

## **Multiculturalism in Malaysia: The Need of Local Knowledge to Grapple with Identity and Ethnicity**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Kearifan lokal dibutuhkan untuk masuk ke dalam diskursus tentang multikulturalisme. Multikulturalisme, multi-etnisitas, pluralisme dan pluralitas pada saat dikaitkan dengan identitas dan pembangunan bangsa dapat saja bermakna banyak hal untuk masing-masing orang. Seringkali kegagalan dalam memahami “basis kearifan lokal dari identitas” membawa konsekuensi sosial-politik yang merusak kepada “komunitas” yang pada akhirnya terbawa bersama kepada level kebangsaan. Skenario ini secara historis membuktikan kepada bangsa bahwa konstruksi yang disusun oleh penguasa kolonial yang menempatkan kepentingan ekonomi mereka pada posisi pertama dibandingkan kepentingan komunitas lokal membentuk batas politik dari bangsa. Kajian ini dimaksudkan untuk menunjukkan bahwa identitas orang Malaysia sangat berhubungan dekat dengan aspek etnisitas.*

***Keywords:** Multiculturalism, Polyethnic, Pluralism, Plurality, Bumi Putera ,*

### **I. MULTICULTURALISM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

Research works on multiculturalism is very problematic. Each individual and social group have their interests at hand to defend. After all patriotism, just as charity, begin at home. With various models of nation-building, identity formation and managing society and state prevailing in this contemporary world, multiculturalism is often

reduced to a convenience concept to defend individual interest by mobilizing group parameter. Universalistic discourses of liberty, justice, equality, rights and fraternity are thus derailed as researchers fail to read their own society, being blinded to societal changes taking place and caught in the problem of presentism by succumbing to a game of manipulating society in order to achieve their own personal agenda.

## II. MANAGING A COMMUNITY OF NATION AND A POLY ETHNIC SOCIETY

Malaysia is a community of nation. It is a polyethnic society where ethnic proportion by population do not produce a dominant majority. Malays as a group or in combination with the other indigenous groups of Sabah, Sarawak and *Orang Asli* still could be on par with the Thais and Indonesians who only have a small Chinese and other minorities. The Chinese and Indian ethnic groups, especially when their population are combined, form a significant minority of 40 percent in the total population.

Malaysia also does not have a pattern of spatial population distribution by ethnic groups as comparable to the Canadian and Switzerland models. Pre-independence picture of the pattern of spatial population distribution by ethnic groups might resemble these two countries, but economic development since the 1970's has brought in Malays and other *Bumiputera* from the subsistence economy of the rural areas to work and reside in the urban areas. The Indians too migrate out of the rubber estates to the urban areas in the 1980's as property ownership changes hand from the colonial corporate to locals and the

conversion of these rubber estates into new townships. By 1990's the urban areas have increasingly become a polyethnic space where the Chinese community prevalence in the colonial days give way to the sharing it with the others.

Horowitz description of the ethnic relations in Malaysia in the 1970's as the unstructured social status system in which the Malays and *Bumiputera* control the political resources and the Chinese control the economic resources could be argued as still relevant but not sufficient to explain the total picture of the ethnic relations observed today.

The New Economic Policy of the 1970's has restructured the Malay-*Bumiputera* communities through education, entrepreneurship programmes, privatization of the public amenities, an expanding economy based on direct foreign investment and the expansion of the public sector into a formidable middle classes. These social classes transformation also can be observed among the Indians and the Chinese ethnic groups, of which the latter only lead the middle classes distribution but were found to have strengthened their presence in the small scale industries, trading and commercial activities. However, the economic sphere has lost the ethnic make-up of the post-independence

era in which a single ethnic community was in controlled though the Chinese community may still predominate over the other ethnic groups.

The political sphere resembles the economic picture of the nation but in which the Malay and *Bumiputera* communities are in strengthened. The population distribution by ethnicity could be in the ratio of 6:3:1 between Malays, Chinese and Indians, respectively, but the delineation of parliamentary and state seats are constructed in favour of the Malay and *Bumiputera* communities. By the logic of this electoral boundary, Malay and *Bumiputera* communities could politically rule the state and national political power by themselves.

But the ethnic political advantage for the Malays and *Bumiputera* communities were never put into practice as the political culture practiced in Malaysia since independence in 1957 is to have a power sharing formula among the Malay, *Bumiputera*, Chinese and Indian communities beginning with the formation of *Perikatan* in 1955 and later the *Barisan Nasional* in 1974 to contest and formed the government of the nation. In such a practice, Chinese and Indian can stand and win election not only in Chinese dominated seats, but also by standing in Malay areas on the

*Perikatan* and *Barisan Nasional* ticket. Such acceptance by the Malay political community allows representation of the Chinese who do not have sufficient areas and, especially, the Indians who do not have a dominant ethnic areas to contest and win electoral seats. Even the opposition political parties such as the Democratic Action Party, *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* and *Partai Islam SeMalaysia* know that without forging a united front among them, the nation's corridor of power will never be within their grasp except for local politics in Kelantan and Terengganu of which the Malay population still formed 90 percent of the population.

Furthermore with rapid economic development and internal migration taking place in the 1990's, newly delineated parliamentary and state constituencies in the new township are getting more ethnically mixed. This can be observed in the township of the rapidly expanding new economic growth centers of Kulim-Sungai Petani of Kedah, Bangi in Selangor, Parit Buntar and Proton City in Perak, Kuantan and Pekan in Pahang, Kertih in Terengganu, Nilai and Senawang in Negeri Sembilan and Pasir Gudang and Tanjung Pelepas in Johor where Malays and *Bumiputera* from the rural areas, Indians from the rubber estates and the commercially minded

Chinese from the traditional urban areas converged to reside and exploit the new economic opportunities found there. Even the traditional urban areas of Kuala Lumpur, Petaling Jaya and Shah Alam in the Klang Valley, Georgetown, Malacca and Johor Baharu are spared of these changes as they too are getting ethnically mixed as their urban boundaries expanded into the hinterland taking additional polyethnic communities within them.

Lastly, the Constitution of Malaysia is federal in nature except for the questions of land, water and religion which lie in the hands of the respective 14 states. Even though these three questions are matters of the respective state, a converging to national policy direction is the norm as the federal government since independence is always in the hands of *Barisan Nasional* and so to nearly all of the respective state except intermittently in the cases of Kelantan and Terengganu.

Studying the federal nature of the Malaysian Constitution, one can notice that what are stipulated for the Malays and Bumiputera such as Islam as the religion, land reservations, quota for the government civil service, business permit and education are caveat with a parallel protection for the other communities. Thus, religious

freedom, teaching in their own mother tongue, business and educational opportunities and landownership for the other communities are defined in the Federal Constitution so as to protect the interests of the minority.

Although Malaysia is a land of the Malays and Bumiputera, they have to share the nation with the Chinese and Indians who have been here for some generations. The Malays and *Bumiputera* are not in a clear cut numerical majority as in Thailand and Indonesia. Pro-Malay and *Bumiputera* delineation of rural constituencies remained but new constituencies delineated in the new township are ethnically mixed. Thus, since independence Malaysians are used to a political culture of power sharing as exemplified by *Perikatan* and *Barisan Nasional* as well as the opposition political parties. With economic development, not only the urban landscape is ethnically mixed but business relations tend to transcend ethnic lines. Economic growth brings social transformation which saw the rise of a middle classes as well as poverty, social disparity and marginalization, irrespective of ethnic groups. The ethnic divide is thinning in the social winners but a thickening ethnic wall among the social losers, though they

share the same plights of powerless and voiceless.

With no one ethnic group in a clear cut majority, be it in term of population size and distribution, controlling of the economic, political and the social status system, Malaysians, irrespective of ethnic groups, find themselves often experiencing a cross-cutting relationship with individuals from other ethnic group and hence producing stability or they find themselves competing with one another in the economic and the political sphere and hence as Shamsul said 'producing a stable tension', especially among the social losers. This internal contradiction between the ethnic groups, the position of the social winners and losers and a federal structure governance supported by a federally based Constitution that stipulated rights and privileges of each communities, lies the strength and potential foundational crisis of nation building in Malaysia.

### **III. DISCOURSES ON NATION-BUILDING**

With the above discussions as the background to our understanding of 'multiculturalism' in Malaysia, many of the prevailing discourses on nation-building and the nation-of-intent need to be redefined and reconstructed.

Prior to independence, three streams of nationalist movement could be identified, namely, a Malay nationalist movement to defend religion, race and nation to found in United Malay National Organization (UMNO), a religiously inclined of the Pan Malayan Islamic Party (PAS) and a radically oriented Malays of the *Parti Sosialis Malaysia* (PSM). The radically oriented Malays did have a united front strategy with the Malayan Communist Party whose initial aim was to oppose the Japanese Occupation and later to take political control of the nation through its reign of terror on the Malay populace as the Second World War ended.

The coming back of the British colonial master and the rejection of the Malayan Union in 1947 meant that political direction of the country would be dictated by the British economic and Malay nationalist political interests. Thus, the radical Malay and Chinese political groups were excluded from any political participation to define the future direction of the nation. The Malayan Communist Party reign of terror and armed struggles to liberate Malaya from British rule was not supported by the Islamic-based Malay community and with concerted government military operation against them as well as the

development taking place in the nation, they put their arms down in late 1960's. The PSRM disassociates themselves from the armed struggle of the MCP and participates within the democratic framework of the nation. PSRM has yet to make much in-road in the political scene of the nation and since 2006 has merged with *Partai Keadilan Rakyat (Keadilan)* to form *Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR)*.

Chinese and Indian nationalist movements in Malaya in the pre-independence era were basically nationalism in China and India on Malayan soil. The middle classes Chinese and India in the Strait Settlement of Penang, Malacca and Singapore preferred to regard themselves as British subjects and wanting to be British citizens. However, among the Chinese and Indian communities, there are home grown nationalists as represented by Tan Cheng Lok and V. Sambathan who mobilized their own respective ethnic group in order to safeguard their interests by forming the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), respectively, and persuaded by the British to work with UMNO in gaining independence of the nation.

The formation of Malaysia introduced People Action Party

(PAP) of Singapore in the discourse of nation-building with its 'slogan of Malaysian Malaysia'. Though Singapore joined Malaysia in 1963, PAP 'Malaysian Malaysia slogan' was not received by the dominant Malay partner in the *Perikatan* and led to the separation of Singapore from Malaysia. PAP political legacy is continued by DAP who in reality is Chinese-based in terms of membership and vote gained. From 1974 there were a number of Chinese, Indian and Bumiputera based political parties that were set up but often they were accepted into the fold of an enlarged coalition of *Barisan Nasional*.

PAS in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, strengthened their Islamic discourse by bringing the political Iranian ideology of Islamic state along an extremist and militant interpretation. The strengthening of PAS Islam nation is supported by a growing Islamic revivalism taking place in Malaysia since post ethnic riots of 1969 as a response to the Malay Muslim material marginalization and fear of the chauvinism prevailing among the Chinese community as observed in the PAP and DAP political discourses.

The economic and the petroleum crises of 1997 and 2007, respectively, brought a new dimen-

sion in political participation in Malaysia. The social losers of the economic success story of the 1990's among the urban vulnerable group and poor, irrespective of ethnic groups, culminated in the urban poor conflict between Indians and Malays in Kampung Rawa, Penang in 1997 and Kampung Medan, Selangor in 2001. These urban conflicts heralded a new form of inter-ethnic conflict as it has moved away from the pattern of the ethnic riots of 1969 in which Malays and Chinese are involved to that of the urban poor Indians and Malays.

These socially vulnerable and poor groups were mobilized by non-governmental organizations which culminated in the *Reformasi Movement* of 1997. The formation of Parti Keadilan and the coalition of opposition as represented by *Parti Keadilan*, PAS and DAP caused *Barisan Nasional* to lose 25 parliamentary seats, inroad in a number of state assemblies such as Selangor, Kedah and Pahang as well as PAS retaining Kelantan and capturing Terengganu in the 1999 National election.

Yet in the 2004 National Election, Malaysian Malaysia slogan of the DAP, the Islamic State of PAS and justice, transparency and accountability of PKR were supported by most Malaysians, irrespective of ethnicity, but not

fundamental enough to be converted into votes against the *Barisan Nasional* candidates who were then newly led by Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. So what is the nation of intent discourse prevailing in the nation in 2004 that brought Barisan Nasional to gain its two-third majority in Parliament and retain all state assemblies except Kelantan?

#### IV. THE CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL DIRECTION

Research works being discussed below assumed that individuals are motivated by gains and risks. That no social group in this world maintain itself. Identity formation does provide individual with one's self-worth but identity too could be manipulated in order to mobilize societal resources and social esteem. It is within this rational choice theoretical framework that multiculturalism in Malaysia will be located.

The conceptual framework that guides this study is that social parameters including ethnicity is not totally *sui generis*. Ethnicity as a concept might be primordial as in the works of Geertz and Miles but it can also be an effect. If ethnicity is an effect, then researchers need to look beyond group characteristics. The ability to understand the dynamic and fluid nature of ethnicity is in how the individuals interpret the con-

sequences of the external social environment on his personal interests. Thus, group membership can be a social force on their choices to act but the parameters of the group could very well be mobilized and manipulated to serve personal calculation.

With such comprehension of the concept of ethnicity, researchers need only to the relationship of the individuals with the social structure but also how individuals do make choices that may not align with the structural analysis. Thus we need to understanding the prevalent and coexistence of the structural level on the individuals and the level of choices that individuals do have in carrying out their social actions; the ability to understand the anascopic versus klaustropic, the bottom versus the top, the individual versus group alignment, jumping versus pushing, the everyday defined versus the authority defined

## V. EVIDENTS FROM THE FIELD-WORKS

### *Revisiting Rabushka's racial stereotype*

A revisit of a study on racial stereotype in Malaysia carried out prior to the May 13<sup>th</sup> by Rabushka was done in 2005. Rabushka understanding of racial stereotype in

Malaysia was based on an interpretation from a colonial knowledge perspective that individual capacity and competency are moulded by one's location in a racial group. The revisit study found out that Rabushka's observations are no longer tenable. Malays are thus found in to be no longer lazy and poor, Indians are no longer of low mental ability and squalid, and the Chinese as the only industrious and wealthy group in Malaysia. Intelligence is shared by Malays, the *Bumiputera*, Chinese and Indians, hardworking is shared by Chinese and Indians, Malays excel in cleanliness and *Bumiputera* as most involved in social public action. Indian and Chinese groups tend to perceive the other ethnic groups with the same traits as hardworking, intelligence and ambitious and Malays, *Bumiputera* Islam and *Bumiputera* non-Islam tend to see the other two ethnic groups in a substantive rationality comprising elements of involving in public social action, honesty, cleanliness and sincerity.

The changing racial stereotype found among Malaysians do indicate that, irrespective of ethnicity, group behaviors and perception of the other group do change as development and social transformation bring about positive



changes through education, employment and a growing middle classes life style.

## **VI. ETHNICITY IS REAL YET PRO STABILITY AND PROGRESS**

### *Ethnic divide is real*

In the 1950's studying ethnicity tends to focus on the internal characteristics of the group. Physical appearance, language, culture and religion are the main characteristics employed in identifying ethnic group. The days of focusing on internal characteristics of the ethnic group by social anthropologist and ethnographer was eclipsed by late 70's by growing concern of the group relations and thus the need to study the ethnic boundary by Barth.

Research works carried out in 2007 show that Malaysians do identify themselves by ethnic identities. The main internal group characteristics of religion, language, culture and kinship are often the parameters employed to distinguish between them. The variations across these ethnic characteristics mean that the ethnic divide is real and the nation is plurality in nature; hence the official tourism campaign of 'Malaysia Truly Asian'. The two studies also show that some of these internal group characteristics prevail but are amendable and thus able to co-exist with the other ethnic groups.

Malays and Indians are found to be amendable and would be willing to accommodate their language, culture and kinship network, the *Bumiputera* non-Islam are observed to do likewise with language, culture and religion and the Chinese with culture and religion. Thus, the ethnic characteristics do prevail but because of the willingness to accommodate with the other ethnic groups they are not necessarily separated.

Yet it is observed that each ethnic group has its own internal characteristics that they are sensitive too and of which they would not compromise with other ethnic groups; do not cross the line. The findings show that Malays and Indians would place religion, Chinese with Mandarin language and *the Bumiputera* non-Islam with tribal ties.

Malays, Chinese, *Bumiputera*, and Indians view cultural items as food, clothing, songs as secondary to group identity and boundary markers of which variation are accepted and accommodated. Malays, Indians and *Bumiputera* do likewise on language. Chinese and *Bumiputera* non Islam take religion as secondary in nature. Thus, it is observed that Malays could be open to negotiation and compromises to other ethnic parameters but do not touch on Islam. Same observations with the Indians who see the Hindu religion as a no

compromise zone. The Chinese are opened to other parameters of ethnicity such as conversion to other religion and cultural practices but put a no cross zone on mastering the language of Mandarin; language is the basis of a Chinese *weltanschauung*, behavior outcome and civilization. Yet with the *Bumiputera* non Islam, they accept religious conversion, variation in language and cultural practices, even other ethnicity but insist on a sino-, India- etc., KadazanDusun tribal identities and boundary.

Based on these findings of the parameters of ethnicity, Malays, *Bumiputera*, Chinese and Indians do place language, culture, religion and kinship ties as markers of group identity and boundary. But these markers do possess traits of adapting and accommodating with other group's parameters. The studies do also indicate that there is an element in each ethnic group and it varies from one group to the others that are held as the anchor to the group identity and boundary of which no negotiation and compromise are allowed.

#### *Stability is central*

Despite such defined internal parameters of group identity and boundary, Malays, Chinese, Indians and the *Bumiputera* non Islam are

least comfortable with political instability in the society. They would not tolerate those who transgress the laws of the nation and would not support social movements that employ extremism and militancy as their methods in raising societal issues and mobilizing members. The latest study on the voting behavior in Kedah also support this observation on the prominent of political stability in the society. Political stability is ranked first and higher in percentage than the bread and butter calculation, governance and other issues faced in the as a determinant in their voting the opposition or the incumbent government political parties.

#### *Pro modernization behavior*

Malaysians, irrespective of ethnicity, are pro market, modernization and a growing population are espousing a middle classes behaviour. They believe in the freedom of the press and religion, giving unemployment benefits, do want to exploit job opportunity beyond the national boundaries, and are open-minded where they celebrate Valentine Day, dye their hairs and think English language is an asset to be acquired, watch Hollywood film and even have a second-English name. The parameters of one ethnic identity and group boundary may be real but not

‘a wall tall enough to divide polyethnic communities’.

## VII. REVIEWING ETHNICITY, STABILITY AND PROGRESS

Ethnicity is concrete and real but individuals within the ethnic groups are more concerned about stability in the nation, the calculation of the bread and butter and managing issues in their locality that would strengthen their quality of life. In the words of Huntington and Harrison, to achieve civilization, a society needs stability and progress; two sides of a coin. Malaysians, do realize that security and stability are paramount. One might be able to eat during time of economic crisis but despite abundant of foods, street demonstrations and incidents of street clashes which can escalate into violence restrict ordinary folks to be within their own houses for to venture out might cause physical pains and potential death.

In Malaysia the street demonstration of *Bersih Movement* which called for a clean and transparent election and HINDRAF movement which raised national awareness of social disparity among the former rubber estate tapper community might be a docile public protest in Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand and Pakistan but the rowdy mob behavior where stones and tear gas canisters were exchanged often

frightening the larger public. The latter saw shops were closed, tourist areas of interest being defamed, hotel received cancellation to their hotel booking, and etc. Extrapolating these isolated consequences on public life, a group of Non Governmental Organizations of anti-*Bersih* and HINDRAF movement met and gathered to sign signatures urging the government to take action by detaining the HINDRAF leaders under the Internal Security Act. Such draconian action was duly taken by the government and the articulators of the HINDRAF movement were sent to the detention center and those still at large went into hiding in foreign lands.

In previous incidents of detention under the Internal Security Act such as in the detention of the leaders of the opposition political parties, religious movements or criminal organizations, the Police in charge of public security and national interests would have to investigate the matters and make recommendations to the Minister of Internal Affairs. In the case of HINDRAF Movement, a group of Non Government Organization from various ethnic and religious groups gathered together, voicing their concern of public security towards the negative effects of the street demonstrations organized by *Bersih* and HINDRAF and coming up with a

petition for the government to use the ISA in preempting potential conflict in the nation.

Comparing Nigeria and Malaysia in the 1980's, Kasper argued that the economic strategies relied upon in both countries are the same. Yet Malaysia relative to Nigeria proves to be a better economic performer. Kasper explains Malaysia success story over Nigeria in economic growth as being contributed by the presence of a mechanism of conflict management. Prior to the street demonstrations organized by *Bersih* and HINDRAF movements, it's the government that initiates any act of anti national security and national interest towards the nation. But in the latest two street demonstrations, it's the people that request the government to act. Concern for stability and progress by the people have socially transformed the society to embed within itself a culture that is intolerant to any act of unpatriotic and treason. ISA which begins as a tool of conflict management perceives as good by the government is now supported and requested by the people too.

The latest study on voting behavior in Kedah indicates that political stability overrides the calculation of good governance and 'bread and butter issues' in getting the people to vote a political party in

this coming election. Such concern of stability in Malaysia is further strengthened by the bombing of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan and Horta in Timur Leste. Political instability to Malaysians is not an alternative to change and progress.

#### *Ethnic boundary thinning*

Gluckman, Barth, Banton and Varshney have been observing the prevalent of cross-cutting social ties between individuals from various ethnic groups. The work of Varshney further argues that the ability of individuals from various ethnic groups to engage in an informal and, especially so, a formal engagement will ensure in the events of misunderstanding and conflict between the ethnic groups not to escalate into violence; it may sparks but catch no fire.

Research works since the 1990 till 2006 on measuring the ethnic boundary among Malays and Chinese have shown that ethnicity as a social force is getting thinner, a secondary in nature and getting less significance as an influence on social action.

The universalistic norms of self interest of the material kind, social status and social obligation *vis a vis* ethnic concern are used to measure the thinning or thickening of ethnic alignment between Malays and Chinese. In the self interest of

the material kind, Malays and Chinese would place material gains over any calculation of ethnic preference. Thus, they would rent their house, their shop house, find a business partner and buy their daily groceries in order to ensure materialistic gains rather than ethnic consideration.

In the self interest of the social status kind, it is found out that Malays and Chinese are ambivalent between the calculation of social esteem and ethnic preference; they are caught between both needs. Thus it is observed that a person with a higher social esteem would be given higher preference over one's own ethnic but not so with a person who has a low social status in which ethnic preference would be the overriding factor.

In the self interest of social obligation, Malays and Chinese would sacrifice ethnic preference in defending the social relations with individuals develop across the ethnic lines. Thus, relationship with a boss, neighbor, classmate and workmate would be viewed in term of the social bonds developed by them rather the ethnic concern between them.

Thus, the 1990-2006 studies indicate that the self interest of the material and social obligation override ethnic preference and self interest of the social status kind is viewed ambivalently. Despite the pro-universalistic norms influencing the

social actions of the Malays and Chinese, it is discerned that Malays view economic activities as fraught with risk and the Chinese feel so in the political context. This shows that despite the tremendous social experiences felt by Malays and Chinese, each group still see that their position vis a vis the others is still rocky.

This portrait of ethnic insecurity is observed to have increased across the study period, especially so in the new millennium. Looking at ethnicity as not only a cause but also an effect, one would be puzzle of such portrait of insecurity as Malays and, especially, Chinese have tremendous improvement in their standard of living as observed in the expanding middle classes among them. This show that ethnicity might be mobilized not necessarily for its own sake but a parameter to defend their own interests.

A study carried out among students in the public and private universities show that the heighten ethnic tension felt after the annual university admission exercise that led to the questioning of the policies on education, examination and criteria admission to these higher institutions reflect ethnic manipulation rather than issues of racial discrimination.

#### *The needs to go beyond ethnicity*

Research works on political behavior in Penang, among Chinese parlia-

mentary constituencies and the urban youth indicate that there are more similarities among the Malays, Chinese, Indians, Bumiputera Sarawak and Bumiputera Sabah than differences. Their personal and local problems are shared. The way they think political should be, who should be their local candidate, the political that they aspire and reject are basically the same.

Though Malays, the Bumiputera and Indians would place religious and moral discourses in how they see the world, political stability is paramount to them and being regarded as more important to that of good governance and economic successes.

### **VIII. MANAGING THE PREVALENCE OF ETHNICITY IN THE PUBLIC DISCOURSES**

The saliency of ethnicity in Malaysia is a very concrete social reality as study shows that awareness about religious-cultural differences was found to have developed among Malaysian university students at an early age of 6 years old. While awareness that religious-cultural differences could lead to conflict were well formed in most Malaysian students while they were 13 years old. With such an early awareness of the religious-cultural differences and its potentiality of conflict, managing

these differences is of utmost important.

This may reason out the concern for ethnic identity and group formation among Malaysians as they, among others, desire their children to study in their own vernacular and religious schools and speaking and reading in their own mother tongue. Despite the possibility of drifting apart along the ethnic lines, the multiethnic space provided for the various languages of the mother tongue-based school at the primary level but still operating within the national educational policy and curriculum was found to be pro national unity. The language differences used as the teaching medium in the primary school were found not to affect the thickening of the ethnic boundaries among the various ethnic groups. In fact the thinning or the thickening of the ethnic boundary is more associated not the the language medium at the primary school level itself but more so because of the ethnicity.

Yet evident from the fieldworks show that ethnicity is there but secondary and losing it significance as a determinant of social actions among Malaysians. But it is problematic to comprehend such a pattern of ethnic relations as public discourses by the politicians, media and the general public tend to be still

in ethnic colour. If ethnicity is not the basis to understand the ethnic problems in Malaysia, then taking the cue that ethnicity can be a cause or an effect, then we need to locate the problem away from ethnicity itself to that of what is stimulating ethnic problems prevailing in the larger society.

Hefner does argue that there is a foundation crisis with regards to citizenship as stipulated in the Constitution in Malaysia as privilege are accorded to Malays and the Bumiputera communities. But this social contract agreed and embedded in the Constitution does not in any

way deprive the rights of the other minorities. Saying so does not mean that managing ethnic relations and multiculturalism is not problematic. But the past 51 years of independence has shown that power sharing through the forming of political coalition, the practice of economic policy with redistribution in the development of the country, the opening of multicultural spaces to the various ethnic groups and managing and neutralizing religious-cultural extremism are Malaysia hope in generating political stability and progress to be a social reality.

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