Southeast Asia and the Concept of Ethnicity

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In March 1981, the Association of South-East Asian Studies in the United Kingdom held a conference on the theme of ethnicity. Seven papers were presented and discussed and six of them subsequently revised by their authors for the present publication. In keeping with the breadth of interests represented among the membership of ASEASUK, the papers given illustrate a variety of approaches and regional foci, but they have in common an appreciation of the complex subject matter arising from the poly-ethnic communities and traditions of Southeast Asia. In short, the essays do not just imply ethnicity; they show it in operation. We hope readers will find some special merit in this feature of the papers which appear in this special issue.

Academic research is often devoted to questions of race and ethnicity, but all too often it is research done from the point of view of one ethnic group or "minority". This one-sided view is noticeable even in anthropology where it would be least expected. The discipline of anthropology was, as is often claimed (for example, Penniman 1952), born of the contact of tribal cultures in classical Greece; it is therefore paradoxical that much of the success of social anthropology since its rebirth in the nineteenth century seems to lie in ignoring ("for purposes of analysis") the phenomena of encapsulated communities and cultural pluralism and insisting on "tribal isolation". This scientific attitude is a dominant one in social anthropology; it is one we would like to dub xeno-ethnocentrism, or one's attachment to one's "own other people" and to them alone. The present volume of essays is, we feel, a corrective to this distortion of the social viewpoint.

A concomitant tendency, in anthropology at least, has been to encourage the notion of tribal homogeneity. But no human society is homogeneous. On the contrary, every society exhibits social discontinuities of some sort. Even in the smallest and most isolated of human groups, there are presumably variations in social composition; perhaps these are only seasonal, but they are there none the less. The question is, at what point does a discontinuity become "public" in terms of the societal model? How does it become functionally significant? Sometimes we get a clue from the people themselves. The South American Bororo Indians, for example, as described by Levi-Strauss (1963, chap. 8), think of their own society as discontinuous, more specifically as two societies joined—as two separate but dependent
wholes, not as a single unit made up of halves or complementary sections.

Most people, including academics, would probably agree to the general proposition that ethnicity represents a form of social cleavage. What would not be so easily agreed is the global and functional significance of the cleavage, that is, whether ethnic boundaries are positive or negative in their effect. This is a major issue with regard to social systems, as Judith Nagata has recently emphasized (1975). The difficulty is compounded when we observe that there is apparently no social scale or level on which the abstract criterion of ethnicity (or pluralism) cannot operate. We take Barth’s point that the most diverse units—“community”, “culture”, language group, corporation, association or population—are all potentially ethnic groups (Barth 1963, p. 34). In the present collection of papers, for example, “ethnicity” or “ethnic group” refers variously to (1) the named subpopulations or parties of modern nation-states (Burma, Malaysia): (2) to local tribal divisions (Borneo): (3) to the now defunct colonialisist society and its overtones of caste (British Malaya): and (4) to language and personal character as ethnic markers (the papers by Kalab and Wilder).

It is not our aim here to praise or deplore the elasticity of the term “ethnicity” in current usage. The semantic ground has been well covered, with some notable discussions (for example, Barth 1969; Cohen 1974; Jackson 1980; Kuper 1969; Morris 1967; Nagata 1975; Smith 1965). What we would like to do is to develop four axioms which seem to be implicit in the data of the papers that follow and which further research on this subject could well address.

1. It seems to be that for the participants, ethnicity is an abstraction of the ultimate order in terms of political identification. In English usage up to a generation ago, the folk or colloquial term for the collectivity of the highest order of social commitment tended to be “race”, a headier word than the cool abstraction of the Greek-derived “ethnic” or the Germanic “stock”, and often a substitute for the more recondite “culture”, “minority group”, or “community”. To take a further example, Malaysians today refer to their own society, in English, as “multi-racial”, and in their national language, Malay, the word bangsa means both race and nation. In both cultures, the semantic centre of ethnicity thus hovers around “nation” or “country”, even though that meaning does not correspond to constitutional realities in either one.

A sociological category that closely resembles ethnicity is kinship. Like ethnicity, kinship commands primary loyalties, is largely premised on birth to one or both specified parents to establish social identification, and often uses biological justification. Indeed, the two categories may act as symbols of each other. In kinship, the image of belonging may be “blood”, “belly”, “hand”, “genealogy” or “tree”. In ethnicity, at least in English, the word “race” similarly draws on the living organism; it has “root-like” associations (Fr. racine; Lat. radix), and hence origins, unbreakable lines of connection, and the authenticity of soil. The natural imagery can of course be used, in both contexts, to divide the society within, to create internal as well as external boundaries; but it is equally true that these two forms of social identification are irrevocable in human societies and form the widest unitary categorization. They are beyond the idea of contract, of specific orga-