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On the Cultural Logic of Symbolic Interpretation: The Imagined Community of Singapura

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Abstract

This paper is about the cultural logic of symbolic interpretation of an imagined community that appears to have existed as a myth since the 14th century or earlier. The paper covers the meaning of cultural logic, symbolic interpretation and imagined communities and how such myths have to be uncovered as fakes.

Keywords: *Political Science, Social Sciences, Symbolic Interpretation, Imagined Communities, Singapore History, Anthropology, Cultural Logic*

1. Introduction

Anthropology is the method of studying the Anthropos or human civilization. There are four subfields in anthropology which are culture, linguistics, biology and archaeology. What is important to note is, that cultures can be alive or dead. Most of the time, anthropologists try to make use of dead culture to understand live culture; and vice versa. The study if cultures that are alive raises several questions of ethics. Does the anthropologist participate in the culture? itself and cause some kind of influence or impact on it? It would be better to avoid participating in living cultures entirely in such cases.

Logic is defined as "reasoning from premises that can be validated against political reality to arrive at a deduction". Cultural logic is the interpretation of a *Weltanschauung* using the principles of logic with reference to a specific culture. This is a generally accepted definition by many cultural anthropologists. However, Rappa believes that cultural logic may be defined in a more thoughtful manner. Each culture is made up of unique traditions, practices, and at least one language. When combined, these ingredients work together in what may be called a *specific cultural logic* that may or may not adhere to the natural principles of logic.

Symbolic interpretation was a popular outgrowth of cultural anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s perhaps beginning with the works of Margaret Mead and the "imagined communities" of Benedict Anderson. It involves distilling meaning from symbols and symbolic acts. As a result, cultural anthropology is also related to and possessed dimensions involving archaeology, excavation technology, psychoanalysis, symbolism and symbolic interpretation. The data used in cultural anthropology often looks at the context and sub-texts of waking discourse, fact, fiction, dreams, myth, legend and fantasy. It is within the psychoanalytic dimension of cultural anthropology where dreams turn into myths, myths into legends and legends into histories. The eventual objective of cultural anthropology is to establish an ethnographic record from which we can decant cultural meaning and value.

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However, the discipline of cultural anthropology may be occasionally distracted by red-herring academics such as McCracken and others like him. McCracken basically claims that we live in a culturally constituted world of neoliberal capitalist consumption; one in which cultural meaning is in *constant* movement (McCracken, 1986). This is a dubious claim because the concept of continuous movement of cultural meaning would leave us in a world of chaos. Apparently, for some scholars of a Chicago School, cultural meaning remains in constant motion and provides insights into the world of consumption, such as the meeting of consumer goods and consumers at "way-stations" (*ibid.*, 1986). This is the saying the same thing as consumers are to be found in a store where they can make purchases. But does a consumer not cease that identity when the leave the store? Accordingly, one might have to stretch the proverbial mind of "God" in order to understand that this so-called idea of cultural meaning in motion would be illustrated by consumers who are store consumers, then bus consumers, then train consumers and when they finally reach their homes, and the chain of consumption appears to reach a halt, the consumer in fact becomes a water, gas and electricity consumer. Hence, he seems to be suggesting a rather crackpot logic as plain English could simply describe what he does without the jargon that he introduces such as cultural meaning, cultural categories, and the substantiation of cultural categories. McCracken does not use any evidence to support his conclusion that the "fashion system" and "consumer rituals" move meaning from the "culturally-constituted world to consumer goods while consumer rituals move meaning from the consumer good to the consumer in modernity" (McCracken, 1986; Rappa, 2000; Rappa and Wee, 2016).

As other scholars have shown, the value of culture in modernity, the core-subject of cultural anthropology, has been so devalued because it has virtually been appropriated everywhere and by everyone (Lopes, 1435; Marcus and Pissarro, 2008, p. 3; Rappa, 2000; Rappa and Wee, 2016). This leaves the McCracken work that claims to focus on the center of our discipline intellectually challenging to say the least. Perhaps the best articulation would be the work of Kropacek *et al.* (1979) on the Islamic Pig Prohibition. (Weakland, 1951; Kropacek *et al.*, 1979; Diener e*t al.*,1980). Normal logic cannot be applied to papers that defy logic or make claims without basis. If it were purely theoretical or philosophical, then let it no be disguised as a positivist form of anthropology.

However, if the earlier and normal definition of logic as "reasoning from premises that can be validated against political reality to arrive at a deduction" we can arrive at a testable set of deductions. This is with the caveat that cultural anthropologists have become very clever at proving the structural character of societies with homogenous cultures that do not change over time; or that only change minimally with time. There is a plain and useful argument made about the problems of our discipline *vis-à-vis* (Libera, 2008) the history of the *Anthropos* as well as the issues about cultural relativism, normative relativism and epistemological relativism (Spiro, 1986; Rappa, 2000; Rappa, 2012).

2. An Ancient Myth

Singapore is a nation-state that was used by Stamford Raffles as a safe harbor for its trading vessels and gunboats since 1819. Since then, the British had developed a myth had discovered Singapore. Archaeological discoveries at Fort Canning Hill not only revealed the grave of Sultan Iskandar Shah, the first Malay sultan to have (also) discovered Singapore. Other 14th century Malay sultans buried in Singapore and Johor are also mentioned in the *Sulalat al-Salatin* (Genealogy of the Kings), better known as the *Sejarah Melayu* or *Malay Annals*.[1]

In the Suma Oriental by Tom Pires, Iskandar Shah (or Syah) was the son of Parameswara. Iskandar Shah had converted to Islam as the second ruler of Malacca. However, many modern scholars believe that Parameswara, Iskandar Shah or Iskandar Syah are one and the same person. So do we believe the Sejarah Melayu (written in the 19th century under the British, and more like a piece of propaganda because of the way in which the Sejarah praises the British colonial masters); or the Portuguese Tom Pires or the Chinese eunuch Zheng Hoe? If we assume that the two foreigners made more accurate records than the 19th century Malays, then Iskandar Shah, Iskandar Syah, Parameswara, and Sang Nila Utama are all the same person. These were very likely to have been his aliases.[2] Iskandar Syah was said to have lived during the 15th century. Parameswara was also known as *Sri Tri Buana*.[3] As the myth goes, *Sri Tri Buana* (श्री त्रि भुवन), "the Lord of Three Worlds", or Sang Nila Utama was on a hunting expedition. Utama was aiming at a mousedeer with his bow and arrow. The modern crest of Malacca shows two mousedeers holding up a warrior's shield. Utama's deer escaped and

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[1]   See for example, Bernard *et al.* (1986).

[2]   Recall that Iskandar Syah was also known as Parameswara. But Zheng Hoe must have picked up Parameswara (a Hindu name not a Muslim one) from Malacca and not Palembang. In which case, Singapore already was discovered by someone else, or by Parameswara.

[3]   It may have been just another uninhabited island. However, centuries later when Sir Stamford Raffles "discovered" "Tumasek" or Temasek, it was already inhabited by about 150 fishermen and their families.

he and his men found themselves on the top of a hill. From there, he could see the rest of the Riau Archipelago. Then Utama spotted an island in the distance with a long, white sandy beach. Utama's men told Prince Utama that the Chinese referred to it as Temasek or Old Sea Town.[2] This would tie-in with the discoveries of the Chinese eunuch Admiral Zeng Hoe between 1405 AD and 1407 AD, as sea travel was slow. The Chinese recorded everything in order to prepare a report to the emperor, who had paid for the journey. Zheng Hoe and his fleet set sail from Jiangsu Province to Vietnam and then Palembang before reaching Malacca. Zheng's fleet comprised 208 vessels total with 62 Treasure Ships, and close to 30,000 sailors. According to the Chinese records, some four years after the first voyage, in 1411, Zheng Hoe brought someone named Parameswara, his wife and 540 officials to China to pay homage to the emperor. So, the Chinese records appear to dovetail with the story of Utama.[3] The *Malay Annals* that are kept in the Raffles Museum in London are considered by the Crown as the official record of the naming of Singapore. In Chapter III it reads, "Nila Utama goes on a picnic to Tanjong Bemban and sees across the water Ujong Tanah, called Temasek (an old name for Singapore). Crossing to it, he encounters a thunderstorm and throws away all the cargo, even his crown (Wake, 1964).[4] Reaching Temasek, he sees a strange animal which he is told is a Lion (Singa). So, he changes the name of Temasek to Singapura and is crowned there as *Sri Tri-Buana*. He begets two sons *Raja Kechil Besar* and *Raja Kechil Muda*" (Winstedt, 1938). The *Malay Annals* also claim that one out of two Malay heroes named Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat, were the direct descendants of Alexander the Great. Some say it was the latter, others, the former. But the Chinese ethnographic record of the era states that both Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat were Chinese warriors. There might have been some linguistic or cultural appropriation by later Malay historians and British colonial scribes. This was how the governance of an imperial cultural construction and identity formation arose in British, French and American colonies (Lionnet, 1992; Price, 2006; Büyükokutan, 2011).

Why would the British support these later Malay claims? This is because the British had, at that time, large vested interests in Malaya and hence Malay history. Furthermore, they were unaware and ignorant of Portuguese records by Tom Pires, Fernão Lopes, and, Gomes Eanes de Zurara, *Crónica da tomada de Ceuta* ("Chronicle of the Conquest of Ceuta"); and other travellers since those were the records of their enemy (Zainal, 1951; Matheson, 1986; Iskandar, 1970).[5]

Prince Utama and his warriors sailed to (what appeared to them as) the island of Temasek but encountered a storm. Their ship was sinking and so the men threw everything aboard into the choppy sea. The distance between Palembang and Singapore is only a few kilometers and so the journey would not have taken long. All the supercargo was thrown overboard and only Utama's golden crown remained. Utama declared that he would offer his crown to the Sea Gods (he was Hindu, not Muslim) and the moment that he did, the storm immediately stopped. The men disembarked and landed on the beach; and Utama resumed his hunting expedition again. Then he spotted another mousedeer. He and his men gave chase but the deer eluded them. Utama hear a noise, a roar, coming from the tropical jungle. He saw a beast that had a black head and a red body. His men told him that it was probably a lion. Another said it was called "Singa". Yet another of his men shouted to the beast to "pura" probably a (Hindu) Sanskrit word for "go away!". Utama was so impressed with the roar and size of the beast that he named the place, Singapura, which is the modern name for Singapore.[6]

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[4]   Wake, C.H. (1964). Malacca's Early Kings and the Reception of Islam. *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 5(2), 104-128. Utama is a popular name in Singapore today because it is a name used for factory buildings, schools, cafes and roads. For some reason people believe that the name Utama (that means the first in Bahasa Melayu) represents part of the larger Malay claim to the suzerainty of Tanah Melayu or the Land of the Malays. In fact, modern Malaysia used to be divided into East and West with the Eastern part known as Semenanjung Tanah Melayu. Temasek is an even more popular name in modern Singapore, with educational institutions and the highest national decoration, Bintang Temasek and Darjah Utama Temasek. The latter is the Star of Temasek and the former is the Order of Temasek. The third highest is the Darjah Utama Nila Utama (Order of Nila Utama). A state decoration is only awarded for acts of gallantry and meritorious service with a distinctive central shape such as a starburst or a cross. On the other hand, a medal may be awarded for good conduct, military campaigns, or civilian achievements. Decorations are adorned on a large red or purple sash; while medals are pinned on the recipient's lapel. Most of these ideas were derived from the British colonial era and adapted for local use. Malay is the national language in Singapore but most Singaporeans do not give a hoot and most cannot even speak or understand Malay. There are three other national languages but English is by far the most understood and accepted form of communications. This is nothing when one realises that Portuguese was the *lingua franca* of Southeast Asia for more than 150 years in the 16th and 17th centuries, followed by Dutch. English language only appeared much later in the late 18th century.

[5]   This is supported by British evidence at the time of Sir Stamford Raffles and his henchman Colonel William Farquhar. It must have been a no holds barred piece of written history because it also mentions Farquhar's Malay mistress. The descendants of a Teochew woman named Tan Chwee Neo, an extremely wealthy woman, claim she died in 1904 and was buried at Bukit Brown cemetery. Those descendants also claim that she was the Chinese mistress of Sir Stamford Raffles. That would have been impossible because Raffles, the so-called modern founder of Singapore died in 1826. T. Iskandar is not a descendant or a remote blood relative or a relative descended by law to Iskandar Shah (Syah). It is a mere namesake.

[6]   By his name, "Utama" it can be hypothesized that Utama was probably Hindu. Utama ruled at the time of the Srivijaya Empire. On his way to Temasek he was caught in a tropical storm. Such storms are rare since experienced sailors and Utama himself would have known about the greater possibility of storms primarily during the two monsoon seasons. The distance

Table 1: A Symbolic Interpretation of Malaya and Singapura

Symbol	Symbolism	Symbolic Interpretation	Margaret Mead's Nature vs. Nurture/ Benedict Anderson's Imagine Communities (1983)
Bengal Tiger	Tropical animal	Power, strength, natural predatory	No imagined community of human beings could co-exist with wild animals even if these wild animals were imaginary
Lion	African animal Natural existence of a lion raised in the wild		
4 Quarters: 1st: Gules Base tower proper; on the battlements thereof a lion passant guardant Lion passant	Straits Settlement crest (1906): Malacca, Dinding, Penang Singapore	Security Agriculture Fruit Maritime influence	The Straits Settlements in Mead's Nature vs. Nurture Does not qualify for an Imagined Community
2nd: Areca nut palm tree proper 3rd: Kruing slipped proper 4th: Azure: waves of the sea; representation of the sun rising behind a mountain a sailing yacht			
Mousedeer or Pelanduk Proper	Malacca Crest Motto: Bersatu Teguh United in Stance	Agility, nimbleness, anxious and fearful	No imagined community of human beings could co-exist with wild animals even if these wild animals were imaginary
Malaysia Two Tigers rampant	Malaysian Crest Motto: *Bersekutu Bertambah Mutu* Unity is Strength	Strength and Courage	The Imagined Community of Malaysia. Anderson's communities are imagined because the members of the same community will probably not know their fellow members. However in their minds appears a reified image of Malaysia.
One Tiger and one Lion rampant	Singapore Crest Motto: *Majulah Singapura* (Onward Singapore)	The Tiger represents Singapura's ties to Malaysia Lion represents Singapura's own roots.	The Imagined Community of Singapore. Anderson's communities are imagined because the members of the same community will probably not know their fellow members. However in their minds appears a reified image of Singapore.

Source: Antonio L. Rappa, A Symbolic Interpretation of Malaya and Singapura

Table 1 suggests some possibilities for the symbolic interpretation of Singapura, Malacca, Malaya and the Straits Settlements; as well as how they might be interpreted according to the works of Margaret Mead and/or Benedict Anderson, the "co-founders" of cultural anthropology.

3. Conclusion

The cultural anthropologist can only interpret this sordid narrative as a series of inherited reimaginations of "Hang Tuah, Hang Jebat, Parameswara, Iskandar Shah, and Sang Nila Utama" as a series of inherited and complex yet interrelated myths that were deliberately warped and made complicated by British and Malay historians and writers because of greed and corruption; vested interests and calumny. In 2022, no one really knows who or what is buried under that mound on Fort Canning Hill. No one knows even if anything is buried there. But to make this a public claim would be to antagonize Singapore Chinese historians from the university as well as their white counterparts at the university; whose entire careers were built on such perfunctory belief systems and origin stories. As a result, there is only silence. Cultural Anthropology's "Symbolic Interpretation" appears to be most useful for explaining and analyzing myth and legend yet there is a cultural logic arising from an interpretation of a live culture that uses the principles of logic within the imagined communities of the neocapitalist world order.

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between Palembang and Singapore is only a few kilometers and so the idea of a storm or a choppy sea is even more surprising. However, that narrow piece of water between Sumatra and Singapore is the entry/exit point of the Straits of Malacca which is known for its storms. But the storms occur mainly during the Monsoon seasons. Although Utama resumed his hunting expedition, one wonders what he used to hunt with since most things were thrown overboard. So, perhaps he used a herring. So Utama and his men must have experienced a freak storm, went on a hunt, and named his new island. Like the freakshow of this Malay myth. He saw a beast that had a black head and a red body. His men told him that it was probably a lion. But lions are only found on the African continent, even ½ million years ago. He probably saw a tiger which was common in those parts of Southeast Asia and would have probably traveled overland from India. The Malaysian tiger is much smaller than the Bengal Tiger which has white fur and lived in the colder or more mountainous regions of India and Pakistan. Also known as Indian Tigers (named as such after the British colonial era from Indian propaganda to take the chance away from the Pakistanis and to distance themselves from the colonial word "the Bengal") and are one of the largest apex predators. The Malaysian Tiger has red fur. Red.

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