DEFINING REGION: CULTURES IN SPACE

CULTURES IN SPACE: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE BALTIC IN A COMPARATIVE ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Thomas K. Schippers

ABSTRACT
This article address some methodological problems related to the mapping out of cultural data and more specifically those related to so-called cultural borders and boundaries in space. The second part of the article is devoted to the Mediterranean region. For half a century, this region has been the locus of much anthropological fieldwork, and has also provoked much debate on the topic of the region surrounding a closed sea as a conceptual entity. As both the Baltic and the Mediterranean seas have been spaces of intense human relations rather than obstacles for exchange, a future anthropological comparison between these two areas may prove stimulating.

KEY WORDS: socio-cultural anthropology, Mediterranean region, Baltic region, cultures in space, maps, borders, boundaries.

ANOTACIJA
Straipsnio pirmojoje dalyje aptariamos kultūros duomenų žemėlapių rengimo metodologinės problemos, visų pirma susijusios su vadinosiosmis kultūrų ir geografinės erdvės ribomis. Antrojo dalio skirta autorius gerai žinomam Viduržemio jūros regionui. Puše šimtmečio šis regionas buvo gausių antropologinių ekspedicijų vieta ir sukėlė daug debatų regiono, supančio uždarą jūrą, kaip konceptualaus vieneto tema. Viduržemio jūros regionas kultūrinės erdvės prasme neabejotinai sudomins Baltijos regiono mokslininkus lyginamųjų sociokultūrinės antropologijos tyrimų galimybėmis.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: sociokultūrinė antropologija, Viduržemio jūros regionas, Baltijos jūros regionas, kultūrinės erdvės, žemėlapiai, kultūrinės ribos, kultūrinės sąsajos.

Dr. Thomas K. Schippers, The Institute of Mediterranean and Comparative Ethnology (Institut d'Ethnologie méditerranéenne et comparative, IDEMEC/CNRS), 5 rue du Chateau de l'Horloge, B. postale 647, F-13094 Aix-en-Provence CEDEX2, France
E-mail: t-schip@libello.com

This article will, firstly, address some methodological problems related to the mapping out of cultural data and more specifically those related to so-called cultural borders and boundaries in space. But as the present conference also aims to discuss the heuristic possibilities of the Baltic region as a conceptual tool, I will devote the second part of my paper to another region I know much better: the Mediterranean. For half a century, this region has been the locus of much anthropological fieldwork, and has also provoked much debate on the topic of the region surrounding a closed sea as a conceptual entity. As both the Baltic and the Mediterranean seas have been spaces of intense human relations rather than obstacles for exchange, a future anthropological comparison between these two areas may prove stimulating.

Maps, borders and boundaries

But let me first start with the central topic of this paper: cultures in space, or more precisely the spatial differences of cultures and their methodological implications. Like other concepts and no-

1 One of the most recent synthesis of these debates can be found in Albera, Blok and Bromberger 2001.

tions elaborated by both anthropologists and European ethnologists, the idea of cultural areas or regions with borders and boundaries nowadays refers to quite familiar categories in Western thinking - space and culture - while it generates at the same time some very specific epistemological and methodological problems when one takes a literally closer look at their geographic limits and contours. Narrowly linked to a spatial vision of the world, the idea of cultural regions refers to a series of perceptions in terms of within and beyond, of limits between presence and absence, of transitions, of changes, shifts and overlaps. Especially the geo-political region, as a child of strategists and international agreements, is conceptually associated with the emblems and artefacts which give it a certain degree of visibility in the landscape with precise border-marks (stone posts, fences, barriers, walls etc.) and also with all the tools which allow it to have a representational visibility or traceability. Among these, of course, two-dimensional graphic representations like maps and cartograms are best known (cf. Schippers 1999: 26-27).

After centuries of rather approximate mapping, technical improvements in the 18th and especially the 19th centuries helped greatly to make geographic maps into acceptable tools for representation of both parts of space and for various forms of distant decision-making - for example by commanders during wartime² or by diplomats and politicians during conferences in the aftermath of armed conflicts. Technical improvements in mapping also facilitated in the 19th century the introduction of so-called “thematic cartography”, used by all kinds of scientific disciplines to give graphic, synoptic representations of the spatial distribution of particular phenomena. European linguistic and later ethnographic mapping and the publication of ethnographic atlases have provided examples of thematic mapping in the field of European ethnology.³

The 19th century, with the introduction of basic education for all in most European countries, also progressively familiarised most young Europeans with maps as graphic icons of their country, representing not only its physical and administrative geography but also literally outlining the shape of its external contours. The general use of so-called “blind maps” for pedagogical purposes has reinforced this process of familiarisation of most nationals with this particular form of popular cartographic imagery. Here national borders often became, in an era of nationalism, the metaphoric contours of self, of a “second skin”. The well-known anthropomorphic or zoomorphic representations of the various European nations as in popular newspapers around the turn of 20th century led to many forms of border/body images, reinforcing among the wider public this identification with the national territory as an extension of one's self and as an accepted representation of the “imagined (cultural) community” (Anderson 1983) formed by the nation state. This familiarity and consequent identification by most people with diverse graphic and cartographic representations of the national space have frequently led to a very emotional relationship with regard to administrative borders of the national space, which in its turn has caused some worries for ethnocartographers. Not only have national or regional administrative borders formed the geographic limits of most ethnocartographic investigations, but in the few cases where these were crossed by researchers for scientific purposes, this has generally given rise to reactions of anger and protest from both politi-

² For example, Napoleon always had always an important staff of cartographers and topographers with him to prepare in situ detailed maps of forthcoming battlefields.
³ For a historical overview European ethnocartography see Bromberger, Dosetto, Schippers 1982/83, 15-40.
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...cians and ordinary people. Such emotional responses also seem to prove that the establishment of borders and limits are generally considered in Europe as the exclusive prerogative of the legal authorities currently in place. Here every form of transgression of this tacit rule, even perhaps the academic mapping of the distribution of some particular tool or of some nursery rhyme, can come to be considered as a potential threat to the politically established boundaries which could lead indirectly to a possible reappraisal of the national entity. Even within a nation state like France, when cultural cartography seems to indicate not officially recognised interior regions or even cross-border cultural similarities, very few cartographic research projects have actually dared to draw these borders or limits (Le Bras and Todt 1981), most preferring to publish only maps with dotted data within the official borders. In modern Europe, spatial transgressions appear as being closely linked to social transgression and can provoke strong popular reactions.

All this seems to indicate that the idea of a limit separating a “within”, a “we-group” from a “beyond” of “others” has become profoundly ingrained in European mentalities, where it models not only the individual and collective perception of geographical, but also of social and cultural “spaces of belonging”.

At the same time, the acknowledgement of forms of otherness in regard to one’s self, leads people to suppose the crossing of some kind of limit or even barrier to which they then often try to grant a mental demarcation line. Here we should ask ourselves why these banal everyday experiences of (mental) border crossing and otherness have caused so many problems to ethnocartographers who, as a result, have been very reluctant actually to draw any borderlines, at least “in public” (i.e. in published documents)?

Many European ethnocartographers have justified their hesitations or even their refusal to draw limits or boundaries on maps presenting cultural data, either because of the too-precise, too-sharp character of a line on a map or on the other hand because of the very complex nature or fuzziness of the data from the field. As a result, the sharpness of a black line drawn on a white cartographic background seems to involve such a degree of interpretation on the part of the academic designer that very few have been willing to acknowledge the authorship of such an audacious act (cf. for example Weiss 1962: 201-231), for it has generally been followed by much criticism (cf. here Burckhart-Seebass 1993: 15-26). So one may wonder if the “cultural area” is only a view of the mind (vue de l’esprit): just a heuristic tool, just nice to think (bon à penser, Claude Levi-Strauss) in the field or in the privacy of one’s study, but quite hazardous or even impossible to draw on a map.

These apparent difficulties in actually mapping out ethnographical data may originate in a lack of theoretical knowledge about the mechanisms at work in “geo-carto-graphic” modelling and also in perhaps a too-exclusive focusing on the micro-variations of the empirically observed field data. Here it should be remembered that most ethnocartographic research has been done within more global projects aiming at the building up archives and databases relating to national or regional popular or folk culture; here maps were generally considered as useful heuristic tools for systematically collecting empirical realia. As a consequence of this, a majority of researchers sought to track down, with the utmost precision, ethnographic facts according to their location, and this has gener-

4 The case of the questionnaires of the Atlas der Deutsche Volkskunde (ADV) sent in the early 1930s to various German-speaking regions outside the German Republic, is a well-known example of the difficulties encountered by academic researchers trying to cross national borders.


6 Nice to aid thought.
ally resulted in rather precise, exclusively dot-like mapping. But this quest for both ethnographic
and topographical precision also has in many cases severely reduced the graphical legibility of the
maps so established, as a majority of European ethnocartographic maps and atlases have illustrated
in the past. This priority given to topographic accuracy to the detriment of legibility, often com-
bined with ignorance of the mechanisms and rules of what Jacques Bertin (1967) has coined as
“graphic semiotics”, seems to have prevented most ethnocartographers from questioning until quite
recently the profound nature of the facts collected and their consequences for the possibilities of
drawing limits and boundaries in space (cf. Schippers 1993: 115-120).

Fractal data and evanescent areas

As has been shown by mathematicians studying so-called “fractals” and as professional cartog-
raphers have known for a long time, a limit or a boundary is a phenomenon very closely related or
even directly submitted to consciously chosen levels of pertinence or to chosen scales of percep-
tion. When one looks at a limit too closely it seems literally to disappear into an infinity of
dots/details, while a too-distant look makes the limit hardly visible/perceptible. So a limit or a
boundary seems to have this curious property of appearing or disappearing according the scales and
levels of pertinence chosen by the observer. One of the first consequences of this evanescent prop-
erty of borders and boundaries is the fact that it obliges the observer to determine a
“good/appropriate distance” (Schippers, forthcoming) necessary actually to establish its presence.
This evanescent character of cultural boundaries equally concerns the regions they seek to outline.

But in the case of the cultural facts studied by European ethnologists, not only the spatial scales
are to be considered. Cultural facts themselves are also grouped in categories and clusters bounded
by conceptual boundaries which have their proper scales like Russian dolls. As the French ethnolo-
gist and archaeologist André Leroi-Gourhan pointed out more than 50 years ago, ethnographic facts
can be grouped or distinguished by category-specific boundaries according to the “classificatory
distance” at which one takes them into consideration. Between the sometimes unique micro-local
variant encountered in the field and the often universal general ontological category to which it can
be considered to belong, an infinite variety of category-specific levels, scales or boundaries can be
chosen. Here again we encounter the fractal idea, but related to the classificatory boundaries or
categories which allow ethnographic facts to be distinguished ipso facto. Confronted with this
problem, ethnologists and anthropologists either impose their own, so-called “etic”, categories onto
the reality observed or they borrow local, so-called “emic” categories from the people they study.
The well-known Wörter und Sachen problem is a good example of this type of category-specific
complexity as it puts into relation local, emic names and taxonomies with, for example, scholarly,
etic categories based on the morphology or function of artefacts.

7 The so-called “Theory of Fractals” was introduced in 1975 by the French-Polish mathematician Benoit
Mandelbrot (b. 1924). Fractal designates mathematical objects of which the creation or the form follow
rules of irregularity or fragmentation. Nature offers numerous examples of fractal character like snowfla-
kes, the ramification of bronchial tubes, of hydraulic networks etc.; a more popular approach to fractals
has been presented by the British mathematician Ian Stewart (1982); see illustrations. Metaphorically the
fractal idea is more and more used to designate phenomena which seem to “dissolve into infinity” when
scrutinised in detail; for example the German essayist Hans Magnus Enzensberger has spoken about Euro-
pe (and European individual identities) as "fractal objects" (1987/88: 367-368).
But borders and boundaries between different ethnographic facts do not only appear or disappear on maps according to the geographical scales or the classificatory distances at which they are studied. In order to have a scientific existence, they also depend on other variables among which time is probably one of the most important. Cultural facts change in time: they appear, change, disappear and sometimes reappear after a period of absence. One of the main problems encountered by European ethnologists has been the extreme variety in the historical depth of many of the cultural items and especially artefacts encountered in the field. As is well known, this lack of temporal precision has been a recurrent source of debate among specialists using cartographic methods. Except in a few cases where precise historic data were available, the drawing of cultural boundaries concerning diachronic changes of ethnographic facts has shown itself to be quite hazardous especially when social or technical parameters have blurred the data. Another, quite different aspect of anthropological interest in borders and boundaries and in particular geopolitical ones, concerns what may be called ‘administrative belonging’, which has significantly influenced local cultures in many places. The modern nation states especially have very often had since the 19th century active policies of ‘nationalising’ local and regional cultures. But earlier administrations have also frequently imposed regulations and rules which have become part of both material culture (architecture, technical solutions, etc.) and immaterial culture (language or dialects, property regulations, taxes, etc.) in large regions and which have survived geo-administrative changes. This interaction between global administrative regulations and more local cultural facts is often most visible at present but also at past administrative borders. During the last decades a series of historical, ethnological and social-anthropological case studies (for e.g. Cole and Wolf 1974, Sahlins 1989, Donnan and Wilson 1998, Minnich 1998) has interestingly documented this ethnographically by showing how particular forms of national identities have been (re)elaborated in border areas in parallel with specific ‘border identities’. They often nicely illustrate the fractal nature of geo-political borders as they show how nation states apply endless effort in translating political decisions into topographical realities on the ground, and also how these borders imposed from above are experienced in everyday life by the people involved. While the old nations and empires, which lacked cartographic precision, were generally surrounded by more or less controlled buffer zones called ‘marches’ (Denmark, Ostmark, etc.) in which the inhabitants often enjoyed specific privileges, the modern improvements in both topographic and cartographic techniques have paradoxically created on the ground frequently totally arbitrary situations of separation. The ethnographic data in these border areas equally seem to suggest that borderline lines decided in central capitals or at faraway conferences generally need quite some time to become culturally significant. On the other hand fieldwork in European regions where national borders have been dissolved, as between the two former Germanies (Korf 1995, Bornemann 1992), indicates that the disappearance of these types of spatial markers can provoke uncertainties and doubts about one's identity or even worrying nationalistic or regionalist retrenchment.

The example of the anthropology of the Mediterranean

After these more methodological aspects of a special approach to anthropological data, I would like to switch now to the second part of this paper which aims to suggest possible fruitful compari-

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8 Cf. for example Voskuil 1982-83: 105-116.
10 A tragic example here is the spatial separation of the Palestinian ‘autonomous territories’ within and around the various Israeli borders (cf. Rabinowitz 1999: 237-248).
sons for those studying in the circum-Baltic regions with the area I am more familiar with: the Mediterranean.

One could start by saying that the first use of the Mediterranean-concept in anthropology was not a geographic but an institutional one within some anthropology departments in Great Britain, the USA and later in the Netherlands and France. In a period when ethnographic research within Europe was either considered as belonging to the domain of folklorists, human geographers or sociologists, the Mediterranean label, already academically patented by the other above mentioned disciplines, proved to be institutionally acceptable in the 1970s as funding was provided and formal research teams of Mediterraneanists were equipped with research facilities both in the USA and in some Western European countries. Notwithstanding the scepticism of anthropological colleagues who viewed the proper orbit of the discipline’s interest as the non-Western world, the establishment and growth of Mediterraneanist interests within anthropology departments was quite successful, supported by increasing numbers of students not always able or motivated to do fieldwork in more difficult locations on other continents.

The transposition of this originally academic divide into the arena of scholarly debate on the anthropological boundaries of the Mediterranean has proved much more hazardous (cf. Pina-Cabral 1989, Gilmore 1990, etc.). The bio-geographic criteria commonly used not only by natural scientists but also though more implicitly by human geographers defining the limits of the man-made Mediterranean ecosystems has often been rejected, especially by European anthropologists as “simplistic (American) cultural area” research if not as totally outdated Ratzelian anthropogeography or Graebnerian diffusionism. A more acceptable and heuristically more interesting strategy, also considered as more suitable with “modern” anthropology’s methodological dictate extolling the virtues of the micro-level ethnographic fieldwork, has been to ask the informants. Here the “Mediterranean boundary” became tracked as a cognitive category, as an “ethnic marker” in informants’ discourses and in their everyday practices.

Unfortunately for the ethnographer the Mediterranean as a mental category of self-definition seems to have entered the vocabulary of everyday life in most fieldwork locations only recently, mainly promoted by politicians and the media in the context of the European Union. Historically often ambiguously connotated, the ‘ethnic boundary’ – in the sense Fredrik Barth (1969) gave to it – of the ‘Mediterranean’ category in emic discourse not only varies greatly according the mental maps of the citizens from countries bordering the northern shores of Mare Nostrum, but also according their social level. For example many Italians consider only their compatriots living south of Rome as ‘Mediterranean’, while producers of Italian goods like cars or clothing made in northern Italy often promote internationally their Mediterranean identity. Similarly a common ‘Mediterranean’ belonging is sometimes put forward by North African élites in order to differentiate themselves from continental Black African or from Islamic or national identities more popularly recognised.

So more than 40 years of anthropological fieldwork and research in countries around the Mediterranean Sea have not only produced a considerable number of monographic studies, especially on the northern shores, but they have also been the scene of lively debates, salutary for anthropology in general. Especially the encounter of various well-established anthropological research traditions in the area (American, British, Dutch and to a lesser degree French, German and Scandinavian) with anthropologists and ethnologists from the Mediterranean countries themselves, has highlighted both implicit and explicit aspects of the discipline’s different mental and national divides.
Jeremy Boissevain (2001) has for example drawn attention to the mental blinkers which have not only prevented most ethnographers from seeing but also including (often thousands of) tourists into their research; a whole list of rather neglected topics could be enumerated here ranging from fishermen to children, from aesthetics to dealing with handicaps. Each national anthropological tradition seems to have brought into the area its own particular theoretical and heuristic toolkits in order to produce anthropological knowledge mainly tailored for colleagues and students back home. For example scholarly mental boundaries — more commonly called prejudices — have more than once prevented “northern” anthropologists from using the work of or even from contacting “local” colleagues, causing surprise and sometimes even resentment (Pina-Cabral 1989 and personal communication). On the other hand, most anthropologists originating from Mediterranean countries have for a long time limited their research to fieldwork “at home” or “back home” as they have often mainly published in their national languages. All this has produced a situation where multiple academic cultural boundaries have fragmented anthropological research within the Mediterranean area. The lively debates concerning centre and periphery between anthropologists of the Mediterranean and anthropologists from Mediterranean countries seem to have been avant garde in regard to other regions of the world. The fact that a number of southern European anthropologists have challenged the Mediterranean idea as some kind of cultural area concept invented by scholars from abroad also shows the fragile — because fragmented — nature of anthropological discourses.

Does all this suggest that in the field of anthropology the Mediterranean has only been an academic device invented by some British and American scholars in order to do (funded) fieldwork in the southern Europe or more rarely in North Africa? Many of the “specific anthropological characters” (as outlined by the first generations of Mediterraneanists) have been de-constructed as either not being pan-Mediterranean or as also being found outside the bio-geographic area. But does this means the Mediterranean world is only some kind of fata morgana of the Roman Empire around the end of the 4th century A.D. (Chalian and Rageau 1995)?

The establishment in Europe of basic education for all has made the cartographic representation the Roman Empire encircling the interior sea familiar to many, while the democratisation of air travel during the last decades has allowed millions of people to inscribe Mediterranean landscapes, cuisine and people into their mental holiday souvenirs while leafing through the latest travel-agency catalogue. So at least for most contemporary Europeans the Mediterranean region exists in a series of empirical things and experiences. But as other forms of identity, the Mediterranean as a cultural category is eminently fractal (Enzenberger 1988: 367).

This means that the Mediterranean as a bounded category, or rather certain forms of “Mediterraneanness”, can only exist at a certain level of generalisation or particularism (Schippers 2001). The screens on which this level of “Mediterraneanness” appears or disappears while zooming back and forth on an imaginary control panel are various. The most obvious screen to get a glimpse of the Mediterranean boundaries is of course a geographical map at a scale which includes parts of Africa, Asia and Europe and where bio-geographic iso-lines (of for example olive-tree growing) offer a nicely delimited areal view. But when one zooms down on this bio-geographic limit at the level of a region of a few square kilometres somewhere in the south of France or in Catalonia or in Tunisia, the Mediterranean limit becomes blurred in an area of transition. The same phenomenon occurs on the screen of ethnographic topics: while one can distinguish at a rather broad scale similar technical solutions in areas around the Mediterranean Sea, for example in the constructions of pre-industrial mills, more grassroots-level fieldwork often reveals an infinity of locally adapted
technical solutions. Identical patterns occur in the field of social anthropology where the existence of specific gender-related sociality has been identified as a valid indicator of “Mediterraneanness” at least at a regional scale, but here again ethnographic data have shown that this gender-specific sociality varies greatly not only in different regions or epochs but even sometimes during the yearly cycle. Sometimes the same individuals can according to circumstances or opportunities behave or not according to the often-stereotyped criteria of “Mediterraneanness”. The “cultural boundaries” of the Mediterranean are thus dependent on multiple scales and dimensions in order to acquire an often ephemeral existence on the analytic screen of the watchful anthropologist. Only such a multidimensional collecting and narrative of ethnographic minutiae may perhaps one day sketch the contours of a multifaceted Mediterranean human ensemble.

I hope this example of the complex relations between on the one hand the shore areas around an almost closed sea (the Mediterranean) and on the other the coming-together in this area of different anthropological traditions, can be considered as an interesting case for comparison with the regions surrounding the Baltic Sea. It could be academically profitable to systematically explore how the Baltic as an area is perceived by the various inhabitants of the surrounding countries. Here it may appear as an emic category (or not) of which the given content could be anthropologically, but also historically interesting. The comparison with other forms of belonging (micro-regional, national, linguistic, etc.) could prove to be of value in future ethnological and anthropological research in this region.

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KULTŪROS ERDVĖJE: KELIOS PASTABOS APIE VIDURžEMIJO IR BALTIJOS JŪRŲ REGIONUS LYGINAMOJOJE ANTROPOLOGINĖJE PERSPEKTYVOJE

Thomas K. Schippers
IDEMEC/CNRS, Aix en Provence, Prancūzija

Santrauka

Pirmoje straipsnio dalyje autorius pristatęs dalyką aptariami kultūros duomenų žemėlapių rengimo metodologinės problemas. Visų pirma duomenų, susijusių su vadinamosiomis kultūrų ir geografinės erdvės ribomis. Antroji dalis skirta kartografijos ir žemėlapių sudarymo praktikos svarbą, o kartu ir geografinės erdvės principų parentų šiuolaikinių nacionalinių valstybių gyventojų savivokus formavimosi supratimo atsidiradimą. Taip pat primenamas teminės kartografijos vystymasis lingvistinės, o vėliau ir etnologijos srityje, prasidėjęs XIX amžiuje. Vienas iš šios srities metodologinių problemų yra ribų bei sienų nustatymas ir nubrežimas. Sėkulos darbo metodikos ir sąvokos, pvz.: pronužų mokslininko André Leroi-Gourhan „fakto laipšininkų“ idėja, leidžianti įtraukti etnografinės „realijas“ į bendresnes antropologinės „tendencijas“. Į šį „fakto laipšininkų“ būtina atsižvelgti, parenkant geografinį mastelį kultūros duomenims žymėti žemėlapyje taip, kad išryškėtų
tarpkultūrinės ribos ir atskirų kultūrų teritorijos. Autorius daro išvadą, kad būtent koreliacija tarp geografinio mastelio ir „fakto laipsniškumo“ atspindi objektyvesnį etnografinių faktų paplitimo konkrečiuose kultūriniuose arealuose pobūdį.


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