

Comment by Arvind Rajagopal to Barlocco's working paper "Media and belonging to the nation in Sabah, East Malaysia"

EASA Media Anthropology Network E-Seminar 8-22 September 2009

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, Barlocco 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.