

## **Sociological Theories of Race and Ethnicity: Contesting, Substituting or Complementing?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Issues, related to race and ethnicity, have always attracted attention from many. Throughout the development of sociology, many theories have been developed to explain these phenomena. Most of the time, however, the theories are read as contesting each other. Similarly, argument was laid out as though the theories are contesting to explain the truth of race and ethnicity. Readers have also contributed to the contest. In fact, it is the readers who, most of the time, categorize the theories they read into school of thought and consequently the theories are contesting at least from the readers' perspective. The theories are also seen as trying to substitute each other, either from the theoreticians' point of view or from the readers' point of view. Maybe it is through these contests and the urge to substitute, more and more theories are constructed to explain race and ethnicity. However, instead of contesting and substituting, the theories should also be read as complementing. Sociology is a field that enables society to be understood. Theories related to race and ethnicity should be stitched together to provide the big picture which ultimately leads readers to understand race and ethnicity phenomena. Therefore, this paper focuses on the thoughts of three social analysts, viz., Banton, Geertz and Eriksen. Their contributions to the understanding of race and ethnicity are immense and have never failed to generate discussions and development relating to these areas. By studying and laying out their ideas in complimenting nature, the big picture of what is race and ethnicity could be developed. The big picture is vital and will give significant input to the understanding of issues related to race and ethnicity, particularly in the plural societies such as Malaysia.

**Keywords: Race, ethnicity, ethnic relation, complimentary approach**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Race and ethnicity are two relatively new concepts which have drawn the attentions of many sociologists who are interested in how people of differing background live and interact with each other. Issues and problems generated by the intergroup interaction have allowed sociologists to study and later try to make sense

of human diversity and unity. However, while the process of making sense has answered many questions, it has also caused opposing thoughts which consequently may affect the understanding of human societies.

Throughout the development of Sociology, many theories concerning race and ethnicity have been developed. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for

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instance, there were two important schools of thought. Among other, the racial typology theories championed by scholars such as Robert Knox, and this was followed by the Darwin's evolution theories which dominated the 19<sup>th</sup> century discussion on race (Banton, 1977, p. 5). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, theories related to how race and ethnicity were actively constructed were in the limelight, in which Robert E. Park claimed that race is a product of European expansion (Banton, 1977, p. 8).

However, these theories have been read as contesting and substituting one another rather than complementing. One tries to replace the other by claiming that their theories provide a better explanation and therefore can give a better solution to racial and ethnic issues. These efforts of substituting are always associated with the sociological paradigm the sociologists are usually attached to.

Unfortunately, substitution may also be interpreted as competition. When one tries to substitute the other, sparks of conflict may appear and these will ultimately cause the ideals of C. Wright Mills' (1959) sociological imagination to be missed. Sociology should be a field which enables the understanding of society inside out. C. Wright Mills pointed out:

*The sociological imagination should enable its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals... (Mills, 1959, p.11).*

However, substitution and competition will break the field into fragments. When the field is fragmented, visions will be blurred.

Therefore, it is important for us to view the theories as not substituting but more on complementing each other. Anthony Giddens (1984) attempted to integrate structure and action theories. Giddens views structure and action as inseparable. The structure of a society cannot exist without action. Similarly, there will be no social action without the social structure laying down the foundation of action to occur.

His *structuration* effort should be seen as an effort to produce an integrated sociological approach of understanding society, which is of course a plausible effort. Sociological theories are, in many ways, complementing each other to provide the overall picture. Thus, the development of new theories is not to replace, but to provide additional explanation or explain areas which are not covered by the previous theories.

Sociological theories which explain the phenomena of race and ethnicity should then be read as complementing. In order to untie the knots which are causing difficulties in understanding the phenomenon, multiple approaches should therefore be employed. Hence, the theories are complementing. Newer theories could then be developed to explain a phenomenon which is unique in its own sense and to lead to a greater pool of theories to understand racial and ethnic phenomena. The larger the pool, the more comprehensive the understanding will be.

With such an understanding, i.e. theories are complementing each other, this paper intends to lay out theories of Michael Banton, Clifford Geertz and Thomas Hyland Eriksen using the complimentary approach, which is to see how compatible or consistent their theories are. These scholars have contributed immensely towards to the development of race and ethnicity sociological theories, particularly in the mid and end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Banton is perhaps best known for his book "Race Relations" (1967). As a professor of Sociology, Banton's writings and thoughts introduced new concepts such as racialization and rational choice theory. Similarly, Geertz, through his book, "The Interpretation of Culture" (1973), introduced the notion that culture is actually an inherited system of symbols. Eriksen is an Oslo based anthropologist who has introduced discussion on the construction of ethnicity through his books, "Ethnicity and Nationalism" (1993) and "Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspective" (2002). Their thoughts and ideas related to this area have been studied and widely accepted as contributing to a greater

understanding of race and ethnicity. Through this complimentary approach, a comprehensive picture of racial and ethnic phenomenon will erase theoretical borders which have fragmented the theories. A more comprehensive picture will definitely look nicer than a fragmented one.

Banton's idea of race is the first to be discussed. His idea about race, which has historical as well as contemporary definition of race, provides a clearer interpretation of what race and ethnicity are all about. While providing the historical as well as contemporary understanding of what race is, Banton's view also leads to the view that race is socially constructed, either by individual action or structurally defined by power.

Banton's discussion is followed by a discussion on Geertz's Primordial Ties which describe why ethnic groups are formed. The primordial attachment establishes ethnic groups through kinship or some other factors which develop the sense of belonging ties individual to ethnic grouping. Geertz's Primordial Ties give a clear explanation of how ethnic groups are naturally a social construct of relationships. In other words, there is an active participation of both structural and action forces in the construction of ethnic groups. However, ethnic identity is meaningless if it is not recognized. In order to evaluate how "others" are playing role in constructing ethnic identity, Eriksen's view on the creation of ethnic identity is laid out as a follow up to the discussion and explanation of Banton and Geertz. In the final part of this writing, an analysis of how the views of Banton, Geertz and Eriksen can be stitched together is done to provide a bigger picture of race and ethnicity. These theories are discussed by referring to Malaysian experiences as the empirical evidences. This is because the formation of Malaysian as a plural society falls within the time frame which the three theoreticians worked on.

### **MICHAEL BANTON'S IDEA OF RACE**

While reviewing the meanings of race and ethnicity, one may start to wonder what actually they are. Are they the same or are they different? Both terms have been used in a rather indifferent manner.

Historically, Banton described how race came into use. Before the term was coined to identify people according to their physical attributes, race was used to symbolize people of different lineage. During this era of thought, the definition of race was in line with the teachings found in the Old Testament. However, the typology of human, according to their common characteristics, came into order in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Banton, 2005, p. 53). The spread of scientific thinking had propagated the idea of classifying people scientifically, with the hope of developing deeper understanding of human being. People, just like animals and plants, can be categorized according to the features they have already ascribed. This caused racialization of people. People who share common physical attributes are classified as people of a common race. One of such classification is the Morton's five races. Samuel James Morton categorized people into Caucasian, Mongolian, Malay, American, and Ethiopian. In Banton's view, these developments later paved the way for the belief of white supremacy and as such, race is a product of the Westerners (Banton, 1997, p. 34).

Another point which could be found in Banton's explanation of race is that the Westerners' view of others can be associated to how an observer views a subject. While they were classifying people into races, they were also creating races from their perspective. Their work is clearly visible in the development of countries colonized by them. In the context of Malaysian plural society, the active participation of the British in constructing the identities of the then people of Malaya had been impactful. British had directly or indirectly constructed the meaning of Malay in Malaysia, when they enacted Malay Reservation Enactment 1913.

The enactment gave meaning to the definition of Malay and Malayness. It also gave life to the concept of Malay from the social actors as well as observers' perspective (Shamsul, 1999, p. 25). Similarly, the British had also contributed to the development of the identity of the Chinese in Malaysia. It was the role of the British as the colonialist which had empowered them to give official recognition. The identity of the Chinese in Malaysia became official when the British conducted census and started to label the people who originated from China as Chinese as early as 1871 (Shamsul, 1999, p.29).

However, as nations get more diversified in terms of people, race alone would not be able to draw the line between people. As a concept, the diversity has caused race to be unable to be used to classify people appropriately. Some people could be white but they are different in terms of their religions, languages, and places of origin. An individual may belong to more than one social group at any one time. The study by Mansor Mohd. Noor (1999, p. 77) elaborated how Malaysians placed universalistic norms above ethnicity. In the 1997-98 financial crises, Malaysians did not blame each other. They were aware that the market forces were the reasons behind the crises. Such awareness prevented ethnic conflict in Malaysia. Malaysians demonstrated the ability to choose not to see everything from the race angle. The experience of Malaysians could demonstrate how race is merely a socially constructed concept.

In relation to the above discussion, Banton has explained the nature of race and ethnicity, whereby both are socially constructed. Race could be summarized as a product of western imperialism. In the case of the Malaysian plural society, the British had contributed to its existence/development by not only encouraging mass migration of people from China, India and the Malay Archipelago into Malaya, but also in laying down the terms which now form the races of Malaysia. Under such circumstances, race and ethnicity do not stand on a concrete ground and they may change as societies align themselves to changes. The idea that race and ethnicity are socially constructed is supported by many other

scholars. Among them are Steve Jones (1998) and John Richardson, who together with John Lambert (1985), claimed that race is socially constructed. All of them agreed that race is a superimposed concept which is also a figment of imagination (Haralombos and Holborn, 2000, p. 204-205). To prove this, Richardson and Lambert explained that unlike animals, human can produce very different cultures in different environment; therefore, the idea of race, which is to typify people of the same physical traits as the same, is false.

### **CLIFFORD GEERTZ'S PRIMORDIAL TIES**

While Banton focuses more on how race and ethnicity are merely created concepts, the motivation aspects of why they are created need to be investigated as well. People do not construct anything which does not carry meaning. The Westerners in the 19<sup>th</sup> century might be motivated to create race for political purposes, what was the motivation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century people? By the mid of 20<sup>th</sup> century, most states that were once colonized, emerged as independent states. Why would race and ethnicity still matter?

Clifford Geertz tried to explain in the newly formed states the phenomena of race and ethnicity, through his Primordial Ties theory. Geertz explained that people of the newly formed states were often caught in a dilemma. They are caught in a dilemma of whether to be loyal to states or to their ethnicity. Most of these newly formed states are multiethnic an outcome of colonization, where states were redefined or realigned, and immigration of labourers was encouraged. Such setting has allowed primordial attachment to play its role in forming groups of people which identify themselves by certain characteristics.

Primordial ties are sentiments which bound people together through blood ties, race, language, locality, religion, and custom. These ties act as strings and tie individuals who together form a community (Geertz, 1973, p. 259). Many modern new states do have such community

which therefore create heterogeneous societies. Individuals are tied or born into a particular community and will remain as members of the community through the primordial attachments. They are, in Geertz's words, being meaningfully sorted and cause the formation of a multiethnic society (Geertz, 1996, p. 41).

Individuals are given membership into certain community. Blood ties or quasi kinship is one of the keys which gives the pass for a person to join. The ties may not be genuine. It could be an assumed blood tie, such as the membership in a particular clan or tribe. When they are members of a particular kin unit, they may also fall into a common category of race and will thus share language, religion, custom, and even place of origin. Geertz does recognize that in a modernizing society, the strength of primordial bonds which differ according to individuals, societies, and times. However, Geertz firmly believes that somehow everyone will be bonded to certain groupings. The attachment, however, may generate chronic and severe tensions. The newly formed states may push for uniformity or a civil order. This may not be accepted by their people since uniformity or civil order will somehow erode their roots. This could be worse if the uniformity is done through domination of other ethnic groups. In retaliation, as pointed out by Geertz, political movements will be formed by the pressured group to ensure the survival and recognition of their group. Geertz used Malaya and several other newly independent countries to illustrate this point. In Malaya, the political parties which were race-based were formed to cater to the needs of the communities (Geertz, 1973, p. 283-286).

It is interesting to note here how Geertz's primordialism managed to explain the formation of Malaysia's major political parties, namely United Malay National Organization (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The parties which were formed in the mid and late 1940s were primarily established to safeguard the needs of the communities they were representing and are still representing till today (Asnarulkhadi and Jayum, 1997, p. 54-55). UMNO is the

largest political party in Malaysia. It was formed when the Malays decided to unite against the establishment of Malayan Union. They saw Malayan Union as a threat to their common future, and UMNO was therefore formed to unite the Malays and ultimately to stop the British from carrying on with Malayan Union. The Malays were worried of the potential gloom in the future, especially when *jus soli* scheme citizenship policy was planned and employed by the British under the Malayan Union. Through the *jus soli*, the non-Malays would be awarded citizenship if they were born in Malaya. They were also worried of the possible take over by the Chinese (Mohd Nordin, 1974, p. 24).

At more or less the same time, the Chinese and Indians had also thought about their future. This development led to the establishment of MCA and MIC. Both parties were set up with the rights of the communities they were representing as their top agenda. Although these parties were able to unite under the *Parti Perikatan* and later *Barisan Nasional* flag, communalism which had its root in Geertz's primordialism was still an important factor that kept the parties going.

Based on the above discussion, Geertz's Primordialism does provide some light on why people are still very much divided in terms of race and ethnicity. When new states were formed, so were race and ethnicities. The two terms are now not defined by the Westerners, but by the people themselves in order to protect their own right as a social group to survive in the newly formed states. From this context, Geertz's theory has complimented Banton's theory, whereby in the contemporary societies, people construct their own social groupings using the primordial factors as guides. In other words, people of a particular ethnicity will continue to breed new members and socialize them into believing that they are the same and they must remain united for political mileages as well as the rights to live.

The mobilizationists disagree with Geertz's views because according to them, individuals actively construct their race and ethnic identity to obtain access to social, political, and economical resources and that nothing is inevitable or



natural about it (Haralombos and Holborn, 2000, p. 232). Civic consciousness and identity may also erode group boundaries described by Geertz. However, the mobilizationists need to understand that although may not be genuine, the primordial ties have somehow laid the foundation for the people to identify themselves collectively and it is through this collectivism that the people are able to mobilize their force and demand for social, politics, and economic access. In other words, the primordial ties are imminent to the formation of ethnic identity.

### THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN'S ETHNICITY

Both Banton and Geertz have explained how race and ethnicity have come into existence. Race was used by Geertz as one of the primordial factor. Meanwhile, Thomas Hylland Eriksen complimented both of them by explaining the meanings of race and ethnicity even further.

To Eriksen, race is socially constructed. This is an idea which is also shared by Banton. Both of them also see race as not very appropriate to be used. Banton has said that the term race is not concrete. Similarly, Eriksen (1996, p. 29) has also claimed that the term has no objective existence. Race, which refers to biological distinction between human, cannot really perform what it is supposed to do since human have interbred, and therefore, it is hard to distinguish people by referring to their biological features. Furthermore, it is important to note that there are also a lot of variations between the people of the same race.

Nevertheless, race is still a term which is used to categorize people. Race is not only used to classify people biologically. As highlighted by Banton, the term race has also been used to categorize people socially, although originally the 19<sup>th</sup> century scientists used it for biological purpose. Its distinction from ethnicity has often been overlooked. To Eriksen, ethnicity differs from race, while ethnic groups exist when groups of people see each other as different and consequently develop what is commonly known as racial stratification within a society (Eriksen,

1996, p. 30). Judging from Eriksen's definition of ethnicity, it is clear that his idea of ethnicity has some similarities with Geertz's Primordial Ties. Both see the objective of ethnic group as forming solidarity. Ethnicity is therefore mobilized as a force to gather political support, loyalty, etc.

Eriksen further contributes to the understanding of ethnicity by claiming that is not an issue when others do not exist. Ethnic group is socially constructed only when there are others. The ascribed aspect a person has is important when the person is engaging with people of other background (Eriksen, 2002, p. 10-12). It is then that ethnicity will come into existence and play an important role in a person's relationship with others. From this angle, Eriksen's view is quite close to what Banton has mentioned in his actor and observer's theory (Banton, 1996, p. 101). An actor will only be performing when there are other actors around. When each and everyone perform according to their roles, there will be a show. A member of a particular ethnic group needs to define or act as though he is a member of a particular group in the event he is with the others. This is important especially when the definition leads him to earn recognition from his own and at the end of the day, the recognition provides him an avenue to share whatever interest his group acquires when engaging with others.

Eriksen's view of ethnicity can be used to illustrate the construction of the contemporary Malaysian ethnic identities. As a plural society, Malaysians are bound to meet with people from different cultures. It is within these processes, Malaysians developed their ethnic identity by referring to the oppositional ethnic group. Lee Yok Fee's study on the construction of the Chinese identity showed how Malaysian Chinese used their ethnocentric perceptions about other ethnic groups in Malaysia in order to construct their own identity (Lee, 2009). In his analysis of the formation of the Chinese identities, his respondents differentiated their identities by comparing themselves with the oppositional ethnic groups. In the comparative discourse, they uttered prejudicial statement towards the

oppositional ethnic groups. These negative statements showed how the Chinese respondents stereotyped people from other ethnic groups negatively and ultimately helped the formation of positive stereotype of the Chinese, to which they belong to. This can also mean that within the Malaysian plural context, the Chinese will be creative and logical in constructing their everyday identity (Lee, 2009, p. 25). However, in the long run, these processes may generate ethnic polarization in Malaysia.

#### **THE COMPLIMENTARY APPROACH: STITCHING THE BIG PICTURE OF RACE AND ETHNICITY**

Banton, Geertz and Eriksen have laid down their points of view in the discussion of what race and ethnicity really are. All three of them have contributed uniquely. Does this mean they are different? Yes, they are different in the context of how each of them has contributed their own ways of defining and interpreting race and ethnicity. However, this does not mean their theories are not complimenting and have failed to generate the picture of what race and ethnicity are.

Their theories should be understood not from the perspective of how their theories are distinctive, but when they are stitched together, these theories draw a big picture of what race and ethnicity are. Both concepts cannot be understood from a single dimension approach alone, as they can only be understood using the multi-dimension approach. In other words, they are flexible in nature and may carry different meanings at different points of time and setting. Thus, although the theories by Banton, Geertz and Eriksen are distinctive, they are able to form a more comprehensive and compact picture when stitched together. Their theories should be arranged in a complimenting manner, although adjustment may still be required to ensure that their theories can fit in the big picture.

Banton provides the historical understanding of the development of race and ethnicity. As discussed earlier, race was developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Westerners and this development has had social implications when it is used to

classify and measure people. The classification has not only caused dire consequences to people, but also to the newly formed race and ethnic groups which affected the newly formed nations in the mid of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Geertz, in the newly formed nations, people have the tendency towards primordial sentiment and the thought that they are different, which resulted from the idea of race brought about by the Western powers, nearly colonized the whole world at one point of time.

Due to the variation that can be found within a race, as well as the impracticality of the term, race is no longer suitable to be used to describe the diversity of human being. Eriksen strongly believe ethnicity is a better word to be used. His view should be accepted since the contemporary societies are much more heterogeneous than before. Heterogeneity is actively constructed when individuals start to identify themselves as members of certain ethnic group. Hence, race as a biological concept has failed. Eriksen did not entirely reject primordialism as one of the factors which leads to ethnic identification. According to Eriksen, individuals are socialized to be members of certain ethnic group. Primordialism binds people together. People actively link themselves to their ethnicity when dealing with people of different backgrounds. This thought is also shared by Banton when he agrees that ethnicity is a product of how a person acts to become a member of an ethnic group when dealing with others.

Therefore, it is clear now that race and ethnicity are socially constructed through perception. Both are developed through how one group of people perceives others and at the same time themselves. The outward perception requires them to identify others as different, which will come about when the inward perception constantly reminds these individuals that they are different. At the same time, conflicts due to shared interest with others will continue to strengthen the inward perception. All these are built upon learning in the socialization process of the group.

## CONCLUSIONS

In many areas, the development of the Malaysian plural society can be discussed from the views of Banton, Geertz and also Eriksen. If stitched together, their views would be useful to describe how Malaysia had developed into a plural society during the British colonization and has continued to be plural even after the end of colonization. In fact, Malaysia is now more plural than before when Malaysians are actively constructing their own identities. Banton's idea of race shows how the British laid down the parameters of the Malaysian ethnic identities. In particular, Geertz explained the persistence of race and ethnicity in the Malaysian political scenario, while Eriksen proved how Malaysians are constructing their ethnic identities using each other as mirrors. In sum, sociological race and ethnicity theories should be seen as complimenting rather than contesting or even substituting one another.

In spite of all the above, the world is constantly changing. These changes are affecting how one individual perceives another. There are other factors which affect human interaction and how they understand each other. Stuart Hall (1996, p. 161) describes modern human as mongrel. Modernity has caused individuals to occupy several identities at any one time. Thus, race and ethnicity are just ones of the many. In some societies, the idea of race and ethnicity may not carry much meaning. What matter most for them could be other forms of identities, such as class and gender. Meanwhile, structural changes will lay the foundation for the changes in the meanings of identities. The changes in the identities will later force for structural changes. This will subsequently influence how an individual perceives another as he or she has many other things to consider about and at the end of the day, it will cause the creation of a new form of identity. Thus, race and ethnicity are just parts of the structure developed by people's actions and those who choose to believe them. In the Malaysian context, economic development has developed fluidity of ethnic identity and boundary (Mansor, 1999, p.75). The encroachment of universalistic

norms, such as the self interest in material kind, status kind and obligation kind, has reduced the influence of ethnicity in dictating the relationship of Malaysians. These developments have contributed to the relatively harmonious relationship among them.

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