Explaining Ethnic Relations in Malaysia Through the “Concentric Circle Model”: Case Studies of the States of Perak and Kelantan, Malaysia

Salfarina Abdul Gapor  
School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia  
11800 Penang, Malaysia  
Fax: +6046570918  
E-mail: farina@usm.my

Mohd. Zaini Abu Bakar  
School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia  
11800 Penang, Malaysia  
Fax: +6046570918  
E-mail: zainiab@usm.my

Azeem Fazwan Ahmad Farouk  
School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia  
11800 Penang, Malaysia  
Fax: +6046570918  
E-mail: azeemf@usm.my

Abstract  
Ethnic relations in Malaysia are complex, dynamic and fluid according to demographic factors which usually relate to spatial location and economic dependence/independence of an ethnic group. The paper examines two extreme case studies, the state of Kelantan characterized by a dominantly Malay populated state compared to the urban areas of Perak with a dominantly non-Malays population. Perceptions on ethnic issues are translated as tools to gauge the respondents’ state of ethnic relations through a survey. A qualitative in-depth-interviews is also conducted to supplement data. The findings are then translated into an ethnic relations model known as the “Concentric Circle”. The model shows that the minority ethnic group tends to partially assimilate more with the majority group for economic and political survival and dependence. On the other hand, when similar ethnic group becomes majority, they tend to reaffirm their socio-cultural roots and create limited networking with the other ethnic groups. They are also more vocal in their opinions of public policies compare to the same ethnic groups who are minorities in a different spatial setting. This model shows that ethnic relations in Malaysia cannot be explained merely by one ethnic relations theory but a mix of both the functionalist and instrumentalist theories.

Keywords: Ethnic relation theories, ethnicity, ethnic relations

Introduction  
Managing ethnic relations remains one of Malaysia’s main challenges. In the process to manage and stabilise the differences between the multiethnic groups, there is a need to understand the dynamics, patterns and trends of how each ethnic group perceive, relate and act towards each other. Previous
studies on ethnic relations in Malaysia cover historical aspects, especially the formation of communalities in each ethnic group and examine factors of disagreement and conflicts between the three races. Other studies focus on socio-economic policies and ethnic affiliation with political parties and its implications on ethnic relations.

Enloe (1970) in her work “Multi-ethnic politics: the case of Malaysia” studied about inter-ethnic division and communal bargaining in Malaysia during the period prior to May 1969. The focus of her study is education, as part of government policy-making and education, whereby the education policy, national language and the activities of voluntary associations related to education are all ethnic related issues that triggered disagreement between the various ethnic groups. Ratnam (1965) highlighted the communal problem in Malaysia from 1945 to early 1960s, when the Chinese and Indian communities became firmly part of the settled population of the country. Ratnam examined source of communal disagreement issues, such as the rights of Malayan citizenship, and the terms of the independence settlement.

Vorys (1975) examined communal crisis of 1969, and the restoration of political stability in the post-riot years. With reference to the issue of ethnic conflict management, Vorys argued that a viable political system in Malaysia would have to come to terms with the country’s deeply ingrained communal cleavages, leading to the creation of their own preference for democratic politics. Consequently, a viable, democratic system is not based on a national community but on the cooperation of discrete communal groups’ so-called democracy without consensus. Wan Hashim (1983) examined communalism in Malaysia from the early 1900s to 1970. He found out that increased economic development and social change heightened and exacerbated communal cleavages rather than diminishing them. He also covered the issues surrounding the formation of a plural society under the British colonial rule and; the origin and development of nationalism in pre-independence Malaysia, which in turn gave rise to the formation of communal socio-political organisations which intensified communal tension and brought about racial polarisation; the demographic, economic, socio-cultural, and political impediments to national integration; and attempts by the Malaysian government to achieve integration and unity after May 13, 1969.

Later studies (Shamsul, 1997; Maznah Mohamad, 2005) continue to focus on inequalities between ethnic groups and relate it to policy, the New Economic Policy (NEP). Maznah Mohamad (2005) suggested that a new formation of ethnic issues were emerging in Malaysia, such as regional inequalities between Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia, Malay-Indians tensions and a new sources of inequality that influence the old dichotomy of Malay-Chinese disagreements. Tamam (2009) examined relationships between university students in public universities in Malaysia and argued that based on “Contact Theory” which postulate that more contact between different ethnic groups will lead to more understanding and better relationships. The focus of the studies has been on solutions to resolve or rather minimise conflicts and differences but problems as result of differences in a plural society shall remain and should be anticipated. The important thing is to ensure that the spark will not become fire. Thus, Shamsul (2005) described Malaysia as a state of “stable tension”, whereby tensions occur now and then but it is controllable as long as everybody is aware and working towards reducing the conflict.

This study takes a different approach by comparing perceptions from two different states with contrast characteristics – Kelantan with a dominantly Malay population and Perak with a dominantly urban Chinese population. This study attempts to create a conceptual model showing how ethnic relation change in a different demographic and socio-economic settings by investigating the effects of “majority-minority” relations of the different ethnic groups perceptions on different issues from their private sphere to the public sphere; current issues and policies; politics and history; socio-economic and socio-cultural.
Literature Review

The precise definition and concept of ethnicity is still debatable. Many also relate it to sense of kinship, group solidarity and common culture (Hutchinson and Smith, 1996) from a larger society based on shared ancestry, history, settlement and migration mainly as a result of political or economic passages (Bates, 2005). Shermerhorn in Hutchinson and Smith (1996) defined ethnic group as;

"a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood"

(Shermerhorn in Hutchinson and Smith, 1996:17).

However, some even relates it to class, race, communalism and nationalism (Eriksen in Hutchinson and Smith, 1996). Whereas, the anthropological approach tends to examine the relational and subjective nature of ethnicity in the form of cultural traits like language, religion, customs and pigmentation, which suggest the fluid and contextual meaning of ethnicity (Tonkin, McDonald and Chapman in Hutchinson and Smith, 1996). In this case ethnicity is self perceived whereby people can change and relate from one ethnic group to another on different social context, which may not be based on ancestry or race as denoted by the biological and kinship theories of ethnic relations (http://www.population.govt.nz/information-by-subject/population-structure/ethnicity.aspx).

There are many ethnic relations theories, mainly categorised under the functionalist or sometime refer to as primordialist and instrumentalist theories. The literature review will only cover theories related and relevant to the study.

The functionalist theories are mainly concerned with majority-minority relations, whereby social stratification due to differences in ethnicity exists. Social stratification is regarded as negative and problematic because it can lead to ethnocentrism, a situation whereby one ethnic group feels dominant and superior towards another ethnic group. The disruption and disparities as a result of divided society will cause it to be malfunction. Ethnocentrism cannot be eradicated but can be minimised by reducing cultural differences; eliminating barriers set by the dominant group to exclude minorities and; by enhancing the disadvantage group to create a fairer and level field. Such actions will eventually lead to some form of assimilation. The problems with the suggestions to reduce ethnic differences in this model are that the burden of change is mainly put up with by the minority groups; the minority groups experience hostility more compared to the majority group and; most disadvantage is inherited and not earned, causing difficulties for incentive arguments to work.

Assimilation theory is also known as the “Melting Pot” theory, drawn from the experiences of immigrants bringing their own culture and eventually creating a new distinctive American culture. Robert Park in his Race Relation Cycle theory and Milton Gordon Stages of Assimilation assumed that the immigrants will eventually assimilate into the dominant groups’ culture by stages from economic survival, competition, accommodation and finally assimilation (Feagin and Feagin, 2003). On the other hand, according to Pluralism theory, also known as the “Salad Bowl” theory, immigrants retain their culture, identity and organisational behaviour in order to cope with the discomfort of being different. Only when the identity is nurtured, some form of minimal assimilation will occur (Marger, 2005).

The instrumentalist theories or sometime also known as transactionalist theory argued nation, nationalism and ethnic identities are invented by the elite. They argued that modernisation, economic factors and social construct created by elites are the source of conflict, unlike symbolic differences as asserted by the functionalist proponents (Gellner, 1983; Young 1993; Tilly, 1997). Gellner (1983) claimed that the nationalists’ propaganda purposely blamed ethnicity as the source of conflict to obscure their intention to maintain their socio-economic and political status quo by projecting that they are actually working for the social mass. Modernisation such as improvement in literacy rates, media, transportation and communication increase social awareness of one ethnic group of the other (Horowitz, 1985). Those who feel disadvantaged or marginalised will feel dissatisfaction, which may accumulate into ethnic conflict. Discriminatory and exclusivist policy will exacerbate the feelings of dissatisfaction and further deepen ethnic conflict. Economic development causes competition in the
labour market; those who are economically deprived will resent those who are better off, leading to ethnic conflict. The nationalist elites are the constructor and manipulator of ethnic identity to benefit them. Thus, ethnic problem is created and not embedded as suggested by the functionalist theories proponents.

Research Methodology
The research utilises both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative approach is based on a survey using a structured questionnaire as the main tool to collect data. The questionnaire is designed to examine the perceptions of the respondents based on their expected behavioural reactions and perceptions on their private (marital and primary) and public (culture and secondary) spheres relationships with other ethnic groups. Secondary sphere includes dimensions like work place, school and public space interactions while primary sphere includes the willingness of respondents to integrate with other ethnic groups that require trust and ability to negotiate religious values such as sending their kids to a nanny of different ethnic groups. Ethnic relations perceptions are also captured by asking proxy questions in the form of current issues and policies; politics and history; socio-economic, socio-cultural and; stereotype. This includes socio-cultural and social status; self experience and historical events; economics; politics and legislation, public sector; citizenship, race, image and the state and; regionalism, media, social and education.

For the quantitative method, a purposive sample is employed, taking the state of Kelantan and Perak. Later the stratification sampling methods is used to split the samples based on districts and villages, taking into consideration their spatial location (i.e. urban and rural). For Kelantan, the selected areas are Jeli, Rantau Panjang, Pasir Mas and Kota Bharu. For Perak, the selected areas are Sungai Siput and Ipoh.

For the quantitative data, the analyses are run according to stages. Firstly, the reliability test to ensure that the variables are scientifically reliable and then the frequency test to provide the background of the respondents and their patterns of perceptions. The Factor Analyses is then run to identify latent variables that will be recategorised as groups of factors affecting ethnic relations in the two states. Based from the screened variables from the Factor Analyses, a One-way T test is done on all variables gauging the perceptions.

Qualitative approach is done through in-depth interviews and focus group discussion. A purposive sampling is used to choose the informants who are from social activist groups, leaders of political parties, officers from the Department of National Unity and Integration and; individual grassroots selected using quota sampling, based on location and race. For the qualitative data, all are transcribed and analysed manually according to themes and issues. Data from quantitative and qualitative are further examined according to issues and variables by looking at the trend whether they support or contradict with one another. A final synthesis of the whole data (both quantitative and qualitative) thus creates the model.

The Concentric Circle Model
The study is based on samples taken from Kelantan and Perak. Kelantan is a dominantly Malay sample (89.4 percent), while Perak is basically non-Malay (50.5 percent Chinese and 39.4 percent Indians). The study regarded ethnic relations in two extreme polar, based on the scale used to gauge the respondents’ perceptions. The scale of 0 to 10 is interpreted as below:
Figure 1: Number Line Showing Ethnic Relations According to the Two Extreme Polar

0 is an extreme hostile relationship, whereby war will occur between the different ethnic groups. On the other hand 10 is the best and ideal ethnic relations condition, whereby one ethnic group fully assimilates into another group. All the scales are tested for reliability tests and the result is highly reliable with a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.914. The Factor Analysis test, with an acceptable KMO Bartlett value of 0.672 regrouped the variables into 6 new groupings:

1. Instrumentalist issues (modernisation, mainly on education and media; elite as constructor such as policy, governance and efficiency of public sector and; competition for economic resources such as economic policy)
2. Daily interaction sphere (both public spheres, at work place, neighborhood and recreation areas and; private sphere decision concerning marital)
3. Nationalist issues (pride of nation, willingness to sacrifice for nation, etc.)
4. Functionalist issues (religion and regional)
5. Historical issues
6. Location and demography

This number line is translated into concentric circle as below, with the factors affecting ethnic relations pointing into the circles. Taking consideration all factors, a One-way T test shows that the average scores of Kelantan is higher, at 7.5, while Perak is 5.7. From the concentric lines, 7.5 indicates an ethnic relationship between “integration towards acculturation”, while 5.7 is between “tolerance and accommodation”. The model is also supported by qualitative data indicating that in terms of location and demography, non-Malays who are minorities in Kelantan tend to partially assimilate more that the non-Malays in Perak. This is due to the effect of majority-minority relationships (size of the community) which causes the minority ethnic group to depend more on the majority groups for economic livelihoods (such as market and human resource). Furthermore, the non-Malays in Kelantan have more contact with the Malays compared to those in Perak. This is in line with the “contact theory” whereby, more contact will create understanding, tolerance and better ethnic relations.
The lower average score in Perak is attributed by resentment and dissatisfaction among the non-Malays especially in instrumentalist issues like competition and distribution for economic resources, the role of media and education issues (refer to Table 1 for details).

**Table 1:** Examples of Instrumentalist Issues (T-test results)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan Perak</td>
<td>The nation economic resources is distributed fairly to all ethnic groups</td>
<td>7.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan Perak</td>
<td>The economic disparities in this country do not lead to ethnic fraction</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan Perak</td>
<td>The formation of a mixed race school can unite students from the various ethnic stream</td>
<td>5.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan Perak</td>
<td>The prime media successfully increase my understanding of other ethnic groups</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan Perak</td>
<td>The prime media increase tolerance between ethnic groups</td>
<td>7.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan Perak</td>
<td>The prime media increase tolerance between ethnic groups</td>
<td>5.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan Perak</td>
<td>The prime media increase tolerance between ethnic groups</td>
<td>7.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2:** Examples of Daily Interaction (T-test results)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan Perak</td>
<td>I am willing to work with other ethnic group</td>
<td>7.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan Perak</td>
<td>I am willing to have other ethnic group as a neighbour</td>
<td>7.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan Perak</td>
<td>I am willing to attend a friend’s funeral of different ethnic group</td>
<td>6.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan Perak</td>
<td>As a mother/father in law, I am willing to accept a son/daughter in law of different ethnic group</td>
<td>7.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan Perak</td>
<td>As a mother/father in law, I am willing to accept a son/daughter in law of different ethnic group</td>
<td>5.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan Perak</td>
<td>As a mother/father in law, I am willing to accept a son/daughter in law of different ethnic group</td>
<td>6.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan Perak</td>
<td>As a mother/father in law, I am willing to accept a son/daughter in law of different ethnic group</td>
<td>5.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelantan Perak</td>
<td>As a mother/father in law, I am willing to accept a son/daughter in law of different ethnic group</td>
<td>3.63</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Functionalist issues like the role of the public sector’s efficiency and policies are also a source of grievances among them. Surprisingly, in terms of daily interaction (mainly secondary spheres), Perak score better than Kelantan, except for the marital spheres (refer to Table 2).

Conclusion
The study shows that ethnic relations in Malaysia cannot be explained only by one theory. Like many other developing countries, which have gone through various historical and development changes, influence from immigration and emigration has shaped ethnic relations into a complex, dynamic and fluid situation. In the future, the state of ethnic relations might change especially looking at the instrumentalist perspective. The changes can occur according to how the ruling elites response to ethnic grievances, inequality in development especially between the east and west coasts, between Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia. Yet, from the Functionalist theory, the symbolic from historical, ancestral and structural differences will still influence the state of ethnic relations in Malaysia.

References