



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i14/5026>

DOI: 10.6007/IJARBSS/v8-i14/5026

*Received: 27 Sept 2018, Revised: 21 Oct 2018, Accepted: 16 Dec 2018*

Published Online: 23 Dec 2018

**In-Text Citation:** (Lim, Yow, Durin, & Chelum, 2018)

**To Cite this Article:** Lim, C., Yow, C.-L., Durin, A., & Chelum, A. A. (2018). Negotiating Modernity and the New Nationhood in IBAN Popular Song Lyrics in 1960s-1970s. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 8(14), 51–60.

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**Special Issue: Transforming Community Towards a Sustainable and Globalized Society, 2018, Pg. 51 - 60**

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## Negotiating Modernity and the New Nationhood in IBAN Popular Song Lyrics in 1960s-1970s

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### Abstract

Iban is the largest indigenous ethnic group in Sarawak, Malaysia which made up of approximately one third of the total of Sarawak's population. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Iban society had gone through a state of flux where people have to readapt themselves in meeting the demanding challenges of Malaysian nationalism. Drawing upon Barendregt's (2014) 'alternative conceptions of modernity' this paper examines how the Iban reference both a national as well as a local music industry particularly through their use of language as an expression of Iban. As seen in Iban popular music, which are created and used as a propaganda tool for national building. First the paper will examine the meaning of modernity. Then, combining the concept of modernity and historiography methods, tracing the history of Sarawak in analysing the the Iban song lyrics. Hence, the aim of this paper is to interpret the meaning of the lyrics and how the song lyrics in 'Malaysia Baru' responded to modernity in the history of Sarawak. This reflects how the Iban people responded to the modernity through the historical processes on the social, cultural, physical, economic and political environments in Sarawak.

Keywords: Modernity, Iban, Sarawak, Postcolonial, Popular Music

## Introduction

Modernity is a common sense term refer to the characteristic of the present taken account of the evolution process of a society. It is seen as a “break between tradition and modernity and typologised as the difference between ostensibly traditional and modern societies” (Appadurai, 1996:3). Modernity is more than often being recognized as historical rupture in social science theory. It means up-to-date, recent; which is favorably used in establishing and locating a historical records in a society chronologically (Hall, 1995). On the other hand, it refers to diffusion of culture in a particular ethnic group. Phrasing modernity as a heuristic marker, hence, there is an ongoing argument approaching modern analytically, economically and also politically (Habermas, 1991; Wagner, 2006). Though this model lacks of theoretical and analytical rational. Held (1995) suggest to examine in various distinctive developments, according to different historical time-scales towards variable and contingent outcomes. As such notable and significant questions raised by Hall (1995) questioning the key process shaping the development and modernization: What, when, how and why modern societies develop? What are the consideration taken into account in structuring and forming a society?

## Literature Review

Modernity is a process. It implies a universal state that demands economic expansion and enforces cultural homogeneity, and historical inevitability (Pinar, 2013). Referring modernization to historical aspect by also taking the practical aspects into consideration of the move to modern with the changes of political, economic, social and cultural realms. To answer the questions raised above, the phenomenon of modernization could be analyzed and accessed based on four units of analysis comprises of nation-state, societal, community or groups and individual (Kedit, 1980). Since World War II, progress and development in the political, economic and social fields of the Third World as a nation-state has gradually brought the attention of social scientist to this area of modernization. “Interests in the politics of the third world”, using quantitative method and behavioral methods strengthening the cross-disciplinary assimilation in the area of studies (Riggs, 1967:319). The political aspect of modernization involves not only the formal structure of government but also the question of ideologies (or social values), economic development and inter-group conflicts as “the ensemble of structure and culture changes in the political system of modernizing society” (Coleman, 1968:395). As it is seen over the past 50 years, the connotation beyond modernization, how democratic or economically open a particular country is. As Malaysia is moving towards modernity and neo-capitalism market, the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) negotiated in Year 2013 is answering the moderation towards the new modernity.

From the colonial period to postcolonial era, Southeast Asia nation states have gone through dramatic historical developments and experienced political and economical changes. But looking at the history of popular music through the lenses of the nation does not in itself produce the whole picture. Instead Barendregt (2014) proposes ‘alternative conceptions of modernity’ that problematize nation-centered narratives about the history of popular music in Southeast Asia. As the concept of modernity ‘Eurocentric’ (Seth, 2016), we can’t escape from the legacy of Western modernity discourse, but, we need to think modernity as a discursive concept as an emergent social formations throughout the Southeast Asian region (ibid). Originally from the West, modernity has traveled across the world with the social values and practices, forms of culture as well as institutional

organizations which had formed the concept used in the present (Gaonkar, 1999). Modernity could be viewed as 'a set of transformation' that happens anywhere in any particular culture (Bhambra, 2007:7). It is a challenge to explain the Euro-American-centered conceptualizations of modernity as Dirlik (2013:7) stated the alternative modernities have an influential "counter-hegemonic" cultural implication, its historization of modernity in "assertion of persistent cultural identity in those very spaces namely nations, cultures and civilization". As a historical emergence of alternative modernity, this had prompted us to rethink, re-accommodate towards the understanding of its past and present in modern history.

Hypothetical enmity between 'the West' and the 'rest' has concluded the time and space of modernity. The modern, has many identical features with the West. Each process of modern and modernization has led to the development of distinctive social characteristics which will be taken together to provide a definition of 'modernity'. It's not simply the origin of recent modern phenomenon. In one's lifestyle, the term modernity instill with definition and usage known as common sense. Reflecting on time as a fundamental aspect of life and culture, there was a significant and tangible shift towards modern (Fornäs, 1995). Progress and development in Sarawak, Malaysia or elsewhere in a 'Non-Western' culture setting, it exhibits the nature of mimicry, an act of 'imitation', 'replication' or 'catch up' (Ong, 1999). Nonetheless, a shift to the modern needs the definition and the meaning, the purpose and intention of space time perception which circumstances developed upon discursive agendas. Nonetheless, modernity is as a process, rather than just a fixed end-point. Therefore, bearing a certain analytical and theoretical values which are related to the conceptual model will support while forming the foundation for theoretical arguments of this paper.

As pointed out by Appadurai (1996), most of the social sciences theory are amplifying modern as a recognizable historical rupture. As encountered by the Iban community as the first agents of change, the Brooke monarchy had paved the way for administration, control and regulation of the Iban as a socio-cultural group within a multi-cultural Sarawak society. The unusual political context of close partnership between the Brooke rajahs and the Christian mission had brought the Iban to the road of modernity. At the same time the Brooke monarchy altered the Iban institutions in order to prepare them to meet the challenges and demands of modern economic society (Kedit, 1980). As mentioned by Mohd. Taib Osman (1989:18):

*"The longhouse way-of life may remain with the Iban for some time yet to come but the modernizing process will surely overtake it. If the roads do not come to the longhouse, the traditional water-ways will be channel which will bring change."*

Hence, the process of modernization the Iban had gone through since the era of Brooke monarchy to British colonization, then from British colonization to Malaysia nation state, these stages and phases in Sarawak history has provided a sufficient platform for discussion. The Iban are introduced to modern infrastructure and facilities provided in conjunction with the development plans of the ruling government. With the trunk road from Kuching to Sibul, modern amenities like the schools, hospitals, radio and television, the helicopter and the hydro-electric dam are the sure agencies of change in the road to modernity. It has manifested several important socio-economic, socio-cultural and socio-historical development and discourses in the area of Christianity and education, Iban language, economic transformation, culture, urbanization and political administration.

As will soon be demonstrated in this study, those effects had extended to the expressions of Iban identity through modernity and its reflection found in the creation of popular music. The expression of modernity and how Iban responses to their surrounding experience and happenings are portrayed in the song lyrics. The source and consequences of modernity and modernization emanation could be seen through cultural transformation towards economic growth, education and institutional change since administration of Brooke till Malaysian nation state.

#### Materials, Methods and Analysis

Using the historiography method, research materials made up Iban song lyrics, radio broadcast, audio recordings, documentaries, article in magazines and government reports. The researchers also searched for historical and archival material about Sarawak and Iban in the local libraries, archive in Sarawak Museum and Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) Sarawak Branch and collected information by interviewing members of Iban singers and songwriters in the 1950s-1970s who had sung and recorded songs with Radio Sarawak and records company and Iban members of local cultural association who were once actively involved in Iban popular music scene.

While analyzing the song lyrics, the historiography method is used to generate the discussion and findings of this research as presented below. According to the period divided based on the history of Sarawak since 1950s to 1970s.

#### Finding and Discussion of the Iban song lyrics 'Malaysia Baru'

The findings and discussion will be presented through themes according to the analysis research method. The themes are 1) Under the Rule of British Colonization, 2) Early Formation of the Federation of Malaysia, 3) After Confrontation: Towards the Road of Modernity.

#### Under the Rule of British Colonization

On 31 August 1957, The Federation of Malaya gained its independence from Britain. The Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman proposed the idea of 'Grand Malaysian Alliance' in 1961 which would include Brunei, Sabah (formerly known as 'North Borneo') and Sarawak (the British crown colony) and Singapore as the Federation. Responding to the formal Proclamation of Malaysia in 16 September 1963, Myra Esther Adam wrote a song entitled '*Malaysia Baru*' (New Malaysia). (Refer Table 1)

<i>Tok Lagu Informen Malaysia Baru</i>	This song is about the New Malaysia
<i>Lagi Mai Pengerindu</i>	Referring to Malaysia, we should love
<i>Aram Kitai Sama</i>	Let's come together
<i>Menuju Malaysia Baru</i>	Towards the New Malaysia
<i>Malaysia Baru</i>	New Malaysia
<i>Udah nah bai raja</i>	Under new governorship
<i>Nyadi Ke Pesaka</i>	In our inherited land
<i>Sama maju sama Bekereja</i>	Working and progressing together
<i>Di Tanah Pesaka</i>	In our inherited land
<i>Sama Sehati Sama Besatu</i>	In one heart, united together,
<i>Di Malaysia Baru</i>	In New Malaysia
<i>Nya meh asai di Malaysia baru</i>	Feel and experience in the New Malaysia

<i>Di Malaysia baru</i>	In New Malaysia
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**Table 1: 'Malaysia Baru' sung by Myra Esther Adam, song lyrics in Iban and the translation in English**

### Early Formation of the Federation of Malaysia

Looking at the song lyrics (refer Table 1), the songwriter sees Malaysia as an inherited property that are kept and cared for by forefathers. What is meant by Malaysia Baru (New Malaysia). The songwriter is referring to The Federation of Malaysia which was to give independence to the Borneo States and Singapore (Ajamain, 2015:225). The way the Federation of Malaysia is formed was based on Resolution 1541 (XV) Principle IX of the Annex says:

"The integration should be the result of the freely expressed wishes of the territory's people acting with full knowledge of the change in their status, their wishes having been expressed through informed and democratic processes, impartially conducted and based on universal adult suffrage."  
(Ajamain, 2015:226)

Because according to the United Nations the people have made their choice in accordance to universal adult suffrage. The United Nations considers the Local Government Elections undertaken in both Sabah and Sarawak in 1963, which the local political parties participated and that the majority of the political parties won on the basis that they promote the idea of the formation of the Federation of Malaysia (ibid:226). A new government was formed in Sarawak after the elections were complete in July 1963 (*Sarawak Maju Sejak Merdeka*, 1974:18). Sarawak became internally self-governing on 31 August 1963 with the first state cabinet members (ibid). As expressed by the song writer, the idea of we are a new people in a new Sarawak, sharing our destiny hand in hand with our brother Malaysians from other States of the Federation. Although Singapore seeded in 1965, the other three territories have remained united until today.

#### After Confrontation: Towards the Road of Modernity

It is seen that Sarawak, a land of many people where multi-racial harmony is a traditional way of life had gained her Independence through Malaysia on 16 September 1963, for progress and prosperity. From British Crown Colony to a self-governed state under the Federation of Malaysia, from there on, Sarawak started to develop progressively. As expressed in the songs written within 1960s to early 1970s, these songs had responded to the government and politics in Sarawak. Infrastructure development started towards the end of the colonial period (early 1960s). There had been considerate expenditure on the construction of new roads, on education, and on the improvement of medical facilities and public health program. During the Japanese Occupation era, the people of Sarawak were having the hard time experiencing all the shortage. Together with the growth of political consciousness, showing the interest towards development is how the Iban responded to modernity. As depicted by Pehin Sri Abdul Taib, who was a member in the First State Cabinet since the new government was formed in 1963.

“We are facing a future of modernity, which may make it harder to us to absorb some of our customs and traditions into the existing environment.” (Abdul Taib Mahmud, 2007:61)

Since the first agents of change introduced by the Brookes, the Iban are now ready to meet the demands of modern economy. Modernity in Sarawak are closely related to the development of the State during 1960s-1970s. Even before Sarawak became independent within Malaysia, political awareness was gradually developing in the state. Gradually, this political consciousness found expression in the formation of the political parties in the State. This was to ensure that Sarawak would have a fully democratic legislature and a ministerial system of Government, before finally entering Malaysia. Therefore, in the process of Independence within Malaysia, preparation in the form of important Constitutional change were carried out prior to Sarawak’s entry into Malaysia as recoded in Sarawak Report (1963-1983):

“As laid down under the 1956 Constitution, the Council Negeri was composed of 14 official members, 24 members indirectly elected by the people, and 4 nominated members. Early in 1963, this Constitution was modified to give Sarawak a fully democratic legislature. The number elected representatives were increased from 24 to 36 while the number of official and nominated members decreased to three each. The new Constitution also provided for a ministerial system of Government for the first time. A member of the Council Negeri, who in the opinion of the Governor, was likely to command the confidence of the majority of members would be appointed as the Chief Minister. He, in turn, would advise the Governor on the appointment of five other members of the Council Negeri to the Supreme Council. These members would be known as ministers and be responsible for the Government Departments. The remaining three members of the Supreme Council were official members; they were the Chief Secretary, the Attorney General and Financial Secretary. When independence was declared, the Chief Minister would preside over the Supreme Council.” (*Sarawak Report (1963-1983)*, 1984:13)

What the new constitution meant to the people of Sarawak is that the political leaders are elected indirectly by the people. It would take over control of the Government from the Colonial civil servants. Hence, in the light of these constitutional changes, new elections were held between April and July 1963 (*Sarawak Report (1963-1983)*, 1984). Since Sarawak retained the three-tier system of election the first stage involved election to the Municipal and District Councils, the second stage from District to Divisional Advisory Councils and the final state, from Divisional Advisory Councils to the Council Negeri (*ibid*).

Through analyzing the selected songs, it depicted the Iban ‘have become Malaysian, ethnic and modern all at once’ with The Federation of Malaysia (Chua, 2007). As nation building is the major goal of modernity and the individual in the field of modernity is determined by the cultural, economic and political necessities given to him/herself in relation to the necessities of the system (Parladir, 2014). Merging the conceptualization of modern, rationalizing modernity, modernization and what it stands for in alternative modernities, this paper has positioned itself within the localized and time-

bound debates (Geschiere, Meyer & Pels, 2008) in the context of Iban popular music in the spirit of nationalism. As time changes, popular music created as songs and sounds portray the desire to be modern as “we strongly believe that these songs and sounds, the singers and musicians that performed them, the audiences they addressed, and importantly the musical life worlds they were simply part of, can tell us something the official history of the region often cannot” (Barendregt, 2014:4). Like the Australian Aboriginal, the Iban are using popular music to tell stories and reaffirm to “express their histories, beliefs and connection” to the country through the song lyrics (Carlson, 2016). The Ibans participated in the conversation, taking the pleasure through listening and music making in asserting their connection to Sarawak. In addition, they gave rise to a bigger picture which can be encapsulated briefly as the formation of new nation can only be realized with love towards it while working together for its continuous progress and development.

### **Conclusion**

Articulating modernity in popular music, the appearance of being ‘modern’ and appeal of ‘modernity’ often connected with modern lifestyle of postcolonial era in Southeast Asia. Encountering modernity, the Iban also went through a period of institutional change from the Pre-Brooke Era (before 1839) to a period when Brooke's monarchy ruled the state (1839-1946), then to the Post-Brooke period under British colonization (1946-1963) until the Malaysian nationalism era (from 16 September 1963). Thus, the agent of change since the Brooke monarchy to the British colonization introduced the Iban to a world driven by cash economy and capitalism where Iban experienced a rapid influx of change. As demonstrated in the paper, Iban popular music are created and used as a propaganda tool for nation building. As popular music associating lifestyle of the people, they also provide insights for the historical dimension of socio-cultural phenomena in 1960s to 1970s. Perhaps, in future research, the highlight could be shifted from the West to Southeast Asia in particular Borneo region merging the concept of modern, and modernity, followed by alternative modernities to justify what sounds modern in analyzing the reciprocation of popular music production in Southeast Asia. Alternative modernities, emphasizing the appeal of modernity in a localized context of Southeast Asia, as a cutting edge to analyze the movement and dynamics of people, music, ideas and technologies among the urban setting in this region.

### **Acknowledgement**

First and foremost, the researchers would like to express our gratitude to the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and Ministry of Higher Education for the Special Grant Scheme given (Grant No.: F03/SpGS/1411/16/12) to carry out this research. Second, the researchers would like to thank Sarawak Broadcasting Department for the access to the audio archive.

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