ETHNIC RELATIONS SYLLABUS
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA*

Rosila Bee Mohd Hussain
Department of Antropology and Sociology
Faculty of Arts and Social Science
University of Malaya

Abstract

Due to the various justifications within the issues of ethnic relations in Malaysia, few ideas and factors are still mislaid. In order to provide a clearer picture of the scenario, a particular set of syllabus had been laid out for the respective students of University Malaya. The syllabi is an additional effort put forward in supporting the ongoing efforts by governments and various parties to uphold the national unity. Among the topics that will be concentrated on will essentially be on the introduction of the various ethnic groups in Malaysia including from Sabah and Sarawak, the background (theoretical) of various ethnic groups including the economic factors, social-cultural factors and political factors. Once the caption is clear, they will be introduced to the various terms and situations that came mutually in the process of ethnic relations, such as the idea of assimilation, acculturation, polarization, segregation, prejudice etc. Finally, with all given information, the idea will be applied and further discussed based on the previous and current scenario, experiences and circumstances of how Malaysia can uphold and maintain its ethnic relations and national unity.

[38]

Introduction

Ethnic studies is the study of the social, cultural and historical forces that have shape the development of Malaysia's diverse ethnic populations and which continue to shape our future.

The syllabus somehow will offer information and knowledge of special interest to those who might be considering a career in education, law, medicine, public health, social work, journalism, business, city planning, politics, psychology, international relations or even creative writing. Furthermore it may impart fundamental skills in critical thinking, written analysis, comparative analysis, social theory and research analysis. These skills will give students the opportunity to satisfy the increasingly rigorous expectations of graduates and prospective employers for a broader perspective.

The main objective of the "Ethnic Relations" course was to raise awareness of the state of ethnic relations in Malaysia amongst the university students from all faculties and programs, in the natural sciences, social sciences and others, and facilitate mutual understanding among the ethnic groups by imparting detailed information about the culture and values of each to a level not normally understood (Shamsul: 2008). Furthermore, businesses, institutions and governmental agencies are increasingly aware of the need to acknowledge and address the complexity of ethnic relations. Thus, they pursue knowledge vital for a critical understanding of contemporary society and for social changes to improve their lives and communities. The ethnic relations studies major will also prepare themselves for advanced graduate study in academics and professional fields.

Objectives

The ethnic relations course provides students an understanding of the complex issues surrounding the ethnic and cultural differences in Malaysia. The syllabus of the ethnic relations studies is basically designed to fulfill a few major objectives:

1. To draw larger theoretical ideas about ethnic and race relations.

[39]

2. To study the particular histories of the different ethnic groups in Malaysia.
3. To understand the problems faced in ethnic and race relations in the world.
4. To look at ways to overcome race problems.

Malaysia is inhabited by a population of many races and variety. The variety can be observed from the ethnic point of view. This difference in ethnicity is paralleled by other differences such as the way of life, language, politics, economy, place of residence and social contacts. The ethnic group's composition of Malaysia can be analyzed by looking at the ethnic groups in the Peninsular, Sabah and Sarawak. In Table 1 below, it shows the breakdown of the ethnic group's composition of Malaysian Communities and Tribal Communities:

Table 1: Composition of Malaysian Communities and Tribal Communities

Peninsular Malaysia				Sabah	Sarawak
Malay	Chinese	Indian	Indigenous		
Banjar	Hokkien	Malayali	Negrito	Kadazan	Bidayuh
Boyan	Chuan-Chew	Punjabi	Senoi	Bajau	Bisaya
Bugis	Chin-Chew	Ceylonese	Melayu Asli	Dusun	Iban
Jawa	Eng-Hua	Tamil	(each of the	Murut	Kayan
Kampar	Eng-Choon	Telegu	stocks	Sulu	Kedayan
Kerinci	Hok-Chew		consists of a	Bisaya	Kelabit
Mendaling	Kwantung		tribal	Kadayun	Kenyah
Minangkabau	Kanton		community)	Orang	Melanau
Rawa	Teochew			Sungai	Malays
Johor-Riau	Hakka			Orang Laut	Murut
	Hailam			Brunei	Penan
					Punan

Many of the Malays were involved in the agricultural and traditional industries that were said to have low productivity. Majority of Malays live in villages within which the community is characterized by strong social ties and strict social control. The Chinese relatively are involved in business as merchants,

[40]

businessmen and craftsmen and comprise various dialectal communities. The Indian somehow did not manage to form a strong business cluster and many were involved in low-skilled or unskilled occupations like remaining in the plantation as laborers. Some manage to get involved in other fields like trading, owning grocery, book or textiles stores. The Indians can be differentiated in terms of their origin, language, caste and religion.

In Sarawak there are 26 different ethnic groups making up 70% of the state's 1.7 million inhabitants. Virtually all of the ethnic people of Sarawak live off the land. They farm, fish, hunt and many of them practice shifting cultivation. Indigenous people in Sabah account for 86.3% of the total Sabah population of 1.6 million. The vast majority of indigenous communities lives in rural area and includes ethnic groups such as the Kadazan, Bajau, Suluk and Cocos Malay. As in Sarawak, almost all of these people live off the land.

The Indigenous (Orang Asli) in Malaysia as shown in Table 2 below are different in many ways like their physical appearances, economic activities and their settlements. The Orang Asli are the indigenous minority peoples of Peninsular Malaysia. The name is a Malay term which transliterates as 'original peoples' or 'first peoples.' It is a collective term introduced by anthropologists and administrators for the 18 sub-ethnic groups generally classified for official purposes under Negrito, Senoi and Proto-Malay. They numbered 150,000 in 2008 representing a mere 0.6 per cent of the national population. The economy of the majority of indigenous people is still based on subsistence and agriculture. Indigenous people are extremely important to the cultural and ethnic mix of Malaysian life.

Indigenous people form an integral part of Malaysian society and contribute greatly to the cultural richness of the country. The diversified ethnic groups speak their own languages and practicing their own religions. However, these ethnic groups can remain locked in their respective ethnic universe, isolated from the rest of the society unless these differences are moderated through infrastructure and development.

Table 2: Distribution of Indigenous People According to their Race and Tribal Community

Orang Asli group	Tribal Community	
Negrito	Kensiu	Lanoh
	Kintak	Mendriq
	Jahai	Bateq
Senoi	Semai	Che Wong
	Temiar	Mahmeri
	Jahut	Semoq Beri
Melayu Asli	Temuan	Kanaq People
	Semelai	Kuala People
	Jakun	Seletar People

[42]

Malaysia represents a tolerant society which respects the right of its people to practice any of the religions found here i.e. Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity. In this respect, Malaysia has been successful in bringing together people from diverse cultures, countries and backgrounds to create a unified society.

ETHNIC SYLLABUS IN UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA (FROM 2002 TO 2006)

Course: Ethnic and Race Relations
Code: ALEA 2307

Some of the selected main references for this course are as follows:
1. Fenton,S (2003), *Ethnicity*, Polity
2. Stavenhagen, R (1998), *The Ethnic Question: Conflict, Development and Human Rights,* United Nation University Press
3. E. Segal, Bernard (1972), *Racial and Ethnic Relations,* Thomas Y. Crowell Company.
4. Rex, John and Mason, David (1986), *Theories of Race and Ethnic Relations,* Cambridge University Press.

However several others related readings form books, journals, articles and others will be given out or recommended from time to time during the commencement of this course. The purpose is to make sure that the students will be updated and aware of the current ethnic and race relations scenario in Malaysia and the world as a whole. By considering this thought, a thorough course outline has been laid out as follows. Below are the course outline provided from 2002/2003 intake to 2005/2006 intake in University of Malaya:

Course Outline: (2002/2003) and (2005/2006)
1. Introduction to background of ethnic and race problems
2. Modernization and Ethnic Development

[43]

3. Types of Plural Society
4. Racism and Prejudice
5. Ethnic and Race Conflict
6. Ethnic questions and human rights
7. Indigenous Position
8. Case in United State of America
9. Case in Europe
10. Case in Asia
11. Case in Africa
12. Ethnic Relations in Malaysia
13. Ways to overcome ethnic and race problems
14. Conclusion

Course Outline: (2003/2004) and (2004/2005)

1. Introduction
2. Modernization and Nationhood
3. Ethnic Stratification
4. Racism and Prejudice
5. Ethnic and Race Conflict
6. Race, ethnic and human rights
7. Minorities and Indigenous
8. Case in United State of America
9. Case in Europe
10. Case in Asia
11. Case in Africa
12. Ethnic relations in Malaysia
13. Comparative cases
14. Closing

Introduction

Sociologists of the early twentieth century have set out many of the fundamental questions of ethnic and racial relations that would provide valuable insight for students of the field. In response

[44]

several central themes emerged in the scholarly literature on ethnic and race relations and some of the most critical of these were concerned with the construction of ethnic identity, the origin and dynamics of group boundaries and impact of postindustrial and modernization forces on ethnic relations.

The development of ethnic groups is not always the result of their members' self-definition that they share common traits and experiences, but it is often also a product of the categorization of outsiders. Taken together, social identity – of which ethnic identity is one particular form – can be seen as the interaction of internal and external forces operating at both the individual and group level (Stone : 2003).

This part will introduced students to the various questions on ethnic identities and its relations to politic, economic and culture. It will discuss the background of ethnic and race problems. Ethnicity is a term now that plays an important part in sociological imagination, in policy making and political discourses. So therefore it is vital for students to be clear about it.

Firstly is to establish what ethnicity is and secondly is to determine the conditions under which ethnic identification becomes a principal source of action. The explicit and implicit meaning of the terms 'ethnic', 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic group' and some closely related terms like 'race' and nation' will be looked into. The term 'race' referred to supposed biological characteristics that distinguish one group or people from another, 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic' apply to cultural characteristics. Derived from the word *ethnos* (a Greek word meaning "people" or "nation"), ethnicity and ethnic basically refer to people who identify with one another on the basis of common ancestry and cultural heritage (Henslin: 2005).

Secondly, an outline of the circumstances under which ethnic identities become an important dimension of action will be laid out. Some of us have a greater sense of ethnicity than others where some might feel a firm boundary between "us" and "them". Others somehow have assimilated to the mainstream culture that they are

[45]

only vaguely aware of their ethnic origins. Sociologist Ashley Doane identified four factors that heighten or reduce sense of ethnic identities and the four keys are relative size, power, appearance and discrimination as shown below (Doanne: 1997)

Figure 1: A sense of Ethnicity
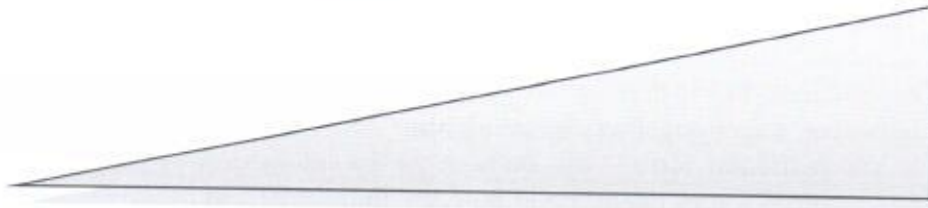
A Heightened Sense

1. Numerical majority
2. Greater power
3. Similarity to the "national identity"
4. No discrimination

A LowSense

1. Smaller numbers
2. Lesser power
3. Different from the "national identity"
4. Discrimination

(Source: Based on Doane, 1997)

Modernization and Nationhood/Ethnic Development

In the first part, we saw that the word 'nation', like 'ethnic group' and 'race', conveyed ideas about ancestral origins. These ideas of descent, origins, ancestry and belonging to the same people are found to be common to all three terms. The main meaning to nation particularly is the idea that nations and states are linked together, this may be the idea that nations should be self-governing or it may be in the idea that people of a state necessary are or come to form, a nation. The latter idea incorporates the notion that people of a state (citizens) are not 'naturally' or without effort a nation, but they can become one by *building* a nation (Fenton: 2003)

Furthermore this part will look into the idea of a 'nation', whereby at first sight a unifying idea. It expresses an idea of

peoplehood which cuts across other divisions, especially of class and regional difference and inequalities. One of the ways is to let the student's be clear of both the history and present situation due to the fact that in nation-formation there have been groups with a particular stake in the idea of a nation and in the present time there might be a situation of nationalism in some way divisive. Understanding nations and nationalism is essential step in understanding ethnicities in the contemporary world.

Ethnic Stratification

The idea of ethnic stratification is stated here which is one form of social stratification. Ethnic stratification is a system of stratification wherein some relatively fixed group membership (e.g., ethnic, race, religion or nationality) is utilized as a major criterion for assigning social positions with their attendant differential rewards (Noel: 1973).

Prior to the emergence of ethnic stratification there must be a period of recurrent or continuous contact between the members of two or more distinct ethnic groups. This contact is an obvious requisites of inter-group relations, hence inter-group contact is assumed as given and not treated as a theoretical element. Distinct ethnic groups like in Malaysia can interact and form a stable pattern of relations due to factors such as nature of groups prior to contact, the agents of contact and the objective of the contacting parties.
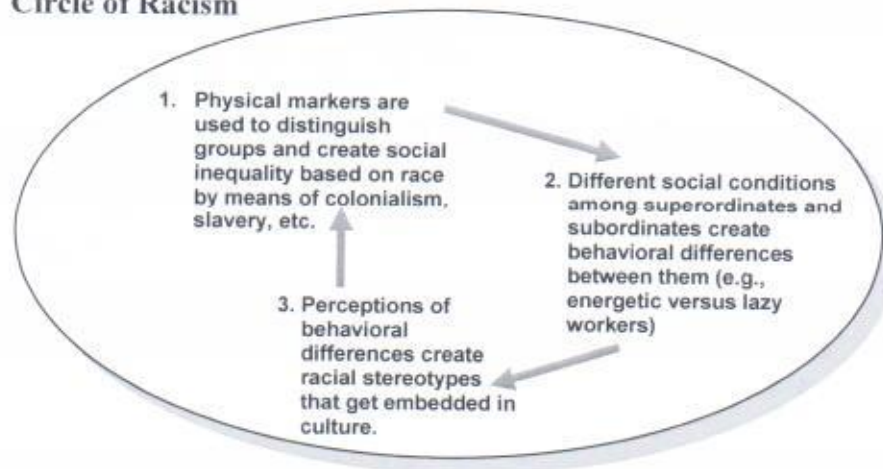
Types of Plural Society

Since Malaysia is made up of ethnic groups who are different culturally and economically (from the point of view of settlement, politically and socially), is a complex society known as plural society. Thereby a few concepts will be put forward in understanding the concept of plural society (by J.S.Furnivall, Morris, Smith, Van den Berge) and the types of plural society will be discussed in this part.

Racism and Prejudice

[47]

Racist ideas have become so widespread that they play to this day an important role in the development of ethnic diversity and nationalism. The phrase, *race and ethnicity*, is widely used without any clear explanation of the distinction. This part will explain how historically, however, one may well argue that culturally different communities were classed as ethnic when they were treated as eligible for citizenship but classed as racially distinct when they were permanently barred from citizenship. Most sociologists believe race matters because it allows social inequality to be created and maintained. Figure 2 below shows how the vicious circle of racism works.

Figure 2: The Vicious Circle of Racism

1. Physical markers are used to distinguish groups and create social inequality based on race by means of colonialism, slavery, etc.

2. Different social conditions among superordinates and subordinates create behavioral differences between them (e.g., energetic versus lazy workers)

3. Perceptions of behavioral differences create racial stereotypes that get embedded in culture.

(Source: Collins: 1982, 66-9)

Secondly the concept of prejudice will be discussed which is closely related to the attitudes that are shown towards other groups based on the generalization (stereotypes) or on evidence that are not concrete (meaning prejudice is a pre-judgment action towards other ethnic groups). Prejudice and discrimination are common throughout the world. Discrimination is an *action* (unfair treatment directed against someone) and discrimination is often the result of an *attitude* called prejudice (a prejudging of some sort,

[48]

usually in a negative way). We are not born with prejudice but we can learn prejudice through the mass media, but often we learn it through the people whom we associate with.

Ethnic and Race Conflict

We often think of ethnic conflict and nationalism as an historical residue based on conflicts between communities whose members have long lived in tension with each other. This part will highlight the dynamics of 'ethnic conflict' (the so call ethnic factor) in development. Previously, the subject of ethnic conflict has been somewhat neglected in the vast literature on development problems but in recent years it has become the centre of attention, basically due to the facts that ethnic conflicts have been more visible and ethnic demands have become political issues of some importance.

Conflict has many results including the development of contact between groups formerly unaware of each other's life styles and antagonisms. For ethnic group conflicts may bring the needs and grievances into public awareness for the first time. Overt conflict between groups also helps to articulate positions and different stances on important issues among ethnic groups. As subordinates ethnic groups attempt to change their position, the barriers to their mobility may become clear through conflict.

Further discussion will explain when ethnic conflicts occur in developing society and also to relate the concept of modernization. For example student will see that modernization is a country has been incomplete or unequal and that ethnic conflict occurs when as ethnic group considers that it has been 'left-out', or it may occur because and ethnic group 'resists' modernization, or on the contrary, a modernizing ethnic group enters into conflict with others who do not wish to modernize. Ethnic conflict appears to be a permanent form of social and political struggle in the modern world and no major region is free from it (Stavenhagen: 1998).

Ethnic and Human Rights

[49]

This part of the discussion will concentrate on the ways states deal with minorities under their jurisdiction in various forms. Some states tend to ignore the existence of minorities' altogether and provide no legal framework whatsoever to deal with minority issues. Some states have laws and policies of 'domination devices' (used by ethnocratic State to preserve its power and to keep minorities in their place – South Africa's apartheid). A number of states have developed variations of pluralist arrangements by which ethnic minorities may have some form of legally recognized representation or participation in the political system. Among some of the discussions will look into the ethnic and human rights situation in USA, Europe, Asia and Africa.

As in Malaysia, it is a federal constitutional monarchy with a population of approximately 25.6 million. It has a parliamentary system of government headed by a prime minister selected through periodic multiparty elections. The country's human right performance improved during the year; nevertheless, problems remained and among the human rights problems that were reported is ethnic discrimination (Malaysia: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: 2005).

Case study in USA, Europe, Asia and Africa

Once students are aware of the significant terms, elements and scenario related to ethnic relations, further discussions will be predisposed to various locations in the world like in USA, Europe, Asia and Africa. In USA for example, the first part will identify ways that contributed to the existence of its various ethnic groups like through conquest, annexation and immigration.

According to Glazer and Moynihan (1970:15), *"The original Americans became 'old' Americans or 'old stock', or 'white Anglo Saxon protestants', or some other identification which indicated that they were not immigrants or descendents of recent immigrants."* The *melting-pot* concept that exists in USA refers to the idea that different cultures among the immigrants will subside through the continuous *'blending'* process. This will then lead to the idea of one national identity that is *'one America'*

In Europe compared to USA a different scenario can be distinguish in relative to the concept of ethnic relations. In United Kingdom, census had never recorded a person 'race' or 'ethnic' origin until 1990. Discussion will continue further by looking at ethnic relations in selected Asian countries like India, Pakistan and Iran. In India for example students will see some elements of discriminations that tend to be look upon as an affirmative purpose in relation to certain ethnic groups.

In the case of Africa, their philosophy and concept regarding ethnic minorities are nearly comparable to those found in Latin America. Discriminations based on race, color and belief system fundamentally does not exist in the federation. According to the Capotorti Report (for the Human Rights groups by concentrating on the indigenous people) in Africa, shows the existence of an *"objective"* minority group that shows a *"subjective"* will to sustain their culture. There are more than 250 different ethnic groups in Nigeria alone, with its populations reaching 90 million people. Discussion continues relating to the concept of genocides, factors contributing to genocide and steps taken to overcome genocide in Africa.

Ethnic Relations in Malaysia

Relations among ethnic groups in Malaysia have been much discussed. This is because the country is indeed renowned as a multi-racial society that has been successfully created peace and become a model of a calm and peaceful plural society for other countries. The stages below simplify the history of ethnic relations in Malaysia:

1. *Stage of co-existence:* At this stage the races of different backgrounds have contact. Even though the people concerned live in the same area they rarely communicate. Contact between them is limited to matters of necessity only, especially in matters of economic significance. This can be illustrated to the life of a multi-ethnic and multi-racial society in the era of the British colonialists.

[51]

2. *Stage of frequent external contact:* Gradually frequent contact among the communities occurred, but the contact was still unable to establish an understanding among them. The frequency in contact arose out of inter-dependence in the interest to survive as when economic specialization crept in. This staged clearly occurred during the era of thee British rule and up to the time of independence.

3. *Stage of compromise:* After the communities concerned became conscious of their common interest, they felt the need to compromise for the sake of looking after their common interest. Usually this compromise takes place in the economic and political area. This stage was obvious at the time of the early independence era. In some instance perhaps the Malaysian society is still in this stage. At this stage the society is still undergoing the process of accommodation.

4. *Stage of unity:* If the communities in the society compromise and cooperate as much as possible, there is the tendency for them to live united in many ways (social, economics, cultural and political). But at this stage the cooperation is still external.

5. *Stage of integration:* Cooperation among races can gradually create a sense of belonging and strong ties among them. The relation among races is not just based on interest but also a sense of responsibility; among them they share the same values. ((Nazaruddin, 2003).

Furthermore ethnic relations in Malaysia can be analyzed based on the degree of 'nearness' beginning with relations that are apart from relations that are close. Meaning concept related to the process of integration will also be highlighted, like the terms segregation, assimilation, acculturation, accommodation and amalgamation.

[52]

Ways to overcome ethnic and race problems

In this part of the syllabus, discussion will focus on problems that are faced in ethnic and race and what are the solutions or ways that can be taken to overcome these problems. Open discussion and suggestions from students will be look into too. Some of the ways that are commonly drawn to overcome ethnic and race problems among others are through compromising in various social and cultural aspects, economic efforts, political efforts, assimilation process, changes of status through social positions, through efforts and achievements, family influences, mix marriages, socialization etc.

Conclusion

Governments have adopted different kinds of policies regarding ethnic groups and minorities through devices for assimilation and integration and etc. The ethnic questions pose a challenge to the social sciences as well as statesmen and policy makers. Nations, whose people quarrel, fight or are in conflict with one another taught Malaysia the lesson that nation in chaos and instability is not beneficial to all parties, instead it makes people's living difficult and miserable whilst evading development to take off.

Sociological research should be able to develop (i) a clear delineation of the relative position of ethnic groups in various societies (ii) the factors that explain their subordinate or dominant positions (iii) the means of control that are utilized to maintain boundaries between ethnic groups and (iv) the extent to which ethnic distinctions are related to class distinction within the society (Gelfand: 1973).

So the ethnic syllabus in the University of Malaya has attempted three things: first, to provide a clear introduction to the field of ethnicity, secondly an interpretation of the place of ethnicity in the contemporary world and thirdly an examining the concept of ethnic relations in the case of Malaysia, the importance of it and the relevance actions to overcome ethnic problems in building its nation.

[53]

Reference:

Collins, R. (1982). *Sociological Insight: An Introduction to Nonobvious Sociology,* New York: Oxford University Press.

Doane, A. W., Jr. (1997). Dominant Group Ethnic Identity in the United States. The Role of 'Hidden' Ethnicity in Intergroup Relations. *The Sociological Quarterl*, 38(3), Summer 1997: 375-397.

Fenton, S (2003), *Ethnicity*, USA: Polity Press

Gelfand, D. E. (1973), *Ethnic Relations and Social Research: A Reevaluation,* in *Ethnic Conflicts and Power: A Cross National Perspectives.* USA: John Wiley& Sons, Inc.

Glazer, N. and D. P. Moynihan (1970). *Beyond the Melting Pot*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Henslin, J. (2005). *Sociology: A Down-to- Earth Approach*, 7th ed. USA: Allyn and Bacon.

Malaysia: *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (2006),* Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, March 8, 2006

Nazaruddin Hj. M.J. Ma'rof R. Asnarulkhadi A.S. Ismail Hj. M.R. 2003. *Malaysian Studies: Nationhood and Citizenship.* Malaysia: Prentice Hall.

Noel, D. L. (1973). *A Theory of the Origin of Ethnic Stratification,* in *Ethnic Conflicts and Power: A Cross National Perspectives.* USA: John Wiley& Sons, Inc.

Shamsul Amri B. (2008). Many ethnicities, many cultures, one nation: The Malaysian experience, *UKM Ethnic Studies Papers* No. 2.

Stavenhagen, R. (1998). *The Ethnic Question: Conflict, Development and Human Rights.* United Nation University Press

Stone, J. & Dennis R. (2003). *Race and Ethnicity: Comparative and Theoretical Approaches.* USA: Blackwell Publishing.

List of websites referred:
http://www.ucsd.edu/catalog/0506/curric/ETHN.htm/.
http://www.hawaii.edu/global/publications_media/Publications_Staff_Fac/riggs.html
http://ethnicstudies.berkely.edu/es/
http://www.cs.cmu.edu/afs/cs.cmu.edu/project/theo3/data/web_type/People/malaysia.ipom.htm