


Understanding Ethnic Groups as Socio-Cultural Constructions and Social Order: A Systematic Literature Study

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Keywords: Ethnic Groups, Socio-Cultural Construction, Social Order, Ethnicity Dynamics, Social Cohesion, Stratification	This systematic literature review examines ethnic groups as socio-cultural constructions and their role in social order. Through an analysis of 25 key publications (2000–2023), the study reveals that ethnic groups are not static biological entities but dynamic outcomes of negotiations between individual agency and social structures via identity practices, policies, and power relations. Ethnicity plays an ambivalent role: as a cohesive force based on <i>Gemeinschaft</i> (Francis, 1947) and as a trigger for stratification when politicized (Brass et al., 2000). The theoretical implications emphasize the need to update ethnicity frameworks based on local contexts and integrate cognitive psychology (Gil-White, 2001), while practical implications advocate for integrating ethnic perspectives into inclusive health policies (Aldridge et al., 2023) and multicultural political systems (Shapiro & Kymlicka, 2020). A key limitation is the dominance of Western literature. Future research should explore ethnicity in the digital society era and comparative studies of ethnic construction in Asia versus the West.
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INTRODUCTION

The study of ethnicity occupies a central position in contemporary social sciences, especially in understanding the complexity of multicultural societies amidst the waves of globalization and migration dynamics (Solomos, 2022). The phenomenon of globalization has accelerated interactions between groups while triggering the revitalization of ethnic identities in response to cultural homogenization (Van der Tol & Becker, 2024). In this context, ethnic groups are not static entities but rather socio-cultural constructions that continue to evolve through symbolic interactions and negotiations of identity boundaries (Nagel, 1994; Jenkins, 1994). The social constructionism perspective (Berger & Luckmann) emphasizes that ethnic reality is constructed through a dialectical process between externalization, objectivation, and internalization of collective values. Meanwhile, Fredrik Barth's (1969) Ethnic Boundary Making theory - as criticized by Jakoubek (2024) - emphasizes that the survival of ethnic groups is determined by the maintenance of social boundaries (boundary maintenance), not by cultural isolation. The dynamics of contemporary ethnic identities face a paradox: on the one hand, collective identities remain a source of social cohesion (Francis, 1947), but on the

other hand, the politicization of ethnicity has the potential to trigger fragmentation and vertical conflict (Brass et al., 2000; Min et al., 2010). Recent research has shown that overlap between ethnic and cultural identities significantly increases the risk of civil conflict (Wacziarg et al., 2015). Furthermore, the conceptualization of ethnicity as a multidimensional construct – encompassing cultural attributions, power relations, and minority experiences (Ford & Harawa, 2010; Phinney, 1996) – shifts the analysis from an essentialist approach to a more fluid and contextual understanding. Based on this theoretical framework, this article answers two fundamental questions: (1) How do socio-cultural mechanisms shape and reproduce ethnic groups through everyday practices, symbolic representations, and social institutions?; (2) What is the strategic role of ethnicity in shaping social order, especially in the context of social cohesion, resource distribution, and conflict dynamics?.

This study aims to: (1) Analyze the socio-cultural construction process of ethnic groups through a critical review of the practices of identification, categorization, and identity performativity (Bentley, 1987; Gil-White, 2001); (2) Explore the impact of ethnicity on the structure of society with a focus on power relations, political access, and social integration (Eubank, 2019; Shapiro & Kymlicka, 2020).

Academically, this study contributes to the enrichment of the perspective of cultural sociology by integrating social construction theory, cognitive psychology (Hale, 2004), and intergroup relations analysis. These findings also address the fragmentation of ethnicity theory through Bourdieu's practice approach (Bentley, 1987). In practice, the results of the study form the basis for responsive multicultural policies, especially in mitigating ethnic conflict (Min et al., 2010), improving the recording of ethnic data in public services (McGovern et al., 2016), and designing culturally sensitive health interventions (Aldridge et al., 2023).

METHOD

This study used a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design with a qualitative approach to comprehensively integrate theoretical and empirical findings. The PRISMA-ScR (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses for Scoping Reviews) protocol was strictly adopted to ensure transparency, reproducibility, and validity of the academic source selection process (Tricco et al., 2018). The literature search was conducted on four reputable scholarly databases: Google Scholar (for multidisciplinary coverage), Scopus (standardized indexing), JSTOR (historical social science sources), and ScienceDirect (cutting-edge journals). The search strategy combined keywords in two linguistic contexts:

- a. Indonesian: "ethnic social construction", "ethnic group + culture + society", "ethnic identity + social dynamics"
- b. English: "ethnic group + social construction", "ethnicity + cultural identity + social order", "boundary-making + ethnic conflict"

The initial screening applied chronological criteria (2000–2023) to ensure thematic relevance to contemporary dynamics. In addition, only publications in journals with a reputation of at least Q3 Scopus or SINTA 2 were considered, with special exceptions for seminal pre-2000 works that are extensively cited in the recent literature (e.g., Barth, 1969). The selection process applied systematic inclusion-exclusion criteria (Table 1):

Table 1. Literature Inclusion-Exclusion Criteria

Kriteria	Inklusi	Eksklusi
Fokus Topikal	Social construction of ethnicity , the function of ethnic groups in the social order of ethnicity	Biological/genetic determinism
Type of Study	Empirical/qualitative, theoretical, multicultural case studies (Indonesia, US, etc.)	Non-academic sources (media opinion, NGO reports)
Methodology	Peer-reviewed , credible analysis	No peer-review or ambiguous methodology
Geographical Context	Global with an emphasis on multiethnic society	Monoculture focus study

The selection stage was conducted in three tiered phases (Figure 1):

- Initial Identification: 328 articles were identified through database searches.
- Eligibility Screening: 142 articles were screened based on abstract relevance and methodology.
- Critical Appraisal: 25 final literatures were selected after quality evaluation using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) instrument.



Figure 1. PRISMA Flowchart of Literature Selection

Data extraction used the thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with the following stages:

- Iterative Coding: Identifying conceptual patterns (e.g., "boundary maintenance", "politicization of identity").
- Theme Grouping: Organizing codes into umbrella themes (Table 2).
- Triangulation: Validating the consistency of findings across sources.

Table 2. Thematic Analysis Framework

Main Theme	Key Sub-Themes	Reference Example
Construction of Ethnic Identity	- Social categorization (Jenkins , 1994) - Cognitive psychology (Gil-White , 2001)	- Nagel (1994), Hammer et al. (2020)

Social Functions of Ethnic Groups - Cohesion vs conflict (Brass et et al. , 2000) - Min et al. (2010), Eubank (2019)
- Akses politik & sumber daya (Shapiro & Kymlicka, 2020)

A critical analysis of 25 selected literatures reveals major theoretical gaps: (1) The dominance of ethnic conflict studies in the Global North ignores the dynamics of peaceful coexistence in multiethnic Southeast Asian societies; (2) The minimal integration of cognitive psychology perspectives in sociological analyses of boundary-making. These findings encourage a reorientation of the research conceptual framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Synthesis of Selected Literature

No	Author (Year)	Title	Key Findings	Theoretical Contributions
1	Wacziarg et et al. (2015)	Culture , Ethnicity and Diversity	ethnicity -culture overlap .	Strengthening the social construction of ethnic identity by emphasizing the flexibility of ethnic boundaries and the structural (economic) influence on cultural dynamics. Including the theme of the Social Function of Ethnic Groups.
2	Ford & Harawa (2010)	A new conceptualization of ethnicity for social epidemiological and health equity research	Ethnicity as a two-dimensional social construct : attributional (group characteristics) and relational (position in the social hierarchy).	Provides a multidimensional social categorization framework (Jenkins , 1994). Includes the theme of Ethnic Identity Construction .

3	Francis (1947)	The Nature of the Ethnic Group	Ethnic groups are subtypes Gemeinschaft ; characteristics of primary (face-to-face) groups are transposed into secondary groups. Ethnic identities can evolve without losing their essence.	Fundamental to the theory of ethnic boundary formation through social interaction. Including the theme of Ethnic Identity Construction.
4	Brass et et al. (2000)	Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity	Ethnic violence is related to strategic aspects of identity construction by elites. Followers are involved because of fear of armed groups or local pressure.	Analyzes the politicization of ethnic identity as a trigger for conflict. Including the theme of the Social Function of Ethnic Groups (cohesion vs. conflict).
5	Brown (2006)	Hypertension and ethnic group	Ethnic differences in the pathogenesis of hypertension suggest two types (1 and 2), each requiring different therapeutic strategies.	deterministic approaches by emphasizing intra-ethnic variation. Includes the theme of Social Function (access to health services).
6	Phinney (1996)	When we talk about American ethnic groups , what do we mean ?	Ethnicity is a multidimensional construct (cultural norms, identity strength, minority experiences), not a discrete category .	Introducing a psychosocial approach to understanding ethnic identity. Including the theme of Ethnic Identity Construction.
7	Eubank (2019)	Social Networks and the Political Saliense of Ethnicity	Ethnic political alliances are mediated by cohesive interethnic social networks .	Linking social networks to ethnic political mobilization.

			Network fragmentation hampers political accountability.	Including the theme of Social Functions of Ethnic Groups (political access).
8	Hammer et al. (2020)	What Is an “ Ethnic Group” in Ordinary People's Eyes ? Different Ways of Understanding It Among American, British , Mexican , and Polish Respondents	Definitions of “ethnic group” vary across cultures: US (race), UK (culture), Mexican/Polish (traditions/history).	Demonstrates the diversity of meanings of ethnicity in everyday social categorization. Including the theme of Ethnic Identity Construction (categorization).
9	Banks (1996)	Ethnicity : Anthropological Construction	Ethnicity is a key concept of anthropology/sociology , but its meaning is ambiguous and needs to be clarified through a constructionist approach .	Reviewing the evolution of ethnicity theory in a multidisciplinary manner . Including the theme of Ethnic Identity Construction.
10	Nail (1994)	Construction Ethnicity : Creating and Recreation Ethnic Identity and Culture	Ethnicity is constructed through social interactions and negotiations of boundaries, identities, and cultures within/outside communities.	Dynamic and situational social construction theory of ethnicity . Including the theme of Ethnic Identity Construction.
11	Bentley (1987)	Ethnicity and Practice	Bourdieu's theory of practice unifies the fragmented individual-collective interpretation of ethnic phenomena.	Integrating theories of practice for the analysis of ethnicity expressions . Including the

				theme of Ethnic Identity Construction.
12	Aldridge et al. (2023)	How is ethnicity reported, described, and analysed in health research in the UK? A bibliographical review and focus group discussions with young refugees	Ethnicity in UK health research is often analysed in aggregate without justification. A multidimensional (eg, free-text) approach is needed to reflect the complexity of identity.	Critiques reductive operationalizations of ethnicity and promotes inclusive approaches. Includes Social Function (policy) theme.
13	GA (2021)	Ethnicity in My Life	The author's ethnic experience (a German minority in the USSR) shows post-Stalin assimilation, discrimination and normalization, shaping a dynamic identity.	autobiographical study of ethnic identity in a repressive political context. Includes the theme of Ethnic Identity Construction.
14	Min et et al. (2010)	Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel?: New Data and Analysis	Ethnic groups rebel when they are excluded from state power, have a high capacity for mobilization, and have previous experience of conflict.	Analyzing ethnic conflict through political inequality. Including the theme of Social Function of Ethnic Groups (conflict).
15	McGovern et et al. (2016)	Ethnicity recording in primary care computerized medical record systems : an ontological approach	Ontological approaches improve the quality of ethnicity data in medical records, supporting epidemiological research .	Methodological innovation for the categorization of ethnicity in institutional systems. Including the theme of Social Function (administration).

16	Anye (2021)	Ethnicity, identity and the search for a new social order: A study of Zakes Mda's The Madonna of Excelsior and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things	Reconciliation of ethnic differences in South Africa/India requires tolerance and respect to achieve a harmonious social order.	Highlighting the role of literature in mapping ethnic reconciliation. Including the theme of the Social Function of Ethnic Groups (coexistence).
	Solomon (2022)	Race , Ethnicity and Social Theory	Cross-national/conceptual dialogue is needed to develop a theoretical framework for understanding contemporary race/ethnic relations.	ethnicity theory existing and encourage the integration of global perspectives. Including both themes.
18	Van der Toll & Becker (2024)	What's ethnicity got to do with it ? Religious and racial politics in Europe	Ethnicity has become a tool of stigmatization as well as identification in Europe. Right-wing identity politics exploits ethnic differences for electoral purposes .	Analyzing intersections ethnicity , racialization , and identity politics. Including the theme of the Social Function of Ethnic Groups (power).
19	Stone (2019)	Ethnic Groups	Ethnic categorization allows for multiracial and primary group determination.	Explaining the mechanism of ethnic categorization in the administrative system. Including the theme of Ethnic Identity Construction.
20	Jacob (2024)	Ethnic Groups and Boundaries :	Ethnic Groups and Boundaries (Barth , 1969) was successful	Linking ethnic boundary construction to

		Groupism and Cognition	because it tapped into the human cognitive module of “ groupism ,” not theoretical novelty.	cognitive psychology. Including the theme of Ethnic Identity Construction (cognitive psychology).
21	Hale (2004)	Explaining Ethnicity	The political significance of ethnicity is influenced by micro psychological factors (not just macro categories). Ethnicity theory needs integration of psychological research.	Promoting the integration of cognitive psychology into the study of ethnicity . Including the theme of Ethnic Identity Construction (cognitive psychology).
22	Shapiro & Kymlicka (2020)	Ethnicity and Group Rights	Ethnic group rights are crucial for political stability, but standard citizenship rights do not adequately accommodate their interests.	Debating ethnic collective rights in liberal democracies. Including the theme of Social Functions of Ethnic Groups (access to resources).
23	Gil-White (2001)	Are Ethnic Groups Biological “ Species ” to the Human Brain ?	The human brain processes ethnic groups like biological species because of surface similarities (endogamy, descent-based membership), encouraging discrimination.	Cognitive essentialization theory of ethnicity . Including the theme of Ethnic Identity Construction (cognitive psychology).

24	Makeenko & Mironova (2023)	Ethnic Culture and Identity in the Context Of Socio-Cultural Development	Ethnic identity is shaped by the cultural-psychological image of the community, customs and traditions, which influence social behavior and development.	Emphasizes the role of tradition in maintaining ethnic identity. Includes the theme of Ethnic Identity Construction.
25	Jenkins (1994)	Rethinking ethnicity : Identity , categorization and power	Ethnic identity is a social identity constructed through a process of external categorization (especially by power).	The theoretical foundations of social categorization and dominance in the construction of ethnicity . Including the theme of Ethnic Identity Construction (categorization).

Socio-Cultural Construction of Ethnicity

Ethnicity is not a static entity that is biologically inherent, but rather a dynamic construction that is continuously reshaped through social interaction, symbolic negotiation, and political power (Nagel, 1994). This process involves a complex dialectic between individual agency in interpreting identity and the pressures of societal structures that limit or facilitate cultural expression. As Jenkins (1994) stated, ethnic identity is essentially a product of social categorization, where group boundaries are defined through power relations—either by the state, political elites, or dominant institutions. This categorization is not neutral, but is laden with political implications, as seen in census policies that classify citizens based on ethnic criteria (Stone, 2019), or in medical record systems that obscure intra-ethnic diversity (Aldridge et al., 2023).

At the individual level, agency is reflected in the actor's capacity to choose, reject, or reconfigure ethnic identity according to social context. Hamer et al.'s cross-cultural study. (2020) show that the meaning of “ethnic group” varies significantly: Poles associate it with shared traditions and history, while US respondents emphasize race as the primary marker. This flexibility suggests that ethnic identity is situational and volitional, as Phinney (1996) asserts—a response to minority experiences, assimilation pressures, or even resource mobilization. However, this agency does not operate in a vacuum. Structural constraints arise, for example, when states implement policies that reduce ethnicity to rigid administrative

categories (McGovern et al., 2016), or when authoritarian regimes use ethnic identity as a tool of repression, as in the case of German communities in the USSR (G.A., 2021).

The structure of society also influences ethnicity through institutional networks that perpetuate inequality. Eubank (2019) argues that the fragmentation of ethnic-based social networks in Zambia hampers political accountability, while Van der Tol and Becker (2024) note how right-wing identity politics in Europe exploit ethnic differences for electoral gain. Within Bourdieu's framework, this dynamic can be understood as a game of symbolic capital, where ethnic identities become "a medium of exchange" in the competition for resources (Bentley, 1987). Cognitive psychology further explains why this construction persists: the human brain tends to essentialize ethnic groups as if they were biological species due to superficial similarities such as endogamy and descent-based membership (Gil-White, 2001). This cognitive tendency is exploited by elites to consolidate mass support, as in ethnic conflicts provoked through the rhetoric of primordialism (Brass et al., 2000). The link between agency and structure gives rise to the paradox of contemporary ethnicity: on the one hand, globalization triggers the hybridization of identities, but on the other hand, there is a reaction of ethnic revitalization based on claims of authenticity (Makeenko & Mironova, 2023).

As Francis (1947) observed, ethnic groups are able to adapt to modernization without losing their core identity, because the characteristics of *Gemeinschaft* (organic community) are maintained through cultural practices. However, this adaptation is not always peaceful. When ethnic identity is politicized as a tool of exclusion, as in policies that make it difficult for excluded groups to access power (Min et al., 2010), conflict becomes almost inevitable. The theoretical implications of these findings emphasize that reductionist approaches both those that simplify ethnicity as a biological inheritance (Brown, 2006) and as a mere fiction fail to capture its complexity. Instead, ethnicity should be understood as a dialectical process involving: (1) negotiation of identity boundaries by actors (Nagel, 1994), (2) structural interventions through policies and power (Shapiro & Kymlicka, 2020), and (3) cognitive dimensions that influence social perceptions (Hale, 2004). This framework is not only relevant to the context of conflict, but also explains the mechanisms of peaceful coexistence in multiethnic societies, where identities are transformed into inclusive social capital (Anye, 2021). Thus, the socio-cultural construction of ethnicity ultimately reflects the tug-of-war between human desires for identity recognition and demands for a just social order.

Ethnicity in Social Order

Ethnicity plays an ambivalent role in shaping social order, functioning as both a cohesive force and a trigger for social fragmentation. On the one hand, ethnic identity acts as a glue for collective solidarity through the mechanism of *Gemeinschaft* (organic community), where primary group characteristics such as trust and emotional closeness are transposed into the wider scope of secondary groups (Francis, 1947). This solidarity is reflected in the capacity of ethnic groups to form inclusive social capital, especially in multicultural societies such as Indonesia and South Africa, where shared traditions and values are the foundation of post-conflict reconciliation (Anye, 2021). Cohesive cross-ethnic social networks can even increase political accountability and reduce conflict salience, as seen in the political dynamics of Zambia (Eubank, 2019).

On the other hand, ethnicity has the potential to become a tool of social exclusion when manipulated for the sake of power. The politicization of identity by elites, as observed in ethnic conflicts in the Global North, often transforms cultural differences into instruments of mass mobilization through the rhetoric of primordialism (Brass et al., 2000). Systemic exclusion especially in access to political power and resources is a major driver of violent resistance, as evidenced by statistical analyses showing that ethnic groups are more likely to rebel when they experience state marginalization (Min et al., 2010). In Europe, ethnic-based stigmatization has been exploited by right-wing political movements to construct divisive electoral narratives (Van der Tol & Becker, 2024), while reductive administrative policies, such as the rigid ethnic categorization of the UK health system, ignore intra-group diversity and deepen inequalities in services (Aldridge et al., 2023). This paradox emphasizes that the social function of ethnicity depends on the context of power relations. When ethnic identity is institutionalized as a means of recognition within a collective rights framework as advocated by Shapiro and Kymlicka (2020), it can promote social integration. However, in an unequal hierarchical structure, the overlap between ethnic identity and resource access actually increases the risk of fragmentation, especially when triggered by economic disparities (Wacziarg et al., 2015). Thus, a sustainable societal order requires multicultural policies that not only celebrate diversity but also address the roots of structural injustice through an inclusive approach—both in medical records (McGovern et al., 2016) and in the design of political systems (Solomos, 2022).

Contemporary Dynamics

The contemporary era presents significant transformations in the dynamics of ethnicity, especially through the intervention of digital media and the evolution of multicultural policies. The digital space has become a new arena for the construction of ethnic identities, where social media platforms facilitate cultural revitalization while accelerating identity hybridization. The process of negotiating ethnic boundaries that was previously limited to local interactions has now expanded transnationally, allowing diasporas to maintain cultural ties while adopting new identity elements (Nagel, 1994). However, digitalization also reinforces polarization through algorithms that crystallize ethnic stereotypes in echo chambers, a mechanism that cognitively activates the tendency to essentialize ethnic groups as discrete entities (Gil-White, 2001). Van der Tol and Becker (2024) note how right-wing identity politics in Europe utilize digital platforms to spread stigmatizing narratives, transforming cultural differences into divisive electoral mobilization tools.

In the realm of policy, contemporary multicultural approaches face a paradox between the recognition of diversity and the demand for social integration. Census and administrative policies such as the UK's medical records system that reduces ethnicity to aggregate categories often ignore intra-group complexity, risking deepening health care inequalities (Aldridge et al., 2023). Yet methodological innovations such as ontological approaches to categorizing ethnic data can improve the accuracy of public policy without sacrificing identity diversity (McGovern et al., 2016). A key challenge lies in designing multicultural frameworks that not only celebrate cultural differences but also address structural inequities. As advocated by Shapiro and Kymlicka (2020), recognition of the collective rights of ethnic

groups (e.g. cultural autonomy) must be balanced with guarantees of equal access to political resources, given that exclusion from state power is a major driver of ethnic conflict (Min et al., 2010). Global transformations also demand a reorientation of policies that are responsive to the fluidity of identities. Solomos (2022) emphasizes the need for cross-national dialogue to develop new theoretical frameworks that integrate psychosocial dimensions, power relations, and digital dynamics. The experiences of multiethnic societies such as Indonesia and South Africa show that sustainable reconciliation requires policies that combine recognition of identity with mechanisms for resource redistribution, as well as space for inclusive narratives in literature and media (Anye, 2021). In this context, ethnicity is no longer a static category, but a living framework that continues to evolve a dialectical process between individual agency in formulating identity and the policy structures that shape its space of expression (Jenkins, 1994).

CONCLUSION

Based on a systematic review of the literature that has been conducted, this study concludes that ethnic groups are dynamic and fluid socio-cultural constructions, not static entities that are biologically inherent. The process of their formation involves a complex dialectic between individual agency in interpreting identity and the pressures of societal structures through policies, power relations, and social institutions. As expressed by Nagel (1994) and Jenkins (1994), ethnic identities are continuously reconfigured through symbolic interactions, boundary negotiations, and everyday practices, where contemporary digital spaces even accelerate the process of hybridization as well as revitalization of identities. Ethnicity plays an ambivalent role in the social order: on the one hand, it functions as a glue for social cohesion based on *Gemeinschaft* (Francis, 1947) through inclusive social capital, shared traditions, and cross-ethnic networks that encourage reconciliation (Anye, 2021; Eubank, 2019). On the other hand, ethnicity has the potential to become a tool of fragmentation when politicized by elites to mobilize violence (Brass et al., 2000) or when reductive policies perpetuate unequal access to resources (Min et al., 2010; Aldridge et al., 2023). This paradox emphasizes that the social function of ethnicity is highly determined by the context of power relations and societal structures. Theoretically, these findings highlight the urgency of updating the conceptual framework of ethnicity based on local contexts, especially by integrating cognitive psychology perspectives (Hale, 2004; Gil-White, 2001) and the dynamics of digital society that are still neglected in conventional studies. Practically, the implications encourage the integration of ethnic perspectives in development planning—from inclusive health policies (McGovern et al., 2016) to the design of political systems that recognize collective rights without sacrificing distributive justice (Shapiro & Kymlicka, 2020). The main limitation of this research lies in the dominance of literature from the Global North, so that the representation of the dynamics of peaceful coexistence in multiethnic societies in the Global South (such as Southeast Asia) is still limited. Therefore, further research is suggested to focus on two agendas: (1) Exploration of the construction of ethnicity in the era of digital society, including the impact of algorithms and echo chambers on identity polarization; and (2) Comparative study of ethnic boundary-making mechanisms in the context of Asia versus the West, in order to develop a multicultural

framework that is more responsive to locality. Thus, ethnicity is no longer just an administrative category, but a living framework that continues to evolve in the dialectic of human desire for recognition of identity and demands for a just social order.

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