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Malay Representations of Modernity, the Present and the Future

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Following a series of recent events in which state-appointed religious authorities were involved in ‘moral policing’ and the splitting up of families in which Muslims were found to have non-Muslim spouses, US-based writer Sadanand Dhume wrote:

Malaysia has done much to deserve its reputation for economic dynamism and social harmony, but a flurry of actions by the country’s hard-line Islamic authorities illustrates the contradictions within the Malaysian model, and raises doubts about the country’s effort to rise to the ranks of developed nations by 2020. In a globalized and increasingly competitive world, Malaysia cannot expect to modernize its economy without modernizing its society. In practical terms, this means choosing the universal values of freedom of conscience and freedom of inquiry over the narrow dictates of Islamic orthodoxy.¹

Such reporting of the Malaysian situation juxtaposing Islamic orthodoxy against universalized modernity raises fundamental questions regarding the conceptualization of the Malaysian (and specifically Muslim-Malay) experience of modernization/modernity, and representations of the present and future more generally. This paper has as its focus teleological understandings, aspirations and priorities in Malaysia, while also exploring understandings of the local engagement with modernity and the implications for Malay identity. Malay political leaders have had a tendency to closely link Malay fortunes and identity with future-oriented visions and goals. Indeed, a specific Malaysian (and Mahathiran) legacy to the world is the now much vaunted concept of ‘Vision 2020’—so many nations now seem to have just such a vision. The ‘salvation of the Malays’² (and Malaysians more generally) is seen to lie in the future. But how is that future envisioned? What does this ‘future’ suggest about the present and those aspects in the present needing change? What are the implications for understandings of modernity, religion and their contemporary inter-relationship?

Despite the unity of intent and pursuit of modernity implied the ‘Vision 2020’ concept, this paper argues that there is, in fact, no single vision or path, or even conception of the ‘future’ that is operating in Malaysia. Rather the ‘future’ and

¹ Sadanand Dhume (2007) ‘Malaysia Backpedals on Modernity’, *YaleGlobal*, 3 May, <<http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=9133>>, (Accessed 07.06.07); See also Farish A. Noor, ‘Malaysia’s Fumbling Modernity’, *OtherMalaysia*, 13 May 2007, <<http://www.othermalaysia.org/content/view/full/80/55/>>, (Accessed 07.06.07).

² Za’ba (1923) ‘The Salvation of the Malays II’, *Malay Mail*, 22.12.23; Za’ba (2000) ‘Jalan Keselamatan bagi Orang-orang Melayu’ in Abdullah Hussein & Khalid M. Hussain (eds.) *Pendeta Za’ba dalam Kenangan*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, pp.188-209.

modernity are sites of contest—wherein different understandings and the associated implications for what it means to be Malay (and Malaysian) are brought into dialogue and even conflict. A consequence of modernity is the existential challenge of living in ‘a world of radical doubt’³ and rapid change. Indeed, ‘change’ may provide an element of continuity, for ‘openness to change’ (and, contrarily, ‘resistance to change’) have long been held as characterizing features of Malay identity.⁴ The desire for ‘progress’ has been a constant, but so, too, has Islam in its various expressions and concerns for life in the hereafter. While the writer cited above interpreted recent Islamic developments in Malaysia as a ‘backpedaling on modernity’, how are we to interpret such attempts to institutionalize religious faith in today’s world? Is this a dialectical reaction to, or retreat from, modernity or the product of a dialogical engagement with, even expression of a localised experience of, modernity?

In order gain an understanding of the ways in which the ‘politics of representation’ are being played out in the contemporary Malaysian setting, this paper will i) comment on some general understandings of modernity and time, ii) explore Malay beliefs concerning this life and the next and the implications for behaviour in the present; and, iii) look at the location and nature of the ‘future’ in the context of contemporary representations of ‘*Melayu*’, and in the context of understandings within Islam and debate about ‘modernity’ more generally. While Islam is integral to Malay life and experience, it has not one but many voices and expressions within which modernity and the future are variously located.

i) Conceptions of Modernity and Time

Social science theorists have posited modernity as being in a disjunctive relationship with a traditional past. Modernity is characterized as ‘future-oriented’ while tradition

³ Shamsul A.B. (1995) ‘Inventing Certainties: The *dakwah* persona in Malaysia’ in Wendy James (ed.), *The Pursuit of Certainty: Religious and Cultural Formulations*, London & NY: Routledge, pp.112-133, esp. p.113.

⁴ As an example of openness to change, Sir Stamford Raffles describes the Malays as lacking ‘bigotry and inveterate prejudice’ leaving them ‘open to receive new impressions, and adopt new examples’. (‘Introduction’, *Malay Annals translated from the Malay Language by the Late Dr John Leyden*, London: Longman, 1821, pp.xi-xiii; republished as Hooker, Virginia Matheson & M.B. Hooker (eds.) (2001) *John Leyden’s Malay Annals*, MBRAS Reprint 20, Selangor.

is a temporal orientation to, and incorporation of the past, in present practices.⁵ There are two basic theoretical approaches to modernity: ‘acultural’ and ‘cultural’.

Acultural theory attempts to describe general trends observable across cultures, for example the growth of reason (scientific consciousness, secular outlook, instrumental rationality and loss of traditional beliefs and practices) and social transformations as a result of increased mobility, urbanisation, industrialization, access to information, etc.⁶ In this view modernity is inherently dynamic and universalizing. It relies on reason, inquiry and doubt; it involves the ‘emptying’ and separation of time and space; it has disembedding mechanisms which lift social activity out ‘from localized contexts, reorganizing social relations across large time-space distances’⁷—the end result of which is a kind of uniformity across cultures. Critics argue that as ‘modernity’ has been largely a Western philosophical and cultural project (and, indeed, has been a key element in the construction and ‘narration’ of Europe and the West),⁸ this infers that the end result of modern transformations globally will be some kind of Westernised modernity.

Postmodern critique has also fundamentally questioned beliefs in ‘progress’, grand narratives and overarching theories of historical and social change by deconstructing the signs, symbols, discourses and theories that structure human interaction and social order, thereby exposing the asymmetries of power involved. In this view ‘science’ no longer has a privileged position, but is but one of a plurality of claims to knowledge.

In response to such critique, scholars such as Giddens and Beck have proposed the concept of ‘reflexive modernity’, wherein the ‘reflexive appropriation of knowledge’ results in the production of systematic knowledge about social life which is integral to

⁵ Giddens, Anthony (1990) *The Consequences of Modernity*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, p.102.

⁶ Taylor, Charles & Benjamin Lee, *Multiple Modernities Project: Modernity and Difference*, <<http://www.sas.upenn.edu/transcult/promad.html>> (Accessed 07.06.07). Instead, some scholars separate societal modernization from cultural modernization, inferring that social transformations are driven by general forces quite apart from cultural specificities. Refer: Gaonkar, Dilip Parameshwar (2001) ‘On Alternative Modernities’ in Gaonkar, Dilip Parameshwar (ed.) *Alternative Modernities*, Durham: Duke University Press, pp.1-23, esp.1-2.

⁷ Giddens 1990: 19,53.

⁸ Bhaba, Homi K. (1990) ‘DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation’ in Homi K. Bhaba (ed.) *Nation and Narration*, London & New York: Routledge, pp.291-322; Kaschuba, Wolfgang (2007 forthcoming) ‘Old and New Europe: Representations, Imaginations, Stagings’ in Tsypylma Darieva & Wolfgang Kaschuba (eds.) *Representations on the Margins of Europe*, Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag.

system reproduction.⁹ In other words, social actors' reflexive monitoring and 'representations' of reality have a role in shaping the actual social order and reality. In this view, the world is not 'post-modern', but rather is entering a period in which 'the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalized and universalized than before'.¹⁰ Somewhat reminiscent of Alvin Toffler's book *Future Shock*, Zygmunt Bauman has proposed the concept of 'liquid modernity' wherein the world is inexorably transient - fluid, impermanent, mutable, with new frontiers of experience, knowledge and uncharted terrains for identity formation and social reordering.¹¹

By contrast, cultural theory (which includes Eisenstadt's proposal of 'multiple modernities'¹² and related conceptualizations of 'alternative modernities'¹³) gives greater emphasis to different localized experiences of modernity, which includes multiple and varied experiences within Europe and the West itself.¹⁴ Because starting points, issues and experiences may be different in different cultural contexts, there is the possibility that the end products of the engagement with modernity may also be different. Thongchai Winichakul, for example, has argued that the nation-state as developed in Europe (to which Western modernity could be added) is only an EARLY model and not THE MODEL.¹⁵ The cultural approach has a wider currency in post-colonial and post-socialist settings where 'modernity' was filtered either through Western colonialism or Soviet internationalism, respectively. As Malaysian scholar Raymond Lee has pointed out, 'postmodernism circumvented the issue of non-Western/Third world development and found little or no resonance in Third World debates on the consequences of modernity' and, it could be added, within Third World feminism seeking individual rights through an appeal to reason and

⁹ Giddens 1990: 19,53; See also Giddens, Anthony (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Cambridge: Polity; Beck, Ulrich, Giddens, Anthony and Lash, Scott (1994) *Reflexive Modernization*, Cambridge: Polity.

¹⁰ Giddens 1990: 3.

¹¹ Toffler, Alvin (1971) *Future Shock*, Toronto: Bantam Books; Bauman, Zygmunt (2000) *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity.

¹² Eisenstadt, Shmuel (2000) 'Multiple Modernities', *Daedalus*, 129(1): 1-29; Sachsenmair, Dominic, Riedel, Jens and Eisenstadt, Shmuel (eds.) (2002) *Reflections on Multiple Modernities*, Leiden: Brill.

¹³ Gaonkar, Dilip Parameshwar (ed.) (2001).

¹⁴ Sachsenmair et al. 2002.

¹⁵ Winichakul, Thongchai (2003) 'Writing at the Interstices: Southeast Asian Historians and Postnational Histories in Southeast Asia' in Abu Talib Ahmad & Tan Liok Ee (eds.) *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History*, Athens: Ohio University Press, p17.

respect for free thought and expression.¹⁶ ‘Multiple modernities’ should thus, Lee asserts, be regarded as an outcome of globalization and the spread of modernity and not of its demise.¹⁷

In a globalizing world, modernity is seen as a system of cultural flows¹⁸ - heterogeneous, multidirectional and complex. Modernity is fractured as a totality and recontextualised in spatial and temporary specificity. Bunnell adds that the ‘multiplicity of experienced modernities ... forged through shifting networked relations of [global-local] interconnection’ resists ready packaging within specific bounded topographies, thus also unsettling the West/rest binary.¹⁹

Critics of the cultural theory position would argue that while local experiences may differ, there is just one modernity and local divergences can be explained recalcitrance, that is by the persistence of ‘tradition’, failures to modernize, and by reactions to modernity.

What is clear is the modernity is complex phenomena with many dimensions. It is at once a philosophy, an outlook and approach to thought and knowledge, a mode of social life or organization and a cultural, even, political project. Lee interprets it as ‘a systematic drive to seek world-mastery’.²⁰ Simply put, it might be seen as an approach to understanding and representing (and strategy for living in) the present and an approach to preparing for (and shaping) the future. Among modernity’s institutional contributions have been systematic capitalist production and the nation-state—the latter being premised on a particular conception of linear time that has been traced back to Newton’s concept of mathematical time.²¹

¹⁶ Khoo Gaik Cheng (2006) *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature*, Vancouver: UBC Press, p.129, citing Maznah Mohamad (1994) ‘Poststructuralism, power and third world feminism’, *Kajian Malaysia*, 12(1-2):119-43.

¹⁷ Lee, Raymond L.M. (2006) ‘Reinventing Modernity: Reflexive Modernization vs Liquid Modernity vs Multiple Modernities’, *European Journal of Social Theory* 9(3): 355-368.

¹⁸ Appadurai, Arjun (1996) *Modernity at Large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

¹⁹ Bunnell, Tim (2004) *Malaysia, Modernity and the Multimedia Super Corridor: A Critical Geography of Intelligent Landscapes*, London & N.Y.: RoutledgeCurzon, p.5.

²⁰ Lee 2006: 364.

²¹ Walsh, Kevin (1992) *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-modern World*, London: Routledge, p.10, citing Whitrow, G.J. (1988) *Time in History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.131; and Newton, Isaac (1687) *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*.

A leading theorizer of nationalism, Benedict Anderson, has argued that in Europe a fundamental change was necessary in the way ‘time’ was apprehended before it was ‘possible to “think” the nation’.²² The medieval Christian mind, he argued, conceived of a simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present. For example, in the Biblical account Abraham’s intended sacrifice of his son Isaac prefigured the sacrifice of Christ. The two events were not linked temporally or causally in a horizontal time dimension, but were linked vertically to Divine Providence. Further citing Auerbach, ‘the here and now is ... [not] a mere link in an earthly chain of events, it is *simultaneously* something which has always been, and will be fulfilled in the future; and strictly, in the eyes of God, it is something eternal, something omnitemperal, something already consummated in the realm of fragmentary earthly event’.²³ By contrast, ‘nation’ in its contemporary sense is conceived as moving calendrically through ‘homogeneous, empty time’. Its history is understood as a progression of causation and effect, of observed continuities and changes/conjunctures embedded in linear and measurable timescale. Simultaneity was, thus, no longer ‘marked by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar’.²⁴ Thus, it was possible to imagine a national community of individuals existing contemporaneously, linked by a common history and cultural experience and moving together in time towards a common future.

It may be that Anderson is overstating the extent of the transition that occurred in this process of secularizing (or desacralising) of ‘time’ and, as some would have it, the birthing of ‘history’. This process also involved a refocusing of attachments to a body of believers and earthly feudal (but spiritually-based) kingdoms to identification with other citizens of the nation. Thus, Giddens characterises religious cosmologies—‘modes of belief and ritual practice providing providential interpretation of human life and nature’—as ‘pre-modern’, indicating that ‘a world structured mainly by humanly created risks has little place for divine influences, or indeed for the magical propitiation of cosmic forces or spirits’. Yet he concedes that because of the

²² Anderson, Benedict (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Ed., London: Verso, p.22.

²³ Anderson 1991:24 citing Auerbach, Erich (1957) *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Trans. Willard Trask, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, p.64.

²⁴ Anderson 1991: 24

possibility of disaster or unwelcome happenings, even ‘where the hold of traditional religion becomes relaxed ... notions of fate (*fortuna*) prevail’.²⁵ However, such a view of modernity fails to explain the persistence, even resurgence, of religion in the West and elsewhere.

Further challenging the view that the ‘modern’ linear view of history was the direct product of only European thought, Southeast Asia historian Anthony Reid suggests that interacting with periodisations based on a ‘cyclical pattern of dynasties’ were religious narratives in both Islam and Buddhism, which ‘introduced a sacred history of much greater length than the dynastic cycle’. Humankind was seen as living ‘in the interval between divine revelation and messianic deliverance’ and thus ‘many religious narratives ... in practice assume[d] a linear quality’.²⁶ Fifteenth century Islamic scholarship concerned with *tarikh* (history) scholarship—preceding European modernity emerging from the seventeenth century onwards—gave due regard for date and fact in seeking to give rational explanation of occurrences with take place in time. Al-Sakhawi (1427-97), for example, described the knowledge of history as ‘instructive’ and as increasing man’s intellectual capacity.²⁷ Indeed, modernity and the Western Enlightenment have been seen as owing much to Islamic scholarship.²⁸

It is suggested that the concept of ‘homogeneous empty (and linear) time’ in which human beings exercised free will with divine sanction and foreknowledge was present alongside (and contesting) that of the ‘eternal present’ in which human existence was to some (varying) degree predetermined by divine will. This has been the case in Islamic as in Christian theology. Modernity and its (Western) correlate secularism are constituted through a reflexive relationship with ‘tradition’ and ‘religion’, thereby needing both for they themselves to exist. Some perspectives within Islam (as in

²⁵ Giddens 1990: 111

²⁶ Reid, Anthony (ed.) (1993) *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era: Trade, Power, and Belief*, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, p.8.

²⁷ Johns, A.H. (1979) ‘The Turning Image: Myth & Reality in Malay Perceptions of the Past’ in Anthony Reid & David Marr (eds.), *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Heinemann Educational Books (Asia) Ltd, pp.58-9.

²⁸ James Wong Wing On (2000) ‘The Islamic Bridge’, *Malaysiakini*, 08 Jan. <http://malaysiakini.com/archives_news/2000/weekend89_1_2000.htm>; Recent publications include: Wallace-Murphy, Tim (2006) *What Islam did for Us: Understanding Islam’s Contribution to Western Civilization*, Watkins Publishing; Hamilton Morgan, Michael (2007) *Lost History: The Enduring Legacy of Muslim Scientists, Thinkers and Artists*, National Geographic Books.

other religions and New Age spiritualities) have been produced or constituted through interaction with, and sometimes in reaction to, modernity and modern living. While these may be simply modernity's reflexive 'other' (either within the dialectic of modernity itself, as per Giddens, or as its external 'other'), such appeals to spirituality may also be jointly derivative of religious perspectives AND modernity. An added complication is that human beings are able to simultaneously hold to apparently contradictory philosophies and beliefs (with varying degrees of discomfort), thus Malays, for example, might be modernists in outlook, hold to a scripturalist Islam while also seeking the services of a *bomoh* (spiritualist healer) as the need arises. Further, belief and practice may not be in direct correlation to each other.

Such apprehensions of time, modernity and the issues raised provide a backdrop against which perspectives in the Malay (and wider Malaysian) context can now be viewed.

ii) Malay Beliefs and Experience

It is observed that understandings and beliefs concerning the hereafter have a great bearing on behaviour in this present life. There are two aspects: a) beliefs concerning life death and the hereafter; and, b) beliefs concerning divine providence in this life and concerning the extent of predestination, human agency and free will. Malay encounters with, and responses to, modernity will then be briefly discussed in section c) below.

a) Beliefs concerning this Life and the Next

Muslims are exhorted to 'enjoin that which is just/good and forbid that which is evil' (in Malay, '*menegakkan amar ma'ruf dan nahi munkar*'), for God will 'reward those who believe and work righteous deeds'. It is anticipated that the pious and righteous are assured a place in Paradise, while 'purgatory or hell awaits the wicked and the unbelieving'.²⁹

²⁹ Mahathir (1986) *The Challenge*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, pp.104,14.

One's future in the afterlife is a matter of some concern. According to Mohd. Nor bin Ngah, in popular Malay belief death takes place with the separation of the soul from the body, whereupon the soul enters an intervening state between death and the day of Resurrection.³⁰ The separation of the soul from the body by the Angel of death, 'Izrail, can be a painful process hence verses of the Quran (Al-Fatihah) are read over the dying to enable a painless separation. *Talqin* prayers read over the grave at the conclusion of burial rituals are as a reminder to the dead to correctly answer the questioning of two 'large black frightful angels (named Mungkar and Nangkir)³¹ ... to determine whether he or she is an infidel, a hypocrite, or a believer'. If correctly answered a beautiful angel assures the dead person of 'the mercy of Allah and the delights of Paradise'.³² Thus, the faithful are ever conscious of fulfilling their religious duties in this life so as to ensure not only a place in Paradise, but also a safe passage to that next life.

Such concerns are not a recent phenomenon and have also been expressed within earlier Malay conceptual frameworks, with varying implications for the associated social and political order. In his study of Malay polity on the eve of colonial rule, Milner observed that 'status in the afterlife was a constant concern for Malays'. An individual's *nama* (status, rank, title, name, and therefore identity) were 'in the hands of the Raja' whose role it was to order the social and political universe around himself by giving titles and enhancing the *nama* of his subjects and thereby also of his kingdom. Importantly, one's *nama* in this life 'determined one's fortunes in the world to come'. As evidence, Milner cites the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) wherein Sultan Mansur Shah is described as concerned with the theological question as to whether people will abide forever in either heaven or hell. When the Sultan of Terengganu entertained in court a Christian missionary, he 'asked questions about "the judgment day, and the world to come"'. He also cites Malay historian Abdullah Hadi bin Haji Hasan in his *Sejarah "Alam Melayu"* (History of the Malay World)

³⁰ Mohd. Nor relates that, while the reading of the Quran is central in religious education and practice, not all Malays (present and past) have (had) full understanding of the Arabic language. Thus, Malay knowledge of Islamic teachings has often been based on a range of religious texts in the Malay language (in Arabic or Jawi script). Mohd Nor bin Ngah (1985) 'Islamic World-view of Man, Society and Nature among the Malays in Malaysia' in Mohd. Taib Osman (ed.) *Malaysian World-View*, Singapore: ISEAS, pp.11-3.

³¹ For questioning of such practices and beliefs, see the dialogue in Keris Mas, *Jungle of Hope*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1990, p.10.

³² Mohd. Nor: 12-13.

written in the 1920s who commented that ‘while Chinese devoted their lives of industry, Malays were concerned with the search of *nama (menchari nama)*’.³³

The 1930s in particular were a period of rapid social transformation in British Malaya. There was a sense of participation in modernity. As one commentator writing in the Kuala Lumpur-based *Majlis* newspaper put it: ‘so much of what we read in Malay newspapers and magazines has to do with modernity’. But he claimed that the only way for a race (*bangsa*) to be aware and have progress (*sedar dan maju*) was to hold to their religion. As Islam was the most respected and true religion, wasn’t it the responsibility of all to point Malays in the direction of our religion (Islam)? He continues: ‘actually whoever truly holds to his religion, it is they who will be honored from this life until the next life to come’.³⁴

Flowing from the Islamic modernist movement originating in Cairo in the late 19th century under the influence of scholars such as Mohamad Abduh and Rashid Rida, there was intense debate also in Malaya as to the kinds of Islamic teachings and approaches to interpretation that should be followed. In challenging the teachings of conservative/traditional Islamic teachers, Keris Mas has one of his chief protagonists in his novel *Jungle of Hope* identifying with *kaum muda* teachings declaring: ‘Islam is not just preparation for death and beyond. It also has teachings for life in this world’.³⁵ Lack of Malay progress was being attributed to a preoccupation with the next life and lack of application of Islamic teachings in this life.

³³ Milner, A. C. (1982) *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule*, Tuscon Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, pp.104-5,155; citing p.155 in Medhurst, W. (1930) ‘Journal of a Voyage up the East Coast of the Malayan Peninsula’, *Quarterly Chronicle of Transactions of the London Missionary Society* (Jan. 1930), pp.125-56, and (July 1830), pp.171-92.

³⁴ ‘Maka tidakkah wajib kita semua menunjukan haluan kita kepada agama kita (Islam), pada hal telah kita ketahui dengan jelasnya adalah agama kita (Islam) itu ialah semulia-mulia dan sebenar-benar agama. Dan sayogianya bagi barangsiapa yang berpegang kepadanya dengan sebenarnya. Mereka itulah kelak akan mendapat kemuliaan dari dunia hingga ke akhirat kelak.’ Samat, ‘Ke Manakah Orang-Orang Melayu Patut Menuju Dengan Sebenarnya?’ (In which direction should Malays go?) *Majlis*, 6 May 1935, p.8. (Transliteration from Jawi made available on the Malay Concordance Website, ANU, Canberra courtesy of Mark Emmanuel, Raimy Che Ross and the National University of Singapore) (Translation into English is mine.)

³⁵ Keris Mas 1990: 30.

In a more recent wave of Islamic resurgence to break of Malaysian shores - in the 1970s and 1980s amongst university students studying locally and abroad³⁶ - emphasis has been placed on *dakwah* or calling Muslims to be better Muslims by going back to the source of their faith in the Quran and Hadith, practising piety and observing the five pillars of the Islamic faith. This has had implications not only in terms of the variety of *dakwah* movements that blossomed forth in Malaysia but also in terms of changes to social organization and political practice as people (after graduation and entering government and professional positions) sought to apply their belief in Islam as a total way of life (*ad-Deen*). If individuals and society were properly observing the tenets of their faith, then there should be a reduction of ‘social ills’ including crime, corruption, moral temptation and transgression and so forth—indeed, an ideal constituency for a rightly guided political and religious leadership!

This raises the perhaps more controversial and contested issue concerning divine predestination and the extent to which human agency can in fact influence outcomes in this life and the next. This issue has been of vital interest to a political leadership seeking to steer the independent Malaysian nation and society towards modernity and ‘developed nation’ status.

b) Beliefs concerning Divine Preordainment and Human Agency

‘Life and death, dearth and plenty, are in the hands of God ... in the hands of *Allah* the Almighty. ... Joy and good fortune are received in utter thankfulness. Received with a thousand *Alhamdulillah* - Praise be to Allah. And when suffering and calamity befall them, these are also received in thankfulness. Also with a thousand *Alhamdulillah*.’ wrote Malaysian national laureate, Shahnun Ahmad, in describing the beliefs of the leading characters of his book, *Ranjau Sapanjang Jalan* (literally, ‘Traps along the Way’, but given the English title ‘No Harvest But a Thorn’ by

³⁶ This was part of a worldwide resurgence in which Islam became prominent on the global political stage with the oil crisis of the 1970s and the 1979 Iranian Revolution. For details of developments in Malaysia see: Nagata, Judith (1984) *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam: Religious Radicals and Their Roots*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press; Zainar Anwar (1987) *Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia: Dakwah Among the Students*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications; Chandra Muzaffar (1987) *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia*, Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti.

translator Adibah Amin.³⁷ Peasant farmers, Lahuma and his wife Jeha, live in the remote village of Banggul Derdap in Kedah, where Shahnnon himself was born in 1933. Every year they face enormous challenges in farming their fourteen *relongs* (about 18.7 acres) of paddy to provide sufficient food for their seven children. But they hold on to their faith in divine providence, for, as is repeated in the novel almost as a chorus, ‘Life and death, dearth and plenty, are in the hands of God. In the hands of Allah the Almighty.’

Shahnnon goes on to further explain Lahuna’s beliefs concerning divine providence. ‘Each Human being born into the world has his *rezeki* - his share of food and the world’s goods. God allots this *rezeki*. ... It was up to God to decide the kind of life each person was to have. It was up to *Allah* the Almighty’.³⁸ Some commentators have interpreted the perspective portrayed in this book as a kind of grinding fatalism and passivity.³⁹ God allocates one’s portion and it is up to us to accept it with thankfulness. Other commentators have interpreted Shahnnon’s understanding and intent as one of encouraging hard work, determination and persistence despite the difficulties that come along in life.⁴⁰ A key to understanding is provided in the text itself: ‘Lahuma never made a value judgement on the *rezeki* given. For good and plentiful *rezeki*, one needed faith in hard work as a way of life. One must extend one’s land. But if one led a beggar’s life, it was still *rezeki*.’

As Dina Zaman explains: ‘The sixth pillar of Faith (*Imam*, as distinct from the Five Pillars of Islam) is belief in *al-qada’ wa al-qadar* (divine preordainment). In short, it means that Allah has decreed all in existence’ in accordance with His knowledge and wisdom. ‘Even if one faces evil right in the face, it does not mean no good will [not] come out of it.’ But Dina asks, if God has decreed all things ‘do we then just let things be, and not plan for the future?’⁴¹ There are actually various positions within

³⁷ Shahnnon Ahmad (1972) *No Harvest but a Thorn (Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan)*, Trans. Adibah Amin, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, p.1; See also Shahnnon Ahmad (1966) *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan*, Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Melayu.

³⁸ Shahnnon Ahmad 1972: 5

³⁹ Banks, David J. (1987) *From Class to Culture: Social Conscience in Malay Novels Since Independence*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, p.118.

⁴⁰ Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir (1982) ‘Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan: The Story of a Peasant Hero’, *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 16(1): 26-47, See pp.36-43.

⁴¹ Dina Zaman (2007) *I am Muslim*, Kuala Lumpur: Silverfishbooks, p.167.

Islamic Scholarship on the issue of God's preordination as against human free will and agency. There is the view that human beings are essentially free agents who can choose between faith and obedience to God or rebellion and infidelity, while others would see creation and humankind as subject God's fixed, predetermined order (Riddell 2001:24). The tenth century scholar al-Ash'ari held that human beings had 'a measure of freedom to choose between options determined by God, with God knowing what options would be chosen before the event'. However, as Riddell further comments, this 'issue of predestination versus free will has remained live throughout Islamic history', including in the Malay-Indonesian world.⁴² Dina Zaman again: 'Islam is a dynamic guide to virtuous living, for its people to cultivate a life and a world that will reward them on earth and in the Afterworld. ... As Muslims believe, you can plan, but in the end it is God that decides your fate.'⁴³

c) The Challenge of Modernity

Malay engagement with modernity has also been thoroughgoing. As has already been indicated, when reading the Malay language newspapers of the 1930s one is struck by the sense that writers had that these were modern times. This was particularly so in the Straits Settlement of Singapore, which was at that time the centre of Malay intellectual production and the newspaper industry. There were many challenges - not the least because of the large influx of migrant workers from China and India to provide labour for the tin mining and plantation sectors on the peninsula, while increasingly taking up small business opportunities and challenging the self-perspectives and ways of life of the Malay community.

It is significant that this modernity (often associated with the West, but also with Japan and with Indonesia - the latter for its literary developments) was filtered through a colonial (and later post-colonial) grid. Modernity came from 'outside' and was seen as carrying some less desirable cultural and moral elements. Thus, Malay responses to modernity have been ambivalent and complex. On the one hand Malays have seen themselves as 'modern' and 'civilised' in contrast to the 'less-advanced'

⁴² Riddell, Peter (2001) *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, pp.25-9.

⁴³ Dina Zaman 2007: 17,70

tribal peoples such as the *orang asli* of the Malayan peninsula. On the other hand, Malays have seen themselves as ‘backward’⁴⁴ and progress and modernity as something to strive after and appropriate so as to improve not only their material wellbeing, but also their self-image and the reputation of Malays as a people, race and religious community (*bangsa* and *umat*). Modernity has been feminised⁴⁵ and ‘occidentalised’⁴⁶ - seen as both seductive and threatening; something to be possessed, something to which the ruling (English-educated) elites had been particularly attracted, but of which others (especially the vernacular and Islamic-educated new middle class and elites) were more critical.⁴⁷

Islamic reformists (the *kaum muda* or ‘young group’) were working for a modernity based on individual reason (*ijtihad*) and a contemporary application of Islam as revealed in the original sources of the Quran and Hadith. There is the view that Islam (and not the West) was the source of Malay modernity because Islam was responsible even before the coming of Westerners to the region for bringing higher learning and culture and initiating the push for general mass literacy and education (based on the need to be able to read the Quran and fulfil religious obligations).⁴⁸ But *kaum muda* views were not uncontested as various schools of thought and political and religious interests circulated, including traditionalist Islam or the *kaum tua* (old group), Sufism, pre-Islamic *adat* (custom) and traditional royalty which claimed authority over Malay religion and custom.

Malaysian scholars, especially those working to advance women’s rights and welfare, describe a contemporary contest between modernity, *adat* (custom or tradition) and Islam. Modernity (especially individual rights and freedoms and democratic practices - as symbolized by modern, educated women either with the *tudung* head covering or without it) and Malay *adat* (as symbolized in contemporary Malay film by women

⁴⁴ Lat (c.1985) ‘Cartoon: President Reagan’s conception of Malaysia’ in *Entah lah MAK ...!*, Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing Sdn Bhd, p.52.

⁴⁵ Ali Sanat (1941) ‘Wak Ketok cartoon column depicting the (semi-clothed) “Woman of Today”’, *Utusan Zaman*, 12 July, p.16.

⁴⁶ Cartoon depicting a Western Woman and an entranced male from the Malay elite, S.B. Ally, *Warta Jenaka*, 6 Jan. 1938, p.10.

⁴⁷ Cartoon of monkey’s dancing, Abdullah Abas, *Warta Jenaka*, 12 Nov. 1936, p.18. (Such dancing is regarded as improper in Malay-Muslim culture, as indicated by ulama’s surprise in the picture.)

⁴⁸ Syed Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas (1972) *Islam Dalam Sejarah dan Kebudayaan Melayu* (Islam in Malay History and Culture), Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, pp.22-4, 50-1

wearing a sarong tied under the arms but exposing the shoulders) are somewhat contrarily mobilized together (with either *adat* or modernity in the mediating role) in challenging a revitalizing patriarchy derived from particular interpretations of Islam and Islamic culture (symbolized in varying degrees of full body covering).⁴⁹

Therefore, modernity is seen as having multiple faces: a Western, colonial (or neo-colonial) face; an older one of Arab-Indian Islamic origins; an 'Asian', especially Japanese, face, and a contemporary progressive Malay face. Scholars have seen the region of Southeast Asia as outwardly oriented with its 'genius' being its ability to draw upon the latest in thought and accommodate or 'localise' it in the Malay context.⁵⁰ Thus, various waves of change (a more recent one being Western modernity) have been incorporated into a basically modernist, outward-looking indigenous Malay mind-set. While individual concerns regarding the 'future' in the sense of life in the hereafter, are ever-present in the Malay psyche, 'modernity' and the 'future' (in both a temporal and spiritual sense) have also been central to Malaysian government thinking and social planning.

iii) Locating the Future ... The Centrality of the Future

The Malaysian state has since independence in 1957 been a 'developmentalist' state seeking to bring 'development' and progress. Since even prior to independence, the practice and discipline of five-yearly national plans was implemented and continues to the present day in the form of the 9th Malaysia Plan. The latter is part of the longer term Vision 2020 programme first proclaimed by Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1991. By the year 2020 Malaysia, it is hoped, will finally achieve 'developed nation' status. Indeed, during the early years after independence, 'development' was consciously applied as a weapon against communist insurgency, to ameliorate poverty particularly amongst rural Malays (and others) and as a means to unite the nation in working towards a common purpose and in support of a government and ruling party seen to be 'delivering the goods'. 'Development' was

⁴⁹ Khoo Gaik Cheng 2006: 84,132; Wazir Jahan Karim (1992) *Women and Culture: Between Malay adat and Islam*, Boulder, CO: Westview.

⁵⁰ Wolters, O.W. (1999) *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University.

regarded as an imperative essential to national survival and success. The nation and its people were to be set on a trajectory towards an imagined ‘modern, developed and prosperous’ future.

a) Locating the Future ... in the ‘Future’ - the teleology of Modernity and Development

This practice of ‘development’ as applied in the post World War II ‘Third’ and ‘developing’ worlds has been seen by its Western advocates as derivative of 18th century European Enlightenment thought which held that systematic thinking might be applied in all areas of human activity, including the governmental and economic spheres. Poverty and social inequalities could be addressed through rational policy making and implementation. However, predating and prefiguring such intellectual developments in Europe, fourteenth century North African scholar Abdul Rahman ibn Khaldun also conceived of human civilisation as developing from nomadism to sedentary and increasingly diverse and sophisticated or ‘civilised’ societies. The human actor and society were central to ‘history’; and ‘civilisation’ emerged as human beings were able to supply basic needs and had time to also culturally embellish their society with arts, institutions, symbols, signs etc. However, over-investment in a luxury and decadence that was superfluous to practical survival resulted in the civilisation’s decline, lending a cyclical view to the trajectory of human history and ‘development’.⁵¹

By contrast, the linear perspective of twentieth century development proponents indicates a belief that ongoing improvement in the human and national condition is possible through concerted human effort. This has clearly been the case in Malaysia where successive leaders have emphasised the importance of modern science, technology, knowledge and thinking. ‘Nature’ is to be developed and utilised for the national good. ‘Knowledge’ and understandings of the functioning of human society

⁵¹ Farish A. Noor (2000) ‘From Majapahit to Putrajaya: the *kris* as a Symptom of Civilizational Development and Decline’, *Southeast Asia Research*, 8(3): 239-79, See pp.240-3.

can assist in the ‘engineering’ a new Malaysian society and state. Malaysians also aspired to be successful and to be recognised as such on the world stage.⁵²

Particular attention was given in Malaysia in the 1960s and 1970s to cultural and other factors hindering development. Shanon Ahmad’s novel writing briefly cited above must be seen as part of this general discourse, as also the writings of Dr Mahathir who explicitly discussed those factors which he saw as hindering Malay development.

He identified ‘fatalism’ as characterizing the Malay attitude to life as illustrated in the Malay axiom ‘*Rezeki sa-chapak tak akan jadi sa-gantang*’, or ‘One’s lot of a quart will never become a gallon’. ‘Resignation to fate’, a ‘dedication to the hereafter’ and a ‘disregard for time’ meant that the Malay community was not predisposed towards ‘economic and social progress’. He explains that Malays feared death as it was the ‘time when a man pays for the wrongs he has done in his life, and receives the rewards for his good deeds and religious piety’. As a result, religious knowledge was valued above all other forms of knowledge, including science and technology that would lead to modernity and development. The pursuit of religious knowledge was ‘quite remarkable, especially in the so-called backward rural areas’, where the Quran was widely read, interpreted and discussed and a command of Arabic was common.⁵³

Though time was a divine gift to be valued, Mahathir was critical of Malays for being careless in the way they spent it. Echoing colonial era discourse about ‘the lazy or indolent native or Malay’,⁵⁴ he describes lack of punctuality, ‘[d]oing nothing, or sipping coffee, or talking ...[as] almost a Malay national habit’. In the 1970s, a government-sponsored text called upon Malays to revolutionise their thinking so they could uplift themselves to be on a par with other races in the country.⁵⁵

⁵² Lat (1994) ‘Cartoon of Malaysian Leaders viewing tall flagpole’ in *Better Lat than Never*, 5th Reprint, (1st Edn. 1989), Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing Sdn Bhd, p.139

⁵³ Mahathir Mohamad (1970) *The Malay Dilemma*, Singapore: D. Moore, pp.158-66.

⁵⁴ Syed Hussein Alatas (1977) *The Myth of the Lazy Native: a study of the image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and its function in the ideology of colonial capitalism*, London: F. Cass; Mahathir 1970: 163

⁵⁵ Senu Abdul Rahman (ed.) (1971) *Revolusi Mental*, Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Melayu.

Modernity was not only to be found in the West, but also in the East. Japan had throughout the 20th century been held up as a model for Asian countries to emulate. The Meiji modernization led to Japan's remarkable economic, technological and political rise, while being seen as retaining its distinctive cultural heritage. Dr Mahathir's 'Look East' policy of the early 1980s was a move toward heavy industrialisation but also encouraged a new work ethic amongst Malays emphasizing discipline, punctuality and diligence. This was part of his project of overcoming perceived Malay deficiencies and instilling a 'can-do' mentality ('*Malaysia boleh*') in the minds of ordinary Malays and Malaysians.⁵⁶

Prior to his announcement of the Vision 2020 programme,⁵⁷ Dr Mahathir had begun speaking about a 'New Malay', which he envisaged as 'someone who highly educated and has a strong confidence in himself' and 'did not fear new challenges'. He was 'able to grasp all the intricacies of new technologies and economy while, at the same time, remain true to his religion, values and culture ... [and] always remaining rational and tolerant of others'.⁵⁸

This generated a lively response in the general media with numerous articles and even books appearing on the subject. Rising UMNO politician Muhammad Muhd Taib became linked to the endeavour through his book *Melayu Baru* and his patronage of a think tank seeking to build links with the wider Malay world outside of Malaysia.⁵⁹ Leading Malaysian cartoonist, Lat cast a somewhat critical eye on the subject with his cartoon depicting the old Malay as a sharp-eyed even crafty-looking Malay

⁵⁶ Cartoon by Nan, *Utusan Malaysia*, 12 June 1993 in Mulyadi Mahamood (2004) *The History of Malay Editorial Cartoons (1930s-1993)*, Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications, p.284

⁵⁷ The Vision 2020 programme has been attributed to Dr Mahathir but was prepared by staff at the government-supported ISIS think-tank.

⁵⁸ Keynote address at the opening of the 21st Century Malay Jati Diri Symposium held in conjunction with the launch of the Za'ba Chair at the University Pendidikan Sultan Idris (previously the Sultan Idris Training College), (Mahathir Mohamad, Majlis Perasmian Simposium 'Jati Diri Melayu Abad 21' Sempena Pelancaran Kursi Za'ba, Dewan Tun Hussein Onn, PWTC, Kuala Lumpur, 29.04.2000; Sa'odah Elias, 'Mahathir envisions new breed of Malays', *The Star Online*, 30 Apr. 2000)

⁵⁹ Muhammad Muhd Taib (1993) *Melayu Baru*, Kuala Lumpur: ITC Book Publisher; See also Chamil wariya (1993) *Suara Bicara Melayu Baru: Minda dan Fikrah Muhammad Hj. Muhd. Taib*, Kuala Lumpur: Media Indah; Rustam A. Sani (1992) *Melayu baru: bebarapa persoalan sosio-budaya*, Kuala Lumpur: Institut Kajian Strategik dan Antarabangsa.

warrior with his weapons (*keris* or Malay dagger and spear), protective charms (*azimat* and *tangkal*) and wearing traditional Malay costume.⁶⁰

Meaning in graphical depictions can be fluid and multiple. In this case the text serves to attach or fix a meaning contrasting the 'lama/old' and the 'baru/new'. To interpret the drawing, it is necessary to have some understanding of the representational repertoire of signs, symbols and tropes characteristic of Malay culture. For example, the clothing and the weapons signify a Malay warrior tradition associated with the fifteenth century Melaka court and subsequent Malay royalty. *Cendekia* (or cunning) was once regarded as a manly strength and marker of high intelligence - though whether this is what Lat is intending to depict in this case is not clear. Attention is drawn via the insertion of text to charms used as spiritual protection, indicating possible critique of superstitious even, though not necessarily, outdated or backward beliefs. On the whole, the old Malay can be seen in quite a positive light, especially when contrasted with a rather vacuous-looking, nerd-type New Malay dressed in a Western suit, talking or blabbing into a mobile phone and with modern preventative to hand (aspirin, valium, etc.). The 'new Malay' seems removed from 'Malayness' and 'Malay tradition' as the Malay cultural markers are absent. These are replaced by the markers of modernity - modern medicines, modern ailments (stress, indigestion) and modern technology (handphones) and globalised business markers (suit, briefcase). Lat's critique of the 'new' is clear ... and the 'old' must be re-read now in the context of the 'new'. The parallels between the old charms and the new medicaments indicates continuity as well as change. It suggests the element of critique of both the old and the new Malay, and thus a critique of the entire discourse - one which invents 'tradition' just as it does 'the new'.

Cartoonist Sofiyan has also been critical of Malaysia's developmentalism. Sofiyan could be described as the epitome of 'Melayu baru' - a UK educated engineer and at the helm of an engineering firm responsible for construction roofing on the KLIA airport, tank farms in the Middle East, etc. Yet, he vests wisdom in the rural *bomoh* (spiritualist) figure of Tok Guru who is almost always given the last word in comment

⁶⁰ Lat (1994) 'Melayu Lama-Melayu Baru' in *Lat 30 years Later*, Petaling Jaya: Kampung Boy Sdn. Bhd, p.164.

on the modern world's shortcomings.⁶¹ Sofiyan might be seen as representative of urban Malay 'nostalgia' for a rural Malay kampong tradition and spirituality that has personally only ever been peripherally experienced. This is evident in the increasing phenomenon of tourism packages, which allow you to get away and experience 'authentic' kampong life.

Meanwhile, aspirational 'New Malay' discourse continues. Current Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak is attributed with advancing the concept 'glocal Malays'. Malays were to be keyed into global business networks while maintaining local roots.⁶² Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi called for 'towering [Malay] personalities' to be recognized and held up as examples for others to follow.⁶³

A globally connected 'discourse of modernity' is also present in architectural statements that now feature prominently within the Malaysian landscape, many as part of the legacy of the Mahathir era. They are 'packaged' as iconic structures signifying 'Malaysia' and 'Malaysian identity' to Malaysians and foreign visitors alike. The KLCC towers, the KLIA, the Multimedia Supercorridor and the new administrative capital, Putrajaya, 'speak' of technological modernity and mastery, but also one achieved through 'seeking knowledge' in and incorporating the architectural signs and symbols from diverse cultures, locations and historical epochs. In other words, Malaysia is modern and itself represents 'modernity'.⁶⁴

Such striving for modernity is also evident in everyday Malay approaches to religion. Dina Zaman describes the competition amongst parents in Kuala Lumpur who want the 'best in Islamic tuition for their children, with an eye towards competing in the Western world. ... The teachers have to speak good English. Classes are to be conducted in English and Arabic. ... Today, religion is re-branded as exclusive,

⁶¹ Sofiyan (1997) Tok Guru questioning 'development', *New Straits Times*, p.12.

⁶² Mohd. Najib Tun Abdul Razak, Dato' Seri (2005) *Ucapan Persasmian Serentak Persidangan Perwakilan Wanita, Pemuda dan Puteri UMNO 2005: Menjana Melayu Glokal*, 19 July; See also Hassan Ahmad (2006) *Ke Arah Kelahiran Melayu Glokal*, Shah Alam, Selangor: Alaf 21 Sendirian Berhad.

⁶³ Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi, Dato' Seri (2005) *Transkrip Temubual Yang Diadakan Sempena Sambutan Maal Hijrah 1426*, 10 Feb., <<http://www.pmo.gov.my/WebNotesApp/PMMain.nsf/91648221a3933b5148256db4002aa809/63fef979054aaabd48256fa80016947d?OpenDocument>>.

⁶⁴ See also discussion in: Bunnell, Tim (2004).

ambitious, and the best way to mould young Muslims set to live in two worlds: the modern and the Muslim. You can find Islamic courses online; there are videos and DVDs to teach Muslims how to pray.’⁶⁵

There are many and various contrary voices - those who want things to remain; those who would be modern with all of its technological benefits but rejecting of modernity’s foreign cultural baggage; those who would find seek a future located in the heritage of a pre-national, international past. Though looking for models, precepts and representational strategies in a ‘Golden age’ of the past, the general character of such movements is future-oriented and directed towards meeting contemporary concerns.

b) Locating the Future ... in the Past

The monarchy is an institution that in Europe that is most commonly associated with a pre-modern period prior to the transformations brought about by the ‘Age of Reason’ and democracy. Nonetheless, constitutional monarchy remains in many countries as a useful (though sometimes expensive) legacy of the past. With Nepal and Bhutan in the process of moving towards democracy, the few countries remaining functioning monarchies, for example Brunei, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Swaziland, might seem somehow anachronistic and out of step with current trends.

The installation on 26 April 2007 of Seri Paduka Baginda Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin Ibni Almarhum Sultan Mahmud Almuktafi Billah Shah as Malaysia’s XIII King in a ceremony rich in pageantry and grandeur and ‘steeped in Malay tradition and custom’ should not be interpreted as quaint remainders of the famed 15th century Malay kingdom of Melaka. This is an institution with representational and symbolic power in the present. ‘His Majesty ascends the throne and stands as the pillar of the country of Malaysia’, according to the proclamation of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. He has responsibility for ‘protecting the special position of the Malays as well as the legitimate interests of the other communities’, according to the Federal Constitution, and as such as a ‘symbol

⁶⁵ Dina Zaman (2007) ‘Alif Ba Ta’, pp.66-71.

of unity'. 'He is the King for every Malaysian, not just for the Malays but also for all races and territories', affirms Mara University of Technology law professor Shad Saleem Faruqi. Furthermore, the King has certain implied and discretionary powers, such that '[t]he potential for the sovereign office of the monarch is tremendous and unrealized',⁶⁶ suggesting that his powers can extend beyond the 'symbolic'.

While some have argued that a feudal political culture persists in Malaysia not only in Malaysia's various state and federal royal courts, but also the halls of government and ruling party politics,⁶⁷ Milner has highlighted the ways in which the monarchy has continued to transform itself updating its justificatory statements in step with contemporary discourses.⁶⁸ Similarly, Kessler has demonstrated the ways in which such 'traditions' are reinvented in the present by leaders seeking to enhance their political legitimacy and secure the loyalty of the people or *rakyat* - a term which once referred to a people who were the subjects of a ruler. Kahn further argues for the modernity of tradition suggesting that it is an urbanised middle class that has been at the forefront of reinvigorating Malay traditions associated with the royal courts and the rural kampongs from which they themselves had been displaced by necessity of education and employment.⁶⁹

While the 'Golden Age' of the 15th century Malay Kingdom of Melaka, provides a rich cultural resource for contemporary and future national life, Islam also provides an important 'Golden Age' template for contemporary emulation. Former deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, for example, called for a *masyarakat madani* - a civil society based on the precepts of society at Medina at the time of the Prophet.⁷⁰ The Islamist opposition party PAS has clearly stated as its objective the establishment of

⁶⁶ *The Star Online* (2007) 'A Symbol of Unity', 26 Apr.

<<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2007/4/26/nation/17375151&sec=nation>>.

⁶⁷ Syed Hussein Alatas (1972) 'Feudalism in Malaysian Society: A Study in Historical Continuity' in *Modernisation and Social Change*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson; Chandra Muzaffar (1979) *Protector? An Analysis of the Concept and Practice of Loyalty in Leader-led Relationships within Malay Society*, Penang: Aliran.

⁶⁸ Milner, Anthony (2003) 'How "traditional" is the Malaysian Monarchy?' in Virginia Hooker & Noraini Othman (eds.), *Malaysia: Islam, Society and Politics*, Singapore: ISEAS, pp. 169-194.

⁶⁹ Kahn, Joel S. (1988-89) 'Constructing Malaysian Ethnicity: A View from Australia', *Ilmu Masyarakat* 14: 6-8.

⁷⁰ Anwar Ibrahim (1998) 'Islam dan Pembentukan Masyarakat Madani' (Islam and the Formation of Civil Society), in *Masyarakat Madani: Satu Tinjauan Awal (Civil Society: A Preliminary Survey)*, KL: MINDS, pp.7-13.

an Islamic state that would embody the first Islamic state of Medina. Because Islam is both a belief system and *ad-Deen* (a complete and comprehensive way of life) it is seen as necessary (even obligatory) for believers to ‘secure executive power and government’ so as to implement Islamic governance and way of life.⁷¹ The al-Arqam group, which was banned by the government in 1994, was an attempt by well-educated Malays to build an authentic Islamic community that was independent of the Malaysian government with its own schools, medical services, businesses, etc.⁷²

While from one perspective this can be seen as looking back to the past for solutions for the present, because God is both imminent in time and transcendent with a final day of judgment yet to come, there is also a sense of the simultaneity of past and future in an instantaneous present. God is timeless, but present.

c) Locating the Future ... in the Present

When Abdullah Badawi was dropped as Defence Minister in the cabinet reshuffle of April 1987 in what could have been the end of his political fortunes, his mother is quoted as saying:

Time and time, I would tell him that Allah will always be with those who are patient and resilient. As a mother, my prayers will always be with him and I also told him to leave everything to God. We have to believe in *Qada* and *Qadar*. We propose, God disposes. We cannot fight against fate. I also told him not to change but to keep with his good traits should he find success in future.⁷³

In other words, it is what we do in the present that will shape the future. In the book in which this quotation appears, Syed Ali Tawfik Al-Attas provides analysis of Badawi’s concept of ‘Islam Hadhari’ - propounded by Badawi in his keynote address

⁷¹ Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) (2003) *Negara Islam*; see also Hussin Mutalib (2003) *Islam in Malaysia: From Revivalism to Islamic State?* Singapore: Singapore University Press.

⁷² Hussin Mutalib (1990) *Islam and Ethnicity in Malay Politics*, Singapore: Oxford University Press, pp.85-88; Ann Wan Seng (2005) *Al-Arqam: di Sebalik Tabir*, Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Universiti Malaya.

⁷³ Syed Ali Tawfik Al-Attas & Ng Tieh Chuan (2005) *Abdullah Ahmad Badawi: Revivalist of an Intellectual Tradition*, Subang Jaya, Selangor: Pelanduk Publications, p.18.

at the UMNO General Assembly on 23 September 2004.⁷⁴ Though Syed Ali challenges the Malay transliteration from Arabic - instead favouring *Islam* as the correct rendering of 'civilisational Islam' - he concludes that what PM Badawi was advocating a shift towards 'understanding the present age in the framework of Islam'.⁷⁵

Nonetheless, once again the inspiration for the present is to be found in the past. Badawi is portrayed in the title of the book as a 'Revivalist of an Intellectual Tradition' - in reference to a poem penned by Badawi, which appears at the beginning of the book. It is this intellectual tradition which is to provide the framework for understanding the present - an Islamic intellectual tradition which goes back to al-Ghazzali - seen as 'wholly responsible for the revivification of the tradition of [Islamic] learning and inquiry' - and which is able to resolve the 'crisis of identity', disunity, 'intellectual catatonia' - specifically 'inability to conceptualise adequate definitions' and 'ignorance with regard to knowledge of Islam, history, philosophy and Islamic thought in general' - which Malays (and in particular those associated with the Islamist opposition party, PAS) are said to be suffering.⁷⁶

Tradition, which gives understanding and accords authority in the present, is portrayed in a further manner. At the opening of the book and thematically tied with a blue background colour is a picture of Dato' Seri Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi (over the page) followed by one of his (first) wife then (over the page with facing prints) one of his father and then his grandfather with (over the page) a final print of the widely used photograph of Abdullah greeting his mother in a Malay and filial manner. It is a depiction of Badawi's pedigree tracing down a line of Muslim scholars (in particular his grandfather) with possible early Arab roots or connections. The writer himself is of Hadrami Arab-Malay descent has a similarly auspicious intellectual pedigree. Currently the director of the Government founded Islamic think tank (IKIM), doctoral studies at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and

⁷⁴ Though the concept is attributed to Abdullah Badawi, Syed Ali explains that it was actually conceptualised by scholars at local universities in response to an UMNO request. UMNO was seeking a platform that would provide an adequate response to the challenge provided by the opposition PAS in the advocacy of an Islamic state (p.50).

⁷⁵ Syed Ali Tawfik Al-Attas (etal.) 2005: 134-5, 140.

⁷⁶ Syed Ali Tawfik Al-Attas (etal.) 2005: 66, 143-4.

Civilization (ISTAC) founded by his father Syed Mohammad Naquib Al-Attas, a prominent Islamic scholar who has been seen as the intellectual father of the ABIM *dakwah* movement and the International Islamic University in Malaysia and elsewhere. By contrast, the Muslim opposition is described as politicising religion, being preoccupied with the ritualistic aspect of Islam, as having an elementary understanding of the legal aspects of Islam and of Islam in general, and as being or being aligned with ‘so called “scholars” from the Indian subcontinent’ and influenced by the activist works of Mawdudi, Abu Hassan al-Nadwi and Hassan al-Banna who were, respectively, founders of the Jamaat Islami in Pakistan and (the latter two) the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.⁷⁷

Badawi himself is quoted as saying that: ‘the pan-Malaysia Islamic party has politicised religion to the extent that it claims a monopoly on Islam. They canvass for votes by telling villagers that they would be assured of heaven if they vote for their party. They have been known to decree members and supported by my party as infidels’. The PAS approach of ‘merely institutionalising a set of misunderstood laws’ will not solve the problems of the Malay and Malaysian community. Rather, the Prime Minister’s progressive approach to Islam (learning from history, advocating a revival in the Islamic sciences and Islamic thought in general in order to advance the understanding of Islam with reference to the Malays) is advocated. It is portrayed as having been all along part of the struggle of ruling party UMNO⁷⁸ as traced, if rather tenuously,⁷⁹ back to its founder, Dato’ Onn Jaffar.

It would be wrong to suggest that ‘tradition’ should be associated with a past left behind as Hobsbawm, Benjamin, Kahn, Kessler and others have pointed to the modernity of tradition and its invention in the present as we look to the future - much as one sees a changing past in the rear view mirror as one is driving forward into a changing landscape.⁸⁰ In cultural/civilisational encounter, ‘tradition’ should not be

⁷⁷ Syed Ali Tawfik Al-Attas (etal.) 2005: 51,144-5.

⁷⁸ Syed Ali Tawfik Al-Attas (etal.) 2005: 51,146-7.

⁷⁹ He does this by reading and interpolating between the lines of a speech made by Dato’ Onn by inserting Islam as the advocated basis of Malay unity, when this is not specifically stated in the original text of the speech (pp.52-55).

⁸⁰ Hobsbawm, Eric (1983) ‘Introduction: Inventing Traditions’ in Eric Hobsbawm & Terence Ranger (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp.1-14; Benjamin, Walter (1969) *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, Tans. Harry Zohn, N.Y.: Schocken; Kessler, Clive S.

associated with 'difference' on a scale according progress and modernity to an enlightened Western 'self' and backwardness to an ill understood 'other'. Nor should religious tradition be emplotted on a scale of progress, which accords to the 'secular' more advanced status as having emerged out of and left behind the 'dark ages' of religion. The various religions have had ongoing trajectories and are expressions of present-day religious beliefs and concerns.

iv) Conclusion

The quote cited at the outset refers to significant developments, which were not discussed in this paper, involving important issues such as constitutionally defined rights and freedoms, legal jurisdictions and the role of religion and religious authority in public and private life. What this paper has attempted to show is that one should be wary of describing such developments in terms of a simple binary between modernity and Islamic orthodoxy - a binary which tends to 're-orientalise' Malaysia as the 'globalising competitive world's' orthodox Islamic 'other'. Despite the efforts by scholars to fracture and disperse the Europe-West/developing world binary, it retains its potency as much in the discursive terrain of Malaysia (and wider Islamic world) as it does in the so-called Western world. Likewise, efforts to unseat (specifically Western) 'modernity' as a reigning paradigm, that somewhat unilaterally sets the conceptual parameters and terms of the debate, would seem to have much work ahead in the face of a revitalised post-postmodern 'reflexive modernity'.

Continuing within these conceptual frames, this paper has sought to convey some of the many historical and contemporary dimensions of debate in Malaysia, as expressed by various spokespersons from Malay-Islamic community, in terms of their varied visions for the future and stances towards 'modernity'. A key point emphasised was that Malay concerns for the future relate not only to this life in the Malaysian context, but also to life in the hereafter. The concerns and priorities relating to both shape responses to issues and the ways in which the political, economic, social and religious order in Malaysia has been constructed

(1992) 'Archaism and Modernity: Contemporary Malay Political Culture' in Joel S. Kahn & Francis Loh Kok Wah (eds.) *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia*, North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, pp.133-57.

It has been apparent that modernity in the West should not only be seen as emerging and departing from its traditional/religious Christian past, but also as having been long 'entangled' with a backward-traditional-religious-Eastern (including Islamic)-previously colonised-developing world 'other' that in the main it has been able to keep at a distance off-shore. This is illustrated schematically in Figure 1 below. By contrast, Malays by and large hold that modernity came to Malaysia via Muslim missionaries (in one view); by Western colonisers (in another view); and, by the active agency of locals participating in globalised Asian, Islamic and Western modernity flows. (The 'alternative modernities' model seems appropriate in this context.) To some extent, Malays (and Malaysians) have been able to choose from a wide array of elements from various sources - selecting some, and rejecting others. (See Table 1). Not only is observation of the choices instructive, but also of the priorities, strategies and dynamics of the localisation processes involved.

There are not one but many responses within the Malay-Muslim community to the rapid social transformation experienced in the 20th century - spanning rejection of perceived Western modernities, to varying degrees of acceptance, to active selection and pursuit of what modernity has to offer from whatever source. The West remains a convenient 'other', in this case not a 'backward other', but an 'other' with a proclivity towards dominance, thus requiring vigilant resistance and concerted self-effort. The struggle is to a large extent within oneself - a seeking to overcome flaws and weaknesses. But there is the possibility for an individual self-identity and orientation to the future, which encompasses both temporal and hereafter concerns.

By contrast, Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 has been undergoing rapid transformations on account of its changing margins and the concomitant reconstitution of its core. In some significant measure the 'Other' has now moved within its borders disrupting the dynamics of the modern Europe/traditional other dichotomy. This poses a far greater challenge for those who are both 'European' and Muslim, than for those who are both 'Malay' and Muslim in predominantly Malay/Muslim Malaysia. While the issues faced in Europe are quite different, the momentum will be towards retaining a sacred/secular division in private/public life, respectively. In Malaysia the issue is not if, but how, and in what manner, Islam is to

find expression in governance and public life, while preserving the civil rights of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The contest in Malaysia is, at one level, a political contest as the ruling party UMNO 'struggles' for ongoing supremacy in the face of opposition challenge. Increasingly, that contest has been fought on the basis of interpretation of Islam, and over who has the authority to make such interpretations and to represent Islam and the interests of Malays (and Malaysians more generally). Concerns for the future (whether in this life or the next) links all Malaysians, though the paths to that 'future' may vary according to religious belief and political affiliation.

Malaysia is in August 2007 to celebrate fifty years of independence from Britain, thus attention is focussed on the nation's progress in the past and the directions it should take in the future. In this context, the Malaysian studies conference of 2006 posed in its title a very important question 'What happens after development?' Presuming Malaysia achieves 'developed nation' status in 2020, what will then follow? What vision will be set before the nation as the goal that will take it forward? Will that future be bursting with optimism and purpose or will it be more measured and constrained?

Renowned scholar and economist, Professor Jeffrey Sachs has in the BBC 2007 Reith Lecture Series described a 'world bursting at its seams' facing the challenge of global warming, overstretched and degraded global resources and a threatened biodiversity.⁸¹ Such a note of cold reality challenges faith in humankind's ability to further 'progress' to the benefit of all. Is this a sign of a post-modernity realised, an age of disenchantment when the lamp of hope for the future burns more dimly?

Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi's recently enunciated 'dreams for 2057' go beyond Vision 2020's nine challenges of creating a united, democratic, ethical, tolerant, scientific and prosperous society. He spoke in lofty terms of the road to 2057 (100 years after independence) as one aiming at excellence, of being about the 'heights to which our people will scale' - Nobel laureates, truly global corporations, leading

⁸¹ BBC, 'Bursting at the Seams', Reith Lectures 2007, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2007/>>.

market brands, pioneers in alternative energy, liveable cosmopolitan cities, a global Islamic financial centre, etc. 'We will have managed to successfully find our place in this world ... I have made up my mind that whatever I do today, it must be for a centennial generation that is rich in mind as well as in spirit'.⁸²

In anticipation of what the 50-year Independence Day celebrations may bring this year, a review of full-page newspaper advertisements by leading private and government-linked companies run in Malaysian newspapers during celebrations on 31 August 2005 provide some insights into just how the Malaysian national future is being envisaged. There is a sophisticated nuancing of the general tropes and representational forms. Children feature prominently.⁸³ Multiple meanings float from on the one hand a nostalgia for the innocence of childhood in the past, when the nation was younger, fresher and full of potential; when in childhood preceding the socialization of adulthood ethnic differences are of little consequence do not prevent friendship and mutual understanding.⁸⁴ This is a simpler, idyllic and idealized past. The children also signify a loyal and unified Malaysian people open to the instruction and leadership of political elites and patriotically committed to their nation. Further they indicate the wealth of the nation and its hopes for the future. In their hands rests the future.⁸⁵

Of interest in the context of representations of *Melayu* and Malaysian-ess is that *Melayu* (signified by a Malay boy) is portrayed as central with Chinese and Indians on either side and often signified as female children.⁸⁶ Dress and physiognomy mark cultural difference with the *songkok* (black headwear) specifically signifying Malayness. Nonetheless, there are also examples when such cultural markers are absent with children dressed in modern, global dress. At times Malay-ness appears as de-centred in terms of location in the picture, but centred by the angle of vision - suggesting experimentation with representational strategies and norms and a level of

⁸² 'Looking Back, Forging Ahead: 50 Years of Business in Malaysia', The Star Online, 15.06.07, <<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2007/6/15/nation/20070615090513&sec=nation>>.

⁸³ astro Advertisement, *Berita Harian*, 31.08.2005, p.7.

⁸⁴ Petronas Advertisement, *Utusan Malaysia*, 31.08.2005, p.16.

⁸⁵ KTM Advertisement, *Berita Harian*, 31.08.2005, p.3.

⁸⁶ DRB-Hicom Advertisement, *Berita Harian*, 31.08.2005, p.24.

subtlety in their application.⁸⁷ There are also examples of race/ethnicity dissolving into a kind of Malaysian (signified by the flag and symbols of modernity and technological progress) or Asian persona.⁸⁸ Children (and thus Malaysians) are shown as having dreams of what they will become in the future.⁸⁹ The images are modern, forward-looking, seductive, pleasing⁹⁰ ... and must be read in terms of the overall corpus and the representational rules and devices employed within in and within wider Malay and Malaysian society.

They affirm that some 50 years after political independence, the national future remains a central focus for elites contesting for the authority to shape that future. A fractured and recontextualised modernity has been very much a part of the national future aspired to. Malays in particular now seem more confident in participating in the global process of negotiating the 'universals' that will characterize 'modernity/ies' in the future.⁹¹ Meanwhile they will continue investing in strategies for living in the present and preparing for the future - in this life and in the next.

⁸⁷ Perdua Advertisement, *Utusan Malaysia*, 31.08.2005, p.27.

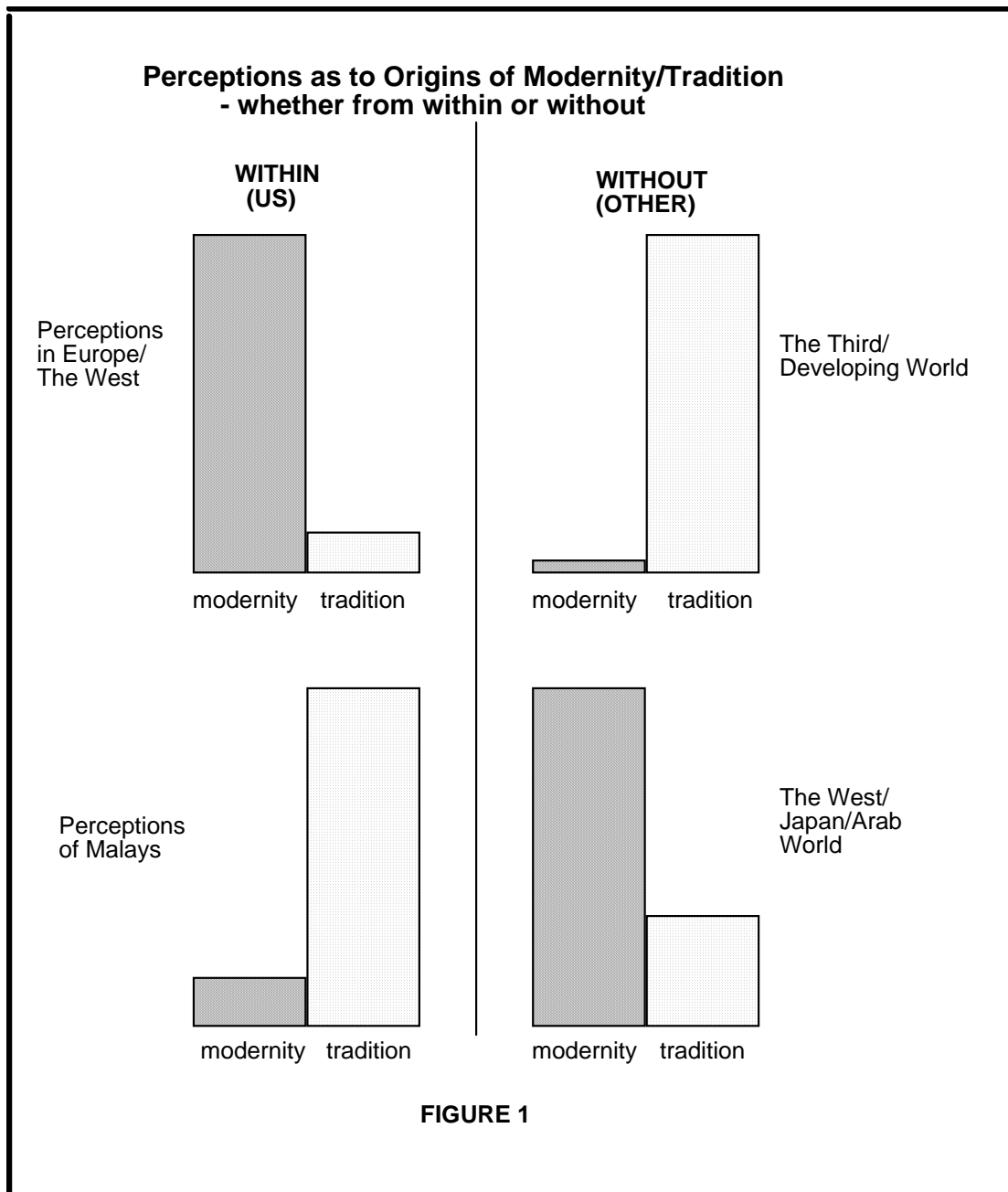
⁸⁸ Telekom Malaysia Berhad Advertisement, *Utusan Malaysia*, 31.08.2005, p.5.

⁸⁹ Digi Advertisement, *berita Harian*, 31.08.05, p.18

⁹⁰ Putrajaya Holdings *Utusan Malaysia*, 31.08.2005, p.7.

⁹¹ Wasserstrom concludes his book review referring neither to the 'immutable "particularistic" worldviews' nor the 'unchanging "universal" values', but rather 'the "negotiated universals" that emerge as cultures learn from adapt to each other' - See Wasserstrom, Jeffrey (2003) 'Review of *Reflections on Multiple Modernities*', in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 62(3) Aug., 917-9.

Appendix: Figure 1



Appendix: Table 1

Generalised Sources of Modernity	Desirable Elements	Undesirable Elements
Malay	Progress; Economic Development; <i>nama</i> ; Ability to compete with all others	Backwardness; Loss of 'tradition'; Moral challenges; Environmental degradation
Islamic/Arab	Islamic (Sunni) tradition; Intellectual heritage; Islamic finance; Some Arab/Islamic cultural elements, esp. music, fashion	Shia beliefs; religious 'deviationism'; Islamic radicalism; Some Arab/Islamic cultural elements, eg. tribalism, patriarchy
Europe	Democracy; individual freedoms; Human rights, include women's rights; Science & technology	Westoxification or undesirable moral elements; Colonising Westernisation
Asian	FDI & trade; Technology transfer; Work ethics; ASEAN as a non-Western international arena	Economic Competition; Illegal Immigrant flows

Table 1: Generalised 'Malay' Perceptions of Desirable/Undesirable Elements of Modernity - as found in Four Perceived Sources of Modernity