

**Nation-states as culture areas:
a comparison of popular media in Sarawak and Bali**

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After decades of relative neglect, anthropologists are now rethinking their national comparative traditions and looking for ways of invigorating some theories and methods of comparison, devise new ones, and jettison others (Gingrich and Fox 2002). Over a decade ago, Marilyn Strathern (1990) called for the contrasting of research problems arising in two non-Western regions to fight the entrenched anthropological habit of positing a nebulous 'West' in contradistinction to a 'native' society. Her call has gone largely unheeded. In my own essays on the anthropology of exchange, media, time, and literacy (Postill n.d., 2000, 2002, 2003), I have found such West-Rest comparisons to be as ubiquitous as they are unhelpful. There are nevertheless some remarkable exceptions, e.g. I.M. Lewis' (1993) insightful essay comparing the history of literacy in Somalia and Ethiopia, or Jack Goody's (1997) large-scale study of the uneven distribution of 'cognitive ambivalence' across Eurasia and Africa. Unfortunately, often anthropologists will practise what Barnard (2000) calls 'illustrative comparison', i.e. the selective use of ethnographic examples from two or more areas to support a prior argument.

My comparative aims below are (a) to reveal some commonalities and contrasts in the popular media history of Sarawak and Bali so as to raise questions for future research, and (b) to link these questions to a set of broader questions regarding the profound territoriality of nation-states.

Popular media in Sarawak

Between 1996 and 1998 I conducted anthropological research in Sarawak for seventeen months as part of a PhD at University College London (Postill 2000). There followed a brief postdoctoral research trip in 2001 while based in Karlsruhe. The initial aim was to study the relationship between television and nation-building among the Iban of Sarawak, in Malaysian Borneo. Soon after arriving in the field, however, the inquiry broadened to encompass other media. By the end of fieldwork I had collected ethnographic and historical data on a range of other information and communication technologies (ICTs), including radio, print media, video, photography, clocks, wristwatches, and public-address systems. This broadening out was the result of a participant observation approach that often led me away from television viewing to other social institutions, both media- and non-media-related. The resulting thesis is a multi-sited ethnography based on fieldwork in three Iban areas: urban, rural and semi-rural. The bulk of field research took place in semi-rural Saribas longhouses, with frequent bus journeys to the capital of Sarawak, Kuching, where I took part in official cultural events and interviewed Iban media producers. Fieldwork ended in early 1998 with an intensive one-month comparative study of a remote longhouse on the Skrang river.

Malaysia is a Southeast Asian nation hastily formed in 1963 as an amalgam of Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak, all erstwhile British territories. At the time Britain and her Commonwealth allies wished to protect the region – and their own economic interests -- from the perceived threat of both international Communism

and Indonesian nationalism. The creation and subsequent military build-up of Malaysia for over a decade succeeded in achieving this goal (Jones 2002). Whilst Singapore seceded in 1965, the other territories have remained within the Federation to this day, with Malaya (today West or Peninsular Malaysia) far surpassing Sabah and Sarawak in economic, political and demographic weight. West Malaysia has a majority of Malays (some 60%) as well as large Chinese (30%) and Indian minorities. The East Malaysian state that occupies us here, Sarawak, has an ethnically more fragmented population with a majority of Dayaks – the blanket category applied to all non-Muslim indigenous groups – as well as sizeable Chinese and Malay minorities.

The Iban are the most numerous of all Dayak groups, numbering some 400,000 in Sarawak and around 10,000 in neighbouring West Kalimantan (Indonesia). They are a predominantly rural people of West-Central Borneo whose language is a cognate of Malay. Most live in longhouses, or ‘villages’ under one roof consisting of a communal gallery (*ruai*) and a series of collateral family rooms or apartments known as *bilik*. A large proportion subsist by swidden farming, cash cropping, and remittances from migrant kin. For decades now migration to urban and industrial areas has been on the increase (Sather 1993, Kedit 1993). The Saribas basin where I carried out most of the fieldwork is renowned in Sarawak for its early socio-economic progress (Pringle 1970: 208). Leading Saribas Iban families benefited from a buoyant international rubber market in the 1910s and 1920s to amass considerable fortunes, turning part of their wealth to the retraditionalisation of local practices. Previously they had acquired an ‘early thirst for education’, and many would travel considerable distances to acquire a mission education (Pringle 1970: 206).

The following three main findings of my doctoral research are germane to the present discussion. First, the 1950s-60s project of creating an Iban literate high culture through vernacular radio and print media was aborted by Kuala Lumpur in the mid-1970s. Second, from the 1980s onwards popular media in Sarawak became increasingly Malaysianised, with television and school textbooks becoming influential media. Third, two urban areas of Sarawak – Sibu and Kuching – have developed their own Dayak culture industries, specialising in popular music and the ‘official’ performing arts respectively.

Let me now briefly take up the first finding. A convenient starting point is the creation in 1954 of Radio Sarawak when the country was still under British rule. Ostensibly aimed at informing and educating a diverse population, Radio Sarawak initially broadcast in Iban as well as Malay, Chinese and English. After a few years, other Dayak groups secured their own language services, which have remained in operation ever since. The Iban Service became an invaluable British ally during the Indonesian confrontation in the early half of the 1960s. Following the reputed success of this medium in fighting communist guerrillas in Malaya, Iban broadcasters were given BBC training to transform indigenous narrative forms and familiar sounds into compelling drama. Similar ‘psy-war’ weapons were deployed in the 1970s against mostly ethnic Chinese communist guerrillas (Postill 2000, chapter 2).

In 1960, the British opened another media organisation with a strong Iban component, namely the Borneo Literature Bureau. The aim was to improve general standards of literacy and disseminate developmental knowledge across Sabah and Sarawak. In its 17-year long history, the Bureau published numerous Iban-language titles, a majority

of them abridged texts drawn from the rich Iban oral tradition. Both the Bureau and Radio Sarawak attracted a disproportionate number of Iban staff and authors from the Saribas area. Indeed, in the early days Radio Sarawak was jokingly known as 'Radio Saribas'. Both media provided indigenous intellectuals with an outlet for their creative energies at a time of major geopolitical, cultural and economic changes. More importantly, their collective agency created an oral-cum-literate discursive space characterised by the search for a form of cultural modernity that would preserve the best of the Iban heritage. In this respect, they were not unlike coeval modernisers in Indonesia (Vickers 1996) or Singapore.

In 1977 the Borneo Literature Bureau was taken over by a federal agency, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. Oral tradition in Kuching has it that not long after this annexation, mountains of books in Dayak vernaculars were buried in what we might call a 'mass media grave'. When the grave was discovered and some of the books rescued, it is said that the authorities resorted to burning the remains. This put paid not only to a flurry of Iban publishing activity, but also to the modernist dream of a modern, literate Iban high culture. The implications are of grave importance, for literate minorities with their own script, print media, and formal schooling have a far better chance of surviving the ravages of the modern state than illiterate ones. Eriksen (1993:128) says: 'Groups which have 'discovered that they have a culture', who have invented and reified their culture, can draw on myths of origin and a wide array of potential boundary-markers that are unavailable to illiterate minorities'. When the Malaysian DBP took over the Borneo Literature Bureau and the Malaysian Ministry of Education established itself in Sarawak, the chances of Iban becoming a viable modern language diminished rapidly (see Postill 2002).

The second main media finding in Sarawak – Malaysianisation -- follows from the first. Television transmission in Borneo commenced in Sabah in 1974, eleven years after it had done so in West Malaysia. From 1975 Sarawak was allowed to use the Sabahan facilities. Various cultural, musical and religious programmes were produced and broadcast by the two states over a joint channel known as Channel 3. However in 1985 Channel 3 was closed down following directives from Kuala Lumpur -- predictably, it was seen as a threat to national unity. Programming was taken over by the centre, with which airtime was now 'shared'. Non-Muslim religious programmes were never again broadcast¹. Today, in spite of Sarawak's impressive economic growth of the past two decades, local production is lower than it was in the 1970s. Three kinds of programmes were still being produced in Sarawak in the late 1990s:

1. *Rampai Kenyalang*². The state's oldest programme, launched in 1976, this 30-minute newsreel is broadcast every Wednesday from 12.15 to 12.45. It covers political events, sports and cultural celebrations such as the annual Dayak Festival.
2. Documentaries on development and culture. Irregularly broadcast, on average twice a month.

¹ When the Christian Kadazan-dominated *Parti Bersatu Sabah* (PBS) swept into power in Sabah in 1990, the rebirth of a state television station was top of their electoral manifesto (Jawan 1994: 220-221). The Federal government, however, successfully thwarted such attempts.

² Previously known as *Majalah Sarawak* and *Mingguan Sarawak*.

3. Music, the arts, entertainment. Also irregular broadcasts (Postill 2000, ch 2).

Together with the Malay-medium school system, television is an integral part of the wide-ranging process of 'Malaysianisation' unfolding in Sarawak and Sabah since the Federation was created in 1963 and accelerated since the mid-1970s. Television is also a key propaganda tool for the ruling government coalition, and in particular for the country's authoritarian Prime Minister, Mahathir bin Mohamad. It is a fundamental conveyor of nation-building and modernity visions. The Iban and other Dayak groups are systematically excluded from television. The sole recurrent Iban contribution is that of a young woman singer clad in 'traditional' Iban costume. Every evening prior to the 8 o'clock news, she joins four other female representatives of Malaysia's main ethnic groups (Malays, Chinese, Indian, and Kadazandusun) in a karaoke-style videoclip to praise the country's achievements and bright prospects. This is a characteristic example of the ruling elite's indefatigable efforts to tame cultural diversity by overcommunicating the aesthetic appeal of the various cultures to a nationwide audience while *undercommunicating* (Eriksen 1993:84 following Goffman) the perceived threat to national unity posed by non-Malay languages and cultures. The Dayaks can be seen on television, but they cannot be heard (Postill 2000, chapter 2).

The third main finding concerns the cultural geography of Dayak media. Sibul is, after Kuching, the second largest town in Sarawak. From 1974 on the timber industry grew rapidly in the state, with Sibul as its hub (Leigh 1983: 164). This attracted large numbers of Iban to an urban milieu where they were already well represented³. Many Iban entered into patron-client relations with ethnic Foochow Chinese merchants (*towkay*) (Sutlive 1972: 119). The same pattern was to prevail in the budding music industry of the late 1970s. By far the most successful Sibul record company to date has been Tiew Brothers Company (TBC). Mathew Tiew Sii Hock, a former salesman, and two of his brothers, founded it in 1977 (significantly, the same year the Borneo Literature Bureau was made redundant). Initially they tried to market Malay albums but found the competition from Peninsular record companies to be too stiff, choosing instead to market Iban pop. Having found a Dayak market niche, they then began to release songs in Melanau, Kayan, Kenyah, and even Malay and Chinese. Iban pop has remained TBC's mainstay. According to company sources, the uniqueness of Iban pop lies in its *rojak* ('mixed salad') melodies: a *melange* of Indonesian *dangdut*, global pop and rock, heavy metal, Latin *baladas* and other styles, all performed to a peculiar Sibul-Chinese beat⁴.

In contrast to Sibul, Kuching is the seat of state government and Dayak cultural development. Urban Dayak elites have followed in the Brooke and British tradition of folklorising Dayak culture through an emphasis on 'refined' dance and music. But with the revenues derived from the timber and oil industries they have greater financial resources at their disposal. By means of a number of foundations and associations, Dayak millionaires sponsor diverse cultural performances – activities that are increasingly linked to the tourist industry. Lacking a television station, these public events are reported in the elite-controlled press, on the radio and through a range of street

³ In 1947 there were less than 300 Iban in Sibul. In 1972, there were at least ten times this figure (Sutlive 1972: 466).

⁴ 'Iban music industry fast catching up with the rest of the world' (*Sarawak Tribune*, 22/3/1998). This catchy headline from *Bernama*, the Malaysian national newsagency, conceals the fact that it is a Chinese family who controls the lion's share of the 'Iban music industry'.

panels and banners. There is also a state-owned living museum named The Cultural Village where, in the manner of such parks in Indonesia and elsewhere, each ethnic group is represented in a separate building (see Winzeler 1997).

The annual Dayak culture showcase is undoubtedly Gawai Dayak, an official festival masterminded by Kuching elites in the 1950s. It is now well consolidated across many parts of Sarawak and celebrated even in Pontianak, in Indonesian Borneo. Gawai Dayak is a multiply mediated 'bureaucratic spectacle' (Debord 1983, Handelman 1998) that brings together a host of public and private agencies, including beer and tobacco transnationals advertising their wares through festive posters displayed in countless coffee-shops. Although originally conceived by cultural developers from the capital, Gawai now blends official (Kuching) and unofficial (Sibu) urban Dayak culture with local practices. Thus a standard Saribas longhouse Gawai will feature formal public-address speeches and government-sanctioned local *adat* rites with karaoke singing and cassette taped Iban *joget* or *dangdut*, etc, while revellers consume copious amounts of imported beer and brandy.

Popular media in Bali

Whilst my knowledge of Iban media in Sarawak is firsthand, for the Bali discussion I must rely on the secondary literature, as I have yet to carry out fieldwork in Bali. An autobiographical note will situate my account. In 1986, in a bid to avoid both national service and overcrowded universities, I left my country, Spain, and sought refuge in Jakarta. For some ten months I worked as a stringer with EFE (Spain's national news agency) while training as a journalist with *Majalah Tempo*, the current affairs weekly. This youthful Indonesian experience eventually led to undergraduate and postgraduate anthropology studies in Britain with a Southeast Asian focus. This included an MA in social anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London under Mark Hobart, who currently specialises in Balinese media (see M. Hobart 2000a). My only direct acquaintance with Bali was a holiday excursion in 1994. This sojourn was brief but auspicious. Soon after we disembarked from the ferry our bus driver made an unscheduled stop at a small petrol station so that he could watch the World Cup final. By then all the best squatting spots in front of the colour TV were taken, proof that the local people were no strangers to universal clock and calendar time – a subject strangely overlooked by anthropologists involved in the now passé 'Balinese time debate' (see Geertz 1973, Bloch 1976, Howe 1981, M. Hobart 1997, Postill 2002).

Having consulted the Balinese media literature, three findings seem of special relevance to the problem at hand. First, the Balinese are keen television viewers and/or producers of Balinese performing arts and historical programmes. Second, since the 1998 political changes in Indonesia, the Balinese have actively engaged with current affairs programmes. Third, young Balinese appear to favour Indonesian over Western popular music.

As I did in the Sarawak case, I will now take one finding at a time. In 1988-9, Mark Hobart (2000) was researching Balinese ideas and practices surrounding 'development'. Unwilling to impose an alien agenda upon his Balinese informants, he asked them how he might best proceed with his research. They advised him to concentrate on theatre, for it is through this art form that Balinese best articulate their

views on development (and, indeed, most other subjects). Around that time M. Hobart was finding it difficult to engage people in conversation whenever Balinese performing arts were being broadcast on television. Previously the central arena of a thriving public life, the marketplace was now deserted in the evenings. So in true anthropological fashion, he followed the locals to their television sets⁵. Eventually Hobart came to organise informal focus groups to view a range of television programmes with Balinese and elicit their commentaries. He then analysed some of these sessions in minute detail, seeking to reveal some of the hidden presuppositions in the work of other Euro-American anthropologists and media theorists (see M. Hobart 1995a, 1995b, 2000a, 2000b). There followed the launching of the ongoing Balinese Television Project to document and analyse regional broadcasts in the face of poor recording facilities at the regional TVRI station in Denpasar (M. Hobart 2000a).

Other researchers have confirmed the increased presence of television in Balinese daily life. Television viewing is hardly a clear-cut activity, as other overlapping practices routinely take place, including conversing, child-care, housework, making handicrafts, etc (Nilan 2000: 122). Television sets ‘cost money, and they take up time’ – the spread of waged labour and new technologies having released more time from traditional economic pursuits, extra time that many Balinese now employ watching television (Hughes-Freeland 1998).

One of M. Hobart’s collaborators, Felicia Hughes-Freeland (1998) found that her British middle-class frames of reference were frequently at odds with those of Balinese viewers. For instance, she was surprised to find that to Balinese viewers televised performances attracted more ‘supernatural power’ (*taksu*) than live ones where temple audiences had a negative effect on the dancers. Because of television’s low audience participation and intense camera scrutiny, performers could now perfect their skills rather than constantly struggle to entertain the audience. Further, knowledgeable viewers did not feel television was eroding Bali’s performing arts. On the contrary, they thought it contributed to their reinvigoration through new means. (1998: 56-8). There was, however, cause for concern as it was thought that numerous local theatre troupes had been driven out of business by their inability to match performances ‘as seen on television’ (1998: 61).

Basing her analysis on materials from the Balinese Television Project, Creese (2000: 41-2) has studied 1990-1995 recordings of historical programmes of three types: performance genres (e.g. *topeng*, *prembon*, *drama klasik*), telemovies (*sinetron*) and documentaries. Over this period, Balinese viewers ‘have journeyed through a millennium of Balinese history’ – a journey undertaken within the tight ideological parameters of Soeharto’s New Order. In this context, the notion of *puputan* (ritual mass suicides by Balinese in front of Dutch occupying forces) has acquired renewed currency. Creese (2000: 68) believes *puputan* has come to symbolise the noble character of the Balinese, a ‘brave, loyal and unflinching’ people. It has also been

⁵ Daniel Miller (1994) experienced similar difficulties while conducting fieldwork in Trinidad and arrived at the same solution: to follow the natives. Both cases are testimony to one of anthropology’s greatest strengths: the ability of researchers to follow unanticipated leads that can potentially transform the entire nature of a project.

repeatedly use to reaffirm Bali's central role in the Indonesian struggle for independence from their European oppressors.

A second reported finding is the growing popularity among Balinese viewers of the Post-Soeharto era of live-to-air current affairs programmes and talk shows. In the new climate of relative openness, viewers are being reconstituted as active subjects engaging in discussions in real time. A media researcher watching television with an urban Balinese family relates a telling anecdote. As a Soeharto crony was being interviewed live on television, a young male member of the family called out '*Bohong!*' (Lies!) from afar. Then something remarkable happened in the studio. To the delight of the entire family, the interviewer challenged the man's version of events. Thrilled by the journalistic feat the young man hastily joined the others in front of the television screen (Nilan 2000). In addition to these shows, Balinese viewers have remained loyal to potentially critical performing arts such as televised *ludruk*, an art form originating in the proletarian theatre scene of Surabaya, in East Java (Peacock 1968) that features 'stock Indonesian historical characters' (Nilan 2000: 145).

Finally, young Balinese appear to prefer Indonesian popular music – and to a lesser extent, Malaysian, Filipino and Singaporean music as well – to Western music. As in the 'traditional' performance art forms of Bali, a great deal of hybrid experimentation takes place in pan-Indonesian music, resulting in mixed genres such as *ska dangdut*, *rap dangdut*, *Indo trash*, *kecap rap*, and *bhangra* (Nilan 2000: 123, 133-9). There is nothing new here. In the 1930s and 1940s, as the Dutch indigenised their colonial administration to curtail nationalist advances across the Archipelago (A. Hobart et al 1996), hybrid performance art forms were developing from the admixture of Malay and Balinese elements, e.g. *kebyar* music, *stamboel* plays, and *janger* dances. In recent years, scholars have identified many such hybridities in the Balinese past (e.g. Vickers 1996). It is significant that today *kebyar* is seen by non-Balinese and migrant Balinese alike as a typically Balinese art form (Hughes-Freeland 1998: 50). That said, further research is needed to document and explain the popularity of Indonesian music both home and abroad (see below)

Comparing popular media in Sarawak and Bali

It should be clear by now that both conditions on the ground and differing research agendas in Bali (with its network of television researchers) and Sarawak (a lone researcher working on a range of media) has led investigators in very different directions. We can nevertheless compare and contrast the two sets of findings by looking out for links, as in the following four contrasts:

1. *Whilst the radio and print media project of a modern Iban high culture was aborted by Kuala Lumpur in the mid-1970s, Bali's regional television continues to produce a range of audiovisual forms of Balinese 'high culture'.*

This contrast raises the question of the relationship between media policy and the sustainability of subnational ethnic cultures. A number of anthropologists have investigated and celebrated the creative way in which indigenous groups, such as Brazilian Indians, Canadian Inuit or Australian Aborigines, are resisting state and market encroachment by means of video, television and other media technologies

(e.g. Turner 1992, Perrot 1992, Ginsburg 1994). I think we should go beyond celebration and subscribe to Gellner's (1983) robust thesis that the formation of modern nation-states from the 19th century onwards created spaces of conflict over the production of, and access to, the new nation's 'literate high culture'. However much postmodern media theorists insist on dethroning literacy and printed knowledge in order to celebrate popular, oral or indigenous culture in their myriad forms, the truth is that without a robust educational system – universally based on literacy and numeracy – a cultural system is unsustainable in today's international economy.

The ethnographic question then arises: To what extent is the Balinese language developing into modern language of education, administration and commerce? Are Balinese children being educated in Indonesian? If so, how are school textbooks and their associated classroom practices shaping their worldview? In Sarawak, I discovered an extraordinary convergence of moral and political ideals cutting across seemingly diverse media practices, e.g. school essay-writing, television commentary, and longhouse speech-making. I have termed such convergence an 'ideolect', that is a local 'dialect' of Malaysia's modernist ideology. It would be interesting to map Bali's major ideolects and compare them to those in Sarawak. Are Balinese ideolects becoming progressively linked to an emerging Standard Balinese Ideolect (cf. Standard Balinese Language in A. Hobart et al 1996), itself linked to a nationwide modernist ideology? Until Balinese media researchers link their television findings to those pertaining to the print media (including school textbooks and the daily press), radio, and other relevant media, we shall not have answers to these questions. We do know from Kitley (2000: 13-4) that in the 1980s TVRI's nationwide audience was variously conceived as a nation, a family and as being infantile. We also know that regional dialects and accents were parodied on TVRI. These reports are however, to the best of my knowledge, yet to be linked to historical media reception research in Bali.

On the other hand, perhaps we should acknowledge the universal bond between orality and sociality. Could orality be a much better transmitter of cultural knowledge than we literate moderns tend to think? The Balinese Television Project is an unmistakably Western academic attempt at salvage anthropology through new technological means. But on what grounds can we justify salvaging knowledge that was designed to be perishable? It is noteworthy that Creese (2000) decries the loss of irreplaceable materials as staff at RTVI Bali tape over old recordings in order to reduce costs. She was also struck by her having to rely on oral research methods to investigate events and materials that should have been properly documented. I encountered similar frustrating problems at RTM Kuching. Yet on reflection this phenomenon is hardly restricted to the 'developing world'. Take G. Born's (1997) ethnography of an artificial intelligence (AI) research centre in Paris. Born discovered that AI software designers often could not decipher their own programmes – some of them seemingly as intricate as coral reefs -- as they had failed to keep a record of their progress. Frequently younger AI designers had to fall back on two ancient human achievements – orality and sociality – to extract precious half-forgotten knowledge from their elders. F. Ginsburg (1998) came across similar obstacles when researching the history of visual anthropology, for these highly technical scholars had recorded little of their common history down the decades! So orality and sociality are here to stay. The question now is how to compare the unique entanglements of orality,

literacy, numeracy, and visuality to be found across human organisations and localities in Southeast Asia.

2. *In the post-Soeharto era, Balinese viewers are actively participating in 'free' current affairs programmes. No such audience participation is taking place in Sarawak under Mahathir.*

For most of 1997 I was living in a Saribas longhouse. This was a critical year for Sarawak. In addition to the regionwide financial collapse, this territory experienced a coxsackie-B epidemic, a thick 'haze' caused by huge forest fires in neighbouring Kalimantan, and an outbreak of Dayak headhunting also in Kalimantan. Yet the Malaysian government's media apparatus managed to deftly 'guide' the rural population through each crisis (Postill 2000, chapter 5).

Most of my informants were startled at the severity of the troubles (excepting the headhunting, which passed unnoticed owing to a government blackout – I only learnt of it through friends in Spain!). After all, Sarawak Iban have grown accustomed to thinking of Malaysia as a haven of peace and economic progress. In contrast, the world beyond Malaysia (*menua tasik*) is described in conversation as a realm of hunger, war and chaos. This picture is reinforced day after day by the structure of the news bulletins and selection of news items both on radio and television (Postill 2000, chapter 5). Earlier I retold the anecdote of the post-Soeharto urban Balinese youth who shouted 'Lies!' at a television interviewee and was rewarded, as it were, with a courageous journalistic performance. An Iban anecdote will illustrate the conspicuous *absence* of an equivalent public sphere connecting Sarawak longhouses to the urban Malaysian corridors of power and knowledge⁶. I was once watching a news conference on Malaysian television with an elderly longhouse resident. The spotlight was on a senior police officer defending his force from malicious rumours. Almost involuntarily, in the customary manner of the European social democrat, I reacted like the Balinese youth and accused the man of lying: *Bula!* I cried. Now, this is a severe accusation to make in Iban country. My elderly companion was astonished. How could he possibly be lying? He was on television! Over the next few weeks I brought up the issue of media credibility with other residents, both old and young. Most responses were very similar. They amounted to the recognition that lying on camera is a highly unlikely action for a senior figure, since the liar would be immediately prosecuted.

Most rural Iban viewers have no autonomous critical space to repair to when making sense of mainstream media reports. Their idelect is far too *informed* by official ideals and images for them to 'step out' and challenge the official line. And even if they were to challenge a report, they would lack the discursive space to articulate a sustained critique. Ien Ang (1985) has made a similar case for Dutch fans of the US soap opera *Dallas*. Surrounded by articulate people who claimed to despise American 'trash culture', these consumers could not find the words to express their enjoyment of *Dallas*. It will be interesting to study the evolution of a longhouse public sphere should Indonesian-style current affairs programmes be introduced in Malaysia in the post-Mahathir era. In any case, this contrast is further proof of how contemporary

⁶ On the importance of absent phenomena to comparative studies, see Goody 1997.

worldviews – here in connection to ‘the state of the world’ -- in Sarawak and Bali are being shaped by national agendas rather than by ‘deterritorialised’ representations.

3. *The Dayak culture industry has diversified with the emergence of two distinct production centres: Kuching (official culture) and Sibu (pop culture). Balinese media researchers are silent on the question of cultural geography.*

Fredrik Barth (1993), a latecomer to Balinese anthropology, has bemoaned the marginalisation of North Bali from ethnographic accounts of ‘Balinese society’. This suggests Balinese television researchers in Bali may have failed to address a North-South divide in the history of Balinese media. Another clue comes from Vickers’s (1996) book *Being Modern in Bali*. In the 1920s and 1930s, says Vickers, North Bali became the centre of Dutch educational efforts on the island. Having been initially reluctant, the local aristocrats now began to send their children to Dutch schools. At a later stage also commoners in both North and South would find advantages in schooling not only as a way of securing bureaucratic jobs, but also as a source of thinking leading to mystical insight (*budi*). North Bali was the centre for the spread of modern ideas, and the challenge to the notion of caste was launched from here. Learned North Balinese used Malay, a language whose scribes had a long-standing presence in the area, which was part of the sprawling *Pasisir* civilisation of the Indies (Vickers 1996: 17-8). Taking into account the modern history of Sarawak where some areas – notably Kuching and the Saribas – had an early developmental start compared to the remote interior, one is led to ask to what extent the 20th century history of Balinese media has been shaped by the North-South divide. According to A. Hobart et al (1996: 219-224) South Bali has become an international fashion and arts centre thanks to the unique synergies resulting from the interaction of creative Balinese and Westerners. No such claims are made for North Bali.

Another neglected aspect of the North-South divide is reception. Nilan (2000: 120) reports that in North Bali (Singaraja) viewers can only receive TVRI and RCTI with a satellite dish, while Denpasar viewers, in South Bali, have no difficulties receiving TVRI, RCTI, SCTV, ANTEVE, TIPI and Indosiar. She does not, however, develop this point further.

What we need is a detailed map comparing the cultural media geography of Sarawak and Bali. An exemplary recent study along these lines is Allen J. Scott’s (2000) *The Cultural Economy of Cities*. Scott, a geographer and policy adviser at UCLA, compares the culture industries of Paris and Los Angeles, with a fruitful aside in Bangkok. Mapping the cultural economy of a given territory – whether a city, a province or a nation-state -- is a healthy corrective to the contemporary tendency among social theorists to overstress processes of ‘deterritorialisation’ and global migration. The truth is that contemporary human populations are anchored to a national territory. Indeed, according to the latest EU statistics, a negligible 0.2% of Europeans moved to another EU state in 2001. This is despite the legal right of EU members to freely relocate to any EU country of their choice. In the UK, for instance, a majority of the population live within an hour’s journey time from their parents, while 72% of grandparents see their grandchildren at least on a weekly basis. These data point at a low degree of intergenerational mobility and a concomitant high degree of sedentarism (Morley 2000: 14). Lifelong investment in social relations, cultural skills, employment, training, property, etc, combined with a host of legal, linguistic,

and economic barriers preventing international migration, ensures that most people remain in their countries of origin for life.

A more promising research avenue than ‘deterritorialisation’ open to media scholars is what I call the *differential mobility* of people, media artefacts and media representations *within a national territory*. The long overdue rapprochement of media and transport studies, two artificially separated research areas, would certainly aid this line of inquiry.

4. *Young Balinese appear to favour Indonesian over Western music. Similarly, young Iban seem to prefer Malaysian and Iban music (Sibu pop). Further research on the subject is needed.*

Another missing dimension in the comparative study of Southeast Asian media is the problem of cultural diffusion. To what degree are the media spreading certain representations, ideas, beliefs, etc? What are the allied social, cognitive and emotional processes of institutionalisation at work? Debra Spitulnik’s (1996, 2000) research on Zambian radio broadcasting is pioneering in its attention to the differential mobility of media discourse and media artefacts, namely radio sets. The widespread diffusion of certain genres or commodities and low or non-diffusion of others – in this case, the low diffusion of American popular music throughout Insular Southeast Asia – demands theoretical models yet to be devised. Dan Sperber’s (1996) epidemiology of representations, an attempt at adapting tools from epidemiology to the study of culture, is still awaiting media applications (see Boyer 2000, Whitehouse 2001). In a forthcoming paper I test Sperber’s model on the spread and localisation of the Dayak Festival from Kuching to other parts of Sarawak that started in the 1960s.

Conclusion

The comparative study of popular media in Sarawak and Bali would benefit from a closer inspection of the cultural geography, cultural epidemics, and inter-medial links obtaining in both territories. In this paper I have suggested some possible lines of inquiry while arguing for the continued centrality of nation-states to the understanding of media and cultural change in the contemporary international order. Balinese and Sarawakians are not being washed away by global waves of technological innovation. If anything, old and new media technologies are strengthening their bonds with fellow provincials and nationals. These bonds are increasingly mediated by national social agents (both human and non-human) based in cultural growth areas such as Sibu, Kuching, Jakarta or South Bali. There are no signs that the cultural boundaries separating Indonesia from Malaysia are becoming blurred. The opposite would seem to be the case, but only future cross-border research will tell.

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