John Postill. *Media and Nation Building: How the Iban Became Malaysian.* Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2006. xiv + 2231 pp. $27.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-84545-135-6.

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John Postill's book, *Media and Nation Building,* provides a bold attempt at revitalizing a field of study left abandoned for decades--that of the role of the media in nation building. After being one of the central concepts of the Anglophone and especially U.S. social science literatures during the early Cold War years, nation building was wiped out of mainstream academic vocabulary and increasingly replaced by notions of globalization, transnationalism, and, more recently, cosmopolitanism. The post-Cold War wave of nation building across Eastern Europe has stimulated a cautious revival of nation-building theory in some branches of the social sciences. Postill's work extends this effort to the discipline of anthropology and, more specifically, to the research area he refers to as media anthropology. It is worth noting right away, however, that the prominence of "nation building" in the title is somewhat misleading: readers with backgrounds in social and political theory may be disappointed that the book engages primarily with traditions and debates within anthropology and only marginally touches on existing debates on nation building. That said, Postill's book will provide a stimulating read to anyone interested in the broad field of nationalism studies. It can serve as one of the crucial building blocks that hopefully will lead, through further comparative research, to the development of a better understanding of the role of media in nation-building processes.

The study focuses on one aspect of state-led nation building only--that related to media--and explores its effectiveness among a single Malaysian ethnic group, namely the Iban living in the largest of Malaysian states, Sarawak, on the island of Borneo. The rich materials informing the book have been gathered over a total of eighteen months of multisided field research in Sarawak between 1996 and 2001. Malaysia is, according to Postill, a clear case of successful nation building: an amalgam of three former British colonies, it inherited a deeply divided multiethnic population, a weak economy, and disputed borders, yet managed to overcome all these obstacles and is now a stable, prosperous nation-state. One of the crucial contributing factors to Malaysia's success, argues Postill, was the state-led process of nation building managed through various forms of media. The book demonstrates the Malaysianization of the Iban by examining an impressive and ingeniously chosen array of media. It starts by examining the usual suspects, providing an overview of state-sponsored print and radio production aimed at preserving Iban cultural heritage in the early years of Malaysia's independence (chapter 3), as well as the subsequent state-led Malaysianization of the media in Sarawak, including the rise of

Malay-language national television and the ensuing marginalization of Iban-language media (chapter 4). The remainder of the book, however, explores less familiar ventures, including school essays and official speeches given at local events (chapter 5); literacy (chapter 6); the use of the media as material objects (chapter 7); the introduction of clock-and-calendar time and the associated media of timekeeping such as wristwatches, clocks and calendars (chapter 8); and, finally, the ritual uses of the media within the context of the Dayak Festival (chapter 9). This broad scope alone makes Postill's study a refreshing alternative to standard examinations of the media and nationalism--with a handful of bright exceptions--that tend to focus on a single medium only, usually print, radio, television, film or (more recently) internet.[1] It is precisely this broad approach that perhaps deserves most attention among media and communication scholars interested in issues of nationalism, collective identity, and related phenomena.

The conceptual merits of the book are less easy to pinpoint. This is partly due to the fact that the theoretical terrain charted is vast and disparate, perhaps too disparate to produce a coherent, readily identifiable outcome. The opening chapter alone covers a broad field: it begins with a brief consideration of the concepts of nation and nation building; it then sketches some of the trends in mass communication research, the main lines of inquiry in the field of media anthropology, and the trends in media research in Malaysia; and it concludes with an attempt to rehabilitate some of the classic anthropological concepts, including cultural diffusion and culture areas. The argumentative threads established in this first chapter alone probably could have provided a complex enough theoretical framework. Yet, rather than elaborating these initial threads, subsequent chapters open additional lines of inquiry--all of them interesting in their own right, but ulti-

mately detracting from the overall coherence of the book.

In spite of this, one can identify a common thread running through most of Postill's theoretical arguments. This thread consists of a revisionist thrust (for want of a better word): the author mostly chooses to criticize what he sees as recent theoretical developments, and pleads for a re-consideration of older, largely jettisoned, and discredited concepts. Within the academic publishing industry, which is increasingly propelled by a relentless discovering of new intellectual fashions, this is a commendable effort. Yet, at least in some cases, Postill allows the theoretical pendulum to swing too far back into the direction of old approaches, unnecessarily jettisoning perfectly workable newer ones. Although his declared aim is to reconcile these different methods, the main thrust of the book remains primarily pinned on asserting the validity of old ones. His discussion of Benedict Anderson's much used (and misused) concept of the nation as an "imagined community" provides a telling example.[2] Postill quite rightly points out that the widespread application of Anderson's concept feeds primarily on its emphasis on imagination, while failing to take into account Anderson's emphasis on the material aspects that gave rise to, and helped maintain, such imagined communities (pp. 14-16). Yet this leads Postill to call for an abandonment of the concept as such, and for its replacement with the concept of culture areas. Malaysia, he concludes, "is no imagined community; it is a lived-in world, a mediated community of practice" (p. 194). The problem is that such a solution only continues to perpetuate the widespread misinterpretation of Anderson's theory, based on the mistaken notion that if we acknowledge the imagined character of nations, we automatically deny, or at least overlook, their material reality.

If he retained the concept of nations as imagined communities, Postill also could have solved, easily, the riddle addressed in the concluding chap-

ter of his book--namely the fact that the Malaysian nation does not entirely fit Anthony Smith's definition of the nation as "a named human population which shares myths and memories, a mass public culture, a designated homeland, economic unity, and equal rights and duties for all members."[3] While the Malaysian nation certainly shares myths and memories, a mass public culture, a homeland, and is also economically unified, its members do not enjoy equal rights and duties; instead, a sharp divide persists between the country's dominant ethnic group, the Malays, whose members have control over all major political, military and media institutions, and other ethnic groups, including the Iban. Furthermore, Malaysia's substantial "non-indigenous" communities, including the Chinese and Indians, enjoy considerably fewer rights than "indigenous" ones. Evidently the Malaysian nation was imagined--and then institutionalized and materialized as a culture area--in a different way than the kinds of nations Smith had in mind when developing his definition; it was imagined, and institutionalized, as a nation that is not (fully) democratic. Without acknowledging that nations can be imagined and institutionalized in different ways, and that no single set of characteristics will describe this variety, we will not be able to capture the mixture of populations named "nations," nor, for that matter, the range of nation building processes in the contemporary world.

The unequal treatment of Malaysia's peoples points to a further element of imagination (as well as materiality) of the Malaysian nation that remains overshadowed by Postill's focus on the effectiveness of nation building among the Iban. This is the simple fact that Malaysia continues to be a multi-ethnic and multi-religious, as well as a federal, nation-state. While being relatively harmoniously integrated into the wider Malaysian nation, the Iban studied by Postill continue to refer to themselves as "Iban" or, in some contexts, "Dayak," and continue to be practicing Christians rather than accepting the state religion of Islam.

Moreover, the official imagination of the Malaysian nation is in fact, as noted in the book, modeled on the motto of "unity-in-diversity." According to Postill, these sub-national identifications and associated practices are now entirely politically insignificant. But their persistence, combined with the official, institutionalized recognition of diversity within the country, should make us proceed more cautiously when drawing conclusions about the wider implications of this case study for the theory of nation building. Malaysia as a thick culture area may well be the most important culture area to which the Iban belong (p. 44), yet without a simultaneous, full examination of other (both subordinated and competing) culture areas associated with the Iban, we will not be able to fully appreciate the specificities of Malaysian nation building. Instead, we will only be able to conclude, as Postill does, that the Malaysianization of the Iban was successful. This conclusion can indeed be seen as a corrective to sometimes overly optimistic interpretations that focus primarily on local resistance and appropriation of mainstream nationalizing discourses and practices, and thus emphasize the ultimate *failure* of nation building. However, it does not allow us to break out of the teleological and mono-directional narrative that informs the predominant understandings of nation building: a narrative that sees nation building as a uniform, unidirectional process leading from diversity to homogeneity, and thus as a process that can either succeed or fail. This narrative allows for only two positions: we either focus on diversity and proclaim that the process of nation building was unsuccessful, or we focus on unity and conclude, as Postill does, that the process of nation building was successful.

Two steps should help us abandon this unidirectional narrative. The first one consists of acknowledging the variety, multidirectionality, and reversibility of processes of nation building across the world. The second one entails a critical investigation of the meanings of "nation" in "nation

building," as employed in a particular context. In undertaking these steps, it is helpful to turn to conceptual distinctions introduced in one of the classic--and unfortunately no longer seriously read--books that initiated the debate about nation building in the immediate post-World-War II period, Karl W. Deutsch's *Nationalism and Social Communication* (1953). In his book, Deutsch distinguishes between the concepts of people, nationality, and nation. The first comes close to the notion of culture area and refers to "a larger group of persons linked by ... complementary habits and facilities of communication," i.e. habits and facilities that allow them to store, recall, transmit, etc. a variety of information, and that range from standardized systems of symbols, such as languages and alphabets, to the material facilities such as libraries, signposts, monuments, etc.[4] A nationality, on the other hand, is "a people pressing to acquire a measure of effective control over the behaviour of its members ... a people striving to equip itself with power."[5] Finally, a nation is a nationality that has effectively acquired the power to back up its ambitions. In much of the writing on nations and nation building, the three are collapsed into one, much to the detriment of analytical sharpness.

Drawing on Deutsch's terms, we could argue that what has happened among the Iban in Sarawak is, effectively, a process of assimilation of the Iban (along with other non-Malay peoples of Malaysia) into a Malay *people*. This process was led by the only segment of Malaysia's population that has effectively equipped itself with power and thus became a *nation* in Deutsch's terms: the ethnic Malay. The ethnic Malays have effectively monopolized the federation and transformed it into a nationalizing state--a state conceived as being "of and for" the ethno-culturally defined "core nation," in this case the Malay, "whose language, culture, demographic position, economic welfare, and political hegemony must be protected and promoted by the state."[6] However, we should note that other indigenous groups, including the Iban, have also been accorded a measure of cul-

tural protection--this protection is, as Postill notes, indeed limited to the protection of "tolerable differences," yet it is a protection nonetheless. The fact that the Iban have largely adopted the communication habits and facilities established by the core Malay group obviously does not mean that they have been assimilated into the original Malay nation, i.e. the core Malay ethic group. The reason for this lack of full assimilation is simple: the way in which the modern Malay nation was imagined and institutionalized--especially its unequal treatment of constituent peoples and emphasis on diversity rather than simply unity--has precluded that. Instead of a full assimilation of all its ethnic groups into a homogenous Malaysian nation, Malaysia has opted for a different process of nation building: one that explicitly tolerates and reproduces a measure of cultural diversity. As such, the Malaysian nation building was importantly different from the ones characteristic of many European nations--at least before the spread of multiculturalist ideas and practices (and notably from the latter as well)--that were aimed at the establishment of fully homogenous national cultures, whether by means of cultural assimilation, exclusion or extermination. And the array of possible kinds of nation building processes does not end here: socialist states have, for example, engaged in nation building practices that were fundamentally different from both types sketched above, in that they imagined and institutionalized nations as groups linked not only a common culture, but also--and often primarily--by a common social position, namely that of the working class.

These points, however, are of minor importance given the strengths of Postill's book. *Media and Nation Building* should be seen primarily as a breakthrough attempt to bring nation building back on the agenda of media and communication research, and a valuable contribution to the field of media anthropology. Further comparative work in this area will hopefully give rise to a revised theory of nation building, one that acknowledges and theorizes the diversity of nation building process-

es, and the associated diversity of modernization projects, around the world.

Notes

[1]. For an example of an exception, see Robert J. Foster, *Materializing the Nation: Commodities, Consumption, and Media in Papua New Guinea* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002).

[2]. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

[3]. Anthony D. Smith, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), pp. 56-57.

[4]. Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication* (New York: The Technology Press of MIT and John Wiley and Sons, 1953), pp. 70-71.

[5]. Ibid, p. 78.

[6]. Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 103.

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