



## Topological Socio-Cultural Evolution a Predictor of Ethnic Conflicts in Multi- Ethnic Societies

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### ABSTRACT

Ethnic conflicts have been one of the biggest single threats for the progress of collaborative human societies. Ethnic issues are common to most multi-ethnic societies. Some of the conflicts are violent and damaging but not all are negative. Owing to the rapid growth of ethnic problems, attempts have been made to overcome them across many nations despite the change in governments or government policies in recent years. However, so far none of the discussions and solutions is able to explain the influence of socio-cultural evolution on the changes in ethnic identities in multi-ethnic society and the effect on the minority. Further, attention is given to discuss the impact of socio-cultural formation topologies of multi-ethnic societies on ethnic issues. In this concept paper, authors explain the socio-cultural evolution process of multi-ethnic societies and the impact of ethnic topologies on ethnic conflicts.

*Keywords:* Ethnicity, conflict, minority, multi-ethnic society, topology, social-cultural evolution

### INTRODUCTION

Ethnic conflicts are becoming common problems in both developed and developing

worlds. However, in recent years ethnic conflicts are more explicit in developing countries rather than developed countries (Ostaby, 2006). There are many theories and explanations on the causes and consequences of ethnic conflicts (Brown, 2010). Some of the explanations relate to the non-violent ethnic conflicts between native majority and immigrant minority (Dancygier, 2010),

#### ARTICLE INFO

##### Article history:

Received: 1 October 2012

Accepted: 18 January 2013

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but most discussions give serious attention to violent ethnic conflicts among the native majority and native minority groups (cf. Tambiah, 1989; Cederman, Wimmer, & Min, 2010).

As it is common for minorities to receive empathy of external third parties, ethnic conflict is generally understood as a consequence of cultural, political or economic discrimination of the minority by the majority. Further, contemporary literature on ethnic conflicts highlights the political and economic disadvantages behind the violent kind of ethnic conflicts in developing countries (Brown, 2010). Hence, critics have raised the hand against the majority ethnic groups for discriminating and disregarding the ethnic identities of minority groups who fight for their rights against the majority or against the governments (Radhakrishnan, 2010). However, there are counter arguments saying most of the violent ethnic conflicts are results of the need for power, control, resources or political rivalry of some groups of minority rather than the real ethnic issues (Bowen, 1996; Cederman, Wimmer, & Min, 2010). Although this argument is not very popular, these are realities that need to be understood by the minorities in multi-ethnic societies.

Natural social and political processes of a democratic country generally work in favour of the majority (Mann, 2005). Likewise natural socio-cultural evolution also favours the stronger social groups and cultural values rather than the minority social groups and their cultural values. Hence,

ethnic and cultural identities need to be understood as changing states of the social life rather than static traits that would not undergo change. Acceptance (or rejection) and adaptation (or non-adaptation) of socio-cultural changes can make the gap between ethnic groups narrower (or wider) that might lead to ethnic conflict. However, the attention given to explore this relationship is not adequate. This paper aims to explain the under-explored causes of ethnic conflicts, which arise due to the inability to understand or ignorance of the basic principles of socio-cultural evolution of a society. In this paper, the authors first explain the natural socio-cultural evolution process and basic ethnic topologies in multi-ethnic society. Second, they explain the positive consequences of the influence of socio-cultural evaluation on the ethnic identity of the minority in a multi-ethnic society. Further they address the negative consequences to the minorities who do not understand or adhere to the natural socio-cultural evaluation. Finally, authors discuss the policy and practical implications of the theoretical concepts of the paper to encourage a multi-cultural collaboration in the multi-ethnic societies in developing countries.

### **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF ETHNIC IDENTITY AND CONFLICTS**

An ethnic group is made up of a group of people defined as alike on the basis of their unique shared socio-cultural characteristics (Yinger, 1994, p. 2). Language is an indicator of the unique identities of any

ethnic group. Hence, most of the earlier discussions about the different ethnic groups of the society have been largely based on their languages (Haugen, 1988). Recent literature on ethnicity has been concerned with the much broader cultural identities apart from the linguistic identity of a community (Fenton, 2010). According to the literature, ethnic groups have their own language, racial, religious, and employment patterns, and even geographical identities can differentiate them from the other groups in the society. In fact combinations of these identities create new ethnic groups within the society, which have their own unique ethnic identities that differentiate them from their original ethnic identities (see Fig.1). Therefore, ethnic identity and ethnicity in modern society are becoming a complex issue than it was in earlier societies.

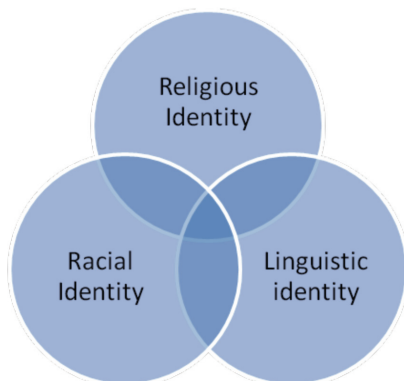


Fig.1: Interactions between three dimensions of ethnic identity

These unique cultural identities give the status, respect and strength to an ethnic community to be established as unique segments of the society. Hence, minor ethnic groups are expected to maintain their

cultural identities even when they live in multi-ethnic societies (French & Seidman, 2006). Further, the majority ethnic groups are expected to respect and understand the unique cultural values of the minority ethnic groups in the society to enforce the inter-ethnic collaboration. However, not all multi-ethnic societies are able to achieve this ideal inter-ethnic collaboration and harmonious living as may be expected by the minority groups (cf. Tambiah, 1989). Minority ethnic groups may have their unique cultural identities, but in multi-cultural society their unique cultural identities are dynamic and constantly evolving traits of the community.

Apart from the multi-dimensional nature of ethnicity, traditionally ethnicity has been identified as a dynamic process in social evolution (Christian, Gadfield, Giles, & Taylor, 1976). In multi-ethnic society, influences of dominant cultural values and identities on minor ethnic groups are unavoidable in natural social settings. Owing to the interactions with social, economic and political factors of the dominant culture, characteristics of minor ethnic cultures might change through time. The adaption and adoption of dominant cultural aspects by the minority ethnic groups are the basis for the long-term inter-cultural harmony within a multi-cultural society (Özbilgin & Syed, 2010). On the other hand, failing to adapt and adopt dominant cultures and languages has been one of the major reasons for some of the long lasting civil wars and ethnic conflicts in some parts of the world (Stavenhagen, 1998; Brown, 2010). Hence, the cultural

identities of minority ethnic groups can either be a source of strength and happiness or a source of conflict and unhappiness within the society, depending on the extent of the influence of the dominant culture on their own cultural identities and the degree of acceptability of the ethnic minorities. However, over-adaptation and adoption of dominant cultures might pose a problem for the continuation of the unique cultural identities of minorities and hence might negatively affect their socio-psychological characteristics (Kennedy & Cummins, 2007).

According to Darwin's biological evolution of species (1859), stronger biological traits are necessary for the biological fitness and survival to be adapted to the changes in environment. According to his theory the biological traits necessary for survival, but weaker and unnecessary biological traits are eliminated from the species in future generations (Cawley, 2006). Hence, the biological evolution is a process based on selecting required traits that the species needs to face the next wave of change in the environment. Even though there are a number of counter arguments against Darwin's theory of biological evolution, it still stands as the best way of looking at biological evolution (McGrath, 2011). However, the construction of artificial environments and social structures create new criteria for selection, and biological fitness is influenced by cultural fitness (Kliver, 2008). Owing to the rapid changes in social and cultural environments, social groups need to be adept to the environment for their survival.

Hence, the socio-cultural evolution may be a significant factor that causes the existing social and cultural mismatches among some groups of the society.

Evolution means changes or progress that takes place throughout long period of time. As the term "socio-cultural evolution" depicts, it has two dimensions. The social aspect refers to how the social groups of the society interact with each other within the pre-defined rules and structures of society (Kliver, 2008), while culture is defined as the generally accepted cumulated knowledge, values, practices and norms of a certain society or social group (Wildavsky, Chai, & Swedlow, 1998). Hence a socio-cultural evolution is the process of how the social rules, interactions and cultural values, norms and practices change over a long period of time within a society. Owing to the rapid artificial social structures, globalization and modernization, an individual is required to play complex and multiple roles in a society now than in the past. Individuals are also required to interact with different ethnic groups within a complex society. Hence, the established social and cultural structures have to be changed in order to accommodate the changes of the environment and growth of the liberal thinking. These socio-cultural changes have influenced the internal social and cultural identities of the different ethnic groups. The social and cultural traits that cannot accommodate the new environment are required to be eliminated, and certain alien social and cultural values need to be accepted for a smooth continuation of the social progress of an ethnic group.

Socio-cultural evolution has a direct influence on ethnic groups of a society. While the socio-cultural traits of the majority groups may be established and accepted by the general public, it is expected of the majority to also accept and adhere to the ethnic identities, liberal thinking, and human rights of the minor ethnic groups. On the other hand, the minorities are also required to understand, learn, accept and adapt to the socio-cultural identity of the majority. Hence, both majority and minority groups have to sacrifice certain socio-cultural identities that might obstruct the inter-ethnic harmony in the society.

However, in certain circumstances ideologies such as ethnic extremism, patriotism and liberal thinking may require a compromise between the majority and minority groups especially when these ideologies seem to be to the disadvantage of the majority groups who are seen to be the more likely perpetrators of ethnic-related problems. These harmful misinterpretations of the compromise between the so-called 'weak and strong' social and cultural traits and the natural socio-cultural evolution process have artificially altered the power sources of the extremist members of both majority and minority ethnic groups. (such as perhaps some examples or citations here) In modern societies there are established ethnic topologies based on the nature of the socio-cultural interactions between different ethnic groups. Therefore, it is natural to expect these topologies to be represented by three generic types: those that are harmonious, neutral and those that

are hostile among the majority and minority ethnic groups.

### **TOPOLOGICAL EVOLUTION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY**

Topology is a generic term often used in mathematics and computer science to explain how the different components of a system are connected to each other (Willard, 2004). However, the discussion of social typology is evitable only since the sociologist is trying to explain the society and its components as a social system (Freeman, 1992). Contemporary philosopher Manuel De Landa (2006) explains the topological ontology of the socio-cultural evolution in society based on the theories of network topology in computer science. De Landa identified three basic topologies: hierarchical, random and collaborative, present in the topological ontology of culture and ethnic identity of the ethnic groups.

In Hierarchical topology, minor ethnic groups originally have the same ethnic identity. However, owing to new interpretations, separations and combinations of linguistic, religious and racial identities, a growing number of sub-minor ethnic groups have emerged. In human history, the majority of the religious-based ethnic groups have been found to step aside from the hierarchical evolution. In hierarchical topology, although lower level ethnic groups have their own identities which separate them from other ethnic groups of the hierarchy, they have common core identities of their original ethnicity. In ancient Hindu

religious scripture Bagavad Geeta, five sub-communities were mentioned, i.e. as *Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudras* and Dalits who were divided according to economic and social functions of the society which has nothing to do with conflicts (Singh, 2009). Although the castes are socially separated from each other, members of all the castes still follow a common religion, Hinduism (Fig.2).

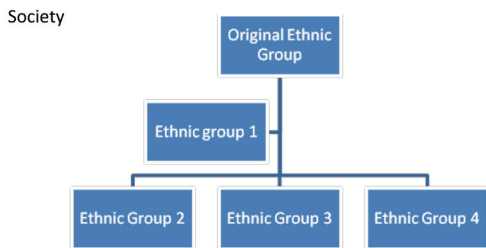


Fig.2: Hierarchical Ethnic Topology

In Random topology, each ethnic group has their own ethnic identity that is not influenced by other ethnic groups in the society. In principle these ethnic groups are loyal to their own ethnic identities and they try to maintain the identities at whatever cost. Hence, their social interaction is conservative and they are typically separated from other ethnic groups to ensure they have their own independent identity within the society (Fig.3). The Amish community in the United States is such a community that has shown significant separation from other communities (Wagner, 2001).

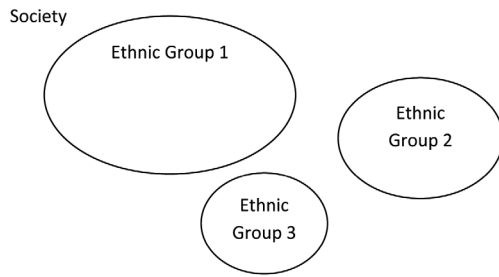


Fig.3: Random Ethnic Topology

The third type of ethnic topology is the Collaborative topology. In collaborative topology there is a clearly identified majority ethnic group in the society. The superior status may stem from historical evolution, constitutional power and politics or due to other external influences. Although superiority is deemed to be accorded based on weak reasons, in collaborative topology the minor ethnic groups accept the superiority of the major ethnic group by adjusting their lifestyles and attachment to ethnic identities in order to achieve a compromise, and to pave the way for a more harmonious living with the majority ethnic groups (see Fig.4). The Hispanic community in United States has significant socio cultural diversity from the Native Americans, at most instances the Hispanic people have conflict-free relationship with the Native Americans (Tienda & Mitchell, 2006).

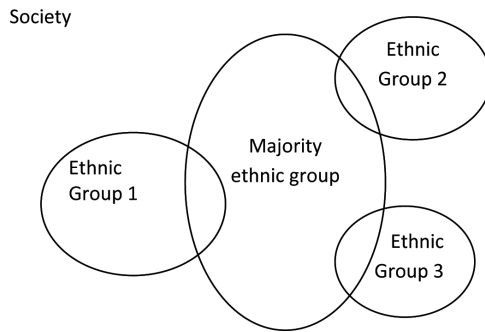


Fig.4: Collaborative Ethnic Topology

Although these types of topological social relationship between ethnic groups are present in the society through socio-cultural evolution the structures of the topology may be changed especially the socio-psychological factors within and among the ethnic groups. Hence, harmonious relationship between ethnic groups and also the hostile relationship between ethnic groups are not static and unchanged. Through the socio-cultural evolution topology structures can also be changed with the changes in ethnic identity. According to the historical experiences of civil wars in multi ethnic countries such as Ghana, Sudan, Nigeria and Sri Lanka, it is explicit that when the different social groups are trying to establish independent identities in multi-cultural societies, inter-cultural harmony will be severely dishonored (Fox, 2004). Hence, in a multicultural society it is important to find ways to live in collaboration with the other communities to achieve equilibrium (Le, Lai & Wallen, 2009).

## ETHNIC TOPOLOGIES IN SELECTED MULTI-ETHNIC SOCIETIES

There is large number of multi-ethnic countries in the world. However, ethnic and cultural diversity among the ethnic groups in eastern societies are much more complex than the western multi-cultural societies (Qunying, 2007, van de Vijver, Chasiotis, & Breugelmanns, 2011) Therefore, eastern societies provide comprehensive illustrations to understand the topological evolution and its impact on ethnic conflicts. In order to conduct a meaningful comparison of the hierarchical, random and collaborative ethnic topologies, four eastern countries are selected for the current paper based on the fact that in each case the same ethnic group (Tamils) is recognized as a minority group but each country differs in their ethnic topology. India represents the hierarchical topology, Sri Lanka represents random topology while Malaysia is selected to represent the forced collaborative topology and Mauritius is selected to represent natural collaborative ethnic topology. Each of these countries is discussed below in detail.

### *India*

India is one of the largest successful democracies in the world and the cultural diversity of India is not second to any nation (Kohli, 2001). Thousands of languages, religions and races make India one of the most complex social systems in the world. However, in general India faces less violent ethnic issues compared to less complex social structures in other neighboring

countries. India is the birth place of most leading eastern religions. The social and cultural structure of India is basically premised on the religious principles and ancient legends. The legendary history of India has explained how India was united since its civilization (Das, 2003). On the other hand, even though there have been extremist (do you want to mention some cases here issues in some parts of the country lately where the caste system has been the focal point of political debates for the uprising of certain political parties. This caste system itself as explained by the Vedas is one of the most significant sources that explain the importance of allowing natural socio-cultural evolution within a society (Varghese, 2008).

The social structure of India is generally based on the caste system that is explained in the religious teachings and hence, it is one of the largest hierarchical ethnic topological societies in the world (Kohli, 2001). Although the western-based liberal thinkers and discriminated minorities may argue over the discrimination of minorities in India, the established hierarchical system has clearly defined the boundaries of each ethnic group and it has allowed to some extent stability within the society (Somani, 2002). It clearly explains there are stronger groups as well as weaker groups in the society and the decision of who is stronger or weaker has been attributed as the wish of the Supreme God. Although it may be the 'wish of the Supreme God', and has religious meanings it clearly indicates the natural selection within the socio-cultural

evolution across the Indian society at large (see Ramacharaka, 2007). However, over-discrimination of the minorities by the extremists based on their caste has been an unresolved problem in Indian social system and is a perpetual issue among the ethnic groups albeit usually covertly (see also Zacharias & Vakulabharanam, in press).

### *Sri Lanka*

Sri Lanka is a small multi ethnic island nation in South-Asia with the majority Sinhalese (74%) and a number of minor racial and religious ethnic groups like Sri Lankan Moors (7.2%), Indian Tamils (4.6%) and Sri Lankan Tamils (3.9%) (Department of Census & Statistics Sri Lanka, 2008). The civilization of Sri Lanka has evolved from India. Hence, the social and cultural structure in Sri Lanka had been significantly influenced by the Indian religious, social and cultural structure. However, when it comes to multi-ethnic interactions, Sri Lanka has become an unfortunate country who has had serious ethnic conflicts between the majority and minority groups for three decades making it one of the world's deadliest civil wars in history (Fearon & Laitin, 2011). According to the constitution of Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese and Tamils have been given equal rights in terms of their social cultural identity.

Both Sinhala and Tamil languages are recognized as the national languages while Buddhist and Hindu religious teachings are taught alongside one another without any serious conflicts. The education system in Sri Lanka allows Sinhalese students



to follow the Sinhala medium and Tamil students to learn in the Tamil medium even at the university level. Even though the policy is intended to give equal rights to the minority Tamils in Sri Lanka, it has made the Sinhalese language becoming gradually unknown and unused among the minorities in Sri Lanka. It has created a significant communication barrier between the majority and the minority groups. Until the civil war, authorities in Sri Lanka were never concerned about the ethnic topology in Sri Lanka. Most of the minority Tamils in Sri Lanka is allowed to be based in the northern and eastern parts of the country while the majority ethnic group resides in other parts of the country.

Although intercultural harmony is the outlying intent of the ruling government, the segregation of the minority to one part of the country has developed random ethnic topology especially in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka. Despite the obvious segregation, the politically discriminated minority Tamils appeared to want to capitalize on this random ethnic topology to establish their own homeland (Imtiyaz & Stavits, 2008). However, the government of the majority Sinhalese would not allow the minorities to take advantage of the random ethnic topology to separate the country. This separatist movement expanded as the deadliest civil war in the world and destroyed the multi-ethnic social, economical and cultural establishments of the country (Goodhand, Klem, & Korf, 2009). Ethnic conflicts in Sri Lanka is a good example of the destructive consequences of

letting the majority and minority groups to be established as random ethnic groups within a multi-cultural society. It avoids the natural socio-cultural exchanges between the majority and minority ethnic groups at least in some parts of the society. Such random ethnic topology works against the natural socio-cultural evolution of the society and leads the country to disastrous ethnic-conflicts. In the case of Sri Lanka, owing to the bad memories of the long civil war, both majority and minority ethnic groups are still unable to find a solution to establish long lasting collaborative social structure in the country (Jayawickreme, Jayawickreme, & Miller, 2010).

#### *Malaysia*

Unlike India, Malaysia has a more collaborative inter-ethnic topology within the society. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic nation and it comprises Malays and the natives (62%), Chinese (27%), Indians (8%) and 3% from other races. The general socio-linguistic culture in Malaysia is dominated by the cultural identity of the Malay community. Owing to this numerical significance and the government enforced constitutional superiority of the Malay community, other ethnic groups have been influenced by the language and other cultural identities of dominant ethnic community in Malaysia (Özbilgin & Syed, 2010). Hence, it is important for the minorities such as Indians and Chinese to be adept with the cultural values of the dominant culture. According to the government initiative to establish harmonious multi-ethnic society, Malay

language has been defined as a compulsory subject for all students. Therefore all minority groups with school-going children need to learn the Malay language in government-aided schools (Loo, 2009). Malaysia has a unique society where most of the minorities can communicate fluently in the majority language (Klitgaard & Katz, 1983). The almost conflict-free interaction between the majority and the minorities enhance the cultural exchanges between the ethnic groups. Hence, code-switching in minority languages is inevitable in Malaysia (Muthusamy, 2010). With a successful collaborative ethnic topology in Malaysia, the government and policy makers are able to focus on the economic development of the country which has generally benefitted the ethnic groups in the country. In general, Malaysia is a good example of the positive consequences of the collaborative ethnic topological social structure.

### *Mauritius*

Mauritius is a beautiful island nation located southeast to the continent of Africa where Creoles, Europeans, Indians, Chinese and Africans have been living together as collaborative multi-ethnic society (Muthusamy, 2010). In Mauritius, the Creole language stands as the common language among the other ethnic groups as well. However, since the colonial era English and French are recognized as the official languages in Mauritius (Eisenlohr, 2006). This is uncommon and a very rare phenomena, where the common language of the society has not been recognized

as the national language of the country. According to Muthusamy (2010), 90% of the population is able to speak the Creole language while the minority groups in Mauritius are rapidly moving away from their native languages. Even though they have lost their language identity (i.e. Tamil), the minority groups are still able to maintain their religious and cultural values, norms and practices in Mauritius (Muthusamy, 2010). Hence, the ethnic identity of the Tamils has not diminished in Mauritius, but remains as a unique ethnic group in the island. The collaborative ethnic topology has bonded all the ethnic groups to accept Mauritius as their own country and the Creole language as their own language, while their own cultural and ethnic identities remained within their ethnic groups. Even though the social and cultural values and practices are different, they have not been obstacles for the inter-cultural harmony and social relationship between the ethnic groups in Mauritius.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

According to the basic principles of evolution, stronger cultural values continue throughout the generations and weaker cultural values are either eliminated or mixed with the stronger cultural values. Hence the ethnic identity in multi-cultural society changes throughout generations and provides a collaborative platform for the ethnic groups to change according to this natural mechanism while maintaining their established ethnic identities and eventually contribute towards becoming a random

ethnic society. When the majority and minority ethnic groups try to be independent from each other, there will be a burst in the society that depends on the force of these ethnic groups to establish their own ethnic identity.

Apart from the rare exceptions, the majority of this ethnic conflict creates more physical and psychological damage to the minority groups than it would the majority for obvious reasons that the majority made up the masses. Hence, the best approach would be for any minority group to be realistic about their expectations of ethnic identity and their rights in a multi-ethnic society by trying to develop a collaborative ethnic topology within the society. When the minorities approach with what appears to be collaborative demands, the reactions of the majority would naturally be more cooperative. Collaboration rather than randomization will not reduce the ethnic identity or pride of any group in society but it would create a win-win situation and sustainable inter-ethnic harmony that would benefit everyone.

Furthermore by using the religious, cultural or political power sources, the majority ethnic groups can and have created hierarchical ethnic topologies which may result in conflicts, and in most cases the conflicts are violent, as seen in the recent past in Sri Lanka. In fact together with psychological influences of discrimination it may easily culminate in dissatisfaction among the minorities in the long run. As for socio-cultural evolution the weaker social or cultural traits are not always eliminated in

totality but are modified and combined with the stronger traits in the society. Therefore, the majority groups in the hierarchical ethnic topologies should welcome the ethnic collaboration to make the weaker ethnic groups stronger by sharing common socio-cultural traits. When the minorities are given their educational, economic, religious and other basic socio-cultural identities, their approach on the ethnic issues would be less violent than in pure hierarchical ethnic topologies.

According to the topological socio-cultural evolution both majority and minority groups are required to establish a collaborative society where the majority need to ensure linguistic, ethnic, religious or geographical rights of the minority ethnic groups. Meanwhile, the minority ethnic groups also have equal responsibility to obey and enhance the natural phenomenon of topological socio-cultural evolution towards the collaborative topology within loosely defined boundaries in multiethnic societies (Fig.5). Need to explain with examples Fig.5. Government and law making agencies need to have clear understanding of the ethnic topology of the country and they should develop policies and practices to encourage collaborative ethnic topology within the country. In order to avoid misunderstandings and irrational resistances, policies need to be developed through mutual understanding with bottom to top forum rather than bring them from top to bottom.

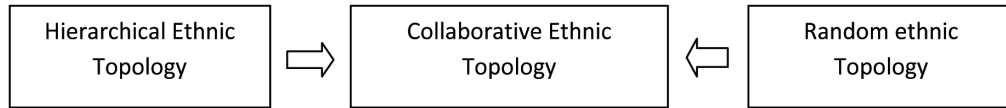


Fig.5: Socio-cultural evolution movements for collaborative ethnic topology

## CONCLUSION

Ethnic conflicts have been the biggest single threat for the progress of collaborative human society. Although not every conflict is violent and explicit, ethnic issues are common in multi-ethnic societies. Despite the efforts put in place by the government and policy makers, solutions suggested at the discussion tables may not augur well with the ethnic groups in practical terms. Thus far very few discussions have offered solutions or explanation on the actual influence of socio-cultural evolution on the changes in ethnic identities in multi-ethnic society. Hence, even if the societies ignore the natural selection process of the socio-cultural evolution, none of the solutions would be able to establish sustainable collaborative ethnic topologies in multi-cultural societies. Therefore, both the minorities and the majority groups must realize the make-up of the socio-cultural evolution and the ethnic topologies of their society and the future progress of the society in totality as a predictor of ethnic conflicts.

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