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## Ethnic Diversity in Malaysia- Lessons Learned from Bio-Diversity Research

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### **Abstract**

Biology and Anthropology/Sociology have dealt with issues of diversity for a long time, developing different concepts, theories and methods. In recent years there has been, if not a convergence, but at least a recognition that problems in nature and in society are interrelated. This paper attempts to use methods of biodiversity research and test their applicability for a study of ethnic relations. It is noted that the preservation of biodiversity ranks high on the agenda of researchers and politicians, whereas ethnic diversity is often associated with unrest, conflict and economic decline. We try to reverse this tendency by emphasizing social cohesion and the social and economic value of ethnic diversity. An “ethnic diversity index” is developed and proposed for further analysis of Malaysia’s plural society. This index is based on Simpson’s diversity index, commonly used in biodiversity research. Furthermore research on the interrelation of bio- and ethnic diversity is advocated.

### **1. Ethnicity: A Malaysian Dilemma**

Southeast Asian societies are usually classified as “plural”, following Furnivall’s classic analysis of colonial societies (Furnivall 1980). During the colonial past of Southeast Asia, the colonial governments used the reduction of the cultural complexity of their colonies as a strategy of governance. The British in Malaya for example classified the native population into constructed categories of Malay, Chinese, Indians and Others, although the ethnic diversity was and is much more complex (King 2008:135).

Our concern in this paper is that the construction of academic and popular analyses on plural societies in Southeast Asia has privileged the ‘conflict approach.’ A heavy emphasis has been given to the workings of centrifugal forces as the ruling societal pattern which divide, and less on the centripetal ones, that encourages convergence. This is perhaps not unexpected in view of the fact that these societies have often experienced internal conflict, struggle and often regime change, mostly traumatic ones. Political analysts often playing the role of ‘prophet of doom’ frequently offer negative predictions about the future of these societies.

Malaysia was predicted to suffer from serious bloody ethnic conflicts every time an economic crisis occurred in Asia. After experiencing a series of economic crises in the last three decades, namely, the 1986-87, 1997-98 and the recent 2009-10 economic crises, Malaysia remains politically stable and indeed enjoying a positive economic growth. Admittedly, there have been

localized skirmishes, some inter-ethnic and others between social groups, have occurred during this period. However, it did not lead to major bloody conflict outbreaks of a proportion comparable those experienced by Sri Lanka or by some of the Central African countries. Instead, since the major ethnic riot in May 13<sup>th</sup> 1969, there has been consistent long peaceful period, punctuated once or twice by ethnic skirmishes. Why did the expected conflict not take place in Malaysia? This has to be explained. In other words, if we were to emphasize the ‘negative’ aspects of ethno-diversity, which usually involves only a small percentage of the population, we are then using a disproportionate focus as an aspect of social reality. As a result, we might miss the larger portion of the ‘positive’ aspect of diversity that the general population is enjoying. For this we have to study the experience and empirical evidence from Malaysia and add clues from biodiversity research and biodiversity advocacy.

## **2. The Concepts Bio-Diversity and Ethno-Diversity**

We are living in a world of increasing diversity, both in terms of measurable items, shapes and feature, but also in terms of imagination, thoughts and constructions of reality. A complex array of theories and concepts has arisen to take account of the changes in our real world. The terms we shall be concerned with in this paper are bio-diversity and ethno-diversity. The concept bio-diversity came into being as recently as 1985 and has since conquered the imagination of scientists, journalists and politicians. The term basically refers to organisms as classified in populations, species, taxa, communities, and other similar categories. It also refers to the composition of ecosystems and evolutionary processes. The term has taken on a strong normative aspect in reference to conservation.

Ethnic diversity or, as it sometimes called, “ethno-diversity” describes the degree of variety of ethnic groups living together on a common territory. There is a very large literature in the social sciences on what constitutes an ethnic group and what binds them together (e.g. the classical study of Barth 1965). Ethnic groups may live together in a “plural society” or form cultural enclaves or “diaspora” in a host society. The issues around ethno-diversity, formerly the domain of social anthropologists, are also frequently taken up by the mass media and by politicians and imbued with a normative tinge, being mostly seen as a burden or a challenge, rather than a boon, especially in nation-building efforts.

If we compare the number of publications on both subjects, bio-diversity is way ahead. As social scientists we could ask the question: what can ethno-diversity research learn from studies on bio-diversity.

**Table 1** Corresponding Concepts of Bio-diversity and Ethno-diversity

<b>Bio-diversity</b>	<b>Ethno-diversity</b>
populations, species, taxa, communities	Ethnic groups, communities, diaspora
Eco-system	Plural society
Conservation	National unity
Sustainability	Resilience
symbiosis	cohesion
etc	etc

Both biodiversity and ethno-diversity research use differently named concepts referring, however, to similar observations and facts (see table 1). Whereas species and taxa are the basic units of analysis in biodiversity research, ethnic groups and communities are the same for ethnicity research. A biologically diverse ecosystem is mirrored by a “plural society”, advocating the conservation of an ecosystem is similar to a call for national unity, etc etc. So far the terminology has not been adjusted to match both systems, the biological and the social, despite Durkheim’s observation a hundred years ago that “the social realm is a natural realm which differs from the others only by a far greater complexity” (Durkheim 1965{1912} : 31).

Heterogeneity or complexity are concepts close to diversity and are often used to convey the same meaning. “Heterogeneity refers to the distribution of people among different groups. The larger the number of groups and the smaller the proportion of the population that belongs to one or a few, the greater the heterogeneity is in terms of a given nominal parameter, such as ethnic heterogeneity of a community or the religious heterogeneity of a society” (Blau, 1977:77; Ziltener 2006).

### **3. Bio-diversity and Ethno-diversity as Value and Resource**

Since bio-diversity and ethno-diversity have entered the public debate or domain, the valuation of the concepts and the reality behind them has differed considerably. It is difficult to follow all different streams of thought on the matter of diversity, but at least a general tendency is clearly visible. Whereas bio-diversity is valued highly ethnic diversity is not. There is advocacy by NGOs on both issues, but by and large high bio-diversity is seen as important to sustain life on this planet, ethno-diversity is mostly seen as detrimental to social harmony and political stability. The diversity of species is highly valued and the sustainability of nature and mankind has been linked to the maintenance of a high level of bio-diversity

In contrast, many national governments have stressed national unity, the assimilation of migrant communities and reduction of ethnic identity. Some governments have even gone as far as reducing ethnic diversity by “ethnic cleansing” as a means to create a uniform society. It is hoped that economic and ethnic differences will be reduced, gaps will be closed and diversity will be diminished.

Political leaders generally tend to stress unity (or at least, like in Indonesia and Malaysia, “unity in diversity” (“perpaduan dalam kebelbagaian” in Malay and “bhinneka tunggal ikha” in Indonesian). The “Satu Malaysia – One Malaysia” policy of the Malaysian government stresses

the unity of the nation and conveys the message that “we are all Malaysians”, rather than Malays, Chinese, Indians and others. Though this position is debated and disputed, ethnic diversity is still largely perceived as a cause for conflict, disorder and trouble. Especially political science thrives on conflict and conflict studies. As Shamsul AB (2010:2) has pointed out, “academic and popular analyses on plural societies in Southeast Asia has privileged the ‘conflict approach’...A heavy emphasis has been given to the working of centrifugal forces, which divide, as the ruling societal pattern, and less on the centripetal ones, that encourage convergence”. In contrast it could be argued: “Kita menolak konsep disunity, yang dianggap negative, dan kita ganti dengan konsep diversity, yang kita terima sebagai sesuatu yang positif. Justru kepada kita, diversity adalah suatu asset bukan suatu beban semata-mata” (Shamsul 2009:9).

When it comes to bio-diversity the general perception is generally positive. The diversity of species is highly valued and the sustainability of nature and mankind is linked to the maintenance of a high level of bio-diversity. The reaction of advocates has become quite vocal. Whereas biological research has, by and large, emphasized the value of diversity, social research (and even more so government planning) has often stressed the potential conflict propensity of multiethnic societies. Whereas the economic value of biodiversity is stressed, the economic value ethno-diversity is still not fully recognized. By applying human values to both bio- and cultural diversity discussions in both fields tend to be highly value-laden. Diversity, whether biological, cultural or ethnic should be protected, enhanced and valued. How can we transfer the positive valuation of biodiversity from eco-systems to social systems? In other words what can we learn from biodiversity research in working on plural societies and ethnic relations?

#### **4. Measuring diversity**

The Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), is involved in developing a Malaysian Ethnic Relations Monitoring System (MESRA) to track changes in the ethnic composition of the Malaysian population, its livelihood and its political behaviour. Within this framework an “ethnic diversity index” has been developed, following earlier studies on the measurement of density and diversity (Evers, Genschick, Schraven 2009; Evers, Gerke, Menkhoff 2010). It takes its cue from research on biodiversity and related fields. This index will enable policy administrators and civil society organisations to track long-term social change and pinpoint, in combination with other data and indicators, possible fields for policy interventions. The EDI will be exemplified with some pilot study data towards the end of this paper<sup>1</sup>.

The degree of bio-diversity is usually measured by a statistical formula known as the Simpson Diversity Index (Simpson 1947), which shows the probability that two individuals chosen at random from the same area belong to the same species. This Simpson's diversity index (also known as Species diversity index) is a measure used to quantify the biodiversity of a predefined area. It measures the number and distribution of each species. For plants the percentage cover in

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<sup>1</sup> In an expert meeting in Singapore in 2010 a new index has been proposed. The Index measures "Biodiversity in the City" including factors such as: % of natural/semi-natural areas, diversity of ecosystems, measures of fragmentation of ecosystems, number of native species, proportion of native species (as opposed to invasive alien species), % of protected areas (as "protected areas indicate the government's commitment to biodiversity conservation"). Details of index construction have not yet been revealed.

a square meter or square kilometre is usually used, for animals the number of organisms of a species is counted. The statistical formula for the Simpson index is:

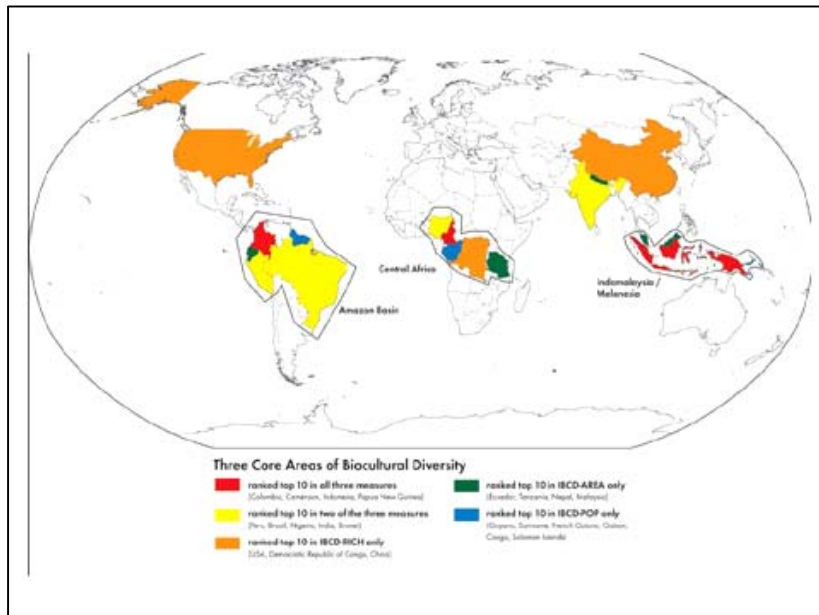
$$D = \frac{\sum n_i(n_i - 1)}{N(N - 1)}$$

where N is the total percentage or total number of organisms and n is the percentage of a species or number of organisms of a species.

The Simpson Diversity Index can be calculated to show, how the ethnic composition of a nation or district has changed or how different areas compare as to the distribution of ethnic groups. The advantage of the Ethnic Diversity Index (EDI) lies in the fact, that large datasets are standardized and can be compared and correlated with other variables. We may assume, for instance, that the conflict potential of certain areas is not only related to the incidence of poverty or the dominance of a particular ethnic group, but also to the degree of ethnic diversity. The hypothesis that areas of high ethnic diversity are less prone to ethnic violence than areas of low ethnic diversity can be empirically tested by large data sets. The EDI is therefore both an analytical as well as a planning tool<sup>2</sup>.

Basic research has just started to link biodiversity and ethno-diversity. The basic idea suggests that man is just one of the many species on earth. Diversity is defined in a broad way to include ethnicity, languages, etc as well as bio-diversity variables (Harmon and Loh 2004:6; Maffi 2005).

**Figure 2** Biocultural Diversity



Three core areas or “hotspots” of diversity have been identified, one of which includes Malaysia and Indonesia (see figure 2). Both these countries contain a population that speak many different languages and large areas of tropical rainforests of high but unfortunately fast declining biodiversity. Lipietz (1992) even argues that biodiversity depends on ethno-diversity. It remains, however, unclear why ethno-

Recently the US Bureau of Census has applied the Simpson Diversity Index to measure ethnic diversity by county. The US diversity index is 0.49. The map clearly shows the areas of high diversity in the South, if persons of Latino origin are counted as a separate ethnic group.

diversity should be systematically linked to bio-diversity at all. Further empirically based research will be necessary to establish this link.

### **5. The Ethnoscape of Malaysia**

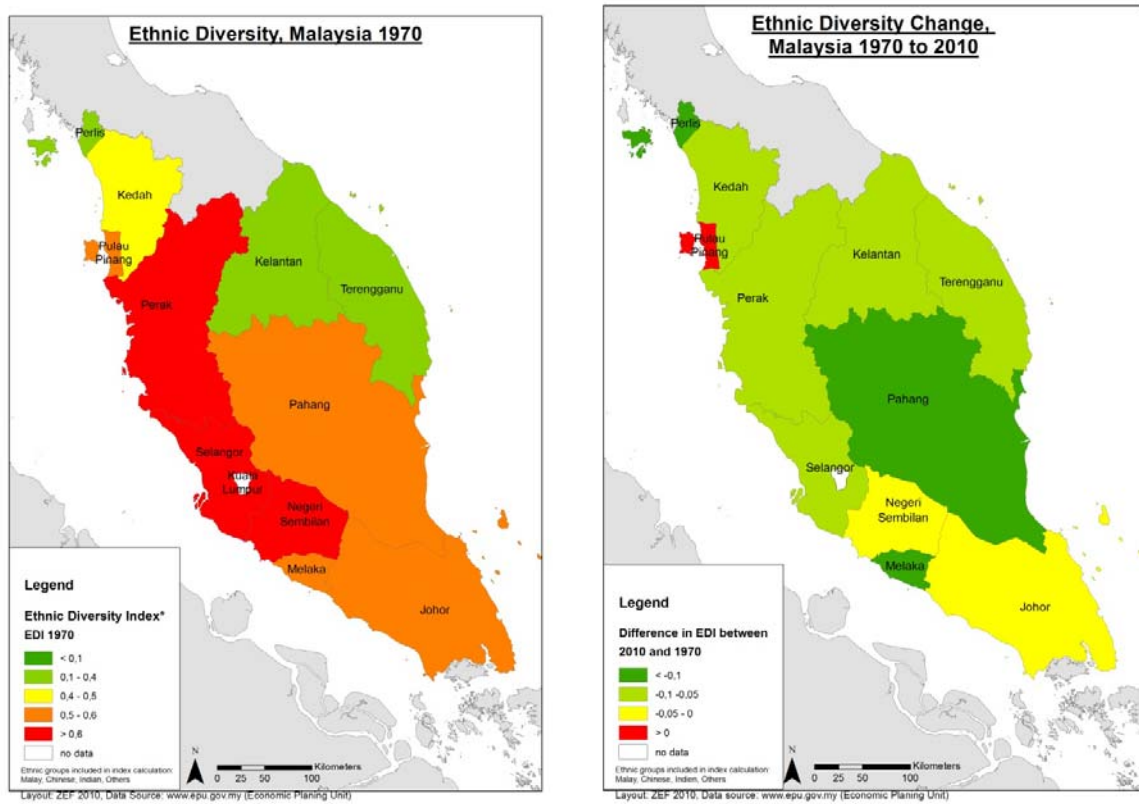
Ethnodiversity creates distinct, but constantly shifting “ethnoscapes” of ethnic groups, distributed across the geographical space of nations. Appadurai uses a rather wide definition that also encompasses many other social categories of people.

By 'ethnoscape' Appadurai mean “the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers, and other moving groups and persons constitute an essential feature of the world, and appear to affect the politics of and between nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree.” (Appadurai 2010). In line with Appadurai authors like Smith (1996) and Schetter (2005) define ethnoscape as the territorialisation of ethnic memory, i.e. the belief shared by ethnic groups in a common spatial frame of origin.

We use this term “ethnoscape” in a more restrictive sense, as only ethnic groups are taken into account that do, however, exhibit many of the social characteristics described by Appadurai. Malaysian states differ greatly in terms of ethnic diversity, even if we only use the broad categories of Malays, Chinese, Indian and others and measure diversity by the EDI.

The following maps show the changing ethnoscape of West Malaysian states. These maps can be easily explained with reference to the well-known population distribution of the West Malaysian states. More surprising, however, is the change in ethnic diversity between 1970 and 2010. In only one state, namely Penang the ethnic diversity has increased, whereas in all other states, particularly in Perlis and Pahang, ethnic diversity has been reduced. A more detailed analysis will be provided, as soon as data on a district and constituency basis become available.

**Figure 3 and 4** Ethnic Diversity 1970 and Change of EDI between 1970 and 2010

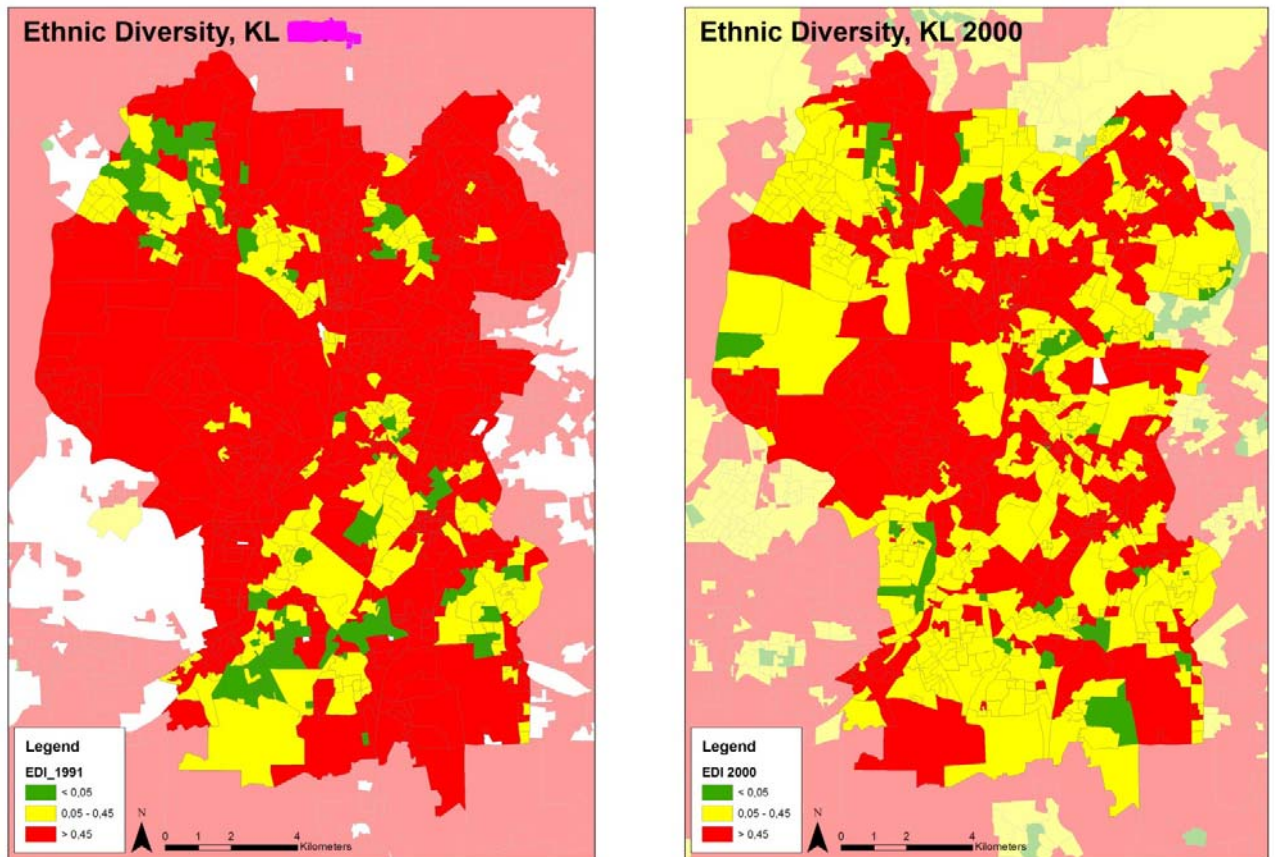


Data: EDB. Map design: Hans-Dieter Evers and Pamela Nienkemper (ZEF, University of Bonn)

Down-scaling the diversity index to census block level yields an even clearer picture of the development of ethnic diversity. The following preliminary maps show the change of ethnic diversity in Kuala Lumpur. If the census data are correct, ethnic diversity has declined and living areas have become more segregated. This preliminary result needs further checking and investigation.



**Figure 5 and 6** Ethnic Diversity Index for Kuala Lumpur, 1991 and 2000



Data: EDB. Map design: Hans-Dieter Evers and Pamela Nienkemper (ZEF, University of Bonn). The professional assistance by Prof. Dr. Abdul Hadi (LESTARI-UKM) is gratefully acknowledged.

## 6. Conclusion

The uses of the diversity index have not yet been fully explored. A Pandora's Box has been opened, as there is still scope to address many questions with further research. The analysis of ethnic diversity will have to rest on the assumption that "ethnic diversity" is a variable in its own right. It treats the all ethnic groups as equal, irrespective of their cultural, social and economic status. As an independent variable it may be correlated with other socio-economic data and enable the researcher to investigate the interrelation between ethnic diversity and development. We hypothesize that ethnic diversity will have a positive impact on innovation, social mobility and economic development. This hypothesis still needs to be tested with empirical data, before any robust conclusions can be drawn.

Although biodiversity differs from social and ethnic diversity, lessons have been learned from biodiversity research, both in terms of methodology as well as concepts and theories. We hope to have shown that cooperation across disciplinary boundaries is likely to open new avenues of inquiry and will yield new results.

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