# Rethinking Modernity: The Construction of Modern Malaysian Society

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**ABSTRACT**

This article explores the concept of 'modernity' that is often associated with the West. Using Malaysia's modernisation project as a case study, it offers insight into Malaysian modernity in the post-Mahathir era. Apart from dealing with the question of what version of modernity the Malaysian government intends to achieve, this article also highlights issues of Malaysian identity, Asian values, multiculturalism and religion. It places Malaysia in the discourse of modernity and argues that being 'modern' does not necessarily mean being 'Western'.

**KEYWORDS**

Malaysian modernity, cultural modernity, Malaysia, the West, Islam

## INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian government has an ambitious plan to transform Malaysia into a fully developed nation. Vision 2020 and Vision 2030 symbolise the country's systematic effort to realise that ambition. The first plan was initiated by Mahathir Mohamad during the tabling of the Sixth Malaysia Plan in 1991. The original idea was to transform Malaysia by the year 2020. Vision 2030 is an indication that Malaysia's transformation is still ongoing. Since the introduction of Vision 2020, a number of scholars have shown interest in the idea of 'new' Malaysia (see Ong 1996; Korff 2001; Bunnell 2004; Chong 2005; Bideau and Kilani 2012; Khan et. al 2014).

Current literature suggests that Malaysia's transformation is commonly associated with the idea of being 'modern'. For instance, Korff (2001) states that among developing countries, Malaysia is one of the first nations that is becoming modern. Bunnell (2004) highlights architecture and urban design in Malaysia, which he points out as signs of national transformation. Similar to Bunnell (2004), Danapal (1992) explores Malaysia's progress by

focusing on tangible development. Both Bunnell (2004) and Danapal (1992) assert that the existence of Kuala Lumpur's city centre illustrates Malaysia's progress towards achieving a fully developed country status. The 'skyscraper' has also long been imagined as "a marker of modernity worldwide" (King, cited in Bunnell 2004). Apart from the discourses and visions of the further development of Malaysia into a fully industrialised nation (Vision 2020), Malaysia's effort to become modern is indicated by the successful appropriation of images of modernisation, such as industrialisation, democracy and the role of Malaysia as a foreign investor in developing countries (Korff 2001, p. 272).

Industrialisation, contemporary architecture and economic stability are seen as the key determinants of modernity, which are particularly the case in the Malaysian context (see Danapal 1992; Korff 2001; Bunnell 2004). These determinants are usually associated with the achievements of developed countries, which are mostly Western. As stated by Ong (1996, cited in Bunnell 2004, pp. 15-16), the idea of modernity is commonly linked to the West and, as a result, progress in Malaysia or elsewhere in the non-West is usually understood as "merely mimetic, an act of replication, imitation or catch up". Ong (1996, p. 60) further argues that, in spite of Malaya's Independence from the British Empire in 1957 (becoming Malaysia in 1962), the country – which is constructed by British-type education and the mass media – seems to be a failed replica of the modern West.

To elaborate, it is common for post-colonial elites to emulate the global centre as they yearn for a future that consists of both Western and Asian influences (Ong 1996). Therefore, tangible and measurable development become the first priority. In the case of Malaysia, every effort was made to improve the image of the nation and thus economic growth, industrialisation and contemporary architecture. This shows that the Malaysian government jump-started modern Malaysia by making noticeable progress. Although the Malaysian modernisation project is all-encompassing, social transformation did not occur alongside country transformation. Instead, the progression to Malaysian modernity seems to consist of two steps: the transformation of Malaysia followed by the transformation of its citizens.

As the transformation of Malaysia is a priority, many scholars tend to explore Vision 2020 by examining its tangible and measurable outcomes. For instance, the study by Khan et. al (2014) explores Vision 2020 within the scope of the Malaysian construction sector. In this context, the growth of Malaysia's gross domestic product (GDP) symbolises the validity of the vision. However, the link between Vision 2020 and the transformation of Malaysians is understudied. This might be due to its complexity and immeasurable outcomes. To contribute to knowledge, this article focuses on Malaysian cultural modernity. It investigates the discourse on modern identity formation involving Malaysian society. Indirectly, it points

out issues of post-colonial identity. Although Ong (1996) claims that post-colonial nations tend to simply imitate the Western countries in order to achieve a fully developed status, I argue that this is not necessarily the case when it comes to transforming society. Factors such as religion, culture, race and ethnicity determine the flexibility of Malaysian society. I also point out that cultural development and country development are both important, deserving an equal amount of attention.

The topic of Malaysian modernity has been explored by a number of academic scholars. However, very few studies have explored the cultural aspect of Malaysian modernity. Furthermore, studies on Malaysian cultural modernity tend to be ethnic-specific, offering limited understanding on the topic despite the diverse Malaysian society. To fill in the gap, this article aims to be inclusive, rather than only focusing on a specific ethnic group in Malaysia. Studies on Malaysian modernity tend to be centred on Mahathir Mohamad (the fourth and seventh Prime Minister of Malaysia) because he initiated Vision 2020. As a result, Malaysian modernity is commonly associated with the Mahathir era. This article provides new insights into the topic and also offers an academic contribution to the scholarship of post-colonial identity. Contrary to studies linking 'modernity' to the West and development in the Western world, this article uses Malaysia as a case study to challenge the synonymity of modernity and the West.

This article addresses and highlights the key points of Malaysian identity and modernity including the theory of 'modernity', Asian values, multiculturalism and religion. These are significant to explain and illustrate the subjectivity of cultural modernity. Critical discourse analysis is employed to identify the abstract idea of Malaysian cultural modernity and validate the article's main argument: exploring the discourse of Malaysian identity and modernity within the period of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's premiership as the fifth Prime Minister of Malaysia. This is to show that Malaysian modernity is a work in progress and remains relevant in the post-Mahathir era.

## THE THEORY OF MODERNITY

In this article, 'modernity' is a term of the utmost importance, as it has long been associated with the development of Malaysia (see Danapal 1992; Ong 1996; Korff 2001; Bunnell 2004; Bideau and Kilani 2012). However, for Malaysia, modernity is still an ambition, rather than reality, and it remains to be seen whether the country is able to realise its dream of becoming a modern state by the year 2030. In the context of Malaysia, the term 'modern' mainly refers to the status of full development. The status is considered equally applicable to both Malaysia and Malaysians. Based on previous studies (see Danapal 1992; Korff 2001; Bunnell

2004), it appears that societal development does not run parallel with country development. The image of the country seems to take priority over the character of the Malaysians. Nevertheless, both developments are the key objectives of the Malaysian modernisation project, as stated in the Vision 2020. Since knowledge on Malaysian cultural modernity is scarce, this study is useful in understanding the complex nature of the project.

The term 'modern' needs to be highlighted in order to provide a clear understanding of the subject matter. According to Lauzon (2012, p. 1), 'modern' and 'modernity' more generally refer to something like "new", "now" or "of recent invention". Lauzon (2012, p. 1) claims that the term 'modern' is used by many as a marker of temporal discontinuity and presents a range of different dates as the beginning of something new, which is described either as "our times" or the "modern world"'. He adds that 'being modern' does not simply mean that the present is superior to the past (Lauzon 2012, p. 3). To be 'modern' also implies that the past should not, in any way, constrain the present (Lauzon 2012, p. 3). Similarly, Brinton (1955, p. 256) states that, 'modern' means "just now" or "current sense", which refers to the state of being strikingly different from ancient times.

However, it is worth rethinking the notion of modernity because 'modern' does not simply mean "new", "now" or "of recent invention" (Lauzon 2012, p. 1). Furthermore, there are several versions of 'modernity', although all definitions of the term point, in one way or another, to the passage of time (Latour 1993, p. 10), showing its subjectivity. As stated by Ong (1996), discourses on modernity almost always involve debates about the role of the West and, according to Lauzon (2012), there are also a few different approaches in understanding modernity, including concepts of 'alternative modernities' and 'multiple modernities'. The subjectivity of 'modernity' suggests a possibility that it's definition can be contested.

In addition, literature on this subject is mainly produced by Western scholars (see Giddens 1991; Foucault 1990; Latour 1993). According to Yack (1997) and Wittrock (2000), there is a significant distinction between the temporal and the substantive conceptions of 'modernity'. Lauzon (2012), however, asserts that these two conceptions are related, noting that the substantive conception of modernity derived from the much older European practice of marking temporal discontinuities in terms of a teleological development towards an idealised and profoundly different future. To Lauzon (2012, p. 2), modernity does not simply symbolise an epoch. The notion of modernity represents a special kind of epoch with distinct historical features (Lauzon 2012, p. 2).

According to Giddens (1991), modernity is profound due to two fundamental reasons. The

first reason is that modernisation contributes to a decline in traditional social ties and incline in the spread of social relations across time and space. This is described by Giddens (1991) as the "disembedding" process. The second reason is that "modernity requires 'institutional reflexivity' or the regularised use of knowledge about circumstances of social life as a constitutive element in its organisation and transformation" (Giddens 1991, p. 242). Giddens (1991) believes that our behaviours are no longer defined by our traditions, and our ideas and actions are constantly re-evaluated as we receive new information. According to Rajaratnam (2009) and Mohd Sani (2010), in the context of Malaysia, information is mainly provided by the government as it intends to reinvent the cultural identity of Malaysian society. In this reinvention process, Asian values are emphasised, which is part of the attempts to 'protect' Malaysian society from 'Western' values (Mohamad 1995). In this sense, it is the government that constantly re-evaluates the idea of new values in order to replace the old ones.

As mentioned earlier, modernity is usually associated with the West (Ong 1996). Ong (1996) states that Malaysian modernity, in particular, is partly influenced by the West as Malaysia was influenced by economic and technological development in Western countries. Furthermore, Latour (1993) asserts that 'modern' was figuratively invented by the West. Malaysia is, of course, not the first multi-ethnic country to experience a national transformation. According to Spohn (2003, p. 282), development, modernisation and decolonisation in terms of state formation and nation building have already occurred in many religiously and ethnically diverse world regions. Inglehart (1995, p. 381) indicates that, around the world, economic modernisation tends to go together with cultural modernisation in coherent syndromes and that fundamental differences in worldviews tend to exist between pre-industrial and industrial societies, not among industrialised societies. This is not the case in the context of Malaysia, which prioritises tangible and measurable transformation (Korff 2001).

In Malaysia, it is debatable if cultural modernisation is happening naturally alongside economic modernisation. Since the Malaysian government initiated the modernity project, a number of cultural policies and programmes have been introduced, amended and replaced to transform Malaysian society (Furlow 2009). The government has been consistent in improving Malaysia in terms of economy and infrastructure by upgrading infrastructure and trying to increase economic growth (Nain, cited in Khattab 2004). Culturally, though, the various ideas – conveyed through political discourse – on what 'modern society' should look like show the government's indecisiveness. In this context, economic and technological modernisations seem like straightforward projects in comparison to cultural modernisation. This also questions whether the Western concept of cultural modernisation is applicable to

Malaysian society. However, according to Hefner (2011, p. 2), the West has major influence on Muslim-majority societies. He asserts that these societies are exposed to new techniques of education, administration, social disciplining, new models for private life and amusement brought by Western hegemony (Hefner 2011). In this sense, Muslim-majority societies seem to operate within the framework of the West.

## MODERNITY, THE WEST AND MALAYSIA

Key theorists of modernity, such as Michel Foucault (1990), Anthony Giddens (1991) and Bruno Latour (1993), have, in different ways, associated modernity with the West. Developments in the non-West, according to Ong (1996), are usually understood as an act of imitation. This may be the case in terms of the physical and tangible transformation of Malaysia. However, in the context of cultural transformation, it is debatable whether the non-West actually imitates the West. Within Malaysia, there is an ongoing discussion on Asian values versus Western values (Furlow 2009). Unlike Western innovations, Western-related cultural values are not fully accepted in Malaysia (see Mohamad 1995). Malaysian political leaders, especially, have vocalised intentions to make Malaysia resist some of the Western cultural values but strive to be 'modern' like the Western world (see Mohamad 1995 and Ibrahim 1996).

Social theorists such as Marx (1936), Weber (1978) and Wallerstein (1995) also tend to focus on Western European and North American societies to understand 'modernity'. According to Bhambra (2011), the Eurocentric historiographical frame has remained constant throughout literature, although the particular histories within it are contested. Similarly, the experiences of the non-West 'others' and their contribution to the historical-sociological paradigm have not been recognised (Bhambra 2011). However, according to Schmidt (2006), in terms of the peculiar set-up of economic institutions, the "varieties of modernity" approach leads to a regrouping of countries, suggesting that several Western countries are more similar to certain Asian countries or civilisations than to their Western counterparts. Schmidt (2006) also suggests that similar findings might emerge if the analysis is extended to other institutional sectors of society, such as social policy regimes and political systems of various modern societies.

I argue that the definition of modern society should not be exclusively associated with the West. I propose the idea of modern society itself is subjective depending on criteria created by any particular nation. By assuming Western culture as an example of modern society, we imply that other societies are backward or non-modern. Although Western modernisation has influenced Malaysia's developmental process, the concept of modern society in the

context of Malaysia is still complex. If Marx (1936), Weber (1978), Giddens (1991) and Wallerstein (1995) tend to give attention to the Western European and North American societies as their starting point to explore modernity, it also makes sense to focus on the Malaysian society to understand the notion of modernity. Malaysia has a unique approach towards civilisation, in which the West is seen as both an inspiration and a hindrance (Hoffstaedter 2009). Western innovations are admired, whereas Western cultural values are disparaged (see Mohamad 1995). Despite the on-going debate on Asian values versus Western values, it remains unclear which part of Western culture Malaysia is opposed to. Therefore, by examining Malaysian cultural modernity, this article aims to contribute to the interpretations of modernity within the context of the non-West.

## MALAYSIAN IDENTITY AND ASIAN VALUES

Since the introduction of Vision 2020, Malaysia has shown good progress towards becoming a developed nation. Malaysia was among the top performing countries in terms of economic growth, and this was acknowledged by the World Bank in "The East Asian Miracle: Economic Growth and Public Policy" (Nain, cited in Khattab 2004, p. 171). This shows promise that Malaysia will be recognised as a developed nation one day. Having stated that, it does not necessarily mean that Malaysia fully imitates Western countries. This has been made clear in a number of political discourses. Anwar Ibrahim (the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia from 1993 to 1998), for instance, stated in his book that there is a destructive effect that the West may have on East Asia, especially if the United States and Europe are imitated blindly (Ibrahim 1996). According to Altalib (1997), Ibrahim's resistance towards Western values is based on the belief that hard work, humility, respect and wisdom of the elders are the strengths of Asia and, without these values, Asia will become weak. Ibrahim's statement somehow depicts the Malaysian government's interference in the idea of Malaysian values.

According to Furlow (2009, p. 205), Asian values derived from the concept of Confucian values. He states that the shift from Confucian values to Asian values was due to the Asian economies' integration and the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In Malaysia, it is apparent that cultural values are important as political figures tend to be very specific in describing them. Apart from Anwar Ibrahim, Mahathir Mohamad is also a leading advocate for Asian values (Furlow 2009). To Mohamad, Asian values are essential to Malaysian development. Interestingly, Asian values, in the context of Malaysia, are deeply influenced by religion. For example, Ibrahim clearly points out the positive role of religion in strengthening Asian society (Ibrahim 1996, p. 51). To him, moral and social deterioration can be avoided through religion (Ibrahim 1996). The emphasis on Asian values versus Western values by Malaysian political figures somehow implies that Asian values are seen as what I

prefer to call a 'prescription' for Malaysian society to combat the Western-type modernity.

To promote Asian values in Malaysian society, 16 universal values are listed in the Integrated Curriculum by the Ministry of Education (Salleh, cited in Suryadinata 2000). Due to their 'universal' natures, it can be argued that they are compatible with Malaysian society, despite the society's differences in terms of religion, culture and norms. The values are: "compassion/empathy, self-reliance, humility/modesty, respect, love, justice, freedom, courage, cleanliness of body and mind, honesty/integrity, diligence, co-operation, moderation, gratitude, rationality, and public spiritedness" (Salleh, cited in Suryadinata 2000). According to Suryadinata (2000), they are taught in all disciplines, especially in moral and Islamic education courses.

The above values are arguably no different than Western ones. Mohamad (1995, p. 81), however, has a different view as he sees a contrast between Western modernism and Eastern thought. Mohamad (1995) argues the West might collapse as it abandons religion for the secular life. Hedonistic values like materialism, sensual gratification and selfishness are seen as contributors to the "impending collapse" of the West (Mohamad 1995, p. 81). Despite his uneasiness with the West, Mohamad had to allow Western ideas and consumerism to enter Malaysia through the Internet and other communication media. Indirectly, the development of a knowledge-based economy limits Mohamad's power to filter out certain elements of the West, as it requires free flow of information and ideas.

Notwithstanding the knowledge-based economy, Mohamad's vision for modern Malaysia was not fully accepted by Malaysians. Some people voiced discontent with Mohamad because they had different opinions on how modern Malaysia should look (Furlow 2009). According to Furlow (2009), these discontents, however, are not signs of rejection of economic, technological or social development. The presence of these discontents also does not mean that the idea of Westernisation is welcomed in Malaysia (Furlow 2009). Instead, opposition towards Mohamad's idea of modernity centres on the issue of society's values because the Malaysian values that he promoted were his personal view and heavily influenced by his background: ruling class and locally educated Malay Muslim (Furlow 2009).

The so-called Malaysian values, which are perceived to be universal, are paramount to Malaysian modernity and the government attempts to instil the values into Malaysians (Furlow 2009). In addition, Furlow (2009) discovered that the values are integrated with science and technology at the National Science Centre, which illustrates their versatility. The values are also reflected in Malaysian architecture and, in this context, the specific Islamic values are incorporated into architectural design (Korff 2001; Furlow 2009). This shows a

clear link between cultural values, moral values and techno-scientific development. Since cultural and moral values take priority in Malaysian modernity, study on this particular topic can contribute to the understanding of modern Malaysian society.

## MULTICULTURALISM AND MALAYSIA'S MODERNISATION PROJECT

One of the key areas highlighted and often associated with Malaysian identity is multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is addressed in this article mainly because this is a study about a diverse Malaysian society. In addition, multiculturalism is acknowledged in Malaysia's modernisation project. As stated by Bideau and Kilani (2012, p. 605), Vision 2020 highlights the multicultural character of Malaysian society and the need to uphold racial harmony, specifically among the three largest ethnic groups: Malay, Chinese and Indian. 'Multiculturalism', however, is not a straightforward term. Noor and Leong (2013) refer to it as a term that celebrates cultural, ethnic, racial, religious and language diversity. In contrast, Nye (2007, p. 110) links multiculturalism to diversity issues, particularly in the context of culture and religion, and the social management that deals with the challenges and opportunities of such diversity. To Vasu (2012) and Berry (2013), multiculturalism is a versatile concept. Apart from being a term to describe the demographics of a society and refer to an ideology that acknowledges racial, cultural and religious differences, multiculturalism has also been employed to describe a government's programmes/policies or a specific theory about the governance of diverse societies (Vasu 2012; Berry 2013).

It is worth noting the subjectivity of multiculturalism because it offers insight into the idea of multicultural Malaysia. In the Malaysian context, 'multiculturalism' can refer to the Malaysian government's policies, created and implemented to manage Malaysia's diverse society. Noor and Leong (2013) explored this type of multiculturalism by comparing the development of the multicultural models that have evolved in Singapore and Malaysia. They conclude that the state of multiculturalism is defined and shaped by public policies and social attitudes (Noor and Leong 2013, p. 723). They also point out that cultural plurality in Malaysia is not a matter of choice (Noor and Leong 2013). The historical past and the legacy of British colonisation have a significant impact on the demographics of Malaysia (Noor and Leong 2013). I highlight multiculturalism in the context of post-colonial Malaysia because it is highly relevant to this study, which deals with the issues of cultural diversity in Malaysia and their effect on the formation of a united, modern and developed Malaysian society.

As stated earlier, multiculturalism is interpreted in various ways by academic scholars (see Nye 2007; Ibrahim et al. 2011; Vasu 2012; Berry 2013; Noor and Leong 2013). Ibrahim et al. (2011), in particular, offer a rather interesting understanding of the term. They define

multiculturalism "as a process that is contextualised to a particular country and it involves active management by the respective government" (Ibrahim et al. 2011, p. 1003). This, according to them, is often translated as "the realisation of the national identity" (Ibrahim et al. 2011, p. 1003), which can be linked to the formation of modern Malaysian society. As the modernisation project aims at the general population of Malaysia, it is beneficial to find out how cultural differences among Malaysians are dealt with in the making of modern Malaysian society. The credibility of the official policies of the Federation of Malaysia, especially Vision 2020, is put to the test in order to analyse the meaning of multicultural tolerance in relation to Malaysian modernity. It is also worth exploring how a shared identity can be formed within a multicultural society. Furthermore, this discussion raises the crucial question of whether cultural diversity is really celebrated in Malaysia and protected by the government.

## METHODOLOGY

The research is based on critical discourse analysis (CDA) because it allows examining the modernity discourse more closely. Instead of focusing exclusively on the grammatical and linguistic use of language, CDA was used as an analytic method to study the social processes that (re)produce and reflect knowledge and power relations through discourses (Fairclough 2003). Fairclough's version of CDA is a key method because of his assertion that language is a material form of ideology and invested by ideology (Fairclough 1995). Although the study drew on Fairclough's version of CDA, the objective was not to produce a linguistic study of Malaysian identity and modernity. Fairclough's version of CDA was simply chosen because it incorporates concepts such as power, ideology, social practice and common sense. Instead of focusing on the grammatical constructions of text or describing the language of text, I examined 'content' to investigate the concept of 'modern Malaysians' and perhaps uncover hidden ideologies, which align with Fairclough's aim of CDA.

The analysis focused on newspaper articles published by two mainstream newspapers in Malaysia: Berita Harian and New Straits Times. The rationale behind this selection is due to a symbiotic relationship between the aforementioned newspapers and the Malaysian government (see Rajaratnam 2009; Mohd Sani 2010; Fong and Ahmad Ishak 2016). Furthermore, according to the Malaysian Canons of Journalism, mainstream media in Malaysia play a significant role in the process of nation building and in the formation of public policy (Mohd Sani 2005, p. 62).

Berita Harian was chosen because its target readers are Malays. I also selected New Straits Times as its readership arguably transcends ethnic groups. Apart from being a 'universal'

newspaper, New Straits Times also caters to the Malaysian 'elite' readers (Shaari et al. 2006) which include Malay elites. Therefore, New Straits Times is useful when analysing news content intended for a diverse Malaysian society. In addition, New Straits Times was selected because it publishes in the English language, which is widely used in Malaysia. Given that the article explores the discourse of Malaysian identity and modernity in terms of Malaysian society as a whole, these two newspapers are the best resources for this study.

I focused on data retrieved within the period from 2003 to 2009, which is the period of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's premiership as the fifth Prime Minister of Malaysia. This sample period was selected because the idea to create 'modern Malaysians' continued to be popularised by Mohamad's successor, Badawi. As a political ideology, Malaysian cultural modernity can only be understood through this Malaysian government's vision for a new, modern society. It is worth noting that Malaysia's modernisation project is implemented by the *Barisan Nasional* coalition, which has had supremacy over the country since Malaysia's Independence in 1957. During the 14th Malaysian General Election in 2018, the coalition was voted out of power for the first time in Malaysian history. However, the coalition returned to power under *Perikatan Nasional* in the aftermath of the 2020 Malaysian political crisis. The coalition was led by Badawi during the period of his premiership.

For Berita Harian, I used the search terms *pemodenan* (modernity), *moden* (modern), *pembangunan* (development) and *bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysians). One hundred and fifty-one of the 224 articles retrieved from the search were relevant to this study. Each of the 151 articles was carefully read to detect patterns or recurring views. There were three recurring views: (1) constructing modern Malaysians based on Islam *Hadhari*, (2) knowledge as the foundation of Malaysian modernity and (3) preserving Malay customs as part of the modernity project. This article only features the first recurring theme, which is constructing modern Malaysians based on Islam *Hadhari*, due to its relevance to the main argument of this article: being 'modern' does not necessarily mean being 'Western'. I chose to highlight the role of religion – Islam, in particular – because I discovered that this was the key theme that differentiates Malaysian cultural modernity from the discourse of modernity that is often associated with the West.

For New Straits Times, the same search terms were employed. One hundred and twenty-one of the 245 articles retrieved from the search were relevant and examined as part of this study. The analysis revealed two recurring views: (1) acknowledging the role of religion in Malaysian modernity and (2) reviving Malaysian traditional symbols. For the reason mentioned above, this article only discussed the first recurring theme, which refers to acknowledging the role of religion in Malaysian modernity.

## CONSTRUCTING MODERN MALAYSIANS BASED ON ISLAM *HADHARI*

In Berita Harian, there was a number of news articles that discussed and promoted the ideology of Islam *Hadhari*. In this context, Islam *Hadhari* was described as an Islamic concept and an approach to develop human capital in Malaysia. News articles on Islam *Hadhari* were mainly extracts from Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's speeches. The definition of 'Islam *Hadhari*' was clearly described in one of the news articles:

Islam *Hadhari* is a teaching of Islam that focuses on life. It is a teaching to increase the quality of life, a degree of which society are civilised and have a distinguished culture in facing the challenges of the new millennium, such as information technology explosion, borderless world, global economy, materialism, identity crisis, and colonisation of the mind (Berita Harian, January 17, 2008).

Discourse on cultural modernity within the examined time frame shows a reference to Mohamad's plan to modernise Malaysia. This indicates that Mohamad's Vision 2020 was still applicable even after he left the office in 2003. There were 46 news articles that re-emphasised the initial objectives of Vision 2020. The obvious addition to the Malaysian cultural modernisation project within this period was the concept of Islam *Hadhari*, which was articulated in a persuasive manner using Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's speech extracts. The need to implement a new concept of Islam in Malaysia was expressed as a necessary measure to avoid failure in constructing modern Malaysians. The texts tended to use the word 'Muslims' as the main subject of modern Malaysians:

Islam *Hadhari* is a humble approach to elevate the entire society including the non-Muslims. As Muslims, we have to choose to be religious first and then decide whether we want to be doctors, teachers or any other professions, in order to contribute towards nation building. Muslims today are being looked down because they are not united to the extent they are not capable on their own to modernise the country, therefore have to depend on the non-Islamic countries. Muslims always blame their fate and this is the reason why they are poor and backward, even though Islam never teaches its followers to be economically and socially deprived. Islam encourages modernity and success. It is compulsory for us to be united because all of the principles of Islam *Hadhari* are for strengthening the dignity of Muslims, Malays and the country (Berita Harian, February 4, 2005).

The above extract raises two key issues. Firstly, the inclusion of the non-Muslims. The subject of non-Muslims appeared in the very first sentence of the text, which classifies it as part of the topic sentence. This suggests that the concept of Islam *Hadhari* was not introduced solely for the Malaysian Muslims. As shown in the above extract, Islam *Hadhari* appeared in

the discourse of Malaysian modernity as a concept and an approach that was compatible with diverse Malaysian society. Despite the universal portrayal of Islam *Hadhari*, the text consistently referred to Muslims, which shows the significant role of religious identity in the formation of modern Malaysians. This was made apparent in the second sentence of the extract, in which religion was regarded as more important than the career. Considering Malaysia's demography, it is compelling to discover that a specific religion, Islam, was considered capable to unite the diverse Malaysian society. The third sentence of the extract suggests two points. First, unity is a key element in the formation of modern Malaysians. As the sentence used the word 'Muslims', it shows that 'unity' in this context refers to religious unity. Second, the connection made between Muslims and the inability to modernise the country suggests that Islam was featured in the discourse of Malaysian modernity partly to improve the image of Muslims.

The second key issue of the above extract is that the religion and teaching of Islam was chosen to be the best 'tool' to achieve Malaysian modernity. This shows a similarity between Mohamad's and Badawi's ideologies, as both highlighted the role of Islam in the Malaysian cultural modernisation project. The main difference between their ideologies is the concept of Islam they tended to endorse. Mohamad advocated a concept of *Fardu Kifayah* (communally obligatory), whereas Badawi promoted Islam *Hadhari* (civilisational Islam) (Mohamad 2008). Indirectly, the text suggests a version of modernity that the Malaysian government intended to achieve. Although modernity is commonly associated with the West, the analysis on modernity in the Malaysian context offers a rather interesting perspective. In this respect, the discourse of Islam sets apart Malaysian modernity from Western modernity. Islam appeared to be the core facilitator for the socio-cultural transformation in Malaysia:

Every citizen has to comprehend the ideology of Islam *Hadhari*, which is introduced to strengthen the identity of Malaysians in order to withstand globalisation (Berita Harian, February 9, 2005).

The above extract shows that Badawi's engagement with Islam was driven by political objectives and the need to restructure Malaysian society. However, the role of Islam in the Malaysian cultural modernisation project seems problematic because not every Malaysian is Muslim. This suggests that the project, first and foremost, has aimed at the Malaysian's Malay-Muslim majority:

As the effort to transform the society is the responsibility of the government, I think it is irrational for anyone to underestimate Islam *Hadhari*. Those who underestimate this concept

are actually jealous and absurd (Berita Harian, February 5, 2005)

The above extract illustrates Malaysia's authoritarian leadership at the time. The subject of Islam *Hadhari* in Malaysian modernity was not open to criticism. Malaysian society was expected to accept the concept wholeheartedly. The text used words such as 'irrational', 'jealous' and 'absurd' to describe individuals who were against the ideology of Islam *Hadhari*. The word 'jealous' in the text implies a reference to Malaysian's non-Muslims who were most likely to disagree with the concept of Islam *Hadhari*. They were labelled 'jealous' for questioning Islam as the chosen religion in facilitating socio-cultural transformation in Malaysia.

## MALAYSIAN MODERNITY AND THE MALAYSIAN GOVERNMENT

News articles on Malaysian identity and modernity reflect authoritarianism as they were structured to mainly include speech extracts from Malaysian political leaders. In addition, the words used in the framing of the headlines of the analysed news articles suggest a positive perception of Islam *Hadhari*:

1. *Islam Hadhari perkasakan ummah* (Islam *Hadhari* strengthens society) (Berita Harian, February 5, 2005)
2. *Islam Hadhari menjana kemajuan ummah* (Islam *Hadhari* generates societal modernisation) (Berita Harian, February 9, 2005)
3. *Islam Hadhari bentuk modal insan berkualiti* (Islam *Hadhari* forms a quality human capital) (Berita Harian, March 17, 2005)
4. *Islam Hadhari galak kemajuan* (Islam *Hadhari* encourages modernity) (Berita Harian, March 22, 2005)
5. *Islam Hadhari perkukuh Rukun Negara, Wawasan 2020* (Islam *Hadhari* strengthens the National Principles and Vision 2020) (Berita Harian, May 5, 2005)
6. *Islam Hadhari tunjang pembangunan* (Islam *Hadhari* is the foundation of development) (Berita Harian, July 22, 2005)
7. *Islam Hadhari strategi tingkat kemajuan ummah* (Islam *Hadhari* is a strategy to elevate society) (Berita Harian, August 31, 2005)
8. *Konsep Hadhari galak pertingkat kecemerlangan* (The concept of *Hadhari* promotes excellence) (Berita Harian, September 5, 2005)

As shown in the headline samples above, the concept of Islam *Hadhari* was given a significant role in the transformation of Malaysian society and consistently portrayed as an ideal approach. The headline entitled "Islam *Hadhari* strengthens the National Principles and

Vision 2020" (Berita Harian, May 5, 2005), for instance, shows that the concept of Islam *Hadhari* was not instigated to replace Vision 2020. Instead, it appeared as a better concept to continue Mohamad's legacy in modernising Malaysians. The strategy to form an appealing image of Islam *Hadhari* is illustrated in the headline samples above. Islam *Hadhari* appeared as a comprehensive concept intended for a general population of Malaysia. Islam *Hadhari* was heavily promoted not only by Badawi, but also by other political figures in Malaysia:

The concept of Islam *Hadhari*, which promotes simplicity, will be able to transform Malaysia into a modern country through Vision 2020, said *Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku* [the King] Syed Sirajuddin Syed Putra Jamalullail. He affirmed, Islam *Hadhari* is not a concept to introduce a new teaching of Islam or new Islamic jurisprudence. Instead, it is an approach to elevate the standard of society without jeopardising the fundamental principles of Islamic teaching and the freedom for the non-Muslims to follow their own religions. Although this Islam *Hadhari* approach takes time, we need to have confidence in it so the objectives of Vision 2020 can be achieved (Berita Harian, March 22, 2005).

As shown in the above extract, the concept of Islam *Hadhari* was supported by the King of Malaysia. The validation from a prominent political figure made Islam *Hadhari* a reputable concept to achieve Malaysian modernity. The above extract also illustrates a correlation between Islam *Hadhari* and Vision 2020. However, the emphasis on the Islamic approach indicates a new form of modernity, which seems to divert Islam *Hadhari* from Vision 2020. The focus on religious identity instead of ethnic identity puts the modernity project between 2003 and 2009 outside the parameter of ethnic groups in Malaysia, which, again, seems to stray from the path of Vision 2020. Therefore, Islam *Hadhari* seems like an approach to enhance Vision 2020 rather than to correspond to it. The analysis of Islam *Hadhari* revealed a persistence to adopt an Islamic concept in Malaysian modernity as an alternative model to Western modernity. The analysis also showed that Malaysian modernity was inspired by the beginning of the Islamic state at the time of the Prophet:

Islam is actually a religion that has a successful outcome. This is based on the history of all prophets, in which human beings are taught to be successful and pious, based on the standards set by Allah (the God). Prophet Muhammad, the last prophet, had formed a successful and pious community (Berita Harian, January 21, 2008).

As illustrated in the above extract, cultural modernity in the Malaysian context referred to a successful and pious society. Elevating society based on Islamic conducts suggests an attempt to alter the identity of Malaysians, both Muslims and non-Muslims. The text

included the word 'pious' to describe an ideal community, which means constructing a God-fearing society was deemed necessary to achieve Malaysian modernity. It shows that the cultural modernisation project intended to instil into Malaysians not only Islamic beliefs but also Islamic practices. The emphasis on orderly conduct among citizens in the discourse of Malaysian modernity suggests two points. Firstly, it illustrates boundaries. The teaching of Islam has been believed to be able to equip Malaysian citizens with necessary moral values to resist external influence brought by globalisation. Secondly, it differentiated Malaysian modernity from Western modernity. It shows that the idea of a civilised nation was redefined. Although Malaysia has aimed to reach a level of modernity displayed by developed nations, the characteristics of modern society in modern countries seemed incompatible with Malaysian citizens, hence resulting in the undertaking of an Islamic approach in Malaysian modernity.

## ACKNOWLEDGING THE ROLE OF RELIGION (ISLAM AND ISLAM HADHARI) IN MALAYSIAN MODERNITY

In New Straits Times, there was a number of news articles focussing on the topic of religion. From the headlines alone, it seems that the news articles were structured to cater to diverse religious beliefs among Malaysians. This is based on the words used in the framing of the headlines. Only 15 out of 99 headlines contained the word 'Islam'. The rest of the headlines contained words such as 'religion', 'religious', 'faith', 'unity', 'harmony', 'greatness', 'kind' and 'amity'. This marks the main difference in terms of news style and structure between Berita Harian and New Straits Times. Berita Harian tended to highlight a specific religion and religious group, which are Islam and Muslims. In contrast, New Straits Times seemed to feature the subject of religion in its news headlines using general terms, which suggests its relevance to the general population of Malaysia.

Interestingly, the concept of Islam *Hadhari* only appeared twice across the 99 headlines, although it was a prominent concept during Badawi's premiership. This suggests that New Straits Times attempted to be more inclusive than Berita Harian. On the surface, religion in general seemed to be the focal point in the discourse on Malaysian identity and modernity. However, a more in-depth analysis of the 99 articles published by New Straits Times revealed the significant subject of Islam. In fact, there were 87 news articles that specifically mentioned and highlighted the role of Islam in Malaysian modernity. In this context, Islam subtly appeared as an important subject, which was made relevant for Malaysians in general.

In the articles, the topic of Islam was presented alongside the topic of Islam *Hadhari*. This shows a dissimilarity between Berita Harian and New Straits Times as Berita Harian tended

to separate these two topics from one another. The discourse on Islam and Islam *Hadhari* in New Straits Times suggests that the knowledge of Islam was deemed necessary among urban Malaysians.

The analysis also revealed that the discourse on Islam seemed more comprehensive in New Straits Times. Islam and Islam *Hadhari* were repeatedly stated as the best approach to achieve Malaysian modernity. As Islam and Islam *Hadhari* appeared concurrently in the texts, this suggests that the text producers intended to shape Malaysians' perception of the Islam *Hadhari* concept. It seems that the news articles were structured to constantly remind Malaysians that Islam *Hadhari* was a rational concept in accordance with the teaching of Islam. This raises two important questions: If Islam *Hadhari* is essentially identical to the original teaching of Islam, why is there a need to introduce and promote the concept of Islam *Hadhari* among Malaysians? Why can Islam not be promoted as it is?

In order to find answers to these questions, news articles on Islam and Islam *Hadhari* were carefully examined to point out the primary objective of Islam *Hadhari*. The analysis revealed two main purposes of the Islam *Hadhari* concept. Firstly, Islam *Hadhari* was endorsed by Badawi as his main legacy or contribution to nation building. He seemed to follow in the previous Prime Ministers' footsteps and advocated a political concept. This suggests that Islam *Hadhari* was first and foremost a 'symbol' to represent Badawi. Secondly, the analysis revealed that Islam *Hadhari* was heavily promoted in the main body of the texts as an initiative to 'rebrand' Islam. The negative perception of Islam was acknowledged in the texts. The religion of Islam seemed to be disparaged not only by non-Muslims but also by the Muslim community in Malaysia. The texts point out that Islam is backward and anti-modernity. This implies the need to improve the image of Islam among Malaysians, resulting in the endorsement of Islam *Hadhari*:

It is, in fact, the Institute of Islamic Understanding (Ikim)'s role to promote better understanding of the faith in a world where Islam is perceived as backward and associated with terrorism and violence. We have to deal with intolerance before it is too late. The prime minister has made it a personal crusade to give the world a more modern and compassionate Islam. Islam *Hadhari* encompasses the principle that Muslims must be tolerant and respect others. He asked what went wrong when the level of tolerance towards others is now wafer-thin or none at all. Asri was forthright. When asked why the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims today was difficult, the answer was: 'the problem lies with Muslims, their appearance, their attitude and their focus on petty issues'. Now, that is interesting. When was the last time you heard the voice of religious authority blaming the ummah? He has this to say about the role of mufti in this country: 'He must be responsible

for bringing the knowledge of Islam in this modern era'. His own role? 'My duty is to present Islam in its modern face and get it out of the clutches of conservatives, who have made the religion look obsolete' (New Straits Times, December 16, 2006).

The above extract shows that the discourse on Islam in New Straits Times consists of two keywords: modern and tolerance. It also shows an attempt to alter the general perception of Islam. The text implies that Islam is generally associated with negativity; therefore, it is important and necessary to reform the image of Islam, at least on a national level. This shows a complexity of the role of Islam in the cultural modernisation project. It seems that Malaysian modernity has not only been a project to restructure the Malaysian society, but also a project to restructure the image of Islam. The analysis showed that the ideology to improve the image of Islam is rather complicated and time consuming.

Taking the above extract, for instance, the project to restructure the image of Islam was still articulated in news articles in 2006, three years after the concept of Islam *Hadhari* had been introduced. This suggests that Islam *Hadhari* was not easily accepted, not only by Malaysian non-Muslims but also by Malaysian Muslims. Perhaps, this is the reason why the discourse on Islam was dominant in both Berita Harian and New Straits Times between 2003 and 2009. However, the analysis revealed that New Straits Times contained more news articles on Islam compared to Berita Harian. This raises another question: why is the topic of Islam more prominent in the English language newspaper? It is important to note that Islam is the official religion of the Malay ethnic group. Therefore, Berita Harian is expected to be the main newspaper to largely spread the knowledge of Islam through its news articles.

Although New Straits Times is seen as a universal newspaper that transcends a diverse ethnic background, its actual target readers are Malaysian elites and Malaysian middle class. Therefore, news articles about Islam in New Straits Times were designed to be relevant to the aforementioned groups. Unlike other vernacular newspapers, New Straits Times aims to cater to specific social groups, not ethnic groups. Given that it is not an ethnocentric newspaper, New Straits Times seems to be universal compared to the other vernacular newspapers in Malaysia. Due to its universality, it is able to reach a wider audience, which explains the large number of news articles about Islam in New Straits Times. This suggests that the Malaysian government used the print media not only to improve the image of Islam but also as a platform for '*dakwah*' (preaching) in order to influence the 'most important' social groups in Malaysia to embrace Islam. These groups are considered important not only because they have been the main subjects of Malaysian modernity, but also because they represent modern Malaysians. As Islam was chosen to facilitate Malaysian modernity, Islam, too, needed transformation to appear modern and appealing.

The above extract published in New Straits Times on December 16, 2006, supports this, as it links Islam to the words 'modern' and 'tolerance'. The word 'modern' was the main keyword in the discourse on Islam in New Straits Times, suggesting that it was also the term that news producers wanted Malaysians to associate Islam with. The extract shows that the idea to modernise Islam was not simply an ideology articulated in the mainstream print media. In addition, the 'rebranding' of Islam not only involved commitment from Badawi to promote Islam *Hadhari*, but also commitment from the Institute of Islamic Understanding. This shows the seriousness of the role of Islam in Malaysian modernity.

Although Malaysia is a religiously diverse country, there were only 11 news articles that mentioned the other religions. The disproportionate coverage of religions in New Straits Times illustrates media bias in Malaysia. Although New Straits Times is an English newspaper and is considered universal in terms of audience reachability, its news articles, however, seem constricted. This shows that the contents of New Straits Times were heavily affected and influenced by the Malaysian (Islam-based) government. Interestingly, the news contents of Berita Harian and New Straits Times were not identical, although they were both linked to the Malaysian government. The main difference between these two newspapers was their medium of news reporting. Berita Harian used Malay language, whereas New Straits Times used English. The analysis of these newspapers revealed the significant role of language in the discourse of Malaysian modernity. In this context, language had an influence on readership demographics and news contents, despite the concentration of media ownership. As presented in this section, the subject and knowledge of Islam was more prevalent in New Straits Times than in Berita Harian. This shows a determination to promote the religion of Islam to the other ethnic groups in Malaysia, which also explains why there were more articles about Islam in New Straits Times.

Ironically, in the discourse on Islam in New Straits Times, the word 'tolerance' was repeatedly used alongside the word 'modern'. There are two angles from which to analyse the use of the word 'tolerance' in the texts. Firstly, the word 'tolerance' could have been used to represent not only Islam but also the Muslims. In the above extract, for instance, the text implies the importance of toleration between Muslims and non-Muslims. The text shows that Muslims were strongly encouraged to respect others. Indirectly, they were also advised to respect other people's religious and spiritual beliefs. Interestingly, in New Straits Times, Muslims and Islam were mentioned separately from one another. As shown in the above extract, Muslims only appeared in the text as a subject responsible for the disunity among Malaysians, particularly between Muslims and non-Muslims. This shows that news articles published by the New Straits Times were cautiously structured to avoid any further

misunderstanding about Islam. Furthermore, Islam seems to be the only religion that was protected and defended by New Straits Times, strengthening this argument. The findings also show that there were two objectives of the discourse on Islam in New Straits Times. The first objective was to 'rebrand' Islam as a modern religion, which makes the reported role of Islam in facilitating Malaysia's modernisation project seem appropriate. The second objective was to convince Malaysian elites and the Malaysian middle class to embrace Islam, which makes New Straits Times a platform for '*dakwah*' (preaching). This suggests that the modernisation project not only aimed to bring forth modern and developed Malaysians, but also more Muslims.

Secondly, the word 'tolerance' can be analysed from a news reporting perspective whereby the use of the term is questionable. This is because the imbalanced reporting of religions in New Straits Times actually shows the opposite of toleration, suggesting that the news content and news structure of News Straits Times tended to contradict one another. Although 'tolerance' appeared as the second keyword in the discourse on Islam, New Straits Times failed to provide a clear argument and sufficient texts to illustrate religious tolerance for people of other faiths. In other words, the knowledge of Islam was deemed more important than the knowledge of other religions, which seems to contradict New Straits Times' standpoint to promote toleration. This suggests that the kind of toleration New Straits Times actually signified was the acceptance of Islam among Malaysians.

## CONCLUSION

This article addressed the intangible aspect of Malaysia's modernisation project. Its main intention was to place Malaysia in the discourse of modernity and to argue that being 'modern' does not necessarily mean being 'Western'. To do so, the cultural aspect of Malaysian modernity was investigated. At a fundamental level, this article considered what version of modernity the Malaysian government under Badawi's premiership intended to achieve. This was to explore the continuity of the modernisation project in the post-Mahathir era. The question was also significant because it involves issues of post-colonialism, Islam, Asian values, Malaysian values and 'the West'. The discourse of Malaysian cultural modernity was explored through the analysis of two mainstream newspapers in Malaysia: Berita Harian and New Straits Times. As stated in the method section, these newspapers were chosen because they are controlled by the Malaysian government (Rajaratnam 2009; Mohd Sani 2010). Moreover, mainstream media in Malaysia have functioned as a medium for the Malaysian government to publicise national policies and nation-building plans (Mohd Sani 2005).

The analysis showed that there was a consistent pattern of beliefs. The need to form a Malaysian version of modernity was apparent in both newspapers. In particular, this article focused on the theme of religion. Although other themes were also revealed by the analysis, religion was highlighted because it pointed out the preferred and ideal kind of cultural modernity intended for a diverse Malaysian society. The inclusion of the subject of religion – Islam, in particular – is significant enough to argue that Western modernity or Western society has not always been seen as a role model for developing nations or at least for Malaysia. This also implies that the characteristics of modern society in modern countries seem incompatible with Malaysian society. The need to create an alternative modernity signifies an opposition to Western modernity, which may be due to the country's history of colonialism. Based on the analysis, part of the objective of creating a Malaysian version of modernity was to restructure Malaysia's post-colonial condition.

During the era of Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, cultural modernity referred to a successful and pious society. The word 'pious' interrelated with the phrase 'an ideal society'. This means that the construction of a God-fearing society was a key process for achieving modernity. Evidently, Islam was integrated into the idea of modern society. The analysis pointed out an attempt to alter the identity of Malaysians in general, both Muslims and non-Muslims. Islam was the preferred 'tool' to modernise the society because it has been believed to be useful in two respects. First, the Islamic approach seems appropriate to equip the society with necessary moral values in order to resist external influence brought by globalisation. Second, Islam can be considered the best option to differentiate Malaysian modernity from Western modernity.

Through cultural modernisation, the government intended to instil in society both Islamic beliefs and Islamic practices. This is an interesting discovery because it contradicts the government's notion that non-Malays are free to practise their chosen religion. Another interesting discovery is that modernity in the context of Malaysia does not necessarily mean 'new' because Malaysia is inspired by development that took place in the past rather than present times. In this context, the Islamic excellence during the time of Prophet Muhammad is the preferred model of modernity, not the West. This study thus presents a concept of modernity beyond the West, whereby Islam and Muslims are incorporated in the general discourse of modernity. It is apparent that the West was not seen as an example of imitation.

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