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Reflections on the Function of National Images in Intra- and Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: This paper presents an analysis and some reflections on the nature of national-ethnic images (mostly visual) in intercultural and intra-cultural communication. We discuss some of the functions and possible principles of national-ethnic images for "soft power" and "national branding". The discussion is illustrated by examples of positive and negative self- and other-images from different nations with different purposes and the images are discussed in relation to their level of concreteness or abstraction and the types of signs they contain. Examples of historical changes in national images are given and comparisons between the images of different nations are made. The purpose of the article is to increase understanding of national images as one of the mechanisms through which cultural attitudes can be constructed.

Keywords: national images, soft power, national-ethnic images, intercultural communication, intra-cultural communication, national branding.

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1. Why are national images interesting?

One of the problems in teaching intercultural communication is that we need an understanding of cultural differences, without thereby increasing prejudice that leads to discrimination and conflict. Unfortunately, national images (when they are part of branding [Kotler et al. 1997] or soft power [Nye 2004]) often tend to make differences between cultures larger, stressing uniqueness and differences rather than similarities. Since national images are an important part of the mechanisms through which cultural attitudes can be constructed, we need to examine the nature of national-ethnic images more carefully as an aid in understanding the nature of cultural differences and similarities.

2. Introduction

The paper is based on an interdisciplinary combination of perspectives from semiotics (Peirce 1931–58), anthropology (Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952), branding theory (Kotler, Jatusripitak & Maesincee 1997), media analysis (Neal 2012), rhetoric (Kennedy 1994), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1995), political science (Nye 2004) and communication theory (Allwood 1985, 2013).

Semiotics is used to try to determine the semiotic status (i.e., index, icon or symbol) of national images, anthropology and communication theory to get a perspective on the definitions proposed, and branding theory, media analysis, rhetoric, critical discourse analysis, political science as well as communication theory to investigate their function.

The method employed in the paper is abductive (Peirce 1931–58), and qualitative, using examples of images from the public domain to contribute to a deconstruction and analysis of the structure and function of national images as means to construct nationalism and national as well as cultural identity.

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First, however, we will discuss some concepts that we will need in our examination and discussion; they are communication, culture, ethnicity, national image. All pictures in the article are used non-commercially. They are taken from the public domain and are reproduced for illustrative research purposes only.

3. Some concepts needed for our analysis

3.1 What is communication?

We can define "communication" as follows: communication = sharing of information, cognitive content, or understanding (which of these three concepts is used to describe what is shared, depends on the focus of discussion). The sharing can take place with varying degrees of consciousness and intentionality. Thus, communication can also take place on subconscious levels.

We can also define "to communicate with someone" as follows: A (sender) communicates with B (recipient) *iff* A and B share a cognitive content as a result of B's having been influenced by A (A's behavior or by the result of A's behavior e.g. texts, other symbols or pictures) e.g., national images.

Further we may note that communication is a causally conditioned, activity influenced, motivated type of rational action in which the understanding of communication requires using both intentional and causal explanations; see also Allwood (2013).

3.2 What is culture and inter/intra-cultural communication?

We can define "culture" in the following way: culture = patterns (similarities) between people that are not given directly by nature concerning four main types of phenomena; see Allwood (1985):

- Thoughts.
- Behavior.
- Artifacts.
- Traces in nature.

Culture is always the result of human cultivation of Nature and does not concern the similarities between people that are directly given by Nature, like the ability to walk or the ability to breathe. It could, however concern specific patterns of breathing or walking in a particular community, since this would be the result of cultivation of the abilities given by Nature. Culture therefore always involves Nature as its basis. Natural events, however can occur without the involvement of culture. Nature thus imposes basic constraints on culture. However, human activity and culture can then in their turn also influence Nature to some extent.

Definitions of culture can vary with regard to how many of the four types of cultural phenomena listed above, they include. Basically, we can distinguish definitions of "culture in a wide sense" from definitions of "culture in a narrow sense"; see also Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952).

(i) Culture in a wide sense includes technology, economy and agriculture.

(ii) Culture in a narrow sense includes behavior and/or only thoughts.

As we will see below, in actual empirical data the four aspects are mostly combined and influence each other: e.g., in health care and education. Although culture can be based on many types of human groups, like regions (the culture of a city or a province, gender (culture of men or women or age (culture of young, middle aged or old people), we will in what follows, in this paper, be primarily interested in the culture of national and ethnic groups.

Using the definitions given above, we can now also define "inter-cultural communication" and "intra-cultural communication".

- Inter-cultural communication = communication between people with different cultural backgrounds (national, ethnic).
- Intra-cultural communication = communication between people with the same cultural background (national, ethnic).

3.3 What is ethnicity and ethnic group?

Two other concepts that often appear in the discussion of national images are "ethnic group" and "ethnicity". Let us therefore also define these two concepts for our discussion.

We can define "ethnic group" as follows:

- Ethnic group = group of people united by a belief in a common ancestry, sometimes with a desire for political autonomy (e.g., French, Russians, Swedes, Sami, North American Indians).

…And "ethnicity" as:

- Ethnicity = the culture of an ethnic group.

Ethnic groups can be differentiated from national groups since the latter do not have to involve belief in common ancestry, rather the term "national group" instead indicates political autonomy (Australians, US Americans, Russians, Swedes). In parallel with "ethnicity", we can thus define "national culture" in the following way:

- National culture = the culture of a national group.

In line with the definitions given above, we may now note that some ethnic groups like the Swedes and the Han-Chinese are also national groups, while others like the Sami and the Miao are ethnic groups but not national groups.

3.4 Comparison of cultures

Making use of the four main aspects of culture introduced above, we can compare two or more national or ethnic units with each other with regard to thoughts, behavior, artifacts, traces in nature and different combinations of the four aspects.

Combinations of the four aspects are found in history, politics, institutions, economics, business and legal practices. National images usually combine thoughts and artifacts but can also be based on behavior and traces in Nature.

3.5 Analysis of national images

We can define a national image in the following way:

- National image = a description in symbolic (verbal and other) or iconic (pictorial) form that captures some property claimed to be characteristic (indexical) of a national (or possibly ethnic group).

National images are often based on cultural stereotypes (i.e., common but not necessarily well-founded generalizations about the group). Some of the issues, we will be concerned with in analyzing, describing, classifying, discussing and understanding national image construction, are the following:

- What is the semiotic status in the Peircean sense of the image: symbolic, iconic or indexical or a combination (see Peirce 1931–58)?
- Is the image positive or negative or a combination?

- Is the image a self-image for a domestic audience (self→self) or a self-image for a non-domestic audience (self→other) or is it an other-image for a domestic audience (other→self)? It could also be an other-image for a non-domestic audience (other→other) or a combination of these.
- What are the communicative functions of national images, especially the functions, identified in rhetoric and critical discourse analysis (see below and see Aristotle in Kennedy 1994 and Fairclough 1995)?

Two important functions of national images are building up the self-identity of a national group ("selfing") and building up a conception of the identity of other national groups from the point of view of the first group ("othering"). In this paper, I will discuss if we can find principles of selfing and othering. To do this we will examine the role of national images in communication, with the goal of finding some features of selfing and othering.

This means we will be interested in how the national images are used for intra-cultural communication (self→self, other→self): e.g., for mobilization, loyalty, solidarity, protect regime or how they are used for intercultural communication (self→other, other→other): e.g., to give a positive self-image, give a negative other-image. We will be interested in discovering similarities and possible uses of images for both intra-cultural and inter-cultural communication.

4. Some examples of national images described with the features given above

4.1 Semiotic status: Symbolic or iconic with indexical features

Flags are usually national images with mostly symbolic (arbitrary, conventional) features. Sometimes they also have iconic and indexical features. For example, the cross is an icon for the Christian cross and also an index of the Christian faith. Images of the sun, the moon or different stars are icons of different heavenly bodies (see figures 1 and 2) which often in addition are given an indexical or symbolic interpretation. For example, the iconic stars on the flag of the USA are symbols of the states which make up the union of the United States.

Figure 1: National flags.

Figure 2: ASEAN flags.

Figure 3: Swedish national coat of arms.

In the Swedish national coat of arms (Figure 3), symbolic, iconic and indexical features are combined. The crown is an icon of a royal crown and also an index of the king and the national state. The fact that there are three crowns probably has its origin in the Swedish king Magnus Eriksson who called himself king of Sweden, Norway and Skåne (then part of Denmark). The other symbols are heraldic coats of arms for the royal families that dominated Sweden. There are many other types of national images. Many are created for home consumption, often to boost loyalty and self-confidence. Usually, they involve a combination of iconic, indexical features.

4.2 Self-images for home audience (intra-cultural communication)

A very common metaphor when it comes to self- images is that of a mother, father or ancestor. We can see this, both in linguistic expressions, like motherland, fatherland, mother language and in more iconic images like images of Rule Britannia (Great Britain) or Mother Svea (Sweden). Sometimes these self-images are humorous like the images of Uncle Sam (USA), John Bull (Great Britain) – see Figure 4 – or Ola Norman (Norway).

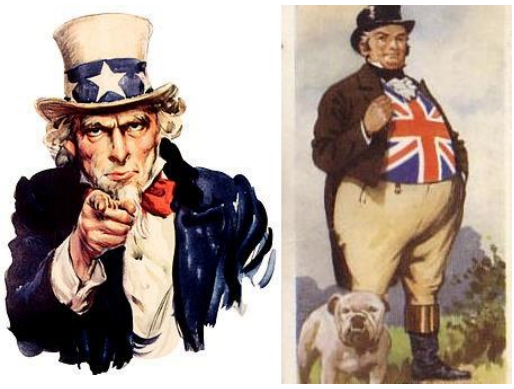


Figure 4: USA's Uncle Sam and Great Britain's John Bull.

The two self-images of Uncle Sam and John Bull have at times also been very well known outside of the USA and Britain, so they have become other-images of USA and Britain that could be used in the two countries and (perhaps outside) to create images of cooperation between them (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Cooperation between the USA and Great Britain.

Let us now take a look at some of the functions of national images in intra-cultural communication. A first function can be found by asking the main question of critical discourse analysis (see Fairclough 1995, Van Dijk 1998, Wodak 2001): in whose interest is the national image constructed? Some possible answers to this question are: The functions of national images are in the interest of the nation itself and those ruling it, often to promote loyalty and to mobilize the population for whatever goals the rulers of the nation have. In some national cultures this can best be achieved by having positive and humorous national images. In others, more dramatic and sometimes aggressive images are required.

Our functional analysis can also be aided carrying out an analysis of the rhetoric (see Kennedy 1994) of national images. Following Aristotle, we distinguish the rhetorical aspects of logos, ethos and pathos of any message. For many national self-images the logos is to communicate Strength, the ethos is to communicate trustworthiness because of solidarity with the nation, in some national cultures reinforced by humor and the pathos is to evoke solidarity, unity, loyalty and mobilization.

4.3 Other-images for home audience and other audience

Let us now take a look at some examples of iconic- symbolic national images of other nations. The images combine humorous and negative features and are intended both for a home audience and for audiences in other countries. The examples are English and are images of France and Frenchmen, Germany and Germans and Russia and Russians (Figure 6).

Figure 6: A frog (French), a kraut (German), the Russian bear.

In some cases, a sense of humor takes over, as when Dutch people use the other-image Belgians have of them *Kaaskopje* (cheese head) to make fun of themselves or when Belgians use the other-image Dutch and French people have of them *Fritje* (fried potato) to make fun of themselves. They are adding an other-image of themselves to their self-image to make fun of themselves (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Humorous Belgians and Dutch: *Kaaskopjes* ("cheese heads"; Dutch) and *Fritjes* ("pommes frites"; Belgians).

4.4 National images in war

In war, national images are mainly related to strength of the own nation and weakness of the enemy nation(s). In World War I, the Germans were fighting the Russians, the French and the British, and the British (as well as the French and Russians) were fighting the Germans. In the two national war images below (Figure 8) we see the self-images of both Germany and Britain and their enemy other-images meant both for a home audience and for audiences in other nations to influence them. The Germans are told *magst ruhig sein* (you can be calm) and the British poster belittles the Germans by metaphorically representing them as a pig, which the British will make bacon out of.

Figure 8: German self-image and enemy other-image of Russian, French and British; British self-image and other-image of the Germans.

If we again carry out a rhetorical analysis, we can see that the images communicate *logos*: strength of the own nation; *ethos*: credibility, believe this because we are strong; and *pathos*: directed to own nation, be brave, fight.

4.5 National image and inter-cultural communication

Let us now turn to consider the role of national images in intercultural communication: i.e., how do we want to portray ourselves to people in other nations. Again, we can ask: "in whose interest is the image constructed?"; and, again, the reply very often is the nation itself and those ruling it. The functions of the images are also similar since the images can reach also the own population. In relation to the home audience they should inspire, reinforce loyalty and mobilize the nation for the goals of the leaders. In times of conflict, the images should also frighten and sometimes belittle others, in order to strengthen self-confidence. As we have seen, in some cultures, this is best done through positive and humorous national images, while in others more dramatic images are thought to be more effective. As for a rhetorical analysis, the *logos*, *ethos*, *pathos* and national image in conflictual intercultural communication are also similar to intra-cultural functions: *logos* (strength), perhaps also thought to give credibility(*ethos*), and pathos to evoke solidarity, unity, loyalty and self-confidence in the own nation by belittling others as well as *pathos* evoking fear and low confidence in others.

We will now continue our discussion of national images by considering some national images from the Nordic European countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland).

5. Nordic national images

5.1 Nordic traditional positive heroic self-images

The images we will consider are national self-images made both for domestic and foreign consumption. Traditionally, Nordic self-images were very often oriented to a supposedly glorious past, using images of Vikings, 17th Century Protestant warriors and more modern times polar explorers or soldiers in the Second World War. Below we first present some versions of the most popular figure: the Viking. The images show how the Viking has retained its popularity to our days, in the Nordic countries. Small children can draw Vikings and dress up as Vikings (Figure 9).

Figure 9: The Viking (Denmark, Norway, Sweden).

During the period 1600–1700, Sweden-Finland and to some extent Denmark-Norway were heavily involved in the religion-based conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Europe. This also gave rise to heroic self-images. One very popular such image was that of the Swedish king Gustaphus II Adolphus: the hero Protestant king from the north (Figure 10).

Figure 10: The hero Protestant (Sweden, 1600s).

Another self-image that was very popular during the 19th Century and first half of the 20th Century was that of the explorer of the unknown and perhaps dangerous areas of the Earth. Two such areas were the Arctic and Antarctic regions (the North and South Pole), and the

polar explorer was a popular figure in Denmark, Norway, Sweden in the 18-1900s. This image was popular in all three countries but perhaps most of all in Norway (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Norway on the North Pole.

Finally, in the 20th Century, the Second World War was also a source of new heroic images, especially in Finland where there was a lot of pride in the tough Finnish soldiers (Figure 12).

Figure 12: The tough soldier (Finland, World War II).

5.2 Nordic more modern positive national images

With a possible exception of the Viking, Nordic national images, the last fifty years have, however, been less focused on heroes and more focused on other aspects of modern life such as design, where the concepts of Scandinavian design as well as of Swedish design, Danish design and Finnish design have been launched (see Figure 13). In all three cases, claims have been made that the styles of design combine elegance and skillfulness. In the Swedish case, the company IKEA has spread ideals of design to many areas of Earth.

Figure 13: Swedish design, Danish design, Finnish design.

Another modern theme of Norway, Sweden, Finland is to use their beautiful Nature to promote a positive national image. Beside Nature, Sweden has also tried to use its welfare state to create a positive self- and other-image. This has been done in serious ways and more humorous even satirical ways. Below (Figure 14), we see two such attempts.

Figure 14: The welfare state (Sweden).

5.3 Nordic humorous negative national images

Just like in the central European countries, there are many negative humorous images of others in the Nordic countries. The Swedes make fun of the Danes claiming that they are treacherous, petty bourgeois and drunk. The Danes make fun of the Swedes saying that they have a Soviet-like political correctness mentality and are drunk. The Norwegians make fun of the Swedes saying that they are "Germans in Human guise". The Swedes make fun of the Finns saying that they drink, fight and are silent and strong. As we can see the two last claimed characteristics of the Finns are not only negative. Below we can see some of the images in pictorial form (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Swede, Dane and Norwegian, and a drunken Swede.

5.4 Other negative humorous images

All over the world, it is fairly common for nations who believe they are strong to have humorous negative images of other groups. Sometimes these other groups are weaker groups. An example of this

Figure 16: German image of an East Frisian and English image of an Irishman.

are the German jokes about East Frisians, the English jokes about the Irish or the American jokes about the Polish. Below we see German and English negative humorous images of East Frisians and Irish (Figure 16).

Negative evaluations of weaker groups are relatively common all over the world. However, sometimes these evaluations meet resistance from the weaker groups so that negative humorous counter images are also produced in the other direction. This has happened to a great extent in the Nordic countries where initial Swedish jokes about Norwegians and Finns have been met with resistance producing a lot of Norwegian jokes about Swedes and Finnish jokes about Swedes. The same thing has happened in the Netherlands and Belgium where Dutch jokes about the Belgians have been met by Belgian jokes about the Dutch and vice versa.

As we have seen, negative humorous images can also be used in conflicts, were the sense of humor is virtually absent; one such example is a caricature from the Opium War in China which builds on the Chinese talk of long-nosed foreign devils (Figure 17).

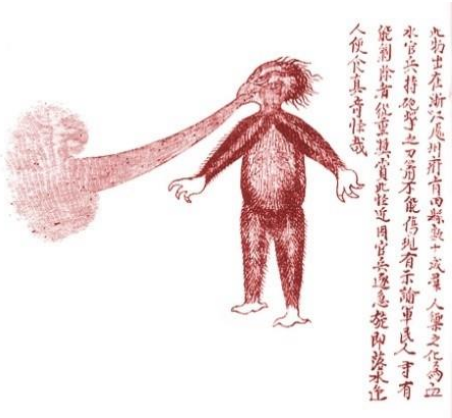


Figure 17: Chinese caricature of Western long-nosed foreign devils.

5.5 More on the functions of national image and intra-cultural communication

We can now return to our analytic questions concerning the functions of national images, to see if the answers we have suggested need to be modified in the light of the new types of humorous and negative images we have considered. Concerning in whose interest the national image is constructed, the answer is the same as before, the functions of national images continue to be in the interest of a particular nation (however perhaps not always directly in the interest of those ruling it), often to promote self-confidence and to belittle people in other nations rather than to promote loyalty or to mobilize the population for some cause.

As far as functions of national images, we have seen that positive self-images often have the function of inspiring loyalty and mobilization, while negative national other-images often are related to evoking self-confidence combined with condescension toward other groups. Both of these functions are related to the pathos function of rhetorical analysis. Regarding the logos and ethos of humorous and negative national images, the logos remains an expression of strength, the ethos relies on the credibility of mobilization in one's own interest.

We have also seen how images change due to pressures of political correctness dependent on ideology. In the next section we will consider some more examples of how national images can be constructed under the influence of political correctness: this time from the Soviet Union and Russia, finally ending up with a comparison between Sweden and China.

6. National images: Changes and differences

6.1 Soviet positive intra-cultural self-images

The images below reflect how Soviet images changed in the period from 1948 to 1965. In 1948, following World War II, the focus was on producing bread and food. In the 1950s, focus was on achieving five-year plans, and the last image reflects national pride in being first in exploring space (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Changes in positive Soviet self-images.

6.2 Soviet negative intra-cultural self-images

Especially the first ten years of the existence of the Soviet Union involve a struggle between capitalism and the new Soviet Communist power. This found expression in images depicting exploitation and subjugation and the struggle against this (Figure 19). These images disappeared in later stages of Soviet development.

Figure 19: Soviet negative conflictual images.

6.3 Changes in national images: From the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation

In 1991, the Soviet Union was dissolved and replaced by the Russian Federation. This political change has also meant that the national images of Russia have changed. In general, they have become more traditional and sometimes softer than during the Soviet period. See Figure 20.

Figure 20: New partly traditional Russian national images.

6.4 A comparison of Sweden and China

We have seen above how national images change with the historical development of political and other ideals. It is also interesting to note how national images are dependent on different concerns and ideals in different national cultures. Below (Figure 21), we compare National Day images from Sweden and China.

Figure 21: National Day images in Sweden and China.

We can see how Sweden focuses on Nature and popular celebration while the Chinese focus is on the unity of the traditional temple of heaven with the national communist banner as well as on national military strength. In both nations, flags – perhaps the most widespread of all national symbols – are used to promote national identity.

7. Some conclusions

National images are made with a communicative purpose. They are an essential part of national culture construction as well as of ambitions concerning soft power (Nye 2004) and exhibit many similarities in structure and function across nations. From a Peircean semiotic point of view, the most abstract national images are symbolic, possibly with some iconic and indexical elements, often they are flags or coats of arms with the function of unifying the nation.

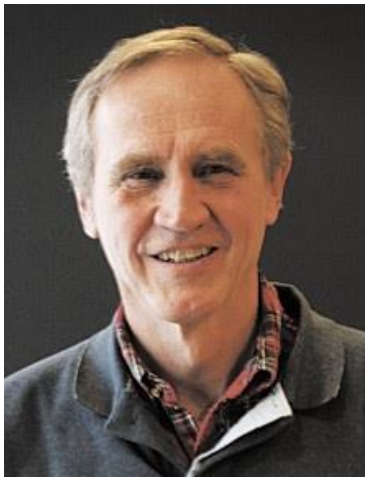
The national images that are iconic images can be self-images or other-images, or combinations where an image is meant both for a home audience and an audience in other nations. Images can be positive or negative or combinations of positive and negative. Often

positive images are self-images and negative images other-images. Sometimes negative images are also used for a domestic audience when there is internal conflict.

Intercultural other-images have often been negative in the past – combining attempts at soft power with hard power through war and conflict. Intra-cultural self-images are often positive or ambiguous – often connected with mobilization of effort, or with promoting a positive self-attitude and loyalty. One of the differences between nations concerning national images seems to be the status of humor. All nations seem to attempt satirical humor directed against other nations. Some nations also seem to tolerate and appreciate self-directed humor while others avoid this.

Even if we can see similarities in the structure and function of national images across nations, their function is often to increase differences between cultures, for example, by employing negative other-images or overly positive self-images. Since in accordance with soft power ambitions of promoting the own nation, they often tend to emphasize uniqueness and to deemphasize similarities, they should therefore be analyzed and deconstructed, in order to facilitate an increased appreciation of the similarities between cultures. An appreciation, which, in turn, will probably tend to support positive outcomes of intercultural communication.

About the author



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