

A TALK ON ETHNIC RELATIONS AND NATION BUILDING AT A  
FUNCTION ORGANISED BY THE MALAYSIAN SOCIAL SCIENCE  
ASSOCIATION  
RUMAH UNIVERSITY, UNIVERSITY MALAYA

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Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Let me first and foremost congratulate the Malaysian Social Science Association and the United Nations University for their efforts and initiative in organising this International Conference. The theme and subject matter of the Conference is relevant for many nations today and certainly relevant for Malaysia and other members of ASEAN. I am sure, with the participation of distinguished scholars from the region, the Conference can provide positive insights on many of the issues and problems which are of concern to all of us.

2. To be amongst eminent social scientists of the region is a rare privilege for me. Now given this opportunity,

Ladies and gentlemen,

3. Science, as we know it, is not value-free. This is more so with social sciences. And certainly, a subject such as ethnic relations, which tends to have an emotional overtone cannot be expected to be presented or analysed with pure objectivity, however one claims, or wants it to be. To an extent, the treatment of the subject depends on the angle that the person is looking at, his theoretical orientation and even political bias, and his short and long-term motives.

4. A social scientist may look at, or even magnify ethnic relations to legitimise his discipline, or even for scholarly recognition. A writer may provide a sensational tint for commercial purposes. A politician may use it to catch votes and wrest power even if he knows it can instill ill-will and suspicion. I am not saying this because I do not believe in the study of ethnic relations. In fact, I believe studies in ethnic relations can be healthy and injustices motivated by discriminative and oppressive tendencies.

5. I do not claim to know which is right in terms of solving ethnic problems, for "right" too is subjective. But I believe ethnic relations, if it is to be positive, must be viewed within a particular historical context, as well as the relevant socio-cultural, economic and political setting. As such, answers to questions pertaining to Malaysian ethnic relations must necessarily be peculiarly Malaysian.

Ladies and gentlemen,

6. We have to be conscious as well as concerned with the ethnic dimension of our Malaysian life. To be otherwise is to delude ourselves. It is an accepted fact that homogeneity is becoming less and less the dominant feature of modern states. While we can blame history for it, it is a reality that we have to accept and live with, and more so, it will be the reality for the future because of greater contacts and communication among societies. Societies, more than ever before, must learn to cope with ethnic problems if the world and human civilisation is to have a meaningful future. I am sure all of us realise that this is not an easy task, and it is made no easier by the pressures for open discussions insisted upon by the so-called "democrats."

7. The multiracial nature of our society is a fact. It is something that every Malaysian must accept, live and cope with. Besides Malays and Chinese which are the two major communities, Malaysia has numerous smaller communities and sub-groups. Malays and other indigeneous groups form the majority. Different groups differ in terms of customs, beliefs, economic activities, locations etc.

8. History showed us that what is Malaysia today is part of what was previously the Malay world, with its people, its system of Government and its customs and laws. Being at the cross-roads of east-west commercial routes, Malay civilisation had a long history of contacts with many nations. Foreigners not only visited us, but some of them have settled down here, and there had been inter-marriages with the local people. What is considered as Malay culture or way of life, even in the days before independence, carried many alien traits. Malay language, attire, food, customs and so on have gone through a process of change, assimilating foreign elements along the way. Hindu and

Islamic influences, though dominant, are but two features. One can only go through Bahasa Malaysia dictionaries to see that Malays have adopted words from all over, not confining to Sanskrit and Arabic. We could have said that what has been regarded as Malay culture is, in fact, hardly Malay. Present day Malay culture is really a mixed culture in which elements of Chinese and Indian cultures have been absorbed, albeit modified in form. The fact that Malacca Babas, or Straits Chinese, without coercion, had evolved its Malaysian identity is a living testimony to what a Malaysian culture can be. Hence, the logic of using Malay and indigenous culture as the basis of the Malaysian Culture.

9. The phenomenon whereby immigrants adopt certain aspects of the way of life of the people among whom they have settled is neither new nor peculiar to Malaysia. It is indeed universal. Unfortunately it was easier in the days when settlers were cut off from their homeland than it is now. The reaction to a conscious effort to retain the original cultures of the immigrants is of course a similarly conscious effort by the indigenous people to reject the influence of the immigrant communities. And so the prospects of integration and cross-assimilation are reduced. Indeed the opposite may take place as is shown by the effort of the Malay-speaking Straits Chinese or Babas to relearn and use Chinese dialects.

10. The task of moulding a common national culture and to integrate people of differing ethnic groups is, therefore, much more difficult today than it was before. Indeed, the natural tendency is for disintegration rather than integration. Hence, the need for a conscious effort at integration.

11. The task of improving ethnic relations in Malaysia is made more difficult because the different groups live apart, pursue different vocations and are economically and socially quite isolated. If integration is to take place these "aparthied" or separateness must be broken. The (NEP) New Economic Policy was conceived with the view to "remove the identification of race with economic function" i.e. to break down the largely economic barriers which keep the races apart.

12. Initially, of course, it was thought necessary only to have a common language and culture. But it was noted that even in countries populated by people of only one race, the animosity between rich and poor, urban and rural can reach the stage when rebellions break out. If the rich and poor, urban and rural divisions are amplified by racial or ethnic divisions as well, the potential for a conflagration is infinitely greater. Indeed one of the major causes of the 1969 race riots in Malaysia was due to this division. The formulation of the NEP was therefore an essential part of the strategy for national integration.

13. In Malaysia a clear distinction is made between race and nationality. Neither the indigenous people nor the immigrant settlers and their descendents, wish to lose their different identities. Similarly, the national culture and the racial cultures are not identical. While elements of the racial cultures of the different ethnic groups are incorporated into the national culture, each race continues to practise its distinct culture in the environment of its own society.

14. Naturally the culture of the indigenous people was selected as the basis of the national culture. Just as naturally the non-indigenous Malaysians are unhappy about this. But there is really little choice. If the cultures of the non-indigenous peoples are made the basis of a Malaysian national culture than Malaysia would become simply an appendage, or an extension of the countries from which those cultures come. In the eyes of the indigenous people this would, in fact, mean being socially conquered.

15. Many would criticise the decision to use the indigenous culture as a basis. Among them are the "liberals" of the West. But we have seen how the British, for example, who are so fond of condemning Malaysia for treating non-Malays as second class citizens, have actually legislated into being three classes of citizens, based on the colour of the skin of the immigrants.

16. What Malaysia does in order to solve the problem of ethnic relations is not by any means the ideal. But, the exodus that we see in Indochina, for example, has not been seen in Malaysia. The vast majority of non-indigenous Malaysians prefer to stay in Malaysia. Indeed, most of them show by deed, and words, that they accept the need to identify with the indigenous people and to reduce the chasm between them.

17. Unfortunately, politicians and journalists cannot leave things well enough alone. Politicians see in racial chauvinism an issue demanding to be exploited. Journalists see too good a story to be by passed merely for the sake of national unity.

18. Nation building in Malaysia has thus become an uphill task. Between the Malay racialists who want to eliminate all non-Malay influence, and the Chinese and Indians who object to anything even remotely Malay or indigenous, the wounds of conflict are kept raw. Ethnicity remains a thorn in the Malaysian body, stifling change and progress. But there is no choice for Malaysia and Malaysians. We just have to continue our efforts to bring the different ethnic groups together and to lessen tension and animosity as much as possible.

19. In the kind of situation Malaysia is in, we have to be grateful even if we achieve a minor degree of success. It is obvious that we are not going to achieve full unity, nor can we remove ethnic conflict completely. Any course that we set for ourselves will result in unhappiness for someone or others. If we are to favour one particular ethnic group, we will make them happy, but the rest very unhappy indeed. If we favour anyone of the other groups we are going to get the same result. So, since we cannot make everyone happy and satisfied, nor can we favour just one of the groups, the only choice left to us is to make everyone equally unhappy. Thus, no one group is favoured in Malaysia. Even the indigenous people are not getting all that they ask for, and are consequently just as unhappy and dissatisfied as are the non-indigenous.

20. We hope that in time everyone will come to accept the situation. We, of course, will do everything possible to encourage this acceptance. A few disgruntled non-indigenous people have emigrated, though most of them are careful to retain their Malaysian citizenship. We don't take much

notice of these birds of the passage. They are obviously opportunists out to get the best for themselves, with little regard for contributing towards nation building. But there are signs that the vast majority have come to terms with the situation.

21. After highlighting some of the issues, let me mention the vision of future Malaysian nation. The modern Malaysian nation is one which shares common values, identity and loyalty in line with our basic socio-economic and cultural policies. Ours will be a diligent, responsible, and active people whose potentials will be channelled for productive purposes so that there will be greater opportunities for all Malaysians in all aspects of Malaysian life. Ours will also be a disciplined and moral society, progressive and prosperous, united and living in harmony.

22. This is not something impossible. It may take time, true. But with responsible cooperation, God willing, we will certainly achieve it. The Government can only do part of what is necessary. We need the fortunate groups, irrespective of their ethnic origin, to also strive to do more so that we can bring up all Malaysians to the level that we aspired for. The fact that one group has to be helped does not mean that the others have to be stopped or retarded. Such thinking and attitudes are negative and not beneficial to the nation. But in striving for success in whatever fields, the more fortunate, must adopt a genuine Malaysian thinking of distributing the opportunities so that Malaysians of every community can actively participate in the Malaysian life. If, I may cite an example, while we want businesses to restructure so that ownership and employment opportunities will represent our multiracial character, we must see that everything is being done to ensure business success because business prosperity can generate more revenues and more opportunities for all Malaysians. Thus entrepreneurship and initiative on the part of any group must not be dampened because they are important to our development and in helping to resolve our ethnic problems.

23. Malaysia, being a multiracial country, has been of concern to many. Our ability to survive after independence was doubted by the many prophets of doom both from inside and outside the country. There were, and still are sceptics about our future. These people, besides making money with their sensational writings, are waiting impatiently to

pronounce to the world the failure of Malaysia as a multiracial society and nation. We can only fail if we so choose to do. I know we have difficult periods in front of us, but with care and reduced ethnic overtones, and by channelling our energy to productive uses we can bring our vision to reality.

Thank you.