

Book Review

***Ethnic Relations and Nation Building, The Way Forward* edited by Maya Khemlani David, James McLellan, Ngeow Yeok Meng, Lean Mei Li, and Wendy Yee Mei Tien. 2010. Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.**

The aim of *Ethnic Relations and Nation Building, The Way Forward*, as stated in the preface, is to investigate the various issues concerning ethnicity in relation to national identity, which, hopefully, will lead to national integration.

The book is a collection of thirteen articles, most of which are papers originally presented at the International Conference on Ethnic Relations held in Kuala Lumpur in 2008. The rest are papers from invited writers. All the thirteen articles are grouped into three parts under themes corresponding to the concepts mentioned in the aim, as follows.

Part I: In Search of National Identity
Part II: Ethnic Identity of Minorities
Part III: National Integration.

With reference to the content of the whole book, all of the articles focus on the relationship of ethnicity to identity and national unity. This is inevitably related to cultural values, religious beliefs and language. With regard to the parallelism between the title of the book and the content, the reader may be misled by the title, which suggests issues of ethnicity in general, but actually, the book almost exclusively covers the issues in Malaysia. Only one

article deals with problems in Myanmar and only one Northern Thailand. However, considering the variability of the issues on ethnicity in such a multiethnic and multilingual society as Malaysia and the informative research-based content of each article, the reader will certainly gain a lot of insight into the general concepts of ethnicity, identity and nationality.

In Part I, which focuses on national identity, there are four articles. The first one entitled "National identity: A subset of social identity" written by Malini Ratnasingam is a quantitative study that aims to discover the contents of social identity among contemporary Malaysian youth. The results show that among the most frequently generated social categories, religion was rated as the highest category, followed by citizenship and gender. Ethnicity and being a student received lower ratings. The author considers the results to be positive in terms of national unity. The second article, "Social capital and common ground for fostering ethnic relations," by Maya Khemlani David, examines the role of social capital in improving relations among ethnic groups. Common values that the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia have in common are analyzed, for example, politeness, respect for the elderly and expressing gratitude. The author says that these shared values constitute social capital and should be emphasized in order to foster national unity. Ultimately, the author suggests that in addition to the promotion of those shared values, ideologies that place one group in a superior position to another should be rejected. The third article is "The politics of *Islam Hadhari* and ethnic relations in Malaysia" written by Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani. The author analyzes the concept of *Islam Hadhari* adopted as a national agenda for development by the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Abdullah Badawi. The

author concludes that the agenda appears to have failed to ensure civility in ethnic relations since the non-Malays considered it to be strongly biased in favor of Malay-Muslims. The concept of *Islam Hadhari* is focused upon again in the fourth article entitled “Perceptions of multiethnic university students toward the *Islam Hadhari* principle: A survey in University Putra Malaysia” by Adlina Ab. Halim. Based on quantitative data, the author concludes that university students’ perception and the acceptance of the *Islam Hadhari* concept is positive and suggests that this approach should be further clarified in every single group in society.

Part II concerns the ethnic identity of minorities. It is composed of five articles. The first one is entitled “Identity formation and policies of exclusion and the ethnicization of ‘minorities’ in Burma: A comparative study of policies towards the Rohingya, Karens and Shans” written by Kazi Fahmida Farzana. It deals with the historical process of construction and representation of the minority groups by the authorities in Burma. The author concludes that minority identity has been artificially constructed over a period of time. In other words, the state of Burma created artificial boundaries among social groups separating “non-Burmese” as “minorities.” This is a distortion of what really happened in the past. The second article, “Does ethnic tourism reduce ethnic classification? The case of hill tribes in Northern Thailand” was written by Kayoko Ishii. It aims to discover whether ethnic tourism in Northern Thailand reduces the ethnic classification of the hill tribes. The findings reveal three connotations of ethnic tourism concerning the hill

tribes. They are feminization (use of women and girls), commodification of pitifulness and commodification of primitiveness. The author argues that these images may taint the ethnic classification of those minority groups. The third article in this section entitled “Challenging the ethnicity-language nexus: Multiple shifting identities and multilingual language use in Borneo” by James McLellan deals with issues of language choice, and shifting identities in Borneo societies, which are known for their high degree of multilingualism and social and geographical mobility. It has been found that Borneo people are highly multilingual and use a lot of code switching. Also, they have developed new interethnic varieties which function as lingua francas. The author concludes that this language situation is likely to reduce the importance of the concept “ethnicity.” In another related article on Borneo communities, which is entitled “In search of an identity: Children of Indian-Bidayuh mixed marriages,” Caesar Dealwis and Maya Khemlani David, using data from home conversations, questionnaires and interviews, seek to examine the extent to which children of Indian fathers and Bidayuh mothers have adopted cultural norms and values of their mothers. They found that the children used Bidayuh, the dominant language, more often and assimilated with Bidayuh cultural norms. The last article in Part II is “The minority majority of Malaysian Indians: An agenda-setting study in a local daily” by Ponmalar N. Alagappar and Lean Mei Li. The aim is to find out how this ethnic group is perceived in an English language daily newspaper (*The Star*) in 2007. Based on the approach of *agenda setting*, the findings support the idea proposed in earlier studies that the coverage on minority groups can leave a positive, neutral, or negative impression on the reader.

Part III of the book is on national integration and is composed of four articles. The first one is "Perceptions of ethnic otherness: A study of Malaysian children," written by Maya Khemlani David and Wendy Yee Mei Tien. The aim is to investigate children's perceptions of other ethnic groups in order to test the hypothesis that children's positive perceptions of others depend on their learning social cues at an early age. The results show that young children who learned the issues of "otherness" from the environment, the media, caregivers and family members tend to develop perceptions about their own ethnic group as well as different ethnic groups. For instance, they can differentiate friends from the different ethnic groups by the color of their complexion. The second article in this section entitled "The importance of cognitive competency in interethnic relations among the youth" by Wendy Yee Mei Tien and Irene Wong Poh Sim focuses on interethnic tolerance. The authors want to find out whether young people's cognitive competence is related to their tolerance of others. The results confirm the hypothesis; i.e., there is a significant relationship between undergraduates' cognitive competence and their tolerant behavior. The next article is "Malaysian university students discuss race and ethnicity" written by Carmen Nge Siew Mun. It reports the results of a workshop in 2008, which brought together university students from various ethnic backgrounds to discuss such topics as ethnic stereotyping, discrimination, quota systems and ethnic relations. The author concludes that the workshop participants did not regard race as an important criterion for any type of quota system. The last article is "Politeness and ethnic

sensitivities in the Malaysian parliament" written by Ngeow Yeok Meng, Kuang Ching Hei, and Maya Khemlani David. It aims at analyzing the verbal discourse of Malaysian parliament members from different ethnic groups. Based on data from recorded sessions of parliamentary debates, it was found that various undesirable strategies, including racism, were used in downgrading others. This is an obstacle to the improvement of ethnic relations in a multiethnic society.

In conclusion, this book provides substantial knowledge of ethnic relations, ethnic identity, national identity, multiethnic and multilingual society, ethnic tolerance and national unity or integration. The presentation of the articles is clear and the findings are useful both in theory and practice to social scientists as well as sociolinguists.

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