

Culture and international imagination in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Using methods developed within cognitive anthropology, we examine the relationship between particular national discourses, cultural concepts and subjective ideas about the international system of nation-states referred to colloquially as countries in English, *negara* in Indonesian and *prathet* in Thai. The analysis is based on data collected among university students in Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand. Broadly speaking, Indonesian, Singaporean and Thai university students share a similar domain of “countries” and similar understanding of what a country is, but they differ in important respects in the descriptive language and cultural schemata they deploy in thinking about this domain. The study has implications for debates on the status of culture in social theory and geography and for the future of regional integration in Southeast Asia.

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Geographers, historians, anthropologists and others have written extensively in recent years about the role of culture and imaginative geographies in spatial practices and place-based identities. Most research in this area focuses on discourses through which geographic imaginings

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are produced and reproduced, embodied in such diverse media as postcards, schoolbooks, literature, television, maps, money, and personal narratives (e.g. Clifford, 1997; Kahn, 2000; Raento, Hämäläinen, Ikonen, & Mikkonen, 2004; Suwannathat-Pian, 2003; Thongchai, 1994; Thompson, 2002; Tolentino, 2001; Unwin & Hewitt, 2001; Williams, 1973). These studies have argued that our understanding of places and relationships between places at various scales, from cities and villages (Bunnell, 2002a; Thompson, 2004) to high-tech investment zones (Bunnell, 2002b) to national “geo-bodies” (Thongchai, 1994), are shaped by discursive practices and cultural concepts, such as divergent and shifting definitions of Central Europe or *Mitteleuropa* (Hagen, 2003) or an imagined Orient (Said, 1979).

This body of work has drawn significant relationships between, for example, historical events, political-economic practices, and geographic discourses. An often taken-for-granted and somewhat more difficult empirical question is the relationship of cultural concepts and discursive practices to individual subjective ideas about geographies and places. In a recent commentary, Sidaway et al. (2004) have illustrated the distinctive geographies implicit in such languages as Portuguese, Spanish, Malay, Korean, Japanese, Urdu, and Thai. Theoretically, these differences would be reflected in different ways of thinking and acting by subjects operating within those linguistic (and more generally cultural) frameworks. However, the extent to which this is the case is still an open and debated question within anthropology, linguistics and related fields.¹ Some anthropologists have argued, for example, that a different lexicon does not correlate with a demonstrably different way of thinking about a particular domain of ideas or experience.² We seek to address this question in the present article. In other words, can we demonstrate a relationship between divergent discourses, cultural concepts, and the ways in which different people actually think about the world?

This study draws on techniques that cognitive anthropologists have developed in order to assess the relative universality or cultural particularity of human reasoning in relationship to semantic domains (domains of meaning), such as emotions, kinship terms, and concepts of health and illness (e.g. Moore, Romney, Hsia, & Rusch, 1999; Romney & Moore, 1998, 2001; Romney, Boyd, Moore, Batchelder, & Brazill, 1996; Weller & Baer, 2001). A semantic domain is “an organized set of words, concepts, or sentences, all at the same level of contrast, that jointly refer to a single conceptual sphere” (Weller & Romney, 1988:9; see also Spradley, 1979:100–105). In our research, we applied these techniques to an explicitly geographic domain of “countries.”

The term “countries” is part of what Akzin (1964) described as a terminological jungle (see also Lodén, 1996; Smith, 1998; Guibernau & Montserrat, 1999). Countries, nations, states, nation-states, and similar terms are differentiated in scholarly disciplines and multifarious everyday contexts. We do not discount the importance of this complexity. At the same time, the students among whom we did our research have a demonstrably similar and clear understanding of “countries” (English), “*negara*” (Indonesian) and “*prathet*” (Thai) as a domain of what most scholars would call “territorially defined sovereign nation-states.” Our analysis is of

¹ As Sidaway et al. (2004:footnote 1) note, this debate relates to the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” in anthropology and linguistics, which argues for a strong relationship between language and cognitive processes, i.e. the language one has to talk about the world strongly shapes the ways in which one thinks about the world (for reviews of the hypothesis see Gumperz & Levinson, 1996; Lucy 1992a, 1992b; Pinxten, 1976).

² Examples include classic work on color lexicons by Berlin and Kay (for a review, see Lucy, 1992a:178) and more recent studies of emotion terms in comparative contexts (e.g. Romney et al., 1997; Rusch, 2004).

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