

5-1-2013

Frederik Holst. Ethnicization and Identity Construction in Malaysia. Routledge Malaysian Studies Series. New York: Routledge. 2012.

Joseph Stimpfl Ph.D.
Webster University, jstimpfl@webster.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Environmental Studies Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Stimpfl, Joseph Ph.D. (2013) "Frederik Holst. Ethnicization and Identity Construction in Malaysia. Routledge Malaysian Studies Series. New York: Routledge. 2012.," *Journal of International and Global Studies*: Vol. 4: No. 2, Article 8.
DOI: 10.62608/2158-0669.1150
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/jigs/vol4/iss2/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International and Global Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact phuffman@lindenwood.edu.

Frederik Holst. *Ethnicization and Identity Construction in Malaysia*. Routledge Malaysian Studies Series. New York: Routledge. 2012.

Malaysia has always intrigued scholars who deal with ethnic identity. The complex origin of this modern state and its convoluted definitions of ethnic identity coupled with contrived and real ethnic relationships offer any serious scholar of ethnicity a panoply of approaches to an academic review of the origin of the state. What Frederik Holst does here is to analyze the creation and continuance of Malaysia as both nation and state using the concept of “ethnicization.”

As he sees it, ethnicization is the process of infusing and intertwining economic or political contestations with collective identities. He finds that ethnicized societies use the perspective of instrumental identity formation to engage at the centers of political power by pursuing divide-and-rule policies. In his view, the resultant state produces key actors biased towards simplified cause-and-effect reasoning based upon underlying ethnic group divisions and loyalties. The intention in the short term is to secure power, but in the long term, the result may be contrary to the goal because of an emphasis on retaining power. Holst finds that this explains the centrality of ethnicized policies and their impact on larger sections of society. He argues that to “de-ethnicize” political and societal systems, there must be a significant shift from instrumental demonization of others towards a more critical approach to the manifestation and implementations of ethnic identity. In this book, Holst examines the impact of ethnicization, “hoping to contribute new perspectives on rationales that seem to be taken as given by politicians and scholars alike who regard Malaysia’s dealing with ethnicization as inevitable or even as a role model.” (press release). His analysis is predicated upon a rejection of ethnic-group-as-an-inevitability, preferring the term “ethnicized group” so as to reflect the arbitrary nature of this state.

The Malaysian form of political ethnicity is described in exhaustive detail, with a particular emphasis on the historical development of ethnic identity and subsequent group relations. The peninsula was already complicated before the arrival of various European colonizing nations. The Europeans’ machinations of exploitation were dependent upon world markets but also upon the various groups manipulated and controlled, including those transferred to Malaysia from other regions of Asia as labor for the various colonial ventures. What was historically a vast, complex set of relationships, based upon mostly small principalities, was ultimately oversimplified as a colonial convenience in the face of the migration of ethnic groups from China and South Asia. The various countries involved in the extraction of Malaysian resources tended to classify residents into generalized categories that mostly lumped together ethnicities that really did not previously exist for members of these groups. For example, those who came from the Chinese empire were identified as Chinese despite often speaking different languages or coming from different regions. This was also true for those from the Indian subcontinent: individuals who were dramatically different from each other in their backgrounds and cultural forms were universally identified as Indian. Religion exacerbated this situation by offering or undermining arbitrary groupings that countermanded even this oversimplified classification. Indian Muslims and many Indonesians could ultimately acquire a hybrid Malay identity through intermarriage, language acquisition, and communal residence, something no longer available in the complex boundary maintenance of present day Malaysian society.

This is not new territory for scholarship. The construction of politically based ethnic identity and the use of this identity by elites in Malaysia to marshal and retain power have been extensively discussed. Holst reviews in detail the construction and refinement of the three components of the Barisan Nasional: UMNO (Malays), MCA (Chinese) and MIC (Indians). He applies admirable diligence to the historical analysis of the development of these and other political groups, ending with the rise of the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR) in recent years. What is unique here is the direct historical and theoretical connection made by the author to the most contemporary of events and his analysis emanating from the continuing and problematic use of these arbitrary political ethnic identities.

In reviewing this in detail, Holst emphasizes that “ethnicization” and ethnic identity should not be confused. The first section of the book is a comprehensive reprise of ethnic theory as it applies to Malaysia. He holds that “identity construction is a continuous struggle that prevents ethnic identities from becoming stable.” In the second section of the book, he ties ethnic theory to the Malaysian context. In his view, Malaysian elites were faced with the problem of state building at the time of independence, which they only accomplished through an arbitrary national identity borrowed from flawed colonial ethnic groupings. He theorizes that things begin to unravel when alternative group identities are available and individuals have choice in their group affiliations. In such cases, ethnicized identities are increasingly abandoned in favor of individual choice affiliations. As Holst explains, such opportunities change perceptions and imaginations of what might be possible. He believes this analysis offers key insights into recent developments in Malaysia such as the rise of PKR and the complications of alternative political affiliations like HINDRAF (Hindu Rights Action Force).

The final section of the book is a summary of his own empirical studies in Malaysia. His research is based upon “critical discourse analysis,” which ties language to social practice as reflected in “how texts and speech reproduce social and political hegemony.” He reviews specific press reports concerning government attitudes and activities concerning “illegal immigrants,” following closely the methodological parameters of critical discourse analysis as described in the text. His main conclusion is that the use of dehumanizing language concerning individuals classified as illegal immigrants is intended to increase the tolerance of harsh measures against such individuals. He also carries out a brief survey of university student ethnic affiliations and associations. He also includes a brief review of some activist organizations, concentrating on the limitations for their activities.

The author concludes by reprising the major themes he introduced early on: Malaysia was re-sculpted after the colonial period as Malaysian government administrators borrowed the oversimplified ethnic identities previously assigned to Malaysian residents. This was made possible through a coalition of elites who cooperated in divesting individuals of primordial identities and lumping them into ethnicized groupings. Although this has stood elites in good stead until recently, the development and acceptability of alternative identities, including new ethnic affiliations, has provided a challenge to the Malaysian elites to maintain control of the state. The complexity of this contemporary reality is exacerbated by new and absolute dichotomies that are beyond the elites’ control, such as those between Muslim versus Muslim or rich versus poor. He points out that the state shows fault lines and potential fracture points but avoids becoming a failed state as long as social identities that mobilize themselves as new majorities do not develop to threaten the structure of ethnicization.

This monograph has two very discrete parts. It is a historical and theoretical review of the development of ethnic relations and ethnic identities available in present day Malaysia. It is

also an interesting micro-study based upon field research that provides data related to the first part of the book. Holst self-identifies as a scholar of Southeast Asian studies with a background in communications studies. His empirical research no doubt relates to the latter field. Although anecdotally interesting, his data unfortunately contribute little to the underlying theoretical approach of the volume, and their relevance to the discussion in the first part of the book is questionable. Even though these approaches yield interesting data that act to support some ideas advanced in the first two sections of the book, they are neither comprehensive enough in themselves nor representative enough of the general population to act as definitive arguments offering broad support for his theory of ethnicization. Despite this disconnect, the volume should be very helpful to those interested in Malaysia. It provides a timely and accurate contemporary cross-disciplinary review of Malaysian ethnic politics valuable to scholars who specialize in the region.

Joseph Stimpfl, PhD
Webster University
jstimpfl@webster.edu