

*Kaum, Kelas dan Pembangunan Ethnicity, Class and Development Malaysia.* Edited by S. Husin Ali. Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia, 1984. 382 pp.

The papers included in this volume were first presented at the "International Conference on Modernization and National Cultural Identity" organized by the Malaysian Social Science Association in January 1983. As the articles have been published in the languages in which they were originally presented, seven of the papers appear in Bahasa Malaysia and twelve in English. This also explains the bilingual title.

According to the editor, the papers can be classified according to two broad themes: (1) bases of inter-ethnic and inter-class alignments and manifestations of ethnic and class attitudes and consciousness, and (2) the distribution of development benefits among different ethnic and class groups, and the effects that these changes have had on ethnic relations and national unity (S. Husin Ali, pp. 7-8). Many of the papers cut across these two themes. It may be for this reason that the papers are actually grouped into six sections — the first and last comprising papers which belong roughly to the first theme and the middle four, titled "Politics", "Socio-Culture", "Education" and "Economics", covering the most salient features of the editor's second theme.

Each of the papers provides some insights into the chosen topic, that is, ethnicity, class and development. Paper writers have (thankfully) avoided polemics and lengthy theoretical discourses to set the debate firmly in the Malaysian context. This is perhaps the book's greatest asset as many of the essays do break new ground. Original research and "hard data" illuminate the chosen topic in such a way that the reader gains insight into the thrust of at least a certain dimension of contemporary Malaysian sociological studies. The paper writers seem to be recasting certain commonly shared messages in their respective contributions, and these messages help bind the volume into a comprehensive whole.

The editor begins by noting that the first topic, that is ethnicity, has a situational uniqueness in the Malaysian context. He elaborates four examples of this uniqueness. Firstly, there is "... no ethnic group that constitutes either the exploiting or the exploited class". Secondly, there are "... common class interests that stretch across different ethnic groups". Thirdly, there is an absence of a majority-minority ethnic group division in Malaysia, and fourthly, that these characteristics have

spawned “. . . many forms of tension and conflict” (S. Husin Ali, pp. 9).

Tan Chee Beng cautions us that even the term “ethnic group” is a very complicated concept in the Malaysian context:

A Hokkien Chinese is both a Chinese at the general level of identification and a Hokkien at the lower level of identification. So is a Malay of Banjar descent both a Malay and a Banjar, and both the Hokkien Chinese and the Banjar Malay are Malaysians at the level of national identification (Tan Chee Beng, p. 211).

The paper writers also seem to share several conclusions as to the relationship between ethnicity and class in Malaysia. They see both ethnic and class cleavages deepening and accelerating with the implementation of the NEP (New Economic Policy). Also of the two, ethnicity is the most important. S. Husin Ali observes that “ethnic ideology and consciousness are still dominant and act as constraining factors to the development of class ideology and consciousness” (S. Husin Ali, p. 10). Several paper writers illustrate how this is both perpetuated and directed by the current state of Malaysian politics, in which “ethnically based political parties are free and vocal in expressing racial policies or ideology, whereas the life of those espousing class ideology is made very difficult” (S. Husin Ali, p. 18).

Some authors observe that the intricate interplay between ethnic and class interests is in concrete instances often not easily distinguishable, and that in fact, ethnic and class factors may merge. Theoretically, however, they can be separated, as the editor outlines in his own article: “Thus it is possible to perceive the horizontal strata, each structurally representing a social class, cutting across the vertical ethnic column” (S. Husin Ali, p. 18). Even this horizontal and vertical reference axis is not free of alternative perspectives as Chandra Muzaffar illustrates in his concluding chapter:

. . . instead of “classing” society further, one should seek to de-class society, to establish horizontal relationships. . . . Horizontal relationships are relationships between human beings in a classless society. These relationships allow people to share common values and common interests that transcend ethnic and cultural differences. For that reason they have the potential capacity to overcome communalism (Chandra Muzaffar, p. 381).

Although the volume raises as many questions as it seeks to answer, the contributors are to be congratulated for initiating a discussion on

various dimensions of the relationship between ethnicity, class and development. This book should be of use to all Malaysianists, as well as to those interested in comparative perspectives and theoretical issues.

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