

**Comments on John Postill's paper: Media Anthropology in a World of States,
introductory chapter to Media and Nation Building: How the Iban Became
Malaysian.**

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John Postill's chapter, 'Media Anthropology in a World of States', is an introduction to his forthcoming book, *Media and Nation-Building: How the Iban Became Malaysian*. Being true to the work it needs to perform setting the stage for a longer manuscript, the chapter offers the requisite ground (or throat?) – clearing around a number of key topics that are central to his work. These include a plea to rehabilitate concepts that have fallen out of academic favor such as 'cultural diffusion', 'nation-building' (as opposed to the perfectly sensible and useful concept of 'nation-making' which Rob Foster coined in 1997 to describe what was happening in the newly independent Papua New Guinea); as well as Postill's concern to place his own work within the relatively recent genealogy of what he calls "media anthropology", a term which he makes capacious (as do most of us in the field) to include a broad range of media including: varieties of print media such as Iban-language indigenous literature followed by Malaysian state propaganda and textbooks; radio and television broadcasts as well as the incorporation of TV sets as actual media of exchange; and, echoing Benedict Anderson's work, the effect of the introduction of technologies of timekeeping such as watches, clocks, and calendars along with the uniform scheduling of national radio, and the invented tradition of The Dayak Festival which has become 'an integral part of Malaysia's nation-building project', reversing its originary intention as a form of resistance to British colonists on the part of Native intellectuals. The depth and breadth of the work promised here are exactly what we hoped would emerge as more anthropologists recognize the epistemological value of training an ethnographic eye on media in their research.

In the meanwhile, I do want to take issue with the "straw man" of prior work that Postill suggests he writes against,, questioning in particular "the present celebration of creative appropriation of media forms", as if that were the predominant framework deployed by those carrying out ethnographic/ethnological studies of media. Indeed, I write this as one of the co-editors (with Lila Abu Lughod and Brian Larkin) of the relatively recent collection Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain, a project that grew out of our "corridor talk" in which it became clear that while all three of us studied media, the relationship of our work to various socio-political formations -- which ranged from social movements to "nation-building" projects – traversed a broad swath of anthropological terrain. Our concern, then, was to show that ethnographic studies of media incorporated a range of research strategies and conceptual camps, and to give some order to the variety of work, indicated by the section titles offered in the book: 1) Cultural Activism and Minority Claims; 2) The Cultural Politics of Nation-States; 3) Transnational Circuits; 4) The Social Sites of Production; 5) The Social Life of Technology. I repeat them here not to be self-serving but to remind Postill and readers of this list that far from repudiating work that addresses the kinds of activities he subsumes

under 'nation-building' or 'cultural diffusion', we sought to demonstrate that these are part of a range of a substantial foci of contemporary work that must always look at media in the particular socio-political formations of which they are a part. If Abu-Lughod, for example, found 'negotiated' or even 'resistant' readings of state-sponsored Egyptian melodramas among peasants in Upper Egypt or domestic servants in Cairo, this is not because she is determined to find a version of 'creative appropriation' but rather because she wanted to understand the efficacy of the Egyptian state's televisual efforts to unify and 'make modern' its citizens. Postill apparently found different results with the Iban of Sarawak in relation to the efforts of the Malaysian state. They have, he argues, become thoroughly Malaysianized through the efforts of state-sponsored media, though their cooperation seems to have been apparently accomplished with some violence as he notes that in an earlier moment, "it is alleged that the federal authorities burnt and buried virtually all vernacular books. He also notes that Malaysia's success is distinctive in an era of "failed states".

Rather than misrecognize prior efforts to define the field, or to shoehorn other work into the rubric that works for his case, I would encourage Postill to work with those of us who are attempting to grasp the range of ways that media are being taken up (or imposed) in many different sites of cultural production. Alas, the tantalizing hints of what's to come in Postill's book – which looks excellent -- make up only a small portion of the chapter offered; to properly engage with the work, one would want to have more of that material to read, as a way of better measuring the interventions Postill makes on the theoretical field. I will certainly want to buy the book to find out more!