

## **Multiculturalism as a human security issue**

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Abstract:

My current research explores the relationship between human security and multiculturalism. The well-being of people is largely dependent on how safe and secure they feel at home. States maintain the structural security of a place and also seek to make people 'feel at home'. In countries where large scale migration has created a multicultural populace, the state is increasingly finding it difficult to make everyone feel at home, indeed in some instances people are excluded in order to make the majority feel more secure in what they see as their home. Thus I propose that multiculturalism is becoming untenable as a policy to maintain a status quo as long as major social, religious and political issues are not addressed adequately. I will use Malaysia and Fiji as case studies.

I wish to make 2 arguments:

1. Multiculturalism is a reality which causes tensions and rifts in societies, even if they have multicultural policies in place.
2. Difference and otherness in multicultural societies is often exacerbated by the state and its organs rather than ameliorated.

Thus for people in their everyday lives, multiculturalism is the lived reality and they have to find viable solutions to mediate it. The state ought to support its citizens in this endeavour and not thwart their modes of negotiation and mediation. I will show how in Malaysia the political elite and government is in practice interested in keeping ethnic/religious identity exclusionary and highly politicised in order to remain the arbiter of societal peace and guarantor to rights and privileges on the one hand and a degree of inclusive citizenship on the other.

### **Ethnic make-up Malaysia and Fiji**

In the 1996 Fijian census Indians made up 338,818 or 43.7% and ethnic Fijians 393,575 or 50.8%. Since then there has been a marked decrease in the number of Indians, due to

a lower fertility and emigration, to Australia and New Zealand in particular. 2007 figures put ethnic Fijians at 475,739 or 56.8% and Indians at 313,798 or 37.5% out of a total of 837,271 people. Thus ethnic Fijians now have a clearer majority in Fiji. These number games are and have been of importance as they constitute electoral outcomes.

In Malaysia the major three ethnic groups are Malays (a complex melange of ethnicities from the Malay archipelago), Chinese and Indians. With a population of 27.17 million in 2007 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2008), Malaysia is home to a multi-ethnic society, where the Malay and other indigenous groups (mostly in East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak), who are defined as *bumiputera*,<sup>1</sup> literally ‘princes of the earth’, comprise 65.1 percent of the population.<sup>2</sup> The second major ethnic group are people of Chinese origin, who comprise 26 per cent, followed by people of Indian origin, making up 7.7 per cent (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2000). In addition, there are a number of Indonesians, Thais, Filipinos and other ethnic groups. In both countries ethnicity is an important trope for politics and identity in general.

Increasingly identities are also complicated by religious affiliation. According to the Malaysian constitution all Malays are also by law Muslims. In Fiji the Methodist church and other religious groups retain strong bonds to the political and thus become embroiled in ethnic strife and the pursuant conflicts.

Malaysia and Fiji are multicultural countries that in their respective ways are attempting to reconcile their multicultural status with often conflicting government policies. In both these countries majorities and minorities may be seen to vie in varying degrees for recognition, acceptance or supremacy. Multiculturalism remains a hotly debated concept, not least in countries that are currently dealing with civil disquiet, unrest or sporadic violence aimed at or emanating from minorities. Both Fiji and Malaysia have had violent outbreaks of racial and ethnic tension in recent years. This violence does not only present itself physically but is also deeply embedded in the social structures and

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<sup>1</sup> The make up of the category of *bumiputera* is extremely contested. It was mainly created to include the various ethnic groups of Sarawak and Sabah, when they joined the Malaysian federation, whilst many Orang Asli (lit. “original peoples” or indigenous) groups from the Malaysian peninsula remain excluded. As Nicholas (2005) argues Orang Asli are theoretically included in the *bumiputera* category, yet excluded when it comes to affirmative action that the state provides for Malays and other *bumiputeras*. On the production of Malay indigeneity vis-à-vis Orang Asli claims, see Nah (2006)

<sup>2</sup> This figure includes all *bumiputeras*, i.e. Malays and other indigenous people of both East and West Malaysia.

political systems of these countries. My previous research (Hoffstaedter, 2008b) looked beyond violence as a physical manifestation and focused on symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991) and structural violence (Galtung, 1969) that may be hidden and embedded within the make-up and everyday fabric of society and the state.

Since its adoption as public policy in the 1960s in Canada, multiculturalism has become the chief policy label for programmes ranging from soft assimilationist policies to accommodation of cultural/religious/ethnic differences. In Malaysia pluralism and accommodation are state policies, however, latent racist policies retain a majority supremacy of Malays vis-à-vis others (Hoffstaedter, 2008a). In Fiji the recent electoral Indian majority aspired to minority status to avoid the backlash of indigenous Fijian claims of supremacy when framed in democratic majorities (Kelly, 1998). The ethnic Fijians in turn want recognition of their indigenous status in perpetuity.

These conceptual beginnings point towards tensions and contradictions between state policies and lived experience, as the state is often out of touch with the everyday reality of its citizens. In Malaysia, government policy is often far removed from how people interact. In fact, my field data suggests that people are well aware that state decrees are often wishful thinking with implementation on the ground ignoring or even acting against them. Thus, it is important to observe on this local level, how people deal with the multicultural reality around them.

Some modes of daily mediation and negotiation, be they framed as cosmopolitan (Hannerz, 1990; Kahn, 2006), 'communicative action' (Habermas, 1984) or negotiation (Hage, forthcoming), can tell us more about multiculturalism as lived reality and everyday modes of accommodation and integration.

Nationalism or the political movement to achieve nationhood ignited Europe in the nineteenth century and continues to wreak havoc in all corners of the world. Rather than disappearing, the nation and its governmental arm, the nation-state, have reasserted themselves and its power. Ever since Anderson's 'imagined community' approach (Anderson, 1991) to nationalism, studies have privileged this view. However, Kelly and Kaplan (2001) show that Fiji's politics of representation owe more to the upheaval caused by the rapid decolonisation post World War II than to the printing press. Indeed,

I would argue that the nation state finds itself trapped in multicultural countries such as Malaysia and Fiji, where the majority is slim or non-existent, as a nation builder, which complicates perception of self and other, rights and duties to assimilate and accommodate. The tenuous position of the state and its institutions as arbiters between ethnic, religious and cultural groups are often played out in cultural displays of the national imagery (Hoffstaedter, 2006; 2008a). The imagination of the nation continues to present problems for multicultural states, especially in regards to claims of indigeneity, or claims over the body politic. Both Fiji and Malaysia have a complicated history of providing legal and social frameworks for difference between those whom the state regards as traditional owners of the land and those who are seen as immigrants and tolerated citizens.

There are limits to the nation state as an exclusionary political machine that according to Hage has exterminatory logic built in (Hage, 2003: 40), as the nation cannot tolerate an Other that has its own subjectivity and therefore is an equal. Nationalism seeks to dictate how we live with others in the nation, whether we like them or not, whether they pose a threat or not. Competing rationales of how a being-with the Other can feasibly work are not encouraged, sometimes not even tolerated. Issues around toleration and recognition are highly contested in both Malaysia and Fiji.

What exist, then, are competing fantasies of the nation (Hage, 1998). These fantasies or imaginaries range from the ethno-nationalist to cosmopolitan, multicultural and inclusive to exclusive ones. These fantasies get played out in the way people conduct their lives and in their everyday interactions. Some people act as managers of what they perceive to be 'their' national space, whilst others act or are made to act as consumers of a national space in a mere form of what Hage calls 'passive belonging' (Hage, 1998: 49).

Multiculturalism unsettles dominant discourses, but never supersedes them. In the North American/Australian debates whiteness and elsewhere other forms of ethno-national chauvinism remain an essential part of the multicultural. The multiculturalism practised only purports to recognise others as part of the discourse, whilst maintaining some form of dominance within their respective system. This may be done subtly or very overtly. Countries like Australia are very subtle, Malaysia more overt in their policies.

What remains the same, though, is that someone recognises an Other, but not as an equal, for recognition from the Other is usually not sought.<sup>3</sup>

Malaysia practises an instrumental recognition, only recognising others when it is beneficial, such as in cultural tourism. Indeed, in such cases the Other is often depicted as only sojourning, a temporary interloper.

There persists a reality of an entire population that self-ascribes to separate group identities, with competing group claims as well as individual rights as enshrined in a British inherited constitution.

Class remains an underrepresented issue in the multiculturalism debate, precisely because the visibility of class distinction and class identification has withered away, although the structural framework of class divisions persists. Thus in my own work in Malaysia, where the multicultural debate focuses almost exclusively on the race/religion nexus as identity markers, class is the elephant in the room no-one talks about. In terms of policing of Islamic laws as well as benefits generated through the bumiputera status that emerged out of the New Economic Policy, it is the poor who lose out consistently. The state, in the hands of an elite, will work towards maintaining the status quo and thus deflecting from class and also gender towards more visible and palpable divisions according to race and religion. This divide-and-rule policy is detrimental to the well-being of the population as a whole and in my view also of the state in the long run, as these divisions become ever more rigid.

In the current Malaysian legal framework, Malays are privileged and afforded positive discrimination, ostensibly to ameliorate their position vis-à-vis the economically better off Chinese. This sort of framework implicitly promotes a hierarchy of worthiness and thus creates tensions between groups as different pathways of life are systematically offered to different citizens.

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that recent changes in Australian citizenship tests have moved the emphasis on becoming Australian on values that have to be shared, rather than knowledge about Australia and Australianess.

As human security offers a framework that focuses on people and their well-being it may be of importance in this context. One glaring problem is that the existential self-realisation of people may clash as their spheres and fantasies may collide. These situations are at the limits of multiculturalism (see e.g. Kymlicka, Taylor). In the case of recognition of and by the other, Taylor has argued that recognition is vital, as we derive our sense of being from the cultural communities we grow up in and from where we derive our sense of self. Indeed, he likens stepping outside of this framework to stepping outside of what he calls “undamaged human personhood” (Taylor, 1989: 27). This strong emphasis on the social as constitutive of self and thus identity may go too far in respect to how we envisage agency and modes of self-realisation. However, I believe it is important to note and emphasise the importance of society, community and one’s immediate environment in the formation of self, one’s attitudes and frameworks of knowledge. This is not to make them deterministic, but to value their contributions in shaping our moral compass, religious (or indeed non-religious) dispositions and social attitudes. Thus these collective dispositions must be acknowledged in the development of policy that also strengthens individual human rights.

### Conclusion:

Is a post-ethnic future possible? Or is that the only way forward? Is a dialogue between the religious, ethnic and cultural groups possible? How do we engage the Other in a meaningful and equitable way?

We have to allow the Other to be a domesticator, to be like us. Thus we have competing claims over land, politics and peoplehood. However, these claims must be negotiated between equal parties in an environment that secures everyone’s human security equally, from the bare life to human rights, from group membership to freedom of religion.

In the current climate, multiculturalism in Malaysia and Fiji remains contested and highly politicised. Ethnic identity politics are sources of instability and insecurity for society at large and individuals within it. Fear, bred by elites and the political system to retain a status quo and thus retain power, is keeping multiculturalism from becoming a space of negotiation. Human security in this case is actually about empowerment and a change of discourse and opens up spaces of action and change.

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