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"Scaling" the Nation State
Religion, Language and Ethnicity in Asia and Europe
Editorial

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In Asia and Europe, as in many other regions around the world, shifting perceptions of "nationhood" and a renegotiation of what it means to belong to a "nation state" have surfaced. What, for instance, does being Japanese or German entail today? While citizenship and nationality (passport) are still relevant in formal procedures and for the entitlement to enjoy certain rights, religion, ethnicity and language play increasingly prominent roles in the formation of an emotional affiliation with a "nation". This becomes evident, for instance, among migrant communities who may enjoy formal citizenship rights but whose ethnic, cultural, religious or linguistic needs are rarely catered to – e.g. with regard to public holidays, official information in one's first or heritage language, diet restrictions, religiously informed rituals, political representation, etc.

In Germany, Christmas Eve is a public holiday, but the Eid al-Fitr at the end of the fasting month Ramadan is not. German canteens inform customers if the meal on the menu contains pork, beef, poultry or if it is vegetarian, but the chemist's shop would not let you know if pig fat is an ingredient in your soap (which would make it *haram*, or forbidden for Muslims). This dimension of acknowledging Germany's multicultural diversity has yet to be catered to. In multicultural Asian societies such as Malaysia, the nation state is defined by plurality, and public holidays for the respective religious and ethnic communities in the state are a normal phenomenon. Japan is different, since the government does not actively promote the idea of a multicultural Japan and keeps the numbers of migrants under strict control.

The conference "Scaling the Nation-State – Religion, Language and Ethnicity in Contemporary Japan and Germany", selected papers from which have been compiled in this issue, was held to explicitly address the issue of how contemporary nation states in Asia and Europe deal with diversity and

pluralism. It took place at the Japanese-German Center Berlin in October 2014[1] and sought to attend to the empirical fact of religious, linguistic and ethnic pluralism and diversity within and beyond both countries. Hence it compared Japan and Germany to other cases in Asia – India and Nepal in South Asia, Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia – as well as to Hawai‘i in the USA, and the European Union in Europe. Allowing for comparisons via individual and in-depth case studies was paramount for the endeavour. A selection of the papers presented to the conference forms the main body of this issue of *Internationales Asienforum*. It invites all readers to join and actively reflect on the semantic dynamics of seemingly familiar concepts such as nation, language, religion or ethnicity.

The conceptual framework of analysis for the paper presenters was taken from Jan Blommaert's work on "scales".[2] "Scale" serves as a conceptual lens to look through in the pursuit of appropriate tools to analyse the spatiality of state and nation state in a globalised world. Jan Blommaert's research embeds the idea of "scale" in a sociolinguistic approach. But Blommaert himself did not invent the concept; he rather borrowed it from the findings on World System Analysis or World System Theory (*Weltsystem-Theorie*). In the world system logic, time and space are not separated from one another, but form one complex unit – a spatio-temporal axis, so to speak. Within time and space, people move, live and act. Even if they act on a tiny local scale, they are affected by global phenomena – e.g. by globalisation effects that they cannot and most of the time do not wish to escape from. The conventional ordering of scales along encompassing levels – from local to national, from national to regional, from regional to global – thus no longer matches reality. Transnational and translocal configurations have become prevalent as scales that transcend the image of concentric circles from local to global. The South Asian presence in the Persian Gulf, for example, shapes a scale that encompasses translocal lifeworlds and intersubjective connectivity beyond the scalar conception of geographically defined borders.

The national level (or scale), conceptualised as the "nation state" in which "state" is the holder of authority, is an entity that has particular importance for the study of space and spatiality. Following James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2002: 981)[3] in this line of thought, it is a valid question to

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1 The organisers express their thanks to the Japanese-German Center Berlin for their generous support and impeccable hospitality.

2 See Jan Blommaert (2007): Sociolinguistic Scales. *Intercultural Pragmatics* 4.1(2007), pp. 1–19.

3 James Ferguson / Akhil Gupta (2002): Spatializing States. Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality. *American Ethnologist* 29/4, pp. 981–1002.

ask "[t]hrough what images, metaphors, and representational practices does the state come to be understood as concrete, overarching, spatially encompassing reality?" States make use of "specific sets of metaphors and practices," and they "represent themselves as reified entities with particular *spatial* properties" (ibid.: 981f.; italics in original). These are means to "secure their legitimacy, naturalize their authority, and to represent themselves as superior to […] other institutions and centers of power" (ibid.: 982).

This has led to powerful state action in the name of "nation", such as declaring one particular tongue the national language or one particular religion the religion of the state. Converting a landscape of multiple horizontal scales of languages into a vertical one with just one acknowledged national language is, as Patrick Heinrich calls it, an act of "indexing diversity" by creating an order that is juxtaposed to an alleged disorder of diverse languages (see Heinrich's contribution on Okinawa). In the wake of globalisation and glocalisation, however, the state's authority and legitimacy to perform such acts of ordering – governing – is increasingly called into question. Nation states with cities characterised by factual "super-diversity" (Vertovec 2006[4]) challenge the encompassment (Ferguson / Gupta 2002: 982) and indexing capacities of the state and cause the notion of "the national" to undergo a reconfiguration. This is particularly visible in the struggle of European Union members to come to terms with the task of "integration", whereas in many Asian nation states religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity are the norm (see Katsuo Nawa's contribution on Nepal). Younger Central Asian sovereign states such as Kyrgyzstan, meanwhile, are facing new trends of what can be called a "post-Soviet nationalism" which is frequently negotiated via ethnic and linguistic identification (see Aida Alymbaeva's article).

Germany, and maybe Japan to a certain extent as well, are struggling with their identity as multicultural and multi-religious, multiethnic nations. There are horizontal spaces – scales – in both countries where language, ethnic background and religious affiliation are different from the so-called mainstream of the society. But apart from *problems* of integration, integration has oftentimes succeeded much better than noticed and publicly acknowledged – individual examples of migrants and refugees in Germany in recent years are cases in point. Moreover, the term integration is not synonymous with assimilation, since local or vernacular identity features – such as language – can be sustained and cultivated. The promotion of "Hawaiianness" in multicultural Hawaiʻi is a case in point for this phenomenon (see Yumiko Ohara's article). Another aspect that merits attention is the fact that the issue of inte-

[4] Steven Vertovec (2006): The Emergence of Super-diversity in Britain. COMPAS Working Papers 06/25, Oxford: Oxford University Centre for Migration, Policy and Society.

gration expands beyond the scale of the nation state. The European Union (EU) is an example of not only a transnational but indeed a supranational effort to forge a "European identity". The way in which the EU is utilised as a frame of reference by its member states (discussed in Claudia Wiesner's article) is an interesting case in comparison to Central Asia (where the supranational "bracket" of the Soviet Union has ceased to be a frame of reference) and East Asia (where such a "bracket" never existed). Despite Britain's majority vote for leaving the EU, the idea of European integration is still alive, if contested more than ever before.

The articles in this issue hold the view that religion, ethnicity and language are not stable or static ontological phenomena, but identity-building blocks that are indexed differently according to context. Understanding the novel configurations of religion, ethnicity and language requires us to study the meaning-making potential of perceptions in different arenas. As a consequence, we need to study how religion, ethnicity and language are scaled in different social orders and communities of practice. That is to say, how religion, ethnicity and language "jump" from one scale to another – from individual to collective, from local to translocal, from national to transnational, or from specific to general – and how this relates to the idea of the "nation". The discourse on religion, ethnicity and language not only moves across time and space – it also moves across different scales. And it is ultimately linked with power relations and inequality.

With the selection of Asian and European case studies, we hope to inspire our readers to search for commonalities as well as differences across the scales of the local, national and regional. We have arranged the compilation of articles as a mélange of European and Asian case studies – in order to inspire readers to engage in the comparison of certain aspects on their own. Among the three markers of belonging and (national) identity – religion, language, ethnicity – language is the one which is examined most intensively in the case studies of Hawai'i, Japan, Kyrgyzstan and Nepal. All four cases reveal how important language has become for the shaping of subnational identities and social distinction, how difficult the conceptual travel of "nation" or "state" across Europe and Asia by "translating" the terms has been (historically), and how shifting scales of reference (from local to national) are reflected in either language revitalisation or language attrition. Yumiko Ohara, for instance, illuminates competing conceptions of Hawaiians and the Hawaiian language, the relationship between ideologies of this language and the construction of a distinct (subnational) ethnic identity. The example of Hawai'i as a subnational territory invites a look at another landscape of subnational distinction, i.e. Japan's southernmost islands in the prefecture of Okinawa (the Ryukyu Islands). In contrast to Hawai'i, where the

language revitalisation movement seems to be growing substantially in size and conviction, Ryukyuan languages and their revitalisation seem to be increasingly succumbing to the dominant national language, Japanese. Identity formation oscillates between Okinawan and Japanese – accompanied by hegemonic national policy-making in the service of a homogenous Japanese nation. Patrick Heinrich evaluates this development as a phenomenon of language ideology claiming the linguistic unity of all Japanese, while hiding and even obscuring the linguistic heritage of the country and its prefectures. The hegemony of Japanese and the decline of Okinawan languages are remarkably visible in public spaces and on public signposts.

The contestation among different languages on the subnational or local scale on the one hand and the national scale on the other hand has adopted quite a distinctive shape in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. The case of Kyrgyzstan is emblematic in several aspects. First, it serves as an example of a nation state that newly emerged after a long period of being part of a supranationally organised, centralised "union" (albeit different from the European Union's form of supranationality and also from the federal organisation of the USA). In contrast to Hawai'i and in a similar fashion to Okinawa, the contestation of identities shaped by the current nation-building process in Kyrgyzstan can be traced along linguistic lines of distinction. The linguistic landscape is reflected in religious and ethnic dimensions of similarity and difference. However, as Aida Alymbaeva points out succinctly, "becoming Kyrgyz" is by now a collective endeavour – shared and accepted by the majority of communities in a region where a movement to revive historical non-Kyrgyz identity markers could well be expected but is not being vigorously championed. It is open to speculation whether the decades-long experience of being part of a larger spatial and administrative scale (the Soviet Union) has led to an increased willingness in Kyrgyzstan to gloss over local differences for the sake of strengthening the newly won sovereign "nationhood".

In this context, it is worth directing a comparative view to the EU and the conception of this union in individual member states. Claudia Wiesner's account of what it means to juggle between the national and the supranational and cater to both scales of identity at the same time (with the example of France and Germany as members of the EU) forms an illustrative foil for reflecting on conceptions and political means of governments to steer identity formation into certain directions. Against this background, it is not surprising that European Studies has become an established subject in European countries, but that Central Asian Studies is not a very popular field in the Central Asian states themselves – if it is on the academic agenda at all. The political conception of what ought to be considered a coherent region is obviously highly influential not only in the field of international relations and diplomacy,

but also in its outreach to knowledge production in the field of (higher) education.

The case of Nepal, finally, reminds us of the comparatively short history of today's conventional perceptions of terms such as "nation", "state", "religion" or "ethnicity". Katsuo Nawa's study of the genesis of the nation state Nepal not only mirrors the frequent mismatch between empirical realities and imposed concepts. His triangulation of the concept of nation state by juxtaposing Japan's and Germany's linguistic experiences to the Nepali case also carves out the paradoxes of trying to treat such terms as neutral analytical concepts across languages. Nepal forms a rare but extremely interesting case for Asian-European comparison.

The critical stance towards the travel of concepts that shines through in the case studies of this journal issue is not meant to decree that conceptual ideas are ultimately incompatible across world regions. Nawa's subchapter on Japan's coping with the introduction of concepts such as nation or religion reveals this in a most tangible manner. In this regard, a view from outside may at times encourage fresh insights for the situation at home. This reasoning is followed by all authors of this issue, and it invites us to think critically about conceptual transfer and translation.

In sum, the articles compiled in this issue allow for the inference that there is work ahead for follow-up research on how nation, language, religion and ethnicity are conceived of in different scales (local to supranational) and across continents. We thus consider the studies presented here as work in progress.