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Sociology of Culture Introduction

No human exists except steeped in the culture of his [sic] time and place (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979: 63).

Any cultural representation is contingent upon the condition that it either reflects or embodies the ideas and interests of the people to which it has any semiotic significance (Jenks, 1993: 53).

**Southeast Asia: defined by culture?**

I do not intend to devote too much introductory space to the description and delimitation of Southeast Asia nor do I wish to address in any detail its general cultural characteristics. I have already provided rather long and repetitious disquisitions on the debates surrounding the definition of Southeast Asia as a region in its own right (King, 2001a, 2005, 2006, 2008a:1-19; King and Wilder, 2003:1-24). The interested reader should consult these pronouncements and much else besides and should also consult a section of chapter 3 when I briefly address issues to do with local and global knowledge with reference to Southeast Asia (King, 2001a, 2005; 2006:24-25, 39-41). However, what I want to emphasize here, as John Clammer has done eloquently before me, that Southeast Asia is characterized, though not clearly and unequivocally defined by cultural diversity and openness; it has a long history of cultural connections with other parts of the world; and it demonstrates the importance of physical migrations and cultural flows into, across and out of the region, which have generated cross-cultural encounters and social intercourse; these interactions have in turn resulted in cultural hybridization, synthesis and mixed or mestizo communities, the phenomena of pluralism and multiculturalism within national boundaries, and in the co-existence of culturally different majority and minority populations (Clammer, 2002: 9-11; and see Forshee, 1999: 1-5).

These historical processes which can be framed in terms of the twin concepts of differentiation (and diversity) and convergence (Mackerras, Maidment and Schak, 1998:1-14) have made Southeast Asia one of the most culturally complex and fascinating regions in the world. Indeed, there are those who have argued that it is ‘the ubiquity of publicly displayed cultural forms’ (Bowen, 1995:1047-1048) and the fact that Southeast Asia is ‘arguably the best place to look for culture’ (Steedly, 1999: 432-433) which serve to define it as a region. The centrality of culture has in turn prompted social scientists of a particular theoretical persuasion, to pursue these cultural expressions relentlessly and develop a particular way of perceiving and analyzing culture in the region (Bowen, 2000; and see King, 2001a, 2005, 2006). On this last point Mary Steedly suggests that it is the work of a particular assembly of American social scientists, pre-eminent among them being Clifford Geertz (see, for example, 1973) which ‘have thoroughly associated this part of the world, and Indonesia in particular, with a meaning-based, interpretive concept of culture’ (1999: 432; and see Goh, 2002a: 29). Yet the situation in Southeast Asia has become if anything infinitely more complex since Geertz turned his early forensic attention to Javanese community rituals (*slametan*) and Balinese cockfights (1973). More recently processes of cultural change in the region have become intertwined with and indeed are generated by modern forms of globalization, the expansion of consumer culture under late capitalism, and the rapidly growing influence of the global media and trans-national communication systems. Zygmunt Baumann, for example, has pointed to a shift from the importance of political economy to the centrality of culture in post-modern society so that power, influence and control operate in more subtle ways through advertising, public relations and the creation of needs and longings by those who generate and control flows of information and knowledge (1987). As regional specialists of Southeast Asia there is an increasing and vital need for us to understand the character of cultural change and encounters in the region and the responses of local people to this bewildering range of forces, pressures and influences. The comparative, region-wide study of culture is therefore central to our enterprise and within that the importance of understanding identity and its construction and transformation.

As Goh Beng-Lan has argued in her intriguing study of cultural processes, cultural politics, power, resistance and identities in contemporary urban Penang and specifically the conflicts and struggles which the Portuguese-Eurasians of Kampung Serani experienced against the redevelopment of their long-established community, our current notions of modernity in late capitalism are preoccupied with ‘the issue of cultural identity and difference’ and, in the construction of what we call ‘the modern’. Moreover, when local agency, context, interests and priorities are acknowledged, which is what anthropologists are particularly skilled in unravelling, then we can better understand how ‘modern forms and ideas are produced, imbued with local meanings, and contested in modern Southeast Asia’ (2002a: 28). One of the most important elements of these more recent approaches to the understanding of change in Southeast Asia is that of culture as comprising ‘meanings’ and ‘understandings’, preferably local ones, and it is to the conceptualization of culture that we now turn.

**The concept of culture**

It goes without saying that ‘culture’ is one of the most crucial, though overworked, and indeed ‘complicated’, ‘complex’, ‘controversial’ and ‘divergent’ concepts in the social sciences and, given its status as a focal point of interest, it has quite naturally been the subject of the most intense debates and disagreements (Jenks, 1993:1). Culture (and its expression in language) is usually presented as defining humanity or what it is to be human, and what distinguishes us from the rest of creation (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; 63; Vervoorn, 2002: 41). Of course, it does not help that it is a term which is also used in a multitude of different ways in popular discourse and that it occurs with alarming and confusing regularity in discussions within and across a range of disciplines. In these debates culture is (or more specifically elements of it are) produced or constructed, deconstructed, invented, reinvented, reproduced, modified, discarded, lost, contemplated, inherited, disseminated, adopted, assimilated, absorbed, used, deployed, manipulated, elaborated, displayed, commoditized, exchanged, and transformed.

It is a waste of my time and that of the reader, in my view, to rehearse these debates and divergences in the detail that would be necessary to provide a comprehensive philosophical and analytical history of or even an extensive guide to the development of the concept of culture in social scientific enquiry and the range of interpretations which it has engendered. There is little if anything that is new under the sun, and therefore it seems unnecessary to repeat what has already been said and argued over *ad nauseam*. In any case there are numerous large and weighty volumes, compilations of readings and indeed slimmer introductory texts which have attempted to set down what culture is and what it is not (see, for example, Alexander and Seidman, 1990). One such attempt which I find especially useful, if at times somewhat tortuous and dense, even though it is meant for students and teachers of sociology, is that by Chris Jenks in the Routledge ‘Key Ideas’ series (1993). He presents us with a health warning when he says ‘The idea of culture embraces a range of topics, processes, differences and even paradoxes such that only a confident and wise person would begin to pontificate about it and perhaps only a fool would attempt to write a book about it’ (ibid: 1). I am neither confident (nor particularly wise) nor, I hope, foolish so that in modest, cautious and measured fashion all I shall do is provide some indication of what I think culture is and what features of it we might usefully emphasize in our exploration of its position and changing role in Southeast Asia and in its interrelationship with shifting and changing identity, or perhaps more exactly, different kinds of identity.

Although, in search of culture, I have read a considerable amount of literature in what has come to be known as ‘cultural studies’, associated particularly and seminally in Britain with the Centre for Cultural Studies founded at the University of Birmingham by Richard Hoggart in 1964 and continued vigorously by Stuart Hall in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, I have not found that it tells me anything that I had not already gleaned from the study of anthropology and sociology in a multidisciplinary and non-Western area studies context. Hall’s explanation of and case for the emergence of cultural studies in breaking with ‘previous conceptualizations’ of culture and ‘moving the argument into the wider field of social practices and historical processes’ and away from the preserve of any one ‘disciplinary empire’, have always seemed to me to be unexceptional and based on a highly selective reading of analyses of culture, and with not much reference to some of the anthropological and sociological debates at the time (1980:20). But perhaps it was innovative in its multi- and interdisciplinary endeavours and in the rather more narrow context of sociology and anthropology as they were practised then, embracing as it did ethnography, history, media studies, and English language and literary studies, in its attempts to address ‘long-term shifts taking place in British society and culture within the framework of a long, retrospective, historical glance’ and from the vantage point of what had been happening in Britain through the early post-war period (ibid:16). Of course, it also speaks to us of the experiences and perceptions of the marginalized, de-centred, migrant, hybrid communities which emerged out of the processes of decolonization and migrated to and settled in Britain and which provided a particular perspective on issues of identity and belongingness (Morley and Chen, 1996: 13-15, 17-18; Hall and Sakai, 1998: 363). There has also been an important stream of writing within the cultural studies framework focusing on issues of decolonization in the former colonialized and colonized parts of the world, though some of this, I confess, I have not read to any advantage (Chen, 1998a, 1998b).

**Culture and the Social**

Returning to Jenks I view culture as primarily a sociological and historical problem and something which is located in and implicated in societies, social contexts and social relations. However, I am by no means prepared to hold to a rigorously ‘social’ and mechanistic explanation of and origin for culture; neither am I prepared to argue that culture is totally dependent on or a mere reflection of society or in some way reducible to it, nor that it simply and straightforwardly ‘reproduces’ society. As Alexander has said in examining certain dimensions of ‘the cultural’, ‘[t]he meaning of an ideology or belief system cannot be read from social behaviour’ (1990:25). In my view therefore culture is in some degree autonomous (see below) and interacts with social relations in dialectical and dynamic ways; it therefore has the capacity to condition and motivate forms of social action and to generate social and economic change. As Clammer suggests, in his discussion of ‘subjectivities’, individuals engage in change subjectively; they have an ‘inner relationship’ with it, negotiate ‘new understandings of reality and of relationships and expanding or changing conceptions of the self’ (2002:16). Culture quite obviously lends behavioural quality, content and meaning to social relationships, as Firth proposed many years ago, in the dim and distant ‘functionalist’ past (1951). It has an imaginative and creative dimension because it is quite obviously a product of our mental processes and is expressed and embodied in our language, and as Purushotam sensibly observes, even though we know that everyday social constructs are indeed ‘constructed’, we cannot but be ‘emotionally connected’ to them (1998a:vii). In my excursion later in this volume into such subjects as the media, performance and cultural tourism I shall be concerned with the active, innovative and ‘meaningful’ realms of culture.

Having said this culture is not a free-floating, detached agent and it does tend to adhere to particular social forms. In this connection I do not use his concept in this book but I think my views are close to Rehbein’s notion of ‘sociocultures’, though for him the cultural dimension appears to be closely implicated in what he calls ‘the division of work’ (2007:1). What needs to be emphasized however rather than a particular dimension of culture is that cultural regularities and certain cultural elements are given more significance, relevance and meaningfulness in the context of and through the demands generated by the imperative of living and surviving together. In other words ‘[i]ndividuals interacting together impose their constructions upon reality’ (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979: 63). Nevertheless, those constructions are not set in stone; they are malleable and they feed back on social encounters in various ways, particularly in the context of late modernity with the emergence of groups of specialists whose professional roles and responsibilities are to produce, reproduce and disseminate knowledge, symbols and material expressions of culture (Featherstone, 2000:15-16).

Jenks attempts to capture this problematic between what Alexander calls ‘mechanistic’ and ‘subjective’ approaches to culture (1990: 1-3) in his discussion of Weber’s sociological methodology and particularly his difficult, one might say frequently obscure concept of an’ ideal type’. In attempting to grasp and analyse culture, Jenks proposes, on Weber’s behalf, that

The state of a culture …. makes reference to the shared individual unconscious held by a people. This is a very diffuse concept but it enables us to reconcile the multiplicity of possible meanings that derive from how any particular aspect of culture appears to different individuals and likewise the multiplicity of different courses of action that may all contrive to give rise to a particular aspect of culture. So social life and the understanding of social life contain strategies….which contrive to bring off a sense of uniformity and singularity in relation to our knowledge of cultural events. We create types, typifications or ideal pictures…’ (1993: 53).

Culture like the social order also has certain biological and psycho-physical interconnections which suggests that each (the cultural and the social) is not derived from or dependent on the other in any direct cause-and-effect sense. Social orders (which include both economic and political relations) present opportunities, constraints and pressures; cultural expressions or representations are also used to legitimize, symbolically express and assign values to particular sets of social relations, differences and reciprocities, for example with regard to social class hierarchies or the gender division of labour or the relations between generations or residential arrangements (Alexander, 1990: 1-27; Vervoorn, 2002: 42-44). They do so through the formulation of ideologies which serve to generalize the specific interests of those who formulate them. Yet culture does more than this because it is embedded in and is an essential part of, indeed both a motor and expression of social actions and the choices made in acting, ‘all of which are subjective, intersubjective and volatile – but real, tangible and material in their consequences’ (Jenks, 1993: 57; Clammer, 2002:16-17). The overriding fact is that people ostensibly act and choose as individuals and they do so subjectively and in terms of cultural meanings and understandings, but they do so in a collective environment in relation to others, and they do so in pursuing their livelihoods and interests and in engaging in economic, political and social activities and in formulating strategies of action and engagement.

**Culture’s Definition**

Before embarking on this exercise in definition we should remind ourselves that culture is a concept; it is, as Kahn proposes, an ‘intellectual construct’ (1992: 161). Having said this I need to attempt to identify the main defining criteria which I consider significant in delimiting culture. For me the following are important: Culture is taught, learned, shared and transmitted as a part of collective life (this is purely Parsonian [1951]; and also derives from the Tylorian ‘complex whole’ [1871]). It comprises the ideational, conceptual, conscious dimension of human life and the ideas, accumulated skills and expertise embodied in material objects (art and artefacts) and carried and given expression most vitally in language. It encompasses the symbolic, meaningful, evaluative, interpretative, motivated, cognitive and classificatory dimensions of humanity (Geertz has an input here, but so have others before him [1973]). It refers in its more popular connotations to ‘ways of life’ and ‘ways of behaving’; it is therefore pervasive. It has to be understood in terms of form, content and process and although there are cultural regularities and continuities which are easily detected, there are also quite obviously alterations, modifications and transformations. In some ways, though not as neatly bounded as was once originally supposed, it is patterned and has a certain systematic quality so that someone who has not been socialized into a particular culture, can, when he or she has discovered its ethical judgements, values, standards, beliefs and views of the world, the connections which it makes between cause and effect and the explanations which it provides for the place and function of humans within the natural world and for the bases of human interaction, organization and behaviour, can make sense of it even without necessarily approving of its underlying principles. Having said all of this I do accept that there may be events and behaviour which are beyond culture or constitute a ‘counterpoint’ to it which is not ‘meaningful’ or ‘comprehensible’, though this is not an issue which I want to explore in this book (but see Daniel, 1991).

We should also take note of what culture is not. As hinted at above, it is not, in ‘essentialist’ mode, firmly bounded, closed and delineated. It is not a totality rather it is open-ended and constantly in process. In this connection social science analyses also need to adopt comparative perspectives, examine several sites, and move across disciplines and time. Moreover, culture is not homogeneous, integrated and agreed rather it is contested and is part of systems of power and privilege, as well as generated, sustained and transformed in strategies, discourses and practices; these contests and struggles operate at different levels and in different arenas. But although those who have power and control economic resources can more easily impose their cultural visions and values on others, this imposition or in Gramsci’s terms ‘cultural hegemony’ is never complete (Gramsci, 1990: 47-54; 1978; and see Hall, 1996a:411-440).

**Culture, Contestation and Power**

As I have said elsewhere drawing on the important socio-historical work of Wim Wertheim (and his Dutch colleagues) on Indonesia and the wider Asia, societies or social units or human communities are never in harmony nor are they ever integrated. They are, in Wertheim’s terms ‘a composite of conflicting value systems’, and in addition they embody ‘conflicting interests’ or ‘forces’ (Béteille. 1990: 16-17). There are always strains, tensions, contradictions, conflicts, opposition, competition, antagonism, discontent, and protest, even though dominant ideas strive to present images of harmony, consensus and integration (1964, 1974, 1993; King, 2008a: 32-35; Vervoorn, 2002: 41, 52-55). Social and cultural processes are dialectical, in Wertheim’s terms (1967). It is this dimension of power, hierarchy and conflict which interests me in my concern with the sociology and more particularly the political economy of culture because culture, as a resource, is shaped, deployed and transformed in these struggles (and see Chen, 1998a: 3; and Winter and Ollier, 2006: 11). In this hierarchical respect we are also touching on the debates which focused on the distinction between cultural elitism or high culture on the one hand with its assumptions of the sophisticated appreciation of culture by the educated and understanding few, and on the other hand popular culture with its connotations of the passive reception of mass-produced, consumption-oriented products by the many; this was a distinction which was discredited some while ago, and, as we shall see, a distinction which does not map directly onto class structures (Featherstone, 2000: 20: Storey, 2003). Jenks has the sense of it when he says ‘There are no societies in which the quality of life is not differentiated by complexes of class, status and power, and as societies become more complex this differentiation becomes more marked, but also more subtly encoded in networks of symbolic cultural representations’ (1993: 99; and see Clammer, 2002: 32). Neither is culture something which is received passively and the preserve of those apparently equipped to understand it. Therefore, culture is not an internally coherent system of meanings but an arena in which people with different interests and with different interpretations and meanings act, engage, co-operate, compete and struggle and in which power and relations of inequality are expressed, constructed, exercised and resisted (Goh, 2002: 29-38; and see Williams, 1965). Any culture is subject to revision and adaptation, particularly in contexts in which those of different cultures encounter one another and interact, and, although a Cambodian refugee in the United States for example carries with him ‘a ready-made set of interpretive frameworks’ in order to make sense of the world around him, he is ‘constantly rearranging and reinventing those frameworks and belief systems to deal with immediate events’ (Smith, 1994: 142).

The reader will see how closely connected this perspective is to Foucault’s concept of ’discourse’ and the role of knowledge, ideas, images and cultural categories in exercising control, regulation and domination over others; in short people deal in cultural capital and use it in social and political strategies (1977, 1980). A necessarily related concept is that of the ‘intentional actor’, who is both imbued with or perhaps socialized into ideas, meanings, values and attitudes but through interaction and action (or ‘practice’) both realises these and is constrained and patterned by them but also manoeuvres, modifies, adjusts and changes them in negotiating with everyday life, with the varied environments or ‘fields’ within which he or she moves, and with the contradictions and problems which these situations generate. This all sounds very like Bourdieu and his conceptual distinctions between ‘habitus’ (embodied structure, objective inscription, learned ‘dispositions’), ‘capital’ (as social, economic, symbolic, cultural and political resources deployed in interaction and encounters) and ‘field’ (the sphere of social action, game-playing and agency, beyond but related to embodied structure, with shifting, overlapping boundaries) (1977, 1984). However, I do not use these concepts here; it seems to me that what I want to describe has already been addressed in more straightforward language; that Bourdieu’s notion of field still seems unnecessarily static, ahistorical and mechanical; that, in class status and power terms, particular groups with particular kinds of socially valued capital can dominate several fields which are therefore arranged in hierarchical fashion; and that fields should be envisaged as transcending the boundaries of nation-states (and see Rehbein, 2007: 22-31).

In rather more simple terms Goh attempts to summarize these various strands of analysis when she says, in relation to conscious and ‘purposeful’ actors, the cultural system possesses ‘very powerful and determining effects on people, yet there are always emergent and residual possibilities located in people’s experiences, passions, and aspirations to effect changes in society’ (2002a: 37). What seems to me to be of special moment in Goh’s work is that, by using this perspective, she manages to bridge the divide between ‘culturalist’ and ‘materialist’ or political economy approaches.

**Culture and Identity**

In my view culture is also very closely implicated in the concept of identity, or ethnicity. I prefer not to use the term ‘race’ in this connection, although as we shall see in political ideologies formulated in Southeast Asia which have been created in the context of nation-building, ‘race’ is often used in place of ethnicity (Kahn, 1992: 160-163). For me what we are concerned with are cultural and not physiological similarities and differences. It was Raoul Naroll among many others who defined ‘ethic units’ as ‘culture-bearing units’, although his mechanistic approach, now very dated, to cross-cultural classification was abandoned many years ago (1964). Some social scientists have indeed talked of ‘ethnicity’ and ‘cultural identity’ in the same breath because the main elements of ethnicity and identity are cultural ones: they comprise values, beliefs, and behaviour and the meanings which are given or attached to these as well as differences (and similarities) in language and material culture. However, ethnicity has increasingly come to be seen as a special kind of identity attached to particular groups, communities, majorities or minorities and which command broader or larger scale forms of allegiance and loyalty. In its specifically ethnic dimension identity is what distinguishes or differentiates a particular category or group of individuals from others. Ethnicity is frequently expressed as unifying and differentiating people at varying levels of contrast, and with the process of separating or distinguishing some from others by certain cultural criteria. In many cases that which unifies some people is considered to be what makes them human (in other words it is their particular culture which marks them off and gives them identity and which logically encourages them to classify others as less than human, as sub-human, savage, barbaric or primitive (Leach, 1982). This is especially the case when majority or dominant populations in nation-states classify and talk about the minorities which they control and wish to incorporate into a modern, national project as ‘marginal’ and ‘unsophisticated’.

In this connection one of the major concerns of political scientists working on Southeast Asia has been processes of nation-building and the associated tensions and conflicts between attempts by political elites to unify and homogenize and the responses of the constituent communities of the state which often wish to retain separate and viable identities. Boundary definition and maintenance is also rendered much more problematical in situations of ‘cultural hybridization and syncretism’ (Chua, 1995:1) A relatively neglected field of research has been the ways in which the media and communications technology have been deployed in the construction of national identities and the effects of the globalized media and other cultural flows on both national and local identities (see, for example, Postill, 2006 and Barlocco, 2008). It is interesting that this subject has not received the attention it deserves given the legacy of one of the most prominent social scientists of Southeast Asia, Benedict Anderson and his examination of the ways in which the nation is constructed and ‘imagined’ through various devices, including such media agencies as newsprint (1991). I hope to remedy this, at least in a general comparative way in this volume.

But identity, which I have phrased hitherto in terms of ethnicity and nation, of course embraces other categorical and group markers such as class, gender, and age or generation (Du Gay, Evans and Redman, 2000a). Identities are therefore cultural and social constructions or inventions and several chapters of this book are divided conveniently into an examination of different kinds of identity: national, ethnic, class, gender, youth (age). Other chapters focus on some of the major processes which have been involved in identity formation and transformation: nation-building, the media, tourism, physical movement and globalization.

**Culture and Process**

Let us turn briefly to a consideration of processes. My particular interests in this volume comprise the multi-dimensional and shifting qualities of the concept of cultural identity or identities, or as I have called it ‘identities in motion’. This concern is located in the context of nation-building, globalization, modernization, local responses, population movements and boundary-crossing, the expansion of international tourism, information technology and the media and the associated cultural encounters which these processes entail on identity formation, maintenance and change. In other words rather than unified identities and cultures we now think increasingly in terms of heterogeneity, fluidity and transformation. Featherstone captures the spirit of this when he argues that we should be focusing on the ‘diversity and many-sidedness of culture’ and its ‘syncretisms and hybridizations’ (2000: 14). I have already referred to Clammer’s work on Chinese diaspora and the reformulation of identity (2002; and see 1980, 1985) and I shall be examining other examples of movement, resettlement and identity in this volume.

Another of my preoccupations is to investigate the literature on cultural production with reference in particular to the processes by which cultural products are consumed and the styles of life and identities which are associated with particular patterns of consumption. This is an especially important subject of interest and research in Southeast Asia given the spectacular growth in the affluence of young consumers in the region, as well as the dramatic expansion of a middle class, and the importance of women as consumers of cultural products in the context of shifts in gender roles and statuses. This in turn is related to processes of globalization, although it is not simply a question of the cultural flows from the West, particularly the United States, to the developing world. As Featherstone has demonstrated ‘there is a growing sense of multipolarity and the emergence of competing centres’. He continues ‘Certainly Japan and East Asia are of growing global significance, currently largely in terms of consumer goods and finance rather than images and information’ (2000:8-9). However, for Southeast Asia in particular Japan is also becoming an important centre of cultural images and lifestyles.

The focal concept of identity is therefore bound up with processes of cultural construction and transformation and the various forms and levels of identity which I shall be examining in this book can never be taken to be complete and firmly established. They are always in the process of ‘becoming’ and they are invariably located in a world of competing and interacting identities made more intense by the impacts of globalization and media technology, nation-building, and trans-national movements and encounters. As Goh has said ‘If culture is a site of difference under modern conditions, then there is an urgency for us to understand how differences are produced, transformed, and sustained within concrete cultural and historical contexts and under the aegis of various types of agency’ (2002a: 28). Obviously my thinking has been stimulated, as has Goh’s and others, by contributions to the study of culture from different disciplinary perspectives which have examined the construction of identities and ‘collectivities’.

It is probably Stuart Hall who captures the shifting and contextualized character of identity (which is valuable in the Southeast Asian context) when he coins the term ‘new ethnicities’. He says with regard to ethnicity specifically, though in relation to race, ‘black cultural politics’ and the politics of representation in relation to Britain, that ‘ethnicity acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual’ (1996b: 446). With that rather demanding programme of investigation let us first examine the interrelated concepts of identity, nation and ethnicity.