

The development of sustainable propaganda

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-Abstract-

In order to succeed, state propaganda has to become a sustainable form of development. The evidence for this thesis comes from two periods in the history of Malaysia: the Malayan Emergency (1948-60) and the post-WWII history of Sarawak until the events of 1998. In both cases, a host of propaganda techniques and actions were skilfully used by the British and postcolonial authorities to win over a divided population. Following Ramakrishna, this paper shows that media campaigns are, by themselves, useless. Sustainable propaganda must also entail tangible social and economic development -- that is, words must be backed up with deeds. A related finding is that propaganda is best sustained through a combination of mediated and unmediated practices. In the rural Sarawak (Iban) case mediated practices included radio broadcasts, school lessons, longhouse speeches, timed rituals and daily gossip. Over time, the line separating state and longhouse propaganda became blurred and eventually disappeared. The paper closes with some general reflections on propaganda as a form of cultural epidemic (Sperber) concomitant with processes of nation- and state-building.

In May-June 2003 I was in Peninsular Malaysia carrying out some preliminary work on municipal politics and the Internet. One of the people I interviewed was a Malay development professional. When I asked him about the viability of the myriad IT pilot projects launched in Malaysia, he replied along the lines of: 'Well, not worried about sustainability-lah. Rural peoples will catch up. When bombard them with IT propaganda already doing sustainable development, isn't it'. I found this idea of propaganda as a form of sustainable development very intriguing. Indeed soon after that interview I coined the term 'sustainable propaganda'. Unfortunately, a google search revealed that the term had already been minted by a German artist¹, proving once again that science always trails behind art.

Another source of inspiration for this paper is an excellent book by a Singaporean scholar named Ramakrishna. The book, published in 2002, is titled *Emergency Propaganda: The Winning of Malayan Hearts and Minds 1948-1958*. Ramakrishna rethinks previous studies of the Emergency. According to these, the British won the hearts and minds of Malayan Chinese guerrillas through a combination of effective propaganda, the massive resettlement of rural Chinese in 'New Villages', and small-unit military action. To Ramakrishna, there are a number of problems with these assumptions. First, they tend to conceal two very distinct groups under the blanket term 'Chinese'. Whereas for educated urban Chinese the question of achieving citizenship rights was of paramount importance, what the Chinese peasantry desperately needed were tangible improvements to their economic lot. To persuade the ethnic Chinese as a whole to accept the proposed Malayan Union, the British would need to send very different messages to the urban educated from those intended for the rural masses. Eventually, the British succeeded on both fronts, but not before a lengthy – and costly – struggle, as is painstakingly documented in the book.

A second shortcoming in previous work on the Emergency, says Ramakrishna (2002: 12-17), is the idea that propaganda refers merely to radio broadcasts, printed materials and the like. For Ramakrishna, we need to broaden the concept of propaganda to encompass non-discursive forms such as the behaviour of leaders, the creation of new settlements, and even events that have unintended effects on the target audience. In

¹ See the project 'Sustainable Propaganda' (Nachhaltige Propaganda) by Oliver Ressler, who is highly critical of the notion of 'sustainable development', at www.jdkj.

other words, in order to be effective, words and images must be backed up with deeds. In this respect, the communist leadership in Malaya failed miserably. From the outset they departed from Mao's teachings, which were curiously similar to those held by the British. While the British generally avoided broadcasting outright lies, the guerrilla leaders sought to control their rank and file through manipulation, deception, and intimidation.

According to Ramakrishna, the key criterion to distinguish propaganda from non-propaganda is therefore neither intentionality nor means of communication nor truthfulness, but rather *relevance*. He gives the example of someone who wants to buy a car. This person will ignore the classifieds on vacuum cleaners and go directly to the car section. The section on vacuum cleaners, however colourful, is irrelevant to her present concerns. Likewise, during the Malayan Emergency propaganda items on the promised granting of citizenship to the Chinese would have been largely irrelevant to a peasant audience but highly relevant to the urban intelligentsia. Emergency propaganda, then, succeeded because it was truthful, relevant and supported by deeds.

Sustainable propaganda in Sarawak

I wish to take Ramakrishna's Emergency insights and apply them to a longer historical period in a different part of what today is Malaysia: the Borneo state of Sarawak. How applicable are these ideas about propaganda to the development of modern Sarawak as it achieved 'independence through Malaysia' in 1963? What happens when propaganda, as I believe is the case in Sarawak, becomes 'part of the culture'? How does propaganda spread and become appropriated?

I shall focus on the Iban of Sarawak with whom I carried out fieldwork into media and nation-building in 1996-8. In the early days of European conquest, the Iban (formerly Sea Dayaks) were renowned for their headhunting exploits but turned to cash cropping and waged labour in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Sather 1994). Sprawled over a vast territory where roads are still rare, most rural Iban still live today in longhouses built by navigable rivers. Although their longhouses are, in a sense, 'villages under one roof' they are far from being communistic dwellings, for they

consist of separate apartments (*bilik*) privately owned by nuclear families. These families are known in the anthropological literature as *bilik*-families (Freeman 1970).

After a few months studying Iban media-related practices in the field, I discovered a marked contrast. On the one hand, I recorded a great diversity of such practices, including radio listening, watching television, using clocks and wristwatches, reading school textbooks, giving longhouse speeches through public-address systems, celebrating the Dayak Festival, and speaking over the telephone. On the other hand, each geographical area appeared to have a highly consistent, uniform local ideology. I call these local ideologies ‘ideolects’², that is parochial derivations of nationwide ideologies, in this case Malaysia’s modernist nationalism. For example, in the Saribas (Betong) area where I carried out the bulk of fieldwork, the local ideolect has a number of core ideals such as:

- national unity and diversity
- the blending of tradition (*adat*) and development (*pemansang*)
- respect towards one’s elders
- peace (achieved through military defence)
- physical endurance (*tan*) in men
- physical beauty in women
- book knowledge for all

Although there are some interesting variations in how the ideolect is reproduced depending on the social occasion, medium, and person’s gender, age, and so on, the core ideals cut across all these distinctions. Let us take the example of an established media practice: school essay writing. I asked two Iban language teachers to set a number of optional essay questions to their secondary school pupils. The pupils could choose to write about their hobbies, career dreams, favourite TV programmes or a well-known governmental slogan: Vision 2020 – the ideal of a fully developed Malaysia by 2020. In the following paragraph I have translated and summarised ideals extracted from among the 64 essays collected (Postill 2000, chapter 5). This

² My proposed term -- ‘ideolect’ -- is not to be confused with the well-established linguistic notion of ‘idiolect’, that is an individual’s idiosyncratic way of speaking a given language.

imaginary paragraph captures the moral certainties derived from years of joint school, longhouse, and mass media indoctrination.

OUR IDEOLECT

Everyone should have a goal in life. All human beings must go to school and study very hard so that they can one day become worthy persons, persons who know the difference between right and wrong. Books make us intelligent. Do not waste time, for 'Time is Gold'. We Iban are not as developed as other races like the Malays or the Chinese. We Iban children should unite to develop our country by the year 2020. Our nation must be protected from troublemakers arriving from foreign countries. Those of us from the new generation who manage to achieve a higher status should not be arrogant towards our elders. We should respect and support our parents and all the other adults who helped us while we were still at school.

I could provide similar instances of these key political ideals extracted from school textbooks, longhouse speeches, gossip, or television commentary. But how sustainable are these indigenous ideolects in a rapidly developing Malaysia? I would say that they are extremely sustainable. This can be seen in rural Iban responses to national and regional crises. In 1997 a series of crises affected directly the lives of people across central and northern Borneo. There was a mysterious Cossackie-B epidemic, a more familiar outbreak of dengue fever, gigantic forest fires billowing thick clouds of 'haze', the collapse of financial markets throughout Asia, and the return of widespread headhunting to Indonesian Borneo. Rural Iban reactions to these major crises are telling. A general sense of bewilderment enveloped the longhouses – for decades, longhouse dwellers had learnt to view the world through the frame of official radio and television. They had learnt about a rapidly developing Malaysia that was at peace with itself and its neighbours – a prosperous Malaysia that sent UN blue helmets (some of them Iban) to restore the peace in less fortunate countries. The world beyond Malaysia was mired in chaos: pictures of starving African children, of chronic warfare in the Middle East, of assassinated Western leaders, said it all. One Iban woman complained to me: 'Those foreign countries, there are so many wars!'. Another said: "You white people, when you disagree with someone you just shoot

them, like you shot Kennedy”. Malaysian politicians, she added, do not even require bodyguards (see Postill 2000, chapter 5).

The televised crises of 1997, alas, revealed that all was not well with Malaysia. Yet, with minds nurtured since childhood by official ideolects, local viewers lacked autonomous spaces from which to query the official reports. It was not merely a problem of lack of access to non-governmental media. To be sure, unlike urban intellectuals, rural Iban had no direct access to the Internet, or to foreign in-depth analyses. More significant is the fact that they are not in the habit of envisaging, let alone discussing, alternative interpretations of events to those presented by the governmental media. Gradually, as the crises eased, rural Iban returned from their initial bewilderment to a sense of normality – doubts may have arisen, but they did not find a discursive outlet. All along, the state radio and television news broadcasts presented the Prime Minister, Mahathir, and his cabinet making steady progress in overcoming the crises. Images of Malaysian helicopters flying over the border to assist the Indonesian fire fighters were repeatedly broadcast; as were speeches by Mahathir reassuring the populace that all would end well.

Ramakrishna’s broad definition of propaganda as consisting of both discursive and non-discursive elements is helpful here. Decades of sustained official propaganda – both of words and deeds – have moulded rural Iban worldviews to such an extent that the political ideals of the urban establishment have become perfectly naturalised. For instance, rural Iban have tangible evidence that studying hard can lead to a clerical job that will generate a steady income, which is exactly what they have been told for decades. The propagandists – the priests, headmen, headmasters, radio broadcasters, politicians, school children, etc – were right all along: school knowledge can be hugely important to individuals and their dependants. As a result, very few Iban parents doubt today the power of the printed word, so the vast majority of children are sent to school.

The making of Iban ideolects

To understand the sustainability of Iban propaganda, we need to ask how Iban ideolects came to be formed over the decades. One early milestone was the creation of

Radio Sarawak in 1954. Controlled by the colonial government, it was set up with the technical assistance of the BBC, and broadcast in English, Mandarin, Malay and Iban. In the 1960s the Iban Section was mobilised against the Indonesians who, under Soekarno, had opposed the creation of Malaysia in 1963. The so-called Confrontation lasted two years. In subsequent years the Iban Section was again pressed into military service to fight communist guerrillas. Some of the indigenous broadcasters were trained by the BBC in Malaya, and are said to have used psychological warfare techniques in broadcast dramas based on vernacular themes and characters³. Another milestone in the development of indigenous propaganda was the creation of the Borneo Literature Bureau in 1960, three years prior to independence. Like the Iban broadcasters, the pioneering Iban authors sought to modernise their people and defend their country while preserving the best of the Iban heritage. The Bureau published a good number of Iban books until it was taken over by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, the Malaysian agency entrusted with promoting Malay, the national language. Some urban Iban privately allege that in 1977 the agency had all the non-Malay books buried for the sake of national unity. It is said that when this mass media grave was discovered and some of the books salvaged, the authorities decided to burn the remaining materials. What had been a modest literary boom was now feeding a bonfire (Postill 2001).

It was also in 1977 that television arrived in Sarawak from West Malaysia. Early attempts at forming an East Malaysian network were thwarted by the federal government, again in the name of national unity. From this time onwards, the Bornean content of the television that Iban people watch has remained negligible. The Iban Section, now absorbed into Radio Televisyen Malaysia, still broadcasts in Iban, but vernacular radio cannot match the appeal of prime-time television. Perhaps even more important than television was the spread of rural schools from the 1960s onwards. For the first time in history, a majority of young Iban are today acquiring at least a basic school education; and this education is mediated by the language and ideology of the Malaysian state. In sum, after an earlier period of Sarawak radio and publishing, from the 1970s we can speak of a growing Malaysianisation of the media. This Malaysianisation was not an entirely alien imposition upon the pristine indigenous

³ Unfortunately, according to staff in RTM Kuching, few of the tapes have survived.

cultures of Sarawak: it renewed and extended processes of modernisation started by Europeans and their native followers in the mid-19th century. Well before the creation of Malaysia in 1963, the Iban had already been incorporated into a state with political ideals very much like those of Malaysia's late 20th century elites – ideals of progress, law and order, territorial integrity, respect towards one's elders, social justice, and so forth. The Malaysian ideology found a fertile ground in existing rural ideolects.

Migration as propaganda

This sketch of the development of Iban sustainable propaganda, focussed on media practices and institutions, would be incomplete without a consideration of a non-media practice of paramount importance: migration. Like other peoples in the Archipelago, the Iban have an old tradition of young male migration (*bejalai* or *pegi*) in search of riches and adventure (Kedit 1993). As the Sarawakian economy developed, this indigenous institution came to resemble the rural-urban migrations found in developing countries around the globe. From the 1960s onwards, large numbers of rural Iban -- both men and women – have abandoned rice farming and migrated to urban areas, timber camps, offshore oil rigs, etc, in search of wages to support their immediate families. More than any school propaganda lesson, this firsthand experience working for members of far wealthier and more powerful 'races' has taught rural Iban that status (*pangkat*) and reputation come to those with book knowledge, family riches, and the right connections (Postill 2003). Here Ramakrishna's Giddensian point about the unintended propagandistic effects of certain actions is apposite: the institution of migration has had the unintended consequence of reinforcing official propaganda surrounding the notion of 'development'. From this perspective, Iban migration is yet another form of Malaysian propaganda.

The epidemiology of nationalist propaganda

We can now move beyond the specificities of Malaysia to ask a more general anthropological question. How can we study the sustainability of propaganda in a systematic manner? I suggest the work of the cognitive anthropologist Dan Sperber may be of value here. In the mid-1990s, Sperber (1996) launched a research

programme named ‘the epidemiology of representations’ (henceforth ER). Although ER has yet to find much empirical support (Hirschfeld 2000) this programme has already shown some encouraging signs of theoretical progress (e.g. in Boyer 2000). In Sperber’s (1996: 61) original formulation, cultures are made up of ‘representations’.

A representation involves a relationship between three terms: an object is a representation *of* something, *for* some information-processing device... We shall consider representations *of* anything we please: of the environment, of fictions, of actions, representations of representations and so on, ignoring the philosophical problems this raises.

Sperber concentrates on representations *for* individual humans, although he recognises that those for other information-processing devices, e.g. computers and telephones, also affect the spread of representations (see Debray’s 1997 critique). He distinguishes two types of representations at the concrete level of ‘physical objects located in time and space’:

[T]here are representations internal to the information-processing device – *mental representations*; and there are representations external to the device and which the device can process as inputs – that is, *public representations* (1996: 61).

ER studies how causal chains of representations come to be distributed within a human population. When a given representation spreads and fades away rapidly, e.g. a fashion or a short-lived propaganda item, it constitutes an epidemic. Should it, however, spread slowly and be transmitted down the generations, it then becomes endemic to a population; in other words, a cultural tradition. Humans are no mere copiers of representations (*pace* Blackmore 1999), they *re*-produce representations anew. Because human beings transform new information as they process it, ER has to explain the relative stabilisation of certain representations and not others. Put differently, where genetics has to explain exceedingly rare mutations, ER has to do the opposite: explain the low mutation rates of enduring representations. What is it about certain grammatical or institutional forms *and the evolved human brain*, asks Sperber, that allows for the stabilisation of those forms? Likewise, we may ask, what is it about certain forms of propaganda, both discursive and non-discursive, that makes them more sustainable than competing forms? For Sperber, in the course of

evolution humans have developed cognitive dispositions and susceptibilities that shape the kinds of representations they acquire. One example already mentioned is grammar; another, more controversial, is religious beliefs. To Pascal Boyer (2000: 196), who works within the ER programme, religious beliefs are not widespread because they sustain the social order (Durkheim) or because they address fundamental human needs (Tylor). Instead they spread and stabilise because they are easy to understand, recall, and communicate (in other words, they are cost-efficient to their bearers). Many of these beliefs are partly in accordance with our intuitive (innate) ontology and partly violate it, e.g. a spirit is attributed a human-like mind (it has intentions, volition, wishes, etc) but can also violate our intuitive physical laws pertaining to humans when it flies away (Boyer 2000: 197). It is this mixture of the mysterious and the familiar that grants religious beliefs their perennial appeal – they are ‘relevant mysteries’ (Sperber 1996: 73) that can never be solved. Recall that Ramakrishna also stresses the importance of relevance with regard to propaganda.

Applying the ER model to propaganda, I wish to propose that *propaganda becomes sustainable when it colonises a population’s institutions without destroying them*. Following Sperber’s usage (1996: 76), I will define ‘institution’ as a complex set of representations, for instance a school lesson, a ritual or a sport. Pre-empting accusations that his ER programme may not be able to cope with the complexities of institutions, Sperber argues that institutions ‘include representations of the way in which the set should be distributed’. An institution, therefore, is ‘the distribution of a set of representations belonging to the set itself’. Sperber gives the example of the Malinowski Memorial Lecture, an annual lecture held at the London School of Economics to honour the memory of the founding father of British social anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski.

A representation was put on paper when the Lecture was first instituted; unwritten additions were made in the course of time. This representation calls for the yearly distribution of invitations, to a speaker on the one hand, to an audience on the other; it represents the speaker distributing to the audience the complex representation called a lecture; it represents the lecturer including in his lecture some deferential references to Malinowski; it represents the lecturer ending the oral representation after an hour or so, so that the, by then, thirsty audience can go for a drink. It represents the lecturer, a few weeks later, submitting a written version of

his oral representation to the journal *Man*, thus ensuring a wider, more lasting distribution of it. When all these representations have been distributed *according to one of them*, then you have... a Malinowski Memorial Lecture (Sperber 1996: 76, my emphasis)⁴.

So the institution of the Malinowski Memorial Lecture consists of the distribution of a set of representations belonging to the Lecture. These representations are supported by computer print-outs, letters, verbal exchanges, and other media. Crucially, the sustainability of the Lecture depends on the continuity of a master representation, namely the oral descendant of a founding document stating the Lecture's mode of distribution. Similarly, maintaining the institution of Malaysia – a 1960s creation – requires the regular distribution of a (massive) set of representations through a range of supporting media. The equivalent source document (i.e. representation) to the Malinowski example would be the Malaysian Constitution. Down the decades, the institution 'Malaysia' has colonised all significant Iban institutions, from formal learning to weddings and funerals, through a myriad channels of distribution. In the 1960s, the institution 'Malaysia' spread like an epidemic on both sides of the South China Sea. By the 1990s, it was endemic to the entire population contained within the country's borders. The complex set of representations (i.e. institution) known as 'Malaysia' not only *relies on* propaganda for its sustainability – in a crucial sense, it *is* propaganda.

⁴ This approach is strikingly reminiscent of Godelier's (1986: 14) earlier call to anthropologists that they use their 'theoretical imagination to penetrate the black box of those mechanisms which govern the distribution of the same representations among social groups with partially or profoundly opposed interests' (quoted in Couldry 2003: 14).

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