities like 'identity' and 'culture' are created within state, popular and even earlier anthropological discourses (2007: 262-63). This approach is well exemplified by Kahn, who declares his approach as focussing on clarifying how subjectivities in the particular case examined are constituted by specific sets of cultural practices and through which social and historical processes these practices have been generated (1998: 17). The understanding of the constructed character of notions such as those of the nation, however, should not obscure that of the effects of such ideas and discourses in the real world (see Kahn, 1993; Banks, 1996).

My approach to identity therefore consists in looking at the way Kadazan individuals identify themselves as Kadazan, Malaysian, Sabahan or members of their village, and how they negotiate the meaning of such belonging within the relationships of power and the dominant discourses, such as those of nation-building and ethnicity, shaping the Malaysian 'economy of meaning'. The next section considers such relationships of power in terms of the relationship between the Malaysian state and the indigenous peoples of Borneo, looking at the way in which the nation-building agenda carried out by the government determined various forms of resistance to what is perceived as a treatment as second-class members of the nation. The Malaysian state and the indigenous peoples of Borneo

Talking about the specific case of Malaysia, characterised by a multi-ethnic population, Judith Nagata (1979) described four possible strategies the government could have used to create a national identity: assimilation to Malayness, the culture of the majority; the creation of a hybrid Malaysian culture comprising elements deriving from different ethnic groups; a pluralistic arrangement in which the main communities retain their cultural distinctiveness or assimilation to a 'neutral' Westernised culture transcending ethnic identities. According to her, the first approach was followed in the emphasis on Malay as the national language and Islam as the national tradition, as well as on the choice of other elements such as the sultan as head of state, the national anthem and the Malay kite chosen as the symbol of the national airline. The second was followed in the presentation of a generalised Malaysian culture, in terms of history, cuisine, costume, music and dance, particularly in tourism promotion, and the fourth in the development and modernisation discourse, especially evident in the Westernisation of the political, bureaucratic and business elites. She concluded that the pluralist model was the prevalent one in the

government agenda, and therefore that Malaysian society was still to be understood in terms of interrelationships between ethnicity, class, status and power (Nagata, 1979: 219 ff.).

The pluralist arrangement favoured by Malaysian nation-builders is aptly put into relief by the comparison with neighbouring Indonesia made by Case (2000), who argues that while the latter, being constituted by an even more complex variety of ethnic and religious groups, insisted on the ethnic or racial commonality of all its citizens, forming an Indonesian race; in the former nationalism remained quite 'equivocal' (Tarling, 1998, cited in Case, 2000: 132), being weakened by 'important continuities between indigenous elites and the colonial power, as well as sharp divisions between indigenous and migrant communities' (Case, 2000: 132).

The equivocal status of Malaysian nationalism, and the conflict between the different nation-building strategies, are well exemplified by the position taken by the then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad in his book published in 1970, *The Malay Dilemma*, strongly supporting the idea of the Malays as the 'definitive people' of Malaysia, therefore claiming their status as ethnic core of the state and apparently moving towards an ethnic form of nationalism based on the primacy of the majority ethnic group.. In the mid-1990s, Mahathir shifted decidedly towards civic nationalism, declaring the goal of creating a *bangsa Malaysia*, a 'Malaysian nation', as part of the development master-plan *Wawasan 2020* [2], an aspiration that, however, at present seems still to be little more than wishful thinking.

All the various strategies to create a sense of nationhood described by Nagata (1979) have been applied to indigenous peoples of Malaysian Borneo in various ways. The state generally allows them to retain some elements of their tradition and identity, as long as these are not perceived as being dangerous for national unity, while some of these have even been incorporated into a hybridised Malaysian culture, particularly with the aim of using them for tourism promotion. The two most applied approaches, however, have been the assimilation to a 'neutral' Westernised culture transcending ethnic identities and assimilation to Malayness. The former is mostly associated with a modernist ideology, expressed in two main connected discourses, that of development and that of national unity, which constitute two faces of the same coin of the nation-building agenda and that have often been used by the government to justify its interventions on the life of indigenous peoples, generally represented by propaganda as backwards and in need to change their 'mindset'. The latter (which has been particularly on the agenda in the 1970s, see chapter 3) is source of much ambiguity, primarily because of the way it is intertwined with the legal status of indigenous peoples of Malaysian Borneo, recognised by the constitution (in its post-1969 revised version) as *bumiputera* (M. 'sons of the soil'), a category that distinguishes between citizens indigenous to Malaysia and non-indigenous, such as Chinese or Indians, and that bestows special privileges on the former. As *bumiputera* they have often been conceptually assimilated to the majority of the members of the class, the Malays, an assimilation that has been at times given as implicit and natural and at times forced upon them in a much stronger way than has been the case with non-indigenous peoples.

Rosaldo (2003) argues that, by trying to draw minority groups into nation-building projects driven by ideas of development, modernity, assimilation and nationalism, metropolitan centres ask members of minority groups to stop being what they are and transform into citizens. The hinterland minorities, on their part, struggle 'to be treated with what they define as respect', a struggle that often takes the form of 'cultural citizenship', expressed in claims they make as citizens 'against the state' in terms of formal rights and in terms of recognition as 'full members' against a second-class position (Rosaldo, 2003: 1-3). The relationship between the

state and minorities involves differences of power and of perception of one another, as well as conflicts between different projects and cultural conceptions. On the basis of this, Rosaldo proposes an argument that fractures the unity of nationalism presupposed by both classical theorists such as Gellner (1983) and Anderson (1991) and nationalist rhetoric, considering nationalism as 'an ideology that simultaneously includes and excludes by defining certain people as full members and others along a spectrum ranging from second-class citizens to non-members' (2003: 6). Considering the relationship between the indigenous peoples of Borneo and the states of which they are citizens (Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei), Winzeler (1997a) stressed the similarity, and sometimes continuity, between the treatment of the colonised peoples by the European rulers and that of ethnic minorities and marginal areas by developing states through the concept of 'fourth world colonialism' or 'internal colonialism'. However, he remarked that while European colonialists limited themselves to pacification and administration, postcolonial governments go much further in their efforts at transforming the indigenous peoples by imposing on them a national culture, religion and language and attempting to eradicate traditional beliefs, customs, lifestyles and modes of adaptation that are seen as backward or savage. Moreover, they regard the interests of indigenous peoples as secondary or null in regards to the use of the natural resources that are present within their region and which are regarded as necessary for the overall development of the country. The impositions made on them by the state, Winzeler (1997a) argued, provoke diverse and often ambiguous reactions by the indigenous peoples, involving dependency and acceptance but also hostility and resistance. Despite the fact that it usually does not challenge the developmentalist paradigm, resistance derives from the perception of being exploited and of the fact that, despite the proposition of the government propaganda, it is very hard for indigenous peoples to reach the level of wealth and development enjoyed by the dominant groups of their polity.

The struggle between the state and indigenous minorities takes place primarily in relation to matters of religion and culture (Winzeler, 1997a) and language (Postill, 2006), and at different levels, including state-level institutions such as the school and the media (Rosaldo, 2003; Postill, 2006), but also local-level ones such as, for example, ritual speech and village celebrations (Rosaldo, 2003; Postill, 2006). A phenomenon that has constituted an integral part of relationship with the state on the part of the indigenous peoples of Borneo is the 'rediscovering' of their indigenous culture and identity (Winzeler, 1997a, 1997b; Wah, 1992; see chapter 3), a process that involved what Wagner (1981) called the 'objectification' of culture, a process of making previously implicit practices explicit as 'custom'.

Describing its usage in Sarawak, Boulanger, concludes that ethnicity can be considered as a form of resistance to modernity as it 'defies the logic of capital, withholds value from the market, repersonalises exchange and respects subsistence' (2002: 231). Because of this character, Boulanger (2002) argues, ethnicity is generally depicted as a backward, subversive idea by modern capitalist regimes, who attempt to reduce it to a 'guided culture', consisting of superficial elements such as costume and cuisine, to be evident only during events. As a response to the unavoidable calls, linked to the national agenda, to change their 'mindset' to adapt to the 'New Reality', indigenous peoples are constructing 'versions of ethnicity that give them a degree of control, however minimal, over the process of being overrun' (2002: 231).

Chua describes the 'irksome mutterings and anti-Malay/Muslim sentiments' which constitute the common attitude of the Bidayuh of Sarawak to the Malaysian state as a form of 'low-level resistance' (2007: 275). She

concludes, however, that 'it would be injudicious to overstate the reactive character of Bidayuh (dis)engagements with this world', and that talking of it as resistance 'reifies 'the local' as the only plausible option of dealing with the situation' (2007: 275). As an alternative approach, she considers the way in which some Bidayuh deal with one of the aspects imposed by the Malaysian state, ethnic fixity, not by resisting it but by 'harnessing the fixed, moden [M. modern] categories with which they have initially been presented' (2007: 275).

As put into relief by the works of the authors I have considered, identity politics, and more precisely the definition of indigenous groups' identity in relation to national identity, is an essential locus of the relationship between the two.

[1] A search of the encyclopaedias of anthropology found in the Loughborough University Library (Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology, eds. Levinson and Ember, 1996; Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology, eds. Barnard and Spencer, 2002; The Dictionary of Anthropology, ed. Barfield, 1997) was unfruitful in finding a definition of the term

[2] 'Vision 2020', a project elaborated by the previous Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, which aims at making Malaysia a fully developed country by that year, and which puts the emphasis on Malaysian nationalism and Islam. By calling for the development of a 'Malaysian race working in full and equal partnership', it implies the subordination of ethnic identity within a national Malaysian identity or 'race' (bangsa Malaysia), which asks citizens to see themselves as Malaysians before anything else.

fausto barlocco [fbarlocco at yahoo.it](mailto:fbarlocco@yahoo.it)

Sat Sep 19 09:10:42 PDT 2009

First of all I would like to answer to John's clarifications, which I realised I hadn't done yet.

1. Yes, I think we could speak of a 'field of Sabahan politics' with a degree of autonomy changing with time (for example I think since the coming of UMNO in State politics in the early 1990s this has decreased).
2. The key political agents in Sabah are: political parties (the Malay UMNO, the Kadazan-led PBS, PBRS and another couple of small ones, all part of the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional; the opposition parties Keadilan (Malay-ruled at the national level but led by a prominent and loved Kadazan veteran in Sabah), DAP (mostly Chinese-led) and Pasok Momogun (Kadazan-led)); the Kadazandusun Cultural Association (KDCA); the Malaysian Consumers' Association (CASH); a couple of Kadazan NGOs (PACOS and another).

Going to Daniel, thanks for your useful theoretical clarifications and for the critical edge of your suggestions.

I agree that there definitely are connections between 'associational life' and how people identify in discussions - in general and in the specific case of Kadazan villagers. I would say (now I am not so sure about it anymore..) I have presented some of these connections in this paper, at least to a certain extent, however less so than in other chapters of my thesis. This might be due that in this paper I have followed more a text-comments upon it format and I privileged the discussion about whether or not (in specific cases) a Malaysian culture has come to exist and whether the nation has been built for the Kadazan. The previous chapter, the one that used the community of practice approach, was, as Daniel's points would predict, more concerned with the way in which assumptions and ways of

seeing the world 'crop up from associational life' into 'commentaries'. By the way, thanks for the explanation of the concept - and to Hobart for elaborating it.

Again, I think that, at least to a certain extent, what I have done is exactly to show the commentaries (even if I did not call them so) of Kadazan villagers, in this case those triggered by media consumption and mostly away from the influence of 'official', elite commentators (apart obviously from the media producers). While saying that "Media are the main means of nation-building in Malaysia" might involve a reification, I think it is not always necessary - and auspicious - to consider all the practices forming the 'idealised' and 'reified' media, especially if we are talking historically and considering a span of 50 years. A reification is allowed in my view if the objective is to look at macro processes and results over time. The macro can then be, in true anthropological spirit, be 'filled up' or 'illuminated' by in-depth micro analyses, as I tried to do in this paper. Starting from the 'other side' and looking at the way in which the media crop up in people's practices and commentaries seems like a very good approach for the task, I agree with Daniel.

Finally, a clarification: the 'community of practice' I am considering is not 'activist' in any way, and its main goal, the way I see it, is just to make the life of its members more satisfying and pleasurable, as it is a 'leisure time' community of practice, very different from those of activists or professionals you might think of.

I would also like to answer to Piero's empirical question, which is as important and interesting as more theoretical or philosophical debates. My statement that 'AF is a particularly Malaysian phenomenon' was obviously ambiguous considering that it is an adaptation of a global format. What I meant is that, despite being an adaptation of a global format, AF is Malaysian in the way in which it is adapted to Malaysia, as for a text that is translated: the aesthetics, the choice of songs and characters, the presenter, the language used, and many other elements make it uniquely Malaysian. AF is, as all the media in Postill's (2006) formulation, means of a 'double Westernisation': culture is exported from the global West to West Malaysia (the Peninsula) and from there to East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). This particular version of this 'modular' global format is made by Malaysians for Malaysians and following the tastes of Malaysians. The 'ethnicist' reading is also in tune with the extreme ethnicisation of any public discourse and interaction in Malaysia (the first thing anybody would ask of anybody would be 'what is his/her race?'), but I am not sure whether in the specific case of comments on AF is limited to the Kadazan (who feel in some way excluded and want to take the occasion to show what they are worth) or is common among other Malaysians (i.e. Malay, Chinese). 'Kadazan seem to have a rather sophisticated knowledge of international TV, do they have any acquaintance of other game shows broadcast from non Malay TV stations?'

Not that I know, as far as I know it isn't viewed on the backdrop of its global circulation as a format. Hope this clarifies your doubts.

That's all for now, have a good weekend,
Best,

Fausto

Julian Hopkins [j at julianhopkins.net](mailto:j@julianhopkins.net)
Mon Sep 21 18:48:12 PDT 2009

Relating to this discussion, I came across a relevant article in the newspaper recently and I thought it may interest some on this list. It's an article from an English language Sunday newspaper (Sunday Star): entitled "A fine example of religious tolerance", it's an example based in East Malaysia, and it's a fine example of depoliticised official 'muhibbah' discourse :)

I'm linking to a scan rather than sending an attachment:

http://julianhopkins.net/uploads/SundayStar090920_FineExampleReligiousTolerance.jpg

Cheers,
Julian

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Sun Sep 20 02:48:33 PDT 2009

Dear all,

Please, find attached the Introduction to Barlocco's dissertation.

All the best, Sigurjon

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Tue Sep 22 02:01:25 PDT 2009

Dear all,

The e-seminar is now closed!

I want to thank Fausto Barlocco for submitting his paper, our discussant Arvind Rajagopal and members of the list who shared their interesting thoughts, comments and criticism.

Transcript of the seminar will be available on our web site within few days.

Our next e-seminar is scheduled in the beginning of November. Then, we'll discuss Dr. Sudha Rajagopalan paper "Not just spooky: the collaborative aesthetics of Supernatural fandom on Runet."

All the best, Sigurjon.