

Media and belonging to the nation in Sabah, East Malaysia

Dr. Fausto Barlocco

**Paper presented to the EASA Media Anthropology e-Seminar,
8-22 September 2009**

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

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.

The Kadazan of the Penampang district of the Malaysian State of Sabah, located on the island of Borneo, are a sub-section of a larger ethnic grouping, which constitutes the largest indigenous group of the State, variously referred to as Kadazandusun (KD), Dusun, Kadazan and Dusunic peoples¹. In the 1950s the Kadazan of Penampang, and in particular an urbanised, mission-educated native elite defined 'Kadazan intelligentsia' by Roff (1969), were at the forefront of a process of creation of a modern 'Kadazan' culture, based on a process of 'objectification', the transforming implicit customs into a conscious and explicitly defined set of 'traditions' (see Winzeler, 1997: 202). These elements of rural Kadazan culture were selected by the 'intelligentsia', elaborated and spread them through the emerging new mass media, primarily radio and newspapers, and through the efforts of an association, the Society of the Kadazan. This process went hand-in-hand with the generation of a sense of unity among the Dusunic peoples, who previously were deeply divided by differences in dialect and traditional customs and that had only a vague sense of belonging to an ethnic and cultural unit beyond the level of local river-based groups. These developments created the circumstances for indigenous peoples of Sabah to imagine themselves as members of a single community, the Kadazan, sharing a common culture but also similar life experiences. The formation of a Kadazan culture was closely associated with a political movement, termed 'Kadazan nationalism' by Roff (1969), which aimed at obtaining a greater recognition for Kadazan interests within the colonial state of British North Borneo and, once it became clear that the British were about to grant independence, to mobilise and unite the Dusunic people to prepare for self-rule.

While it is likely that the members of the 'Kadazan intelligentsia' envisaged the prospect of leading a majority within an independent, multi-ethnic Sabah, soon the situation changed with the constitution of Malaysia in 1963, and the Dusunic peoples found themselves to be an ethnic minority with a small demographic weight². Upon its formation, the Malaysian government was faced with the task of 'building a nation' (see Postill, 2006) out of a 'hasty amalgam of Malaya, Singapore and the Bornean regions of Sabah and Sarawak' engineered by Britain (Anderson, 1998). In Sabah - like in Sarawak (see Postill, 2006) - the nation-building agenda entered in conflict with the previous development of the modern indigenous culture and identity, and the State and Federal governments have invested their efforts in acquiring the control of the educational system and of the main mass media - radio and later television - closing all but a few minor avenues for the expression and development of the culture and languages of the Dusunic peoples. These nation-building efforts have mostly resulted in policies promoting cultural, linguistic and religious homogenisation with the Malay Muslim majority, sometimes explicit like the imposition of Malay language and the forced conversion to Islam of the Mustapha government of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and sometimes in a more veiled extension of the control of the Malay-dominated federal government (Loh, 1992; Luping, 1994; Reid, 1997).

Looking at Malaysia today, I agree with Postill that the nation-building efforts of the government have been rewarded as the country can be considered an 'integrated system of cultural institutions and practices'

¹ In order to avoid the political implications of the various labels (see Reid, 1997) and their problematic ethnographic status I have chosen to refer to the larger group by the term 'Dusunic peoples', deriving from the fact that the great majority of them speak closely related languages belonging to the Dusunic family (see Barlocco, n.d.)

² They constitute about 2% of the total Malaysian population.

(2006: 15), or what he defines a 'thick culture area' (2006: 14-17). The case study through which he reached these conclusions, the Iban of the other East Malaysian State, Sarawak, appeared to have become deeply 'Malaysianised' by the 1990s despite being a minority ethnic group living about 2000 kilometres away from Kuala Lumpur. Postill attributes this success of the 'Malaysianising' agenda to the way in which the government has used the media, and primarily of those he calls the 'foundational media forms' of 'state propaganda, writing (literacy), television and clock-and-calendar time' (2006: 3).

This paper³ looks at the importance of the media in regards to what appears to be a neglected aspect of many researches dealing with nation-building, identity, by looking at the way in which Kadazan villagers situate themselves in relation to the discourses spread by the media and how their responses to them takes the form of an identification with the nation or with other, alternative collective forms of identification. These forms of collective identification, corresponding to a sense of belonging to the ethnic group and the sub-national level, show an enduring strength that, apparently being at odds with the success of the Malaysian nation-building, remind of Geertz's (1973 [1963]) 'primordial sentiments' of attachment to language, culture, religion and blood of the population of post-colonial states.

The approach of this paper follows the one used by Mirca Madianou in her study of reception of television news in Greece (2005), taking identity at the centre of her research project, and 'follow [ing] the circulation of meaning in the context of discourses and practices about the nation and belonging' (2005: 51), focusing on media and consumption in the context of everyday life. Finding no causal correlation between media and identity, a conclusion confirmed by my empirical findings - as will be evident from the reading of this paper - Madianou (2005) 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.

This approach is an attempt to solve the apparent inadequacy of positions that assume a priori either the power of media to influence culture and identities (e.g. McLuhan, 1964; Dayan and Katz, 1992; Morley and Brundson, 1999) or that of culture to influence media consumption and interpretation (e.g. Caldarola, 1990; Liebes and Katz, 1993), and is in line with that of media anthropologists such as Mankekar (1999), Peterson (2003) and of the contributors to two seminal media anthropology readers (Askew and Wilk, 2002; Ginsburg *et al.*, 2002).

The discussion of the relationship between the media and the positioning in collective forms of identification provided by this paper starts with an analysis of one of the main 'foundational media forms' considered by Postill (2006), state propaganda. Starting from Doolittle's (2005) description of the responses of Sabahan villagers, showing some important forms of resistance to the penetration of the ideas and practices promoted by government propaganda, I partly question its success in the case of Sabah. The paper then follows with the analysis of another essential medium, television, expanding on Postill's (2006) discussion of the form of resistance, which he considered as ineffectual, inherent to the rejection of Malay

³ This paper is taken from the fourth chapter of my doctoral thesis, submitted in 2008 at Loughborough University, made possible by contributions from the University's Social Sciences Department and the Radcliffe-Brown Fund as well as by the help of my supervisors Sarah Pink and John Postill and many others. The paper is based on a period of 12 months fieldwork in Penampang, during which I combined ethnographic methods with interviewing and the collection of secondary sources.

soaps by the Iban. The section is complemented by a case study analysing the reactions to a very popular Malaysian programme broadcast by satellite television, *Akademi Fantasia*, and highlighting the way in which Kadazan viewers identify themselves as a different group within the national imagined community and how this position is connected to the perception of exclusion and second-class status described by authors such as Winzeler (1997), Boulanger (2000; 2002) and Rosaldo (2003). The following section provides three case studies of the readings made by the Kadazan of three news items published by the newspapers, showing the coexistence of dominant, essentialist readings and of another essentialist oppositional discourse of belonging to an oppressed Kadazan and Christian, imagined community. Finally, the paper ends with the consideration of an example of the development of a new sensitivity connected with the exposure to different ways of life afforded by the 'glimpse into other worlds' (Thompson, 1995) provided by foreign, transnational media forms.

Theoretical approaches to media, identity and the nation

Madianou: the news and discourses of belonging

In her analysis of the mediation process, Madianou (2005) concentrates on the way in which audiences react to the discourses presented by the media and the way in which they stimulate discourses of identity. Starting from previous works on audiences, she elaborates a set of categories for defining the readings made, distinguishing between critical and non critical readings of the news in relation to both the news form and its conventions and to its content. She further divides the readings critical of news content between those accepting the 'dominant, official discourse about the nation and its 'culture'' (2005: 102), which, following Hall (1980) she calls 'dominant' decodings, and those contesting these dominant decodings. Madianou defines these readings as 'demotic', taking the term from Baumann (1996, cited in Madianou, 2005: 25), who used it to refer to the discourses challenging reifications of culture and identity he found in the multicultural London area of Southall. Madianou (2005) also classifies as 'contextual' those decodings that interpret the news through a knowledge of the context in which they are placed, 'historical' those that interpret the news in the light of knowledge of previous events and 'analytic' those in which audiences 'attempt to read through the events and provide reasons for their presentation – or not – in the news' (2005: 102-103). Madianou (2005) also considers the essential interaction between the news content and personal experience of the viewers, determining shifts from news to context in which identity discourses and experiences are articulated in an essential way.

Madianou (2005) concludes her analysis of television news' reception in Greece by arguing that the news provides a common point of reference for the majority of those watching, circulating constantly in people's everyday lives and therefore emerging beyond their informational dimension to become a wider socio-cultural phenomenon (2005: 134). Moreover, she argues that the news broadcasts, through their essentialist

discourse based on an 'us and them' dichotomy, contribute in certain cases to the shift from an open to a closed discourse identifying the nation as a culturally and ethnically homogeneous group, therefore excluding minorities and obliterating internal differences. That is especially the case in relationship to international issues in which people feel the need to defend their identity by essentialising it and to mute any internal dissent in order to present a united image of the nation outside its boundaries.

Foster: nation making through media and consumption

Robert Foster (2002) brings forward the notion of nation making to refer to the role played in 'materializing the nation' by non-state agents such as commercial media and consumer culture. His stress on the importance of mass-mediated commercial culture is derived from the specific case he studies, Papua New Guinea (PNG), a 'weak' postcolonial polity in which, he argues, the nation has nevertheless come into existence, often not through state intervention, and in certain cases even against the state, as in the case of discourses about corruption in which citizens thought of themselves as members of the nation betrayed by the state apparatus. Following Anderson (1991), Foster considers the nation as a modular entity, replicated around the world on the basis of 19th century models. He argues that his study of PNG offers comparative material useful to understand the adaptation of the nation to different historical and geographical conditions and to clarify some universal characteristics of the nation, such as the ideological and ontological similarities and connection between the nation and consumerism. He therefore considers advertisements as particularly important in creating the sense that commodities sold at the national level are embodiments and possessions of 'the nation', as well as a vehicle for imagining a community of consumers - a situation that, however, applies mostly to members of an 'emergent urban consumer culture' - 'whose shared consumption practices and ideals put them in experiential unison with each other' (2002: 64).

While I agree with Postill (2006) that the Malaysian state seems much more powerful and more in control of the 'materializing of the nation' than in Papua New Guinea (PNG), I think Foster's insight can give us clues to one of the ways in which a national frame of reference for identity materialises through everyday consumption practices. The availability of the same products, the wide circulation of discourses dealing with their economic, social or health value, the common understanding of notions of distinction connected to the consumption of different commodities, and the exposure to the same media messages promoting the values inherent to such commodities are all experiences shared by the great majority of the citizens of a country, constituting banal, but nevertheless significant, presences.

Thompson: self and experience in a mediated world

Thompson argues that, as the self is a 'symbolic project that the individual actively constructs [...] out of the symbolic materials [...] available [...] which the individual weaves into [...] a narrative of self-identity' (1995: 210), this process of self-formation becomes increasingly dependant on mediated symbolic materials in modernity. Two of the effects of such increased importance of media in the 'reflexive organization of the self' discussed by Thompson are of particular relevance here: the 'mediated intrusion of ideological messages' and the 'double-bind of mediated dependency' (1995: 212-13). By the former he refers to the instrumentality of the media in creating 'the conditions for the intrusion of ideological messages into the context of everyday life', a process given in-depth consideration by Postill (2006). However, Thompson has a contextual approach to ideology, arguing that whether mediated messages are ideological depends on the way in which they are received by individuals and incorporated reflexively in their lives, becoming part of their projects of self-formation. The second effect of the increased 'mediation of culture' considered by Thompson is that the more mediated symbolic forms are used in the process of self-formation, the more the self becomes dependent on media systems behind its control. This double-bind goes beyond the realm of the media, including the educational, labour and welfare systems, with which individuals become increasingly involved yet which they are mostly unable to influence (1995: 214-15).

Another essential effect of the media considered by Thompson is the possibility they provide to experience events that would otherwise not be experienced, either because they occur in a different place or time, or because they have become 'sequestered' from everyday life, as in the case of crime or mental insanity, therefore detaching experience from direct encounter. Thompson therefore distinguishes between lived experience - which is situated, continuous and, to some extent, pre-reflexive - and mediated experience. The two have a different 'relevance structure', a term Thompson, following Husserl (1970, cited in Thompson, 1995: 229) and Schutz (1974, cited in Thompson, 1995: 229), uses to refer to the relevance of experiences for individuals on the basis of the priorities determined by their project of the self. While lived experience has a direct and unavoidable relevance, the relevance of mediated experience is much more variable, having a 'rather tenuous, intermittent and selective relation to the self' (1995: 230). The relevance of this form of experience varies between individuals and between situations; individuals, according to Thompson, tend to integrate mediated experiences more in their daily schedules the more relevant they are perceived to be to the self (1995: 230-231).

Summing up

This section has introduced the main theoretical approaches I am following in the analysis of the relationship between the media and the identification with collective forms of belonging among the Kadazan. Starting from Postill (2006) my discussion sets itself to investigate the effects of the formation of a 'thick' national culture in Malaysia, both through the efforts of state-led nation-building and through the establishment of local configurations of consumerism (Foster, 2002), on the way in which the Kadazan identify themselves. The first part of the analysis, following Madianou's (2005) conclusion that there is no direct connection between the media and identity, examines the way in which the readings of the news made by my informants show a complex engagement with discourses about the nation, often involving shifts to closed discourses which at times correspond to a sense of belonging to the nation but often situate individuals within oppositional categories that are, nevertheless, equally essentialist. The nation, however, appears often as an essential frame of reference (Foster, 2002; Madianou, 2005). Moreover, following Thompson (1995) I consider the symbolic material provided by the media to be used by individuals to create self-narratives that encompass the various frames of reference and discourses by combining lived and mediated experience in a whole that has a form of coherence despite the disparate experiential material used to construct it and its seemingly incoherent applications.

The next section deals directly with one of the 'foundational media forms' through which Postill argues the Malaysian nation has been built, development propaganda, which consists of both discursive and non-discursive elements and which clarifies the political context influencing Kadazan reactions to the media.

'Sustainable propaganda'

Postill stresses the use of development made by the state as a tool for nation-building by considering it, following Ramakrishna (2002, cited in Postill, 2006: 89-90), as a non-discursive form of propaganda putting into practice the words of the discursive part. He uses the term 'sustainable propaganda' to refer to the fact that government propaganda on security, development and national integration presents itself, according to him, as a form of sustainable development (2006: 89).

He argues that the propaganda coming from the political and cultural centres has rapidly reached even remote areas, where it has become integrated with local ideals, giving birth to what he calls an 'ideolect', a sort of ideological dialect of Malaysia's nationalist ideology, and shaped the people's worldview to such an extent that it has become hardly distinguishable from the views of people from all backgrounds. Postill found a striking similarity between the ideolects of Iban of different areas of Sarawak, which seems to stand in contrast to the quite marked differences in media practices among different Iban localities (2006: 91-93).

In his analysis of the ideolect of the Saribas area of Sarawak, he singles out two primary loci in which state propaganda has effectively shaped the local ideology: the school and the longhouse. The former is the site in which the moral order of children is most explicitly and repeatedly articulated through media practices. Essays and coursework are analysed by the author as the best way into the children's moral order,

and as giving insights into the way hegemonic ideology is internalised by them. Some discourses, such as the preference of many boys for becoming policemen and girls to become teachers, are highly prevalent, as they are supported by a number of entwined social formations, agents and media. Postill (2006) explains this phenomenon arguing that the school experience of the almost totality of the Iban children he encountered in his research elicited only what Rorty (1991, cited in Postill, 2006: 101) called ‘paradigms of inference’, which tend to confirm existing beliefs and encompass a minimal degree of transformation when new knowledge is acquired. At the level of the longhouse, the traditional form of oratory has dramatically declined and, when public speeches are often given through public-address system, the speakers are generally caught between the knowledge associated with literacy and Malaysia and the local and oral Iban one, without being able to bridge the gap between the two (2006: 93-105).

Postill (2006) attributes the success of the state’s sustainable propaganda in shaping the local idiolect to its strong resonance with traditional values, such as the respect for the elders, and to its apparent effectiveness, as deed actually follows word, and messages have usually proved to be right, as in the case of education, which really gives better opportunities of employment and career. The reality of the state’s propaganda derives also, to an important extent, from the Iban’s lack of access to any alternative source of information, such as non-government media, which might challenge these representations. The problem, however, goes beyond accessibility, as most rural Iban, according to Postill, do not have the habit of considering or discussing interpretations of events alternative to that provided by the government.

Sabah: a failure of ‘sustainable propaganda’?

Similarly to Postill, Doolittle (2005) argues that development is used in Sabah as ‘a central strategy for building a modern nation in which Federal ideologies are integrated into local life’ (2005: 1), and for increasing the political, economic and cultural domination of the Malay-Muslim central and local ruling elites. Rather than, as officially declared, alleviating the lower strata’s poverty, development practices, according to Doolittle legitimise the government and ‘facilitate the expansion and entrenchment of the ruling, national ideology at the local level’ (2005: 2). The development agenda, as expressed by the official literature of the *Gerakan Desa Wawasan* (‘Village Movement toward Vision’, GDW) - the rural development program which is part of the *Wawasan 2020*⁴ master plan - aims at transforming rural agriculture from subsistence-aimed to commercial, a transformation based on the ideology of ‘productive’, ‘orderly’ rural management and on ‘highly disciplined working habits’ (expressions quoted from official propaganda). The GDW official propaganda also has a strong Islamic colouring, calling for ‘spiritual awareness’ and for ‘spiritually uniting people with Allah’ (1996, cited in Doolittle, 2005: 8). _

Doolittle, however, concludes that development programmes in Sabah are ‘only partially successful at legitimizing state authority at the local level’ because of the resistance of rural populations, able to

⁴ ‘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.

demystify the ideology and refuse their support to the actualisation of the state agenda. In the case analysed by Doolittle (2005), the residents of Tempulong, a village in Sabah's interior, questioned and even rejected the development programme brought forward by the federal agencies and federal involvement in local affairs, not being convinced that it would bring benefits to themselves or to the village as a whole. Moreover, 'recognizing the political message behind the rhetoric of rural development, residents did not fully embrace UMNO [United Malays National Organisation, the main Malay Malaysian party and main component of the ruling coalition] ideology, the Islamic religion, or Malaysian nationalism as a result of GDW' (2005: 31). The villagers reacted in a mixed and confused way to the overall project: while the appeal of modernisation and development was strong to them, they contested many of the propagandistic elements. The reactions included laughing, mockery, contempt and statements showing a deep animosity toward the Malay Peninsula (*Semenanjung*), the federal government and its alleged taking over of Sabah government. This failure of propaganda was, however, not complete according to Doolittle, as a partial bureaucratic reach to the village was obtained by the federal agencies and their local UMNO ally strengthened his political base by being able to attract the development funds. The government acknowledged the failure of GDW projects in the majority of the villages, but, taking an attitude described also by Postill (2006) blamed the villagers' 'mindsets' for that.

The issue of development has a different significance in the Penampang plains than in other areas of Sabah such as the one considered by Doolittle (2005), as the area, being relatively developed and close to the State capital, Kota Kinabalu, is not an object of plans from the government. The idea of development, therefore, is not connected with rural plans, but with a more general idea of benefiting from education, employment, infrastructure and other services.

The inhabitants of the Penampang plains, as I will show throughout the paper, have a very critical stance towards the state and federal government and, similarly to the residents of Tempulong, identify development projects as instrumental in establishing Malay-Muslim control and in furthering a Malayisation agenda. As described by Doolittle for Tempulong (2005: 23), Penampang Kadazan from all backgrounds regard allegiance to UMNO as a betrayal of their ethnic identity, and openly acknowledge the use made of development to get votes for UMNO and for expanding the federal power. The marginal status of the Kadazan within Malaysia, in my view (see also Winzeler, 1997b, Rosaldo, 2003), explains the apparent lack of success of development propaganda and the rejection of Malay(sian) media -and not only- products (see below), without unwarrantedly 'elevating marginal viewers to interpretive parity with the intelligentsia'(cf. Postill, 2006: 9). Differently from the situation described by Doolittle in Tempulong in the mid-1990s, however, most Kadazan of Penampang in the mid-2000s share a lack of trust also in their own leaders and in previously cherished institutions such as the Kadazandusun Cultural Association (KDCA) and the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), the main Kadazan and Christian-led party.

In the next sections, after briefly describing the patterns of media consumption in Kitauu, the village in which I carried out my fieldwork, I provide a discussion of the way in which the village residents position themselves in relation to dominant discourses present in the media.

Media consumption in Kituau

Television is a very common medium, as all the households with electricity own at least a set. Satellite television has also become very popular since the setting up of the Malaysian provider ASTRO in 1996, with more than half (around 65%) of the households with television subscribing to it. Currently, the service provides 68 television, 17 radio, and 5 pay-per-view channels plus various interactive services. Many of the villagers also have a DVD player for watching DVDs or Video CDs, which they can buy at low price from street vendors and exchange with friends and relatives, though they most often watch television.

Television is the main form of evening entertainment for the majority of the villagers, and people generally tend to stay in the house watching it with members of their family. Some informants told me that when they had no television they would go to bed early or spend time chatting with their family and friends, a fact that bears many similarities with the shift of evening activities from the public area, the 'gallery', to the private apartments (*bilik*) in Iban longhouses (Postill, 2006: 19). While television is on most of the times in houses, very often people just keep it on as a background to their activities, and just get a glimpse of the images and the sounds being broadcast, as described by Bausinger (1984), that is especially the case for women preparing meals.

Excluding the illiterate minority, the majority of my informants considered the newspapers as their favourite source of news, arguing that they are more independent and reliable than television and radio. While both locally produced and national newspapers, coming from the Peninsula are available in Sabah, all of my informants and acquaintances always read Sabahan newspapers, choosing among one of the three, the *Daily Express*, *New Sabah Times* and *Borneo Post*, published in a tri-lingual - English, Malay and Kadazandusun - version. They justified their preference for Sabahan newspapers, and in particular for the *Daily Express*, considered the most independent, with their focus on events often not reported in the national media. A good knowledge of either English or Malay provides a full access to the news, while the Kadazandusun sections only consist of two pages, and therefore include only certain items, while they also have some unique contents, such as village news and letters or poems sent by readers. Retired men and those not working at the time also often meet at some coffee shop in the nearby town of Donggonggon, about 7 kilometres away, and discuss the news they have just read as well as local events which have happened to members of the family, friends or other villagers.

Radio is, at present, less of a favourite medium than television, but it remains, together with tape player, the preferred medium used while driving to work or to the shops, and is also often played at full power in the public buses. There are only two Sabahan stations available, both run by the public broadcaster RTM, but various commercial stations from the Peninsula can also be received. Most of my informants, however, told me they were mainly interested in the Kadazan broadcast, which can be heard in the early mornings and between 2 and 4 in the afternoons.

The Kadazan Section of Radio Malaysia Sabah constitutes the main medium using the language, which makes it suitable for those who prefer media in their mother-tongue. People told me they were interested in the Kadazan broadcast because it provides local news about Penampang and nearby districts as well as

entertainment in the form of Kadazandusun music, both traditional and modern. People who listen to the Kadazan Section often do so animated by a sense of nostalgia for the old times, especially satisfied by ‘classical’ Kadazandusun music recorded by famous stars of the past, as well as by an interest, coupled by a sort of pride, in things that are peculiarly Kadazan and that, among the media, can be found only on the radio. Among those are discussions about *adat*, the traditional customs, as well as traditional myths and legends belonging to Kadazan oral literature as well as - the one to which people listen with most care - the announcement of somebody’s death, accompanied by the sound of Kadazan flute, the *tuahi*, which some people even use as a ring tone for their mobile phones, which carries an emotionally reassuring sense of continuity with a traditional, pre-modern condition.

In rural Penampang only a minority of the population regularly accesses the internet or acquires much information through it. The situation can be attributed to the fact that the only internet connection available within the village was, until very recently, a dial-up one, which was comparatively slow and quite unreliable. The lack of access to the internet, however, cannot be attributed solely to problems of access, as many of those working in Kota Kinabalu have some access to it – though limited by working constraints – from their offices. The majority of the adult population just does not seem very interested in using the internet or in learning about it, and the internet remains mostly a domain of youth in their teens and twenties, who usually access it in internet points located either in Donggonggon or, more rarely, Kota Kinabalu.

The mobile phone, on the other hand, is very common and it is the most used and valued interpersonal medium, and its use spans from the exchange of funny SMS chains or the making of arrangements for the time at which to meet at a pub to the circulation of SMS asking for support to an anti-government protest campaign and soliciting participation in a huge popular demonstration against a resettlement scheme. Moreover, the mobile phone has substituted the wristwatch as the primary time-keeping medium, incorporating two different functions into a single object. Mobile phones are used by the majority of adults and increasingly by teenagers, while the elderly are usually not attracted by this relatively new technology, which has become a vital possession for all those who learned how to use it and have quickly become used to it.

A site of contestation? Reception of Malay TV dramas and films

When asked about television programmes, villagers consistently, across distinctions of age or gender, replied giving negative opinions about Malay TV dramas. A recurrent discourse expressed dislike for Malay soaps dismissing them as *Malazu* - (Malay in Kadazan) an expression often used with some sort of disdain by the Kadazan – implying that they were made by *Malazu* for *Malazu*, therefore catering for the tastes of the Malays and only representing their lives and their experiences.

This identification of the soaps with Malayness is arguably based on the main features common to the genre, which Anuar and Kim (1996) identified in the use of Malay language, the almost totally Malay casting and setting in locations such as Malay villages or neighbourhoods. Moreover, these dramas mostly

focus on the socio-cultural implications of modernisation upon certain members of the Malay community, generally presenting successful Malay professionals, while sometimes expressing concern over certain elements of a modernised society, proposing recourse to the Islamic values promoted by the government as a solution to the contradictions emerging. They rarely represent non-Malay characters, distancing themselves from the everyday life of Malaysians, which involves constant inter-ethnic encounters, and marginalising members of other ethnic groups. They also represent women in a very limited way, as wives and mothers, or, rarely, when involved in business, as unable to look after career and family at the same time, bringing negative consequences to their family (Anuar and Kim, 1996: 270-72).

The dislike of Malay soaps I found among the Kadazan corresponds to what described by Postill (2006: 107-110), who found that Malay soaps ranked very low in a survey about the popularity of television programmes he carried out among the Iban in the Saribas region of Sarawak. Postill (2006) explains what seems to be a 'collective rejection of an entire television genre on their basis of their being 'full of rich people eating in expensive restaurants' (2006: 108) by arguing that Malay soaps constitute an irritating anomaly, a 'matter out of place' like dirt in Mary Douglas's (1966) famous conceptualisation, in the Saribas Iban's idiolect. The soaps, while they belong to the 'ideolectally-correct' genre of television drama, by presenting 'urban Malays flaunting their wealth on television' (2006: 109), would be at odds with the Iban egalitarian principles that form part of the Saribas idiolect. At the same time, they would also belie the propaganda ideology, internalised in the idiolect, according to which all Malaysian races, Iban included, are simultaneously developing towards prosperity. Another relevant aspect of Postill's discussion (2006) consists in the explanation he provides for the apparent contradiction between the rejection of Malay soaps and the positive reaction reserved for Western soaps such as *Dallas* or *Dynasty*, similarly portraying the rich and the famous. Postill argues that Malay soaps would be part of a 'system of commensurate difference' (Gewertz and Errington, 1991, cited in Postill, 2006: 108-109), constituted by the Malaysian inter-ethnic frame of reference, while the world of the *orang putih*, the 'white man', would be beyond such a system and incommensurate to it.

This interpretation seems valid for explaining the preference for Western media products expressed by the majority of my informants, based on the widespread opinion that their much higher quality – in terms of actors, make-up, costumes, special effects, directing – cannot be equalled by Malaysian ones. As described by Postill for the Iban, aesthetic accomplishments and race seem to be inseparable, as the products of the *orang putih*, 'the most advanced race on earth', are well shot and acted and 'have logic' (2006: 109), while Malay dramas are pale imitations of them. The same sense of 'incommensurate difference' between the West and Malaysia was expressed by some of my informants, especially the elderly, through a different attitude towards violence and other 'immoral behaviour' when portrayed in Western and Malaysian media products. An example is given by the village priestess of the traditional religion, who, like other villagers, argued that Malay television dramas present an excessive level of violence and other 'bad behaviour', encouraging negative attitudes in the youth, but, when asked about whether the same problem was true for Western products, replied that 'these things are part of the culture of the *orang putih*, so it is normal that they show their society as it is'.

It must be noted, however, that most villagers also appreciated soap operas from other non-Western countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia and Mexico, despite the fact that their lack of production resources is similar to that of Malaysian ones. These products are usually appreciated on the basis of seemingly completely different aesthetic criteria: as expressed by Judeth, an avid viewer of Indonesian soaps, 'Indonesian soaps are better than Malaysian ones, as they have good acting and imaginative plots. Yes, they are unrealistic, but they are not meant to be realistic as the Malay ones, they are set in sort of magic world, a fairyland'. Again, we can see a system of incommensurate difference (Gewertz and Errington, 1991, cited in Postill, 2006) in which, despite a lack of hierarchy as that perceived between the West and Malaysia, other foreign media products are judged according to different canons from those applied to the Malaysian ones. Another essential aspect of the interest of many Kadazan in foreign media product is constituted by the possibility it gives to get a 'glimpse of other worlds', to vicariously experience life in other places and other times through them (Lull, 1991; Thompson, 1995: 212). Western films and soaps, moreover, have the added educational value that, as told me by Josephina, they offer the possibility to improve one's level of English, a fact that is much appreciated by parents, considering the high value put on knowing the language and the predominance of Malay in the national education system.

Postill considers the rejection of Malay dramas as one of the 'key tensions and contradictions in some of the media practices that shape the maintenance of the idelect' (2006: 105), but concludes that it constitutes an 'ineffectual form of resistance, for it perpetuates the illusion of a nationwide equality despite mounting evidence to the contrary' (2006: 110). Considering that the dislike of Malay dramas was never explicitly expressed by my informants in terms of disapproval of the way of life of the rich and the powerful, however, I would explain such attitude through a lack of fit between the life experiences portrayed in such media products and those of the Kadazan viewers, conferring a low position in the 'relevance structure' (Thompson, 1995) of Kadazan viewers. The life experiences encountered through foreign media are certainly even more alien, but being part of an incommensurate system are not questioned and appreciated because they provide the knowledge of other worlds and, in certain cases, some skills necessary to understand and imitate the 'most successful race in the world', whose way of life is becoming, thanks to the media, less and less foreign. The Malay soaps, on the other hand, show the experientially far, yet familiar, world of, mostly urban, Peninsula from the point of view of the Malays, an experience to which the Kadazan cannot and do not want to relate. The lack of interest in relating to this world should be attributed to the general resentment of Malay domination within Malaysia and to the consciousness of the second-class status of the Kadazan vis-à-vis the politically dominant Malay and economically powerful Chinese. From such a perspective, the Kadazan are encouraged to make an 'oppositional' reading of Malay media products, including soap operas, identifying, often unconsciously, a propaganda element promoting a national culture based on Malay and Islamic values.

Akademi Fantasia

The television programme *Akademi Fantasia* (AF), broadcast since 2003 on the satellite channel Astro Ria and reaching its fifth edition in 2007, was, at the time of my fieldwork, one of the most popular among my informants who, like many other Malaysians nationwide, followed regularly its Saturday night broadcast and daily repetitions and updates. The programme, whose format was first developed in the Mexican show *La Academia* (www.wikipedia.org), is Malaysia's first reality show, in which young aspirant singers, stay in a house called 'Akademi', are imparted daily singing lessons and perform on Saturday night in a prime-time show at the end of which a contestant is eliminated every week.

What is unique about Kadazan people's relationship with the programme is that they seem interested only in the performance of Kadazandusun or Sabahan contestants. As expressed by Denis (40 years old), who said 'I watch it just to see how our kind does', by which he meant Kadazandusun contestants, Kadazan people seem to be interested in the programme mostly as an arena for their own 'kind' to show their worth at the national level. The interests they put in the way Kadazandusun and Sabahans perform seem to derive from the unconscious desire to 'beat the Malays' in their own field: the national arena and especially the media, strongly controlled by the centre, thanks to their skills, in this case singing, an activity Kadazandusun are very fond of and in which they pride themselves to excel. In so doing, Kadazan seem to want to dispel some prejudices held by the people from the Peninsula, according to which Sabahans would be unrefined country-bumpkins or even savages, 'still living on the trees'⁵. This reading seems to be confirmed by a statement by the same Denis, who lamented that one of the contestants, Velvet, was very rough and unrefined and gave a bad image of the Kadazan. This interest for Kadazan and Sabahan participants, which is shared also by non-Kadazan Sabahans I have talked to, is often associated with a dislike for Malay participants, especially exemplified by Mawi, the winner of the third edition and now a famous singer and public character, often labelled as 'a fanatic from Kelantan'⁶ and 'a negative model they are trying to promote, just because he is Malay'.

An important recurrent topic of conversation and discourse relating to AF was the one about how, during the third edition a Kadazandusun finalist, Marsha, had been eliminated from the programme despite the fact that she had received many votes, allegedly because the reception of SMS from Sabah had been disabled, and therefore the votes of her supporters had not been counted. While the event had later been recognised as a technical fault, and Marsha had been re-entered in the competition, the organisers made sure, according to those exposing this sort of 'conspiracy theory', that she would not win against the Malay Mawi by manipulating the votes during the final. This 'conspiracy theory' is in tune with the feelings of being sidelined by the state establishment, as well as misrepresented and mostly left out from the media, that appeared to be common among Kitauu residents. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that AF is a particularly Malaysian phenomenon in which, despite their opposition, Kadazan are still situated, and situate themselves, as consumers of a national media and political arena and whose rules they follow.

⁵ That is what more than one Kadazan told me Peninsula people think of Sabahans

⁶ A State of Peninsular Malaysia known for the very Islamic attitudes of its majority and for being ruled by the Islamic opposition party PAS

The circulation of discourses in the news

Most of my informants, and particularly the males, seemed to be very interested in all types of news, and they generally had a highly politicised and critical approach (see below). The press arguably has a strong agenda-setting role, as news items very often trigger conversation about the reported issues, and the knowledge about the facts reported by the newspapers is often an implicit prerequisite for much conversation.

In the following sections, I analyse three case studies constituted by three debates among some of my informants triggered by their reading of three news items in the national press, the favourite source of news. The issues reported by the news were not particularly important, but I have chosen them as relevant examples of how my Kadazan informants react to the discourses present in the media by situating themselves within particular frames of reference and projecting themselves into collective forms of identification.

The Singapore bridge issue

On 13th of April 2006, the newspapers (e.g. *Daily Express*, 13/4/2006) reported that Malaysia had decided to stop the construction, started in 2003, of the 'scenic bridge' meant to replace the existing causeway between Malaysia and Singapore. The decision was justified by the arising of 'legal implications and complications' as well as by the fact that, according to the prime Minister, Malaysian people were unhappy with the conditions posed by Singapore as a prerequisite for their acceptance of the project. Later, the press reported criticisms moved by former PM Mahathir Mohamad, the 'mind behind' the project, who said that Malaysia should not have bowed to Singapore's pressure. The criticism was one among various moved by the former PM to the present government since he has retired (*Daily Express*, 14/4/2006).

As is usually the case with news items from the press, the issue became a topic of discussion among a group of people sitting outside Jaunis' house chatting and drinking some beers. The people taking part in the conversation divided themselves between those agreeing with the decision and those agreeing with Mahathir's position.

None of the participants in the discussion made a reading critical of the news as genre or of the journalistic conventions, nor did they make what Madianou (2005: 102-103) calls analytic readings, 'attempt[ing] to read through the events and provide the reasons for their presentation – or not – in the news'. The readings of this item of news, on the other hand, was contextualised with previous knowledge derived from previous media reports, most likely other newspaper articles but also television news, which provided people with the basis on which to form their opinion about the present and former PM and Cabinets and their way of working. Some people criticised the bridge project as another result of Mahathir's politics of grandeur, while others like Jaunis argued that criticising this type of project was short-sighted, as in the case of the construction of the Formula 1 circuit at Sepang, initially criticised by many as another

unnecessary ‘show-off’ by Mahathir, which not only ended up being a commercial and economic success, but it gave Malaysia fame and renown by putting the country on the map of one of the world’s most popular sports and therefore giving it international visibility and respect.

In this case the readings of the news were articulated in a way not directly informed by personal experience or by alternative sources, but rather on personal opinions derived from the previous mainstream news.

The readings of news contents by all discussants, whether they took a pro- or anti-government position, should be considered as dominant, as neither of them challenged the official discourse about the nation and the presupposition that all readers belong to it. The readers did not contest or seem aware of the ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig, 1995) identifying the readers as naturally belonging to the nation, and as being part of the Malaysia to which the article attributed the decisions and actions taken by the government. Moreover, the people participating in the discussion not only took for granted the fact that the issues discussed in the paper involved, despite the lack of any direct connection with their life, them as Malaysians, but also that, within the international order constituted by a world of states, states should try to increase their political, economic and symbolic power vis-à-vis the others.

The Danish cartoon events

In February 2006, Malaysia was involved in the worldwide controversial issue regarding the reprinting of cartoons allegedly representing Prophet Mohamed by the Danish *Jyllands Posten* and then by various European dailies. The reaction of Malaysian Muslims was not as strong as in other countries such as Indonesia, and it did not escalate into acts of violence. The Malaysian public opinion was further stirred when the *Sarawak Tribune*, Sarawak’s oldest daily, published some of the Danish cartoons. Many Muslims reacted with outrage and the government called the paper’s editor for questioning and eventually revoked the *Tribune*’s publishing licence (*Daily Express*, 9/2/2006; 23/2/2006).

The stir created by the news reached Sabah, where people, like all Malaysians not living in Sarawak, had no occasion to see the cartoons under discussion, a fact that created much curiosity about the cartoons that could determine such a strong reaction around the world, and the issue became subject of discussion among the villagers of Kitauau. The reading made by those I discussed the issue with, as in the case previously examined, was critical neither of the news as genre nor analytic. The reading they made was dominant as it did not challenge the Malaysian state ideology that issues such as religion and ethnicity are sensitive and the media should therefore avoid offending sensitivities at all costs. This principle is not only completely internalised by the media producers, who consistently practise a form of self-censorship, partly as a result of fears of having their newspaper’s licence revoked, but also by Malaysian citizens such as my Kadazan informants who took it for granted that issues of religion and ethnicity are sensitive and should therefore be treated with the maximum caution or even not treated at all.

The issue triggered a reflection on the different reactions to issues of this type between Muslims and Christians and on the different protection of the two groups' sensitivities afforded by the Malaysian government and media. One of my informants, a woman in her late thirties, expressed this view saying that 'Muslim sensitivities are much more easily hurt than those of Christians' and that if such cartoons had been published about Christian religion nobody would have protested with such strength, nor would have the Malaysian government. She supported such view by citing the example of the debate on the controversial *Da Vinci Code*, which was condemned by the Catholic Church as presenting a false view of the life of Jesus Christ and of the history of the early Christian Church, but which did not determine any reaction in the Malaysian government. Moreover, she argued, 'we Christians did not make a big fuss as the Muslims did about the Danish cartoons'.

This kind of reaction should be read as deriving from the experience of being a Christian minority within a Muslim country, and to the deriving feeling, reinforced by the memory of the various policies of Islamisation and Malayisation carried out in the 1970s, of not being fully accepted by the government as such.

While various villagers expressed the curiosity to see the cartoons in order to judge for themselves whether the reactions were justified or not, implicitly agreeing with the *Sarawak Tribune's* choice, they did not have such a chance. Among my informants only Martha, one of the few people who obtain a significant amount of information through the internet, was able to see the cartoons through a website, and she told me she thought the reaction to them was excessive, as the mocked character was never directly identified as Prophet Mohamed.

My informants, therefore, got involved in the series of international events started by the publication of the 'Danish cartoons' through the media, not challenging the dominant position demanding to avoid 'sensitive issues' but also interpreting the debate in the light of their unique, local, condition, opposing themselves as a perceivedly oppressed minority who feels they are not being treated with respect (Rosaldo, 2003) by the Muslim-dominated state. This reading, while challenging the implicit depiction of Malaysia as a Muslim country, and implicitly asking for recognition of the rights of minorities to equal treatment, responded with another closed, essentialist discourse of identity, confirming Arendt's argument (1968, cited in Madianou, 2005: 137) that upholding an identity is a usual reaction to the feeling of it being under attack through defamation and persecution.

The Sipadan incident

On the 17th of May 2006, the Sabahan newspaper reported the collision of a large barge, loaded with building materials, with the coral reef of Sipadan island, a national park and one of the main tourist attractions of the State, attracting a great number of divers from all around the world (*Daily Express*, 17/05/2006). After the incident, many official sources and NGOs called for a review of the proposed RM5 million project (about 700,000 pounds) to construct a restaurant/club house, dive shop and staff quarters, possibly using concrete materials and apparently involving heavy machines. Sabah's chief Minister

intervened in the matter ordering the suspension of all construction activities and a full probe on the destruction of corals. He also decided that projects carried out in environmentally sensitive areas should have prior Cabinet approval in the future (*Daily Express*, 17/6/2006; 18/6/2006). The press later reported that the State Minister of Tourism replied to a question from a local MP by saying that the project carried out at Sipadan was aimed at providing basic facilities like toilets and a resting place for tourists and divers, following the Government's decision to cease the operations of resorts there. The project also included the construction of quarters for 12 army personnel, seven police personnel and eight Sabah Parks' staff who are on duty there (*Daily Express*, 1/7/2006).

My informants made an analytical reading of the news regarding these events, attributing the incident to the desire of the politician and businessmen involved to make the highest possible profits without taking care of the measures necessary to safeguard safety or the environment. This reading identified this way of acting as the deep, real cause of the incident, and was critical of the journalistic conventions not reporting the real causes of certain events when these go against the interest of the powerful. In this reading, similarly to what was described by Madianou (2005: 105-106), my informants referred to the journalists, media owners and politicians through the pronoun 'they', implying a symbiosis between the media and politics to cover up the real facts in order to defend the interests of the powerful. From this point of view, one of my informants argued that, considering the Chief Minister is from an area of the East Coast very near Sipadan and that he owns or participates in most of the companies of the area, it was very likely that he had a personal interest and some stake in the business causing the incident. My informant therefore considered the stance of the Chief Minister to be hypocritical and argued that he had stopped the building on the island only because of the negative local and international reaction – some international diving blogs reported the incident – and that he might re-start the operations once the fuss calmed down.

This attitude is often corroborated by personal experience, as exemplified by the great amount of wealth amassed by a villager who was involved in politics and has bought a great amount of land and built an extravagant villa on top of a hill dominating the *kampung*. The same informant who accused the Chief Minister of being hypocritical told me that, while visiting the local MP at the State assembly to discuss a project, he saw many people going to him asking for money, even as little as 20 ringgit. He described the event as normal, arguing that the life of the MP is much about managing people who come to ask for something, providing a view, which I found to be widespread among the villagers, seeing the relationship between politicians and voters as one in which the former act as patrons, getting votes from their clients and then redistributing the resources, deriving from people's taxes, either in form of contracts or even in cash. While the villagers seem to accept this patron-client relationship as a normal component of politics, they are, on the other hand, as shown by the reactions to the Sipadan incident, ready to denounce, and even to infer without concrete evidence, the misconduct and corruption of politicians.

This attitude is expressed through an essentialist discourse that identifies politicians, of all parties and ethnic origin, as being primarily moved by self-interest and as putting such interests before those of the people they represent. Nevertheless, this attitude provokes an ambiguous moral stance mixing condemnation and the idea that the behaviour of the politicians is intrinsic to the exercise of power.

Subjectivities for the new modernity

Postill argues that television plays, together with the Malay-medium school system, an essential role in the 'double westernisation' of Sarawak and Sabah, a term by which he describes 'the two-step flow of ideas, images and practices from the Western world (especially the U.S.A.) selected and recycled in West Malaysia and then re-exported to East Malaysia' (2006: 84).

The advent and widespread diffusion of satellite television have arguably reinforced this flow while limiting to a great extent the control the state exerts on it. Satellite television is in fact the ultimate vehicle of the spread of the global modernity linked to consumerism. This is a type of modernity which is, however, different from, and at times at odds with, the one promoted by both Malaysian and Kadazan modernists. The main carriers of this global consumerism are foreign-produced television programmes, going from films to television show formats (e.g. AF) to advertisement to 'lifestyle' programmes and documentaries. The latter, in particular, showing people going around the world visiting attractions or sightseeing, going to restaurants and hotels, showing dream houses or world cuisine, by appealing to viewers' interest in glimpsing at other worlds and having vicarious experiences (Thompson, 1995), spread a global form of consumerism and the appreciation for features of different places and activities seen as possibilities for almost limitless spending and consumerist pleasures, encompassing all aspects of life, from leisure to working, from everyday life to vacation.

In disagreement with Foster (2002), I would argue that the form of consumerism promoted by these commercial media, despite their being a Malaysian configuration of global ones, does not generate a national frame of reference, but rather a global one, which Kadazan individuals seem to find highly appealing, possibly for the promises it bears of direct access to the culture and way of life of the *orang putih*, bypassing the control and limitation imposed by the Malaysian state and by its Malay ruling elites.

The new form of modernity promoted by the media has slowly been penetrating urban Sabah and spreading from cities, modifying the lifestyle of many of the relatively well-off and modernised inhabitants of Penampang, especially those who have a direct contact with its practical embodiment in the working and shopping practices of the State capital. Young and early-middle-age women, in particular, tend to be more attracted by this ideology because of their often most dynamic role and because these messages focus more on elements belonging to the feminine sphere: ways of keeping the house and cooking, household products, raising the children, beauty, and products offering to obtain it. Young Kadazan women also seem to be more involved in another aspect of the consumerist, 'cosmopolitan', lifestyle, travelling and going out to pubs and restaurants, which I would argue is connected to their stronger connection with the urban environment and their more 'modern' patterns of social interaction, while the men generally tend to prefer more traditional patterns of consumption and of leisure.

The personal experience of one of my informants seems also to suggest the influence of television in the development of new subjectivities, in line with Mankekar's argument that media consumption is 'a contested space in which subjectivities are constituted' (1993: 471). Similarly to what described by Mankekar (1999), representations of family on television caused personal and subjective family experiences

to surface. My informant, however, seemed to be able to articulate them by elaborating the discourses about family that were implicit in various media products she had consumed. Josephina, a 38 year old bank clerk, argued that by watching foreign, and especially American, films she understood the importance of creating bonds within the family by showing affection to the other members and by showing her inner sentiments and teaching her children to do the same. This new subjective position led her to question and criticise the Kadazan – and more broadly South-east Asian – traditional cultural character, which sees expression of inner emotions negatively, a character that she sees as exemplified by her husband, who ‘never hugs or shows affection to his children’.

The new subjectivities exemplified by Josephina, which I found to be common also – although often in a less articulated way – to other young women often involves a discourse paying attention to people’s behaviour and mental states and explaining them on the basis of popularised and simplified psychological notions. This psychologistic discourse is associated with a more general medical one, spread by the media, especially through health-related surveys on television or columns of newspapers and magazines, dealing with arguments such as diet, general health, good parenting, solving emotional and relational problems and even horoscopes. The penetration of this medical discourse is evident in everyday interaction, where talk about health in pseudo-medical terms is very common, such as in the very common case of an adult man meeting a friend and asking how he is and being answered ‘I am ok, but I have the usual problems with BP [blood pressure], I should do some exercise’ or people talking about the cholesterol content of some of their favourite traditional foodstuffs.

This medical discourse can be compared with the discourse of health, communicating ideas of physically strong and morally sound bodies, constituted, according to Foster (2002) by the imagery and exhortations of commercial advertising. This discourse, which involves the idea of athletic, medically sound and morally acceptable bodies, invokes according to Foster, the dominant themes of Western individualism, considering the person to correspond to the body and to be the individuated and discrete locus of autonomous agency (2002: 88). 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.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown that Kadazan villagers have a strongly negative attitude towards development and other forms of state propaganda, as well as more generally towards Malay products. This negative attitude is derived from a strong resentment towards Muslim-Malay domination and what is perceived to be a colonisation of Sabah by the Peninsula, as well as from the feeling of being second-class citizens, not enjoying the benefits that official propaganda and policies attribute to the native population.

My argument is that this attitude 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, such as the ethnic group or even the village in which they live (see Barlocco, n.d.).

This attitude also informs the reading of the news, in which Kadazan individuals tend to demonstrate a critical stance towards the government and the world of politics. The essentialist discourse of nationhood widely present in the press is therefore generally contrasted through an equally essentialist discourse of ethnic and local belonging. The reaction to news and other media products is also informed by a local 'relevance structure' (Thompson, 1995) stressing the importance of lived experience and therefore leading to the rejection of Malay dramas on the basis of their lack of fit with it. The reading of the news is similarly influenced by a stress on personal experience (Madianou, 2005) whenever its application is feasible.

On the other hand, even while rejecting the discourse of the nation, the Kadazan do so within the national frame of reference (see Foster, 2002), not having an alternative one, as exemplified by the reaction to the alleged discrimination within *Akademi Fantasia*. This national frame of reference is not simply discursive, but, as argued by Postill, depends on the fact that Malaysia has come to be, in most regards, 'an integrated system of cultural institutions and practices' (2006: 15).

One of the most essential features of this system is the ethnic discourse, which is shaping the relationships within it in a way that has allowed Malaysia to be a stable and relatively successful state, but also determining the continuous relevance, especially in the case of minorities that feel marginalised, of ethnic belonging for individuals' sense of identity.

Finally, the direct contact with global culture and consumerism seems to offer a possibility to bypass state control on culture and therefore to enjoy a greater cultural and identity freedom, a prospect that seems attractive to the Kadazan, but whose results are still largely unknown.

References

- Anderson, B. (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edition, London: Verso
- Anderson, B. (1998) 'From Miracle to Crash', *London Review of Books*, 19th April
- Anuar, M.K. and W.L. Kim (1996) 'Aspects of Ethnicity and Gender in Malaysian Television' in D. French and M. Richards, eds., *Contemporary Television: Eastern Perspectives*, London: Sage
- Askew, K. and R. Wilk, eds. (2002) *The Anthropology of Media*, Oxford: Blackwell
- Barlocco, F. (n.d.) *Between the Local and the State: practices and discourses of identity among the Kadazan of Sabah (East Malaysia)*, PhD thesis submitted at Loughborough University, October 2008
- Bausinger, H. (1984) 'Media, Technology and Daily Life', *Media, Culture and Society*, 6, 4, pp. 343-51
- Billig, M. (1995) *Banal Nationalism*, London: Sage
- Boulanger, C. L. (2000) 'On Dayak, Orang Ulu, Bidayuh, and Other Imperfect Ethnic Categories in Sarawak' in M. Leigh (ed.) *Borneo 2000: Proceedings of the Sixth Biennial Borneo Research Conference*, vol.1, Kota Samarahan: Universiti Malaysia Sabah and Sarawak and Sarawak Development Institute
- Boulanger, C.L. (2002) 'Inventing Tradition, Inventing Modernity: Dayak identity in urban Sarawak', *Asian Ethnicity*, 3, 2, pp. 221-231
- Caldarola, V.J. (1990) *Reception as Cultural Experience: Visual Mass Media and Reception Practices in Outer Indonesia*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, PhD Dissertation at University of Pennsylvania in 1990
- Dayan, D. and E. Katz (1992) *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press
- Doolittle, A.A. (2003) *Resources, Ideologies and Nationalism: the Politics of Development in Postcolonial Sabah*, presentation at Conference on Order and Disjuncture in Development, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 09/2003
- Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Foster, Robert J. (2002) *Materializing the Nation: Commodities, Consumption, and Media in Papua New Guinea*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press
- Geertz, C. (1973) 'The Integrative Revolution: Primordial sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States' in C Geertz *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, first published in 1963 in C. Geertz, (ed.) *Old Societies and New States*
- Ginsburg, F., L. Abu-Lughod and B. Larkin, eds. (2002) *Media Worlds: anthropology on new terrain*, Berkeley: University of California Press
- Hall, S. (1980) 'Encoding/Decoding' in S. Hall *et al. Culture, Media, Language*, London: Hutchinson
- Liebes, T. and E. Katz (1993) *The Export of Meaning: cross-cultural readings of Dallas*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press

- Loh, F.L.K. (1992) 'Modernisation, Cultural Revival and Counter-Hegemony: The Kadazans of Sabah in the 1980s' in J.S. Kahn and F. L. K Loh, eds. *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin
- Lull, J. (1991) *China Turned On: television, reform and resistance*, London: Routledge
- Luping, H.J. (1994) *Sabah's Dilemma: the political history of Sabah, 1960-1994*, Kuala Lumpur: Magnus Books
- Madianou, M. (2005) *Mediating the Nation: News, Audiences and the Politics of Identity*, London: UCL Press
- Mankekar, P. (1999) *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: an ethnography of television, womanhood, and nation in Postcolonial India*, Durham and London: Duke University Press
- McLuhan, M. (1964) *Understanding Media*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Morley, D. and C. Brundson (1999) *The Nationwide Television Studies*, London: Routledge
- Peterson, M.A. (2003) *Anthropology and Mass Communication: myth and media in the new millennium*, Oxford and New York: Berghahn
- Postill, J.R. (2006) *Media and Nation Building: How the Iban became Malaysian*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn
- Reid, A. (1997) 'Endangered Identity: Kadazan or Dusun in Sabah' *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 28, 1, pp. 120-36
- Roff, M. (1969) 'The Rise and Demise of Kadazan Nationalism', *Journal of South-East Asian History*, 10, 2, pp. 326-43
- Rosaldo, R. (2003) 'Introduction: the borders of belonging' in R. Rosaldo (ed.) *Cultural citizenship in Island Southeast Asia: Nation and belonging in the hinterlands*, Berkeley: University of California Press
- Thompson, J.B. (1995) *Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*, Cambridge: Polity
- Tsing, A.L. (1993) *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-Way Place*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press
- Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Winzeler, R.L. (1997a) 'Introduction' in R.L. Winzeler (ed.) *Indigenous Peoples and the State: Politics, Land and Ethnicity in the Malayan Peninsula and Borneo*, New Haven: Yale University
- Winzeler, R.L. (1997b) 'Modern Bidayuh Ethnicity and the Politics of Culture in Sarawak' in R.L. Winzeler, ed. *Indigenous Peoples and the State: Politics, Land and Ethnicity in the Malayan Peninsula and Borneo*, New Haven: Yale University.