

## COHESION AND CONSENSUS: THE PREVALENCE OF ETHNIC HARMONY IN A UNIVERSITY CAMPUS<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstrak** Ada sesetengah perhubungan di antara manusia dipengaruhi oleh kedua-dua norma kesejagatan dan etnik, manakala dalam yang kes perhubungan lain, individu-individu berbeza-beza dalam meletak keutamaan yang mereka berikan secara relatif dengan orang lain, sesetengah perbezaan ini dicorak oleh etnisiti, gender, status, agama dan pembolehubah lain. Kajian yang telah dijalankan dalam tahun 1996, 1998 dan 1999 di kalangan pelajar-pelajar Melayu, Cina dan India dari Pusat Pengajian Sains Kemasyarakatan di sebuah universiti di Pulau Pinang telah menunjukkan dalam beberapa keadaan sosial di mana dorongan kepentingan individu (berbentuk material dan status) dan ikatan sosial telah menjadi pengimbang kepada pilihan tingkah laku etnik.

Pilihan tingkah laku etnik sedia wujud, dan akan menjadi kuat semasa persaingan berbentuk politik dan ekonomi, tetapi pertumbuhan ekonomi semenjak tahun 1970an telah menghadkan peranan itu. Pelajar-pelajar Malaysia didapati tidak sedar betapa besar perubahan sosial yang sedang berlaku sekarang ini. Mereka menganggap pertumbuhan ekonomi dan perubahan teknologi yang sedang berlaku ini secara bersahaja dan tidak melihat kesan sosialnya.

Artikel ini cuba menengahkan yang penyebab kepada tingkah laku etnik tidak terkira banyaknya. Ia menunjukkan identiti etnik bukan bersifat primordial yang diprogramkan dalam diri individu, tetapi sentiasa dibentuk melalui tindakan manusia apabila mereka memilih untuk menghubungkan diri mereka dengan yang lain, tanpa menggiatkan cara mana yang dipilih, telah menggunakan gambaran sosial yang dikongsi bersama untuk mengkategorikan siapa boleh diterima atau sebaliknya. Fenomenon ini bukan sahaja menunjukkan yang beberapa ahli satu dari kumpulan sosial telah meninggalkan kumpulan etnik mereka, atau ditarik dari pelbagai arah, tetapi setiap ahli dari kumpulan etnik lain juga sentiasa berinteraksi hingga membawa perubahan kepada kumpulan mereka sendiri. Kumpulan sentiasa berhubungan dengan kumpulan-kumpulan lain. Ikatan etnik juga berinteraksi dengan kebanyakan institusi sosial dalam masyarakat dan ini akan mempengaruhi mereka juga untuk berubah.

Artikel ini mempunyai bukti untuk merumuskan, sekurangnya di kawan bandar, kekuatan tingkah laku pilihan etnik sedang menipis. Rakyat Malaysia yang terdiri dari pelbagai keturunan etnik patut memperakui perubahan realiti sosial ini dan yang mana kesedaran mereka itu pun tidak tepat. Perubahan sosial yang berlaku sekarang ini adalah lebih pantas daripada apa yang mereka sedari. Jika masa hadapan Malaysia mahu dijadikan lebih baik daripada apa yang ia telah buktikan dalam satu atau dua dasawarsa ini, maka penting untuk kita tidak menggalakan perkara yang kontroversi dan sebaliknya memahami dengan tepat akan apakah faktor-faktor yang menentukan ikatan etnik itu.

### INTRODUCTION

A sociologist aspires to be a neutral spectator when he analyses individual and societal changes and tries to discover how the actions of the players often have consequences which

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they do not anticipate. It is sometimes said that the spectators sees more of the game than those any of the players involved.

In the course of their lives, Malaysian are engaged in many 'games'; in their families, workplace and the communities. Each game is played according to rules that the players take for granted. One fiercely contested game is that in which Malaysians divide themselves into ethnic teams, among others, with the Malay and Chinese teams struggling over the distribution of the benefits produced by an expanding economy.

However, economic growth in Malaysia has meant the introduction of new technology and lifestyles, like motorcar, computer and information technology, McDonald, Ninja Turtle, Power Rangers and others which creates new relationships that are not defined ethnically. The growing importance of universalistic rules is changing the nature of the Malaysia society, but Malaysians, like the players in the game, take it for granted that technological requirements and new life styles are non-ethnic. Yet because they are so busy playing their roles, they do not see what is happening in the other parts of the playing field or how, over time, the nature of the games itself is changing.

New technology and life styles introduce new rules that everyone has to observe. These effects are direct. However, in a changing society there are also indirect effects. Malays and Chinese meet in social situation that are governed partly by universalistic and partly by ethnic norms. To find out how one is balanced against the other as it relates to cohesion, consensus and ethnic harmony, it is necessary to look further into the nature of universalism and in particular into the way in which economic growth encourages individual choices and the pursuit of self-interest of one kind or another. It is then possible to devise ways of measuring the weight individuals attach to universalistic norms relative to ethnic preference.

### **THE STUDY AREA AND SAMPLING**

The data analyse in this article are collected from four studies carried out from 1996 to 1999. The primary data for the first study was collected in 1996 among 406 students at the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang (Mansor Mohd Noor 1997b). The second study was carried out in November 1997 to January 1998 among 314 students. (Mansor Mohd Noor 1998). The third and fourth studies are carried out in the month of September to November among 519 long distance learning programme (1999b) and 641 campus students (1999a).

It is hoped that the findings of these four field surveys among the students at Universiti Sains Malaysia carried out from 1996 to 1999 would increase our understanding of the changing nature of inter-group alignment prevailing among the students.

This study shows that individual students in the University Science Of Malaysia are increasingly coming under the influence of universalistic norms and that ethnic preference is on the decline. This study also indicate that the students interviewed vary in the importance they attach to ethnic preference relative to other norms, the variations being pattern by ethnicity, sex, religion and other variables. These variations help define the nature of some of these new norms.

### **Analytical Framework**

In some societies ethnic groups occupy a distinct territory within which their language and culture are dominant. Within the ethnic group there may be divisions of class or religion.

The government of the state may tolerate this so long as ethnic alignment does not run contrary to the citizens' obligations to the state. It is possible to envisage a series of group alignments constituting a hierarchy. The government could insist that in certain spheres all citizens must align themselves nationality; but within the nation they could be ethnic alignments and, within that, class or religious alignments. Some writers maintain that in the long run class alignment will be the prime divider to which the others will be progressively subordinated. Religious believers often look to a world in which the profession of their faith will be the most importance, tolerating other social division only within a religious framework.

When ethnic groups no longer occupy distinct territories, this kind of hierarchy is less likely. People may find that it is in their interest to learn other languages or to understand the culture of other groups. In such a polyethnic society, individuals at times align themselves with the other individuals of the same ethnicity. There may be occasions when, instead, they align with individuals of the same class or religion, even if they are not from the same ethnic group. While at other times, class or religious alignment may operate within the same ethnic structure.

Other kinds of alignment, thus, compete with ethnicity. Much will depend upon the circumstances of the group encounters. If ethnic groups are in competition for political power or economic resources, there will be pressure on individuals to align themselves ethnically in very many situations. Nevertheless, individuals may resist such pressure. They may act in accordance with what they see as their self-interest rather than express ethnic preference. They may also subordinate ethnic preference to their personal obligation to someone who is not of the same ethnicity as them.

The study of ethnic alignment has therefore to distinguish between group and individual alignment. An individual may act in a way, which apparently expresses an alignment to fellow members of a nation, an ethnic group, a class, or expresses a religious preference. The strength of any such of preference, and priorities given to these different bond, will vary with the circumstances. Equally, an individual may act in a way, which suggest that he or she gives higher priority to a personal choice or denies any group preference and defines the situation as permitting the pursuit of self-interest. Thus, ethnic boundaries do not necessarily maintain themselves.

Whatever the alignment be, much will depend upon the stimulus which evokes the alignment and which result in individuals defining the situation as one in which their behaviour should be governed by ethnic, class, religious obligation or personal choices. It would be possible to study the processes involved by observing individuals over a long period of time, but it simpler to ask people how they or others would act in imagined but realistic situations.

The hypothetical families of Mustapha and Lim Lam Seng will be the basis of our understanding as to how he Malay and the Chinese students would alignment themselves in those social situations. The actions of these individual students in choosing whether or not to align themselves with others of similar ethnicity help to explain the strengthening, maintaining or weakening of ethnic boundaries. Ethnic alignment, as it is here conceived, is the reaction to stimuli designed to indicate whether or not, in real situations, people's behaviour would be governed by ethnic preferences.

In this study, the strength of ethnic preference is measured by comparison with individual motivations such as self-interest and personal obligation. Self-interest and personal obligation are not constant that can be abstracted from social context and used to build a general theory. However, they can be used to formulate and group question that measure the relative importance attached to conflicting goals. This enables the research worker to investigate the price individuals put upon ethnic preference vis-à-vis cohesion, consensus and ethnic harmony.

### **Self Interest**

The predictions of the varsity students interviewed about the strength of self-interest of the material and status kinds relative to ethnic preference are presented here. Self-interest, (be it of a material kind or a desire for social recognition by associating with a person of higher status and gaining 'respectability') and the call for ethnic preference, are two influences that something come into conflict with one another. The manner in which an individual resolves such a conflict will depend both on his own sentiments and on his beliefs about how his peers will interpret his behaviour.

Source: Primary data for 1996 from Mansor (1997b), 1998 from Mansor (1998), 1999a and 1999b (Mansor 2000)

### **Self Interest Of The Material Kind**

Three hypothetical social situations bearing on self-interest of the material kind were formulated for each of Mustapha (underlined) and Lim Lam Seng (not underlined) (see Table 1).

In Table 1, Malay and Chinese students place material gains rather than ethnic preference in all 6 hypothetical social situation posed. They would rent the house out, mind the child, seek business partner, go to the grocery shop, approve bank loan and renting shop house on the basis of material gains rather than defending their own ethnic preference.

Thus, the predictions made of Mustapha and Lim Lam Seng do testify to the advance of a commercial ethos among the Malay and especially the Chinese students at University Science Of Malaysia. The Chinese students, perhaps, because they are more involved in commercial culture, gave a higher priority to self-interest of the material kind and it looks as if they project their own values when predicting the responses of a representative Malay. Likewise, the Malay students transpose their economic and political insecurities vis-à-vis the Chinese by being sensitive to ethnic preference when calculating Chinese interaction with them. Yet such insecurities and fears do not materialize when the Malay students felt that they are in control of such social events. It is this calculation on the part of the Malay students, that makes them to consider ethnic preference of relatively more importance to self-interest than the Chinese expectation of them to. Despite the ethnic concern, a marked commercial ethos was observed among the Malay students.

Self Interest of the Material Kind  
Table 1: The Strength of Self Interest of the Material Kind  
Relative to Ethnic Preference 1996-99 (Percentage)

Individual Alignment Hypothetical Social Situation	1996		1998		1999a		1999b	
	Malay	Chinese	Malay	Chinese	Malay	Chinese	Malay	Chinese
Self Interest (Material)								
Renting House	71	78	70	83	77	84	66	81
Child Minding	80	76	73	70	76	74	74	72
Business Partner	56	62	65	63	60	68	62	66
Shopping Choice	53	64	61	69	63	71	52	69
Bank Loan	53	66	65	66	74	76	57	84
Renting Shop Hs	88	97	94	92	93	91	92	94

Self Interest Of The Status Kind

Two hypothetical social situations for each family were asked that bore self-interest of that status kind.

Source: Primary data for 1996 from Mansor (1997b), 1998 from Mansor (1998), 1999a and 1999b Mansor (2000).

Table 2 shows that Malay and Chinese students will sacrifice status gain for ethnic preference in choosing whom to bring to the zoo and whom to adopt. But ethnic preference is minimal on invitations to a wedding and a birthday party, the exception being for the both ethnic group on-campus students for the 1999a year and the Malay students in 1998 in the wedding invitation hypothetical social situation case.

Table 2: The Strength of Self Interest of the Status Kind  
Relative to Ethnic Preference 1996-99 (Percentage)

Individual Alignment Hypothetical Social Situation	1996		1998		1999a		1999b	
	Malay	Chinese	Malay	Chinese	Malay	Chinese	Malay	Chinese
Self Interest (Status)								
Zoo Trip	30	22	33	24	24	15	21	24
Child Adoption	38	17	21	18	22	21	31	20
Wedding Invitation	77	55	47	51	64	53	78	67
Birthday Party	63	61	78	65	48	39	51	54

The overall findings showed that the self-interest of the status kind is not that developed among the Malay students at Mustapha generation, as those social situations are fraught

with ethnic risk. Malay students place self-interest of the status kind only in Lim Lam Seng's case. This reflects control and security on the Malay student's part. The Chinese students did give priority to self-interest of the status kind, though in some of the cases they were ambivalence; risks were foreseen. Self interest of the status kind is also less important relative to self-interest of material kind in influencing the prediction of the students.

**Personal Obligation**

Personal obligation generates social bonds, which reflect the type and intensity of relation between the individuals. There exists a self-interest element within personal obligation for those individuals who fear they might suffer if they were known to have neglected their obligation. Some kinds of behavior bring individuals psychological rewards and satisfaction if they act in the manner expected of them. Sometimes though, actions are regarded as good in themselves.

Furthermore, as people work or come into contact with one another in mutually rewarding relations, they come to feel a sense of debt or obligation to one another; such an obligation can at times be a higher priority than ethnic preference. Thus, when personal obligation is placed against ethnic preference, the relative strength of one against the other could be relied upon to weigh the strength of the two inclinations and to note the degree of cohesion, consensus and conflict prevailing.

I will present the results from 6 questions designed to measure the strength of personal obligation as an influence upon alignment by comparison with ethnic preference on Mustapha and Lim Lam Seng.

**Table 3: The Strength of Personal Obligation  
Relative to Ethnic Preference 1996-99 (Percentage)**

Individual Alignment Hypothetical Social Situation	1996		1998		1999a		1999b	
	Malay	Chinese	Malay	Chinese	Malays	Chinese	Malay	Chinese
<b>Personal Obligation</b>								
Support Boss								
Mother's Wishes	63	46	55	52	57	54	55	47
House Key	81	78	78	77	79	78	86	76
Child Playmate	86	89	81	80	87	79	88	87
Help a Workmate	78	82	88	92	83	83	75	86
Paying Condolence	95	95	89	91	90	83	91	82
	68	74	77	85	76	79	67	76

Source: Primary data for 1996 from Mansor (1997b), 1998 from Mansor (1998), 1999a and 1999b (Mansor 2000).

In Table 3 , with the exception of supporting the boss for the Chinese students in 1996 and 1999b, personal obligation as an influence on the students behavioural preferences is very dominant relative to ethnic consideration. They would support their bosses, respect the wishes of the mother, trust their house key, assist a workmate and pay condolence to their decease as social bonds developed among these individuals erode the concern for ethnicity.

Personal obligation is predicted by the students to be relatively more significant than ethnic preference in influencing the behaviour patterns of the Malay and Chinese. Though in certain social situations they felt it is fraught with risks and thus the ambivalence's prediction observed.

**Behavioural Similarities And Differences**

Source: Primary data for 1996 from Mansor (1997b), 1998 from Mansor (1998), 1999a and 1999b Mansor (2000).

The questions to be presented here did not relate directly to ethnic alignment. These questions pertain to inter-ethnic contact, inter-ethnic perception and bond of citizenship. The significance of these other questions about counter-weights to ethnic preference lies in their indications of a growing similarity of behavioural choices, values and views among Malay and Chinese students on their living experiences in Malaysia. Their differences and similarities should help us to understand the direction and speed of change occurring with regards to cohesion, consensus and conflict among the Malay and Chinese students studied.

**Table 4: Multi-Ethnic Behavioural Patterns:  
Similarities and Differences 1996-99 (Percentage)**

Attitude & Behaviour Patterns	1996		1998		1999a		1999b	
	Malay	Chinese	Malay	Chinese	Malay	Chinese	Malay	Chinese
Frequent Cross-Ethnic Interaction	49	51	58	51	56	46	56	66
Places of Contact								
Residential Area	20	25	25	22	25	22	13	9
Workplace	33	25	16	13	25	22	70	80
Shopping Center	2	1	1	2	4	3	4	2
Ethnic Perception								
Good, Nationally	35	39	43	34	45	40	51	49
Next 5 Yr Nat'ly	28	52	28	42	32	40	39	42
National Symbols								
Displeased, Anthem	87	76	77	64	76	68	88	93
We're Malaysian	53	97	70	81	71	90	69	98
Law & Consti'tion					86	69	90	84
National Issues								
Dissatisfied Migrate	67	38	54	34	44	33	50	46
Govt Prog S'drome	82	79	76	72	76	75	81	80
Racial Discrimin'					18	29	15	35

The data from Table 4 on inter-ethnic contacts, inter-ethnic perceptions and bond of citizenship indicate a sharing of value among the Malay and Chinese students rather than differences. The Malay and Chinese students are in frequent contact with one another,

especially in the residential and studying areas. They had developed a strong bond to the nation as they had accepted the national anthem and the other ethnic groups as fellow nationalities as well as to uphold the country's laws and Constitution. Similarity rather than difference is also observed on their views of the national issues. They agreed that there are slight ethnic based discrimination in the country, that over dependent on the government would destroy initiative and creativity of the citizens and those dissatisfied with the nation should pack their bags and migrate out.

### **IMPLICATION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The previous analysis show that ethnic preference continues, and can be acute in times of political competition, but the new economic growth of the 1970's has restricted their capability. Malaysians seem not to have recognised how great these social changes have been. They take the continuing economic growth and technological change for granted and do not notice its social consequences.

Some relations are affected by universalistic and ethnic norms, while in others, individuals vary in the importance they ascribe to one relative to the other; some variations are patterned by ethnicity, gender, religion and other variables. The findings of the social surveys above show that Malay and Chinese students encounter some social situations, in which individual motivations of self-interest of the material and status kind and personal obligation are a counter-balance to ethnic preference while other social situations place them in a conflictual position. The two kinds of norms were sometimes seen as having equal weight as influences on Mustapha and Lim Lam Seng's actions.

### **The Changing Scenario Of Contemporary Malaysian Campus Community.**

New relationships governed by universalistic rather than ethnic norms are being introduced onto the Universiti Sains Malaysia campus as Malay and Chinese students are relating to one another in social relations that attribute little significance to ethnic preference. Their relationships between them as fellow students, course-mates, hostel-mates and even with their lectures and administrators of the university are being linked in new ways. Concerns for material interests, respectability and personal obligation often override and weaken these individuals' concern with ethnic sentiment. The new relationships provide opportunities for Malay and Chinese students to relate to one another as individual male and female students, and in this way restrict the applicability of ethnic norms.

As the new semester begin, the Malay and Chinese students congregate to the lecture theatre early. They wait for the doors to be opened or the class beforehand to empty the hall. They march in through the doors and as they sit, the right hand side taken by Malay female students wearing headscarf, the left hand side by male males and the mid-section of the hall by students of mixture gender, religious, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds could be observed.

A deeper analysis of these three social groupings indicates greater differentiation. The mainly Malay female group separates themselves by state origin, sub-ethnic group, schooling medium, and urban-rural and socio-economic differences. This same pattern is observable with the mainly Malay group. Thus, one could observe those who come from Kelantan, with Javanese parentage, studying in rural-based Malay school, children of paddy farmer and fishermen, among others, tend to group together among themselves. The socio-

culturally diversified group of the mid-section tends to gather students that are urban-based and belonging to the middle upper status irrespective of ethnicity and religion. Their dressing are more western, they speak with one another in English and more often driving cars rather than motorbikes. Yet the individual members of this group too portray similar social traits as those of the other two groups. The three Chinese groupings seat far from one another as they too are differentiated by rural-urban, socio-economic, dialect and state origins.

The same pattern of student grouping can be observed in the tutorials. Those tutorials attended by the mid-section group tend to be lively and discussive. While the other twos, they wait for the lecturer to take the first step. But often it ends up being monologue rather than a two-way dialogue. This reflects a more traditional behaviour of showing due respect to the lecturer by these students.

Scenes at the library saw Malay and Chinese students speaking in their own respective mother tongues and often studying with fellow ethnic members. Yet there were other Malay and Chinese students who sat silently reading their books but sharing table not occupied by their own ethnic groups. Discussion rooms at the university library showed the same variations. There were groups, which were gender-based, others ethnic-based and sometime a multi-ethnic and multi-gender grouping, conducting their academic discussions in a serious but cheerful ways.

When Malay and Chinese students drive their motorbikes and cars in the campus, crossing the Penang Bridge and highways, their commonality of experience of driving causes them to react as drivers. The same traffic codes and laws govern them, at time faced with the same adverse circumstances such as traffic jams, accidents, electrical faults with the traffic lights, flash flood, landslides etc. When their motorbikes or cars are in need of repair, a mechanic's shop is chosen on the basis of a competitive price and quality of service. A Malay student motorbike owner may prefer his motorbike to be repaired by a Malay mechanic, but he will think twice if he finds that a Chinese mechanic could provide a similar service at a lower price and promptly.

The students jumped on the others' motorbike or squeezed into a car without much thought of the owners' ethnic background, they are bonded together as they attended the same course and the same lecture hall and tutorial. These social experiences create opportunities for these Malay and Chinese students to cross each other ethnic boundary and come together. The same can be observed with the Malay and Chinese students commuting by bus to the campus; the ethnic origins of the bus driver and of the other passengers are irrelevant as these commuters queue and board those buses.

Even within the bounds of these individual students, ways of life and values are converging among them. People often read their own ethnic-based newspapers, watch ethnic-based television programmes and tune to the ethnic-based radio channels, but there are Malay and Chinese students who read English newspapers, prefer American-produced television series and hum the latest popular songs from the West. This commonality of cultural tastes between them, of what is considered modern rather than particularistic, is manifested in the way people communicate to one another about local and international affairs. Even their own cultures, their own students' newspapers, the locally produced television and radio programmes cannot escape the influence of "X-File" or the "Robocop" series. The record

and video shops patronised by the Malay and Chinese students sell Madonna's "Evita", "The English Patient", "Titanic", "American Beauty" etc.

At the canteen scattered through the campus, students group themselves more often by ethnic tastes rather than other criteria. Malays, Chinese and Indians prefer to eat their own ethnic cuisine. Students take a light breakfast, eating *roti canai*, *nasi lemak*, the traditional Malay cakes or half-boiled eggs with toasted breads. For morning break they would eat fried noodles or rice or some cakes. For lunch, preference for ethnic cuisine found students going to specific canteens that sell what they desire. For the evening meals, Chinese students often walk in groups or riding motorbikes to the Chinese stalls found scatter outside the varsity fence in Sungai Dua, while the Malay students journey to Sungai Gelugor, on the other side of the varsity fence, to eat their curry-flavoured rice.

There were some students who took their lunches outside the campus eating Kentucky Fried Chicken or eating beef-burger and hotdog with root beer at the McDonald in Sungai Dua. To these Malay and Chinese students, ethnic tastes are no longer regarded as given. Just as during the lunch break, Malay and Chinese students on the campus seemed to exchange their ethnic tastes for foods with new flavours by going from one canteen to the next on the campus and at the same time come into contact with other ethnic students who shared the same taste-bulb. The exercise of personal preference in taste with regards to foods consumed brought them into non-ethnic relationship with other ethnic individuals.

In their leisure time, over the weekdays and especially over the weekends, Malay and Chinese students, acting on personal ties developed at the campus, play games together, attended the video shows organised by the student's societies, went swimming at the various seafronts on the island, jogged around the recreational centres such as the playing fields at the university, the Botanical Garden or just chit-chat and gossip away the time near the Vice-Chancellor's Rock over-looking the Penang Channel.

Games, which were once ethnically based, have now changed. The playing fields near the main-gate and the stadium complex near the road leading to Bukit Jambul were patronised by the Malay and Chinese joggers. Soccer is no longer exclusively played by Malay students, but includes Chinese and others. Badminton has lost its Chinese image as Malay students have taken it up with success. When the soccer, hockey or netball varsity team played with other university teams, the Malay and Chinese students would converge to the field to support their teams. A loss would sadden them just as a victory would cause them to jump and hug each other. But scene at the swimming pool is a reverse; Malay students especially their females shunned it; not so much on ethnic issue but more for concern to uphold their own religious principles of dressing codes and inter-sex mingling. There were some enthusiastic swimmers from this latter group; but they preferred to patronise instead the smaller but enclosed pool. The scene at the gymnasium fair better; attracting more Chinese students and Malay males. Despite the variations in the groupings and their composition, ethnic preference is not the barrier in bringing them together but rather it reflects their own individual choices.

During major festivities, the Malay and Chinese students packed their bags and headed home, emptying the campus. But stories told by them show that the same could be observed regarding ethnic festivities, which used to be meant only for family members and co-religionists. Malay and Chinese students were accepting the other's festive season such as

the Chinese New Year, Christmas, or the Muslim celebration of the end of fasting as social events for everybody even though they may have special religious and ethnic meanings for some of these participants. Malay students welcome their Chinese friends to their festivities just as they in turn are welcomed to the Chinese. Hosts are careful to respect their guests' feelings, taking care that no inappropriate foods are served. Because of personal bonds, some visit their friends from the other ethnic groups in times of bereavement, either calling at their homes to express condolence or joining them at the cemetery. Thus, a Chinese student related that he went and paid homage to his Malay student's friend on knowing of his death. Such relationships are on the increase as Malay and Chinese students encounter one another on universalistic terms of personal interest and need without giving much ethnic colouration. Such changes indicated acceptance and reflect the widening of social relations based on materialism, respectability and personal obligation as Malaysians are drawn into the growth sector.

These Malay and Chinese students would encounter further new relationships as their campus day come the end with the approach of the convocation day and their entrance into the labour market. They would be relating to one another in new working situations and places that were alien to their parents' experiences. The Chinese are often regarded as the economic-commercial force and the Malays as the political arms of the nation. But these and other divisions such as urban-rural, private-public sector employees, professional-administrators and etc., are gradually breaking down. Material interests and the desire for respectability set these students in pursuit of new goals. A Malay farmer's son hope to become a commercial bank manager after finishing his accounting course, while a rich Chinese miner's daughter might end up working as an administrative officer in a government department after finishing her Bachelor of Arts in two years time. The social make-up of the country will further change as some Chinese students expect to be the boss of a local agricultural department with a basically Malay staff and serving a Malay-based community. Even the local Chinese shops near the university, formerly family run, now often employs a Malay sales girl wearing headscarf. The social scenes are changing and blurring the ethnic lines. The urban areas may still be identified with the Chinese, but Malays are taking up jobs and residence, and thus inevitably changing the demographic composition of the urban areas.

This descriptive analyse of campus life shows that Malay and Chinese students do hold to their ethnic and religious identities, but the encroachment of universalistic norms of material gains, respectability and obligation have weakened their concern for ethnicity. Cohesion, consensus and ethnic harmony dominate the campus life as Malay and Chinese students interact with one another crosscutting ethnic and religious ties.

### **Portraits Of Racial Harmony Or Polarisation.**

Abdullah Taib (1984) and Agoes Salim (1986) painted a different picture on ethnic and race relations on the university's campuses in Malaysia. Doubting the effectiveness of *Rukunegara* in promoting sentiment conducive to national unity, they claimed that racial polarisation was on the increase and that relation between Malay and non-Malay students were deteriorating. Agoes Salim (1986:27) remarked that on the university campuses, "the children who were too young to know or understand the racial clashes of 1969 are now the young men and women in the colleges and universities. These same people were brought up with very heavy doses of *Rukunegara*. They were imbued with a sense of justice and fair play; they were thought about the need of racial tolerance and understanding; they were

exhorted to work together for the good of the nation. Yet these are the very people among whom there is great suspicion and cleavage. There is very little inter-racial mixing among the students in these institutions and the situation seems to get worse rather than better”.

Such an inference of ethnic polarisation among students on the campuses differs from the survey findings and the descriptive analysis of ethnic relations presented above. The differences between the conclusion of Abdullah Taib and Agoes Salim and this research worker are not a consequence of wanting to highlight a different view but rather in the kinds of social relations we had examined. The university campuses and their social milieu are the nation's educated class and is often the section most modern in a society. Universalistic norms as exemplified by materialism, consumerism and economic individualism could be expected to prevail among these university students.

Abdullah Taib and Agoes Salim painted a portrait of polarisation on the campuses by noting that Malay, Chinese, Indians and other students rushed to the lecture halls together, but when inside arranged themselves into distinguishable phenotype groupings. They greeted one another and asked whether the other had taken their lunch and dinner, but when the meal times came they patronised canteens operated by their ethnic members. Malays crowded playing fields and the library packed by Chinese students. Chinese students organised dragon dance and discos and Malay preferred the tranquillity of the mosques and religious study groups. The students' unions were monopolised by Malay students who carried out programmes with which the Chinese could not identify. Chinese found public issues such as equality, human rights, poverty, politics and etc, things to discuss, but ethnic sensitivity had tabooed such topics. Community works brought Malays and administrators handling accommodation often received requests from Malay students wanting to transfer rooms and be with people of their own ethnic origin. Interracial courtships were rare, especially with the Malays.

The differences in the portraits of ethnic relations portrayed by this research worker and that of Abdullah Taib and Agoes Salim lie in the kinds of social relations analysed. Driving cars may be important in creating new relationships that demand Malay and Chinese students to obey universalistic rules, but in changing society there are situations where individuals are governed partly by universalistic and partly by ethnic norms. The research worker has concentrated on ethnic relationships in which economic individualism and pursuits of self-interest have been encourage while the picture painted by Abdullah Taib and Agoes Salim reflects situations in which concerns of individual interest run parallel with shared interest; the relations of individual Malay and Chinese students were thus, interpreted as the relations of group representatives. University campuses epitomise societal benefits that divided Malay and Chinese students and their communities into ethnic teams as they struggled over the educational resources for their own advantage. The images polarisation and dominance of ethnicity in the Malay-Chinese student relations emerged from focusing solely on group competition over the benefits of economic growth.

However, this study has uncovered another dimension of ethnic relations. The increasing encroachment of universalistic norms among Malay and Chinese students has eroded the political significance of ethnicity. The findings also show that while people may be sensitive to ethnic consideration in certain circumstances, such as the Shopping Choice and Supporting The Boss, large areas of their life come under the influence of non-ethnic norms. This changing social reality of Malay-Chinese student relations has been brought about by individual actions and weakened their concern for group boundaries.

Abdullah Taib and Agoes Salim did not focus on such processes because his image of ethnicity and of Malay-Chinese student relations characterised more the defence of ethnicity and privileges at the political level. In some settings individual interest may be eroding shared interest while in other settings individual interest may reinforce shared interest. Groups grow or diminish by actions at the periphery as individuals cross the boundary to align in new social relations and becoming new members of one social grouping and leaving another. Agoes Salim overlooked such changes because of his view of ethnic relations as reflecting political desires.

Abdullah Taib and Agoes Salim's interpretation reinforces the view that Malaysians in the course of their lives are engaged in many games; in their families, workplace and communities. Each of these games is played according to rules that the players take for granted. In Malaysia, one of the most fiercely contested games dividing Malaysians into ethnic teams, are their struggles over the distribution of the benefits produced by an expanding economy. However, because they are so busy playing their roles, Malay and Chinese students, just as the larger public, do not see what is happening in the other parts of the playing field or how, over time, the nature of the game itself is changing. This study has shown that universalistic norms prevail in the lives of many University Science Of Malaysia's Malay and Chinese students as they increasingly come under economic expansion and technological change.

#### **Need to Caution Contemporary Theories on Ethnic and Race Relations.**

The findings in this paper demonstrated that the images of society and its ethnic relations held by university students cannot all be correct and some of the discrepancies may be due to the tradition of Furnivall. Scholars studying ethnic and race relations have followed the tradition of Furnivall (1948) who would describe Malaysia as a plural society where different sections of the community lived side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Each segment in the society had its own values, belief, language and way of life. The segments were divided vertically cutting across the strata. The society as a whole was more characterised by conflict and coercion than value consensus. Indeed, value consensus was conspicuously lacking (Freedman 1960). Ting (1982:120) noted the political and economic changes taking place in the country since independence, but hasten to add that basically, the main plural features which developed during the colonial period persist until the present day.

Lee (1990:499) argued in the same vein that the idea of ethnic nationalism was not only an organised reaction to colonialism but also the driving force behind the conceptualisation of ethnic policies in the post-colonial state. Jesudason (1989:1) argued that "... ethnic consideration decisively influenced the political elite's choices over critical development issues such as the degree of state intervention in the economy, the choice of entrepreneurial groups to promote, the level of tolerance for economic inefficiency, and the degree of strain to impose on the state's fiscal position. In short, the essential motor of the development process, extending to macro-economic policies, was driven by powerful ethnic sentiments and patterns of ethnic political mobilisation".

The primacy of ethnic-cultural variable over economic variables led Snider (1977:4 - 7) to observe that Malaysian politicians were correct in their assumptions that only overtly communal parties could gain and hold voter support; those parties mainly supported by the

middle and upper classes (originally founded on a specific basis of multi or non-communalism) drifted toward majority membership of and the identification with the interests of a particular communal group. Having such view of ethnic sentiment, Von Vorys (1975:14) set out to present a democratic system not based on national community, but by necessity and choice on the co-operation of discrete communal groups. Mutalib (1990:1) indicated that Malay ethnic nationalists tended frequently to dispense with Islamic values and universal principles like the emphasis on equity, tolerance, fair play and justice irrespective of race and creed, in the defence of their ethnic, particularistic interests and unique cultural heritage. Ethnic attachment is thus, regarded as unalterable, and "a fact of life" to be ignored at one's peril. (Milne 1981:4-6).

Blumer (1965:245) argued that the rational and impersonal forces of industrialisation did, not cause the dissolution of racial alignment. How industry conformed to the prevailing pattern of racial alignment and its accompanying racial codes. Referring to the British colonies in Asia, such as India and the Malay Peninsula, with their own special racial ordering that allowed for much industrialisation to be in the hands of native groups. Blumer found evidence in support of his argument. However, this study shows the contrary. The inner forces of industrialisation can erode a scheme of racial ordering when there is political change. In Malaysia, political power, societal privileges, job vocation, etc., are no longer the exclusive properties of ethnic groups. Sanusi Osman (1979) had indicated that Malaysians were articulating among one another along class lines, especially the elites, sharing similar life styles, economic and political interests. The changes in the political structure had changed the relations between individual Malays and Chinese. Thus, one should not expect the conclusion of Blumer and those who share his idea of the continuity of the colonial structure to the post-colonial period to be valid in understanding Malaysian society in the 1990s.

However, these writers could be exaggerating as to the continuity between the colonial and post-colonial period. This is possible as in many post-colonial societies the one point on which everyone has been able to agree in on blaming the colonial era for any misfortunes. This is a way of evading responsibility, as one does not have to come up with a remedial policy that questions the status quo and jeopardises their own class interests. Furthermore, it is unwise to regard plural societies as a permanently distinct class of societies; the features that characterise them seem to be valid at a certain stage in a sequence of conquest and rule by an invading group. No group of any size, be it a nation, a 'race', a class, a congregation or a family, maintains itself automatically. Groups dissolve and change as they interact with one another.

### **Ethnic Manipulation And Pessimism.**

For Malaysia, one of the consequences of the changes in the pre-independence ethnic order and codes were the riots in 1969. These led many Malaysians to believe that their country had a problem of national unity. The riots had a traumatic influence upon their image of their own society and shaped their conception of ethnic relations. Other countries have had worse riots without being so shocked by them. The riots of 1969 warned the Chinese that they had to make concessions if their security and businesses were not to be peril; a warning that ethnic conflict could prevent economic growth.

However, some Malay leaders have elevated the significance of those riots for their own political purposes. Those leaders persuade their followers to put less and energy into non-

ethnic memberships and activities, and transfer it to their ethnic membership, the leader exhorts them to invest in that membership in the expectation of a future return in material or emotional satisfaction greater than can be expected from other activities. The desire to preserve ethnic distinctiveness is therefore associated with an interest in defending group monopoly. Malays considered themselves the owners of the territory and to have prior rights to its produce but found the Chinese to be gaining the upper hand.

An image of ethnicity was created that proved self-perpetuating. Thus, it was in some peoples' interest to present ethnic relations in a pessimistic way. Pessimism in this area can create a downward spiral in which people behave in a more hostile way towards members of the groups because they believe that it is expected of them. To persuade their audience of the seriousness of the matter they highlight instances of conflicts, prejudice and discrimination: if unchecked this would bring increasing conflicts and economic costs in the future. Under such situation, even if a person's own sentiments have become more positive it would not be surprising for him to conclude that the decline must be the fault of others: others' prejudice must be greater than his.

This line of argument observed in this study supports Banton's (1988) work that showed British people to be less pessimistic about racial trends in the localities they knew best than at the national level where (as in their views about the future) they were influenced more by mass media presentation of social reality. The concern by individuals to obtain the approval of their peers, or their fears of disapproval, often inhibit their interactions with individuals from other ethnic groups in circumstances when they would otherwise be accepting. When people believe that they are expected to be on their best behaviour they often rise to the occasion. If ethnic relations are defined in such a way as to exclude the very possibility of good ethnic relations, then this blinds people to important grounds for optimism.

### **Misperceptions of Post 1969 Development Policy.**

Another possible reason for the prevalence of a false image is that it has taken time for the effects of the changes in policy started in 1970 to become apparent. In the aftermath of the 1969 racial riots and as new policy and laws were implemented, numerous writings in the newspapers, the magazines, and scholarly works were reacting to the perceived discriminations. Writings in the early seventies created an image of racial relations as deteriorating. Basham (1983) assembled views of Malay, Chinese and Indian students at Universiti Sains Malaysia in 1974 to present an educational environment that was crumbling, where incompetent students were admitted and the university staffed with similarly incompetent lecturers because university admissions and job allocations were ethnically motivated. Sivalingam (1989) noted that Malays, Chinese and Indians were affected positively by structural change in the economy which coincided with the implementation of the New Economy Policy the modern sector expanded and within the modern sector, the tertiary sector expanded more than the secondary sector, income differentials between ethnic groups were reduced: and yet even he concluded that Malaysian economy and society were set for stormy times ahead. The act of portraying ethnic relations to look worse than do the statistical data on the subject in one of the reasons that make people believe that ethnic relations have become worse.

Hirschman (1989:81) may have the advantage of hindsight when he argued that "... it is premature to assign cause and effect, but active government intervention in the economy did not seem to slow down the economy" The resulting cauldron of development and industrial

activity, helped by national resources and favourable terms of trade, has fuelled the economy to an impressive real gross domestic product growth rate of 9.8 percent in 1990 and with a similar average till 1997.

This, in turn, has fed powerful rises in private consumption which surged continuously until today with 14.7 percent in 1991 as the country's middle class stepped up purchases of big-ticket items such as automobiles, housing, and major appliances. This spending revolution has spawned far-reaching changes in Malaysian life styles. Huge shopping malls and 24-hours convenience outlets are making inroads against a traditional infrastructure of family-owned shops and open-air markets. Luxury condominiums are rising in areas formerly dominated by squatter shacks and abandoned tin mines. With created between Malays and Chinese. Malays and Chinese obeyed the same universalistic rules as they climbed the social ladders.

The recent works of Jomo (1999), Shamsulbahriah (1997) and Abdul Rahman Embong (1999) show that the New Economic Policy has created an ethnically balanced social stratification system in the country. Thus, the economic crisis of 1997 and the ensuing political crisis faced did not destabilise the social fabric of the nation as Malay and Chinese blamed the market forces for the spiralling prices of goods and services. In Indonesia, the same problem was vented on the minorities and powerless social groupings such as Chinese and the Christians (Mansor 1999)

#### **Common Sentiment And Recognition of National Interest on the Campus.**

Malay and Chinese students were observed to give responses that reflected common sentiments and recognition of national interests. The Malay and Chinese students thought it disgraceful if people did not stand as a mark of respect to the country's national anthem. Malay students may find giving due respect to the national anthem a patriotic act on their part, but the sentiment express by the Chinese students to accept such a Malay-based national symbol represents a major change on their part. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most Chinese in Malaysia were politically oriented towards China and Chinese nationalism. Now both ethnic groups recognise this country is not just for the Malays but to be shared together. It is thus observed that the Chinese students have appreciated the value of their citizenship. Malay students too are observed to have undergone a major change in recognising that this country is not just for them alone. In 1965 Lee Kuan Yew and Singapore were ousted from the Malaysian political scene as they struggle for 'a Malaysian Malaysia'. These responses indicate that the Malay and Chinese students concur in their sentiment of being Malaysians and that the loyalty and patriotism of both ethnic groups should not be doubted.

As the bonds of a common citizenship were observed to be more important than ethnic sentiment they were willing to scrutinise themselves and the country's development policy as both agreed that people should not be dependent on government programmes. A large proportion of Malays and Chinese students have increasingly shown dissatisfaction to such communal discourse in solving their problems. Their purposive social actions have opened up new areas of behaviours not linked to ethnic norms.

#### **Changes In Government Policy**

Post-1970's policy might have encourage economic growth and economic individualism but some of the policy failed to produce the desired effect. Attempts have been made to

reconsider and change some of these policies, while others are left untouched. A lot of discussions have concentrated on the allegedly counter-productive nature of an ethnic-based New Economic Policy in bringing about national integration and economic growth. This study also shows that Malay and Chinese students argued that the dependency on government sponsorship would destroy an individual initiative and creativity to perform: a corresponding shift has been noted with the new National Development Plan of 1990-2000 which replaced the post-1969 New Economic Policy. The new development plan recognised that "...too much emphasis on the redistribution of wealth along racial lines at the expenses of rapid economic growth not only hinders the overall development of the country, but has also created areas of economic privilege and inefficiency" (Far Eastern Economic Review, 16 April 1992:54). A shift was thus, observed from the previous plan which emphasised growth with ethnic redistribution to one of the market-generated growth with social redistribution, irrespective of ethnic origin.

The government has also shown commitment to the notion of making qualitative changes to Malaysia's faltering programme of English-language education which has suffered since 1969 due to the emphasis on promoting Bahasa Malaysia as the national tongue. This will combat the gradual loss of English proficiency in the workforce, an escalating complaint among multinational corporations doing business inside the country (Far Eastern Economic Review 16 April 1992:53). Malay and Chinese students on the campus were found to be bilingual as they responded to the commercial interest.

The political decision to develop a national culture which is Malay-based has been accepted by the public. Despite such formal acceptance, Malay and Chinese students were observed to come under the influence of other events more than those elements defined in the national culture; viz, Malay culture, Islam and the acceptance of other cultures restricted to the two previous elements mentioned. Non-official cultures such as international and national contests on badminton, football, athletics, pop culture, Miss World, disco, styles of life of the rich and famous of Hollywood, etc. influenced their ways of life more than the national culture being politically designed. Under such influences it is not surprising that the Malay and Chinese at the varsity in Penang were found to be cosmopolitan, characterised by a western-based cultural orientation in their choices of television programmes watched and newspapers read.

### **Banishment Of Sensitive Issues**

The banishment of sensitive issues such as Malay language, the Special Position of Malays, the King and etc., through an act of Parliament and the bringing together of other political parties into expanding alliance called National Front might depoliticise communalism but not necessarily the element to promote cohesion, consensus and national unity. This study showed that encouraging individuals to pursue their own self-interest and choices could have been the most fruitful policy in developing common sentiment and national interest among Malay and Chinese students.

An overtly based communal political formula could be pragmatic to gaining and holding political power in a polytechnic society, but the insistence to maintain an ethnic-based political structure does not reflect a realisation on the part of these ethnic leaders of the changing social reality in the Malay and Chinese relations. Those political parties having power such as the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) are blinded to these changing

sentiments among the Malay and Chinese students. The blindness of these political parties to this social transformation even pervaded the opposition political parties such as Pan-Islamic Party (PAS) and Democratic Action Party (DAP). Their blindness and failure to read these signs would cause them dearly in the national and by-election to be held in the country. The results of the 1999 national election support this study as the Chinese and Malays on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia voted in leaders based on material calculation while Malays in the east coast states of Kelantan and Trengganu voted on religious reason (Mansor 1999). Ethnicity is no longer the basis of voting as other influences coloured their behavioural choices. In the long run this changing behavioural pattern would call for the emergence of a new breed of leadership to meet the changing social reality where ethnic consideration is of declining importance in an increasing range of social situations. Government policy can now afford to change faster in giving due support to this changing nature of the society observed.

The relations between these Malay and Chinese students are more socially patterned than ones stimulated by ethnic preference. Such crosscutting social ties between ethnic individual will surely erode ethnicity and widen the human sphere of non-ethnic sociological interaction and interdependence. A move towards cohesion, consensus and social harmony would prevail as Malay and Chinese students at the Universiti Sains Malaysia inevitably come under the influence of universalistic norms.

## **CONCLUSION**

Awkward questions have to be asked whenever ethnicity as a theoretical and conceptual tool is characterised as unalterable. The theory and concept employed should relate to the reality of experience and not be reified. This study disputes Miles' (1982) claims that the sociology of race relations necessarily reifies race. Failure to notice other important influences have blinded many scholars to the way Malays and Chinese are being increasingly absorbed into a non-ethnic universalistic sphere. Sociologists are often more interested in large scale social trends and have failed to heed Barth's (1969) advice to explore the different processes involved in generating and maintaining ethnic groups.

Cox (1948:320) argued, "...by race relations we do not mean all social contact between person of different 'races', but only those contacts the social characteristics of which are determined by a consciousness of 'racial differences'. Two people of different race could have a relation that was not racial". To discover the conditions under which such a relation could be attained would point to a strategy for reducing racial tension. To observe such conditions, the focus of investigation should be shifted from studying the internal constitution and history of separate groups to the examination of ethnic boundary maintenance. The utility of such a bottom-up approach is indicated by the way this study has shown Malay and Chinese students to share sentiments and interests influenced by universalistic norms of materialism, respectability and personal obligation. Previous studies of ethnic relations in Malaysia have concentrated upon Malay-Chinese differences and overlooked the similarities.

The determinants of ethnic alignment are virtually infinite. The present study indicates that ethnic identities are not primordial characteristics programmed into individuals, but have continually to be established from the actions of people as they choose to align themselves in one way or another, and make use of shared notions about who belongs in what social category. It is not just that some members forsake one ethnic group, or pull it in a different direction, but that members of the other ethnic groups are engaged in changing their own

group too. Groups interact. Ethnic alignment interacts with most of the institutions and is influenced by them.

Since the Malaysian society itself is changing relatively rapidly because of economic growth, the inter-dependencies are extraordinary complex. Ethnic preference is both a cause and an effect. Therefore, the only satisfactory way of studying cohesion, consensus and ethnic alignment is on the individual plane, while searching at every point for the influence of collective patterns. Features of one historical period persist only if there are factors that keep them alive.

This study gives reason to conclude that the strength of ethnic preference has been declining and has outlined the process by which the changes have taken place. Malay and Chinese students and the public should recognise this changing social reality of which they are only imperfectly aware. This social change seems to have been more rapid than they had realised. If Malaysian's future is to be as fortunate as its recent past, it will be important not to encourage unrealistic expectations and to have a more accurate understanding of the determinants of ethnic alignment. Then we may have a chance to build a ethnically harmonious society where cohesion and consensus rules and for today's world to learn from.

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