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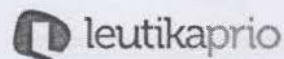
Satu Rumpun Banyak Tunas

KUMPULAN PEMIKIRAN GENERASI MUDA
INDONESIA DAN MALAYSIA

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Kata Pengantar

Hubungan Indonesia dan Malaysia sangat dinamis dalam lima belas tahun terakhir. Krisis ekonomi yang melanda kedua negara dan perubahan politik di Indonesia turut memengaruhi peristiwa-peristiwa yang mengiringi hubungan kedua negara serumpun, bersaudara, dan bertetangga ini. Seperti halnya dalam kehidupan sehari-hari, dua keluarga yang hidup berdampingan dan masih memiliki ikatan kekerabatan, sering kali mengalami permasalahan, baik permasalahan akibat perbedaan cara pandang, perselisihan pagar batas, ataupun masalah-masalah kecil yang tidak jarang menimbulkan keributan.

Pertanyaannya kemudian adalah bagaimana sebenarnya bagian dari masyarakat kedua negara, yaitu para generasi muda memandang fenomena ini? Apakah mereka juga larut dalam perselisihan ini atautkah memiliki gagasan untuk memperkuat kebersamaan dua saudara ini? Buku sederhana ini hadir sebagai ungkapan gagasan dan pemikiran beberapa generasi muda di Indonesia dan Malaysia dalam memandang hubungan kedua negara. Beberapa isu penting muncul dibahas dan sekaligus beberapa gagasan penting solusi juga ditawarkan. Buku "Satu Rumpun Banyak Tunas" memiliki arti keserumpunan akar budaya yang dimiliki oleh Indonesia dan Malaysia yang merupakan sebuah modal sosial dan budaya yang luar biasa. Sementara itu di dalam keserumpunan itu telah tumbuh tunas-tunas baru, yaitu para generasi muda dengan gagasan dan ide-ide yang mempererat hubungan kedua negara.

DAFTAR ISI

	hal
Kata Pengantar.....	iii
Negara Serumpun: Antara Dua Persepsi Himawan Bayu Patriadi, PhD <i>Koordinator Indonesia, Forum Sejahtera Indonesia-Malaysia</i> <i>Pembantu Dekan I (Akademik), Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan</i> <i>Ilmu Politik, Universitas Jember</i>	ix
Daftar Isi	xxiii
Selected Issues on Bilateral Relationship between Malaysia-Indonesia and the Role of University Students in Peacebuilding Approaches Aizat bin Khairi	1
Kesepakatan ASEAN tentang Pencemaran Asap Lintas Batas Wilayah Sebagai Penguat Hubungan Diplomatik Indonesia-Malaysia Binti Nikmatul Afdila	24
Penguatan Hubungan Malaysia-Indonesia Melalui Pendekatan Tasawur Islam Muhammad Mu'adz Mohd Saufee.....	40
Pemberdayaan Musik Melayu Sebagai Sarana Penguat Identitas Bersama Indonesia-Malaysia Fatchur Rozi dan Musfiroh.....	59

Islam: Kukuhkan Hubungan Malaysia dan Indonesia Nur Nasliza Arina binti Mohamad Nasir	79
Kerja Sama Bilateral Indonesia-Malaysia melalui Pengemasan "Unyil dan Upin-Ipin" sebagai <i>National Branding</i> Cita Teranisa	103
Ratu Cantik dan Konflik Budaya: Satu Realitas Lai Kien Wee	121
Who Is Claim Who's Culture? (Siapa Mengklaim Budaya Siapa?) Tri Ajeng Anggraini	139
Hubungan Internasional Indonesia-Malaysia dan Asia Tenggara: Sebuah Analisis Awal Ali Maksum	159
Indonesia - Malaysia Conflict : The Conflict Which Getting Simpler and Wider Rangga Setiawan	192
The Locality and the Immediate Realities: Tracing Modernity in Indonesian and Malaysian Modern Art Dr. Sarena Abdullah dan Chelliah Thiruchelvam.....	204
Editor dan Penulis.....	157

The Locality and the Immediate Realities: Tracing Modernity in Indonesian and Malaysian Modern Art

Sarena Abdullah dan Chelliah Thiruchelvam

Abstract

The modern as defined by Baudelaire refers to the current or contemporary developments. Modern art starts with artworks that represent the vignettes of daily life in the privacy of private studios in Paris to the beauty of modern life seen from multiple surroundings. The appropriation and mutation of modernity by Africans, Arabs, Indians, and Asians, for example, do not indicate Westernization but rather an active participation in the construction of modernism by non-European sources. Jim Supangkat terms it as "multi-modernism" in which he argues for non-European modernism to be contextualized, articulated, and theorized within their own specific historicity (Supangkat, 1997). Within this context, this paper attempts to discuss the context of early modernity of modern art specifically in Indonesia and Malaysia. This paper will argue that modernity does not only belong to the West but it can be multiplied and pluralized over its Western origin. Therefore, this paper upholds that modern art that was accepted and developed in the non-Western world is a form of a discursive formation, which continues to be 'under-construction' that is multifaceted and yet an intricate subject of study, in which this paper attempts to unfold.

Introduction

In discussing Indonesian art, Joseph Fischer highlights that almost all the attention given to Indonesian art, has focused on folk art or classical ancient art, especially in the domain of archaeology and anthropology. According to him, interests in Indonesian art has always focused on the traditional, exotic, sacred, and ancient – objects or artifacts that are highly demanded in the tourism and world markets due to the beauty and 'exotification' of these items. These interests, however, has resulted in the lack of interest in modern art and generally a certain dislike towards exhibiting the so-called "Westernized" Indonesian art (Fischer, 1990, p. 10). One of the reasons is because Indonesian modern art does not match the exotic expectation of Western curators and their audience (Spanjaard, 1990, p. 55). Other scholars have also commented on how Asian artists are stereotyped as Second or Third World artists who produce third-rate art (Clark, 1993; Spate, 1993). Therefore, this paper tries to unfold or present how modern art that has been accepted and developed in the non-Western world must be studied as a form of a discursive field, which is multi-faceted and under studied.

With such observations made by prominent scholars, it can be highlighted that modern art that is situated or developed outside the West needs to be examined. It cannot, however, be examined as a progressive linear development from modernist tradition that was developed from the age of Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution in Europe. Although there is a common perception that the world

outside the West adopted both modernity and Western culture around World War II, such assertions must have been made blindly without trying to examine the situation deeper. As for modern art produced outside the Western worlds, these fundamental questions must be raised: What are the characteristics that denote these modern arts? What are the shifts and local movements or international movements that denote these modern artistic expressions? How is modern art being accepted and used to reflect or represent a nation's early of post-colonial modernity?

This paper will briefly examine the context of Malaysian and Indonesian modern art. Malaysia and Indonesia are two neighbouring nations that share similarities in many aspects. The history of both countries is often intertwined. The borders of ancient kingdoms and empires — such as Srivijaya, Majapahit, Malacca, Aceh, and Johor-Riau — often comprised both modern day countries. For centuries, the relations, migrations, and interactions between Indonesians and Malaysians have been quite powerful. As such until today it is still common for Malaysians to trace their relatives in Indonesia and vice versa. Therefore, although both countries are separate and independent states, there are also deeply embedded similarities tied by common religion, language, proximity, cultural heritage as well as cultural practices that date back centuries ago.

The discussion of modern art in this paper, however, will not dwell on these intertwining histories but it will discuss and examine the forms of modern arts

in both countries independently. This paper will examine the premise of modern art in both countries by arguing that the internal engagement of thoughts through modern art occurs when artists are confronted by immediate realities based on their immediate localities either through the individual experiences and artistic exploration or collective experiences of the society.

Local Context (Indonesia and Malaysia) in Modern Art

An obvious factor that differentiates modern art that resulted from the age of Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution in Europe, and modern art that was produced in the non-Western art world is the locality and historical settings. Eventhough modern art in Indonesia and Malaysia has Western outward look, the internal spirit or belief is very fundamentally rooted it its local cultural belief which has developed over time. Supangkat asserts that just as the Western world was established on modern thoughts in the 19th century, Indonesia was at part with the West as they were opposing the Dutch colonialism by waging for freedom of speech and their equality in the parliament. Thus, this proves that the non-Western world may have not be in reference to the West, in terms of modernity as popularly believed or implied to believe (Supangkat, 2009).

He argues this in his early writings that ever since Western art entered Indonesia in the 17th century, there were already developments indicative of assimilation between Eastern and Western culture. He discusses on how there are strong possibilities that Javanese court culture had

already adapted the concept of High Art between the 17th and 18th centuries. The term 'kagunan', in Javanese culture for example, means "fine arts," and within a wider cultural context, this term is also known as 'kagunan adiluhung' or "high art" (Supangkat, 1997, p. 12).

The definition of *kagunan* sets out the nobility of character in the moral sense as the basis of sensibility. *Kagunan* is defined as: "(1) cleverness, or (2) beneficial activity, or (3) the pouring out of intelligence/sensibility related to nobility of character." He argues that this concept does not exist among other traditional cultures in Indonesia. He highlights that within the framework of the traditional arts in Indonesia, visual sensibility has never been considered? —except through the term *kagunan*— which the term refers to drawing and sculpting. He also adds further that the term *seni rupa* (fine arts/visual arts) in Indonesian language was also conceived in consideration of the understanding of the *kagunan* concept as there was no other related reference prior to the coinage of the term. The basic meaning of the two terms, *seni rupa* and *kagunan* are almost identical even though the Indonesian language is a modern language adapted from Malay language and not Javanese (Supangkat, 1997, p. 12).

In the context of Malaysia, however, the understanding of modern art could be seen as a Western art form that was introduced to the locals by early 20th century immigrants. Two dimensional works such as painting is not a form of local aesthetics. The only artistic expressions of the Malays are in the form of utilitarian art such as basket

and textile making, carving, metalwork, etc. As beautiful as they are, they are not the "modern expressions" associated with modern art. Malaysia's development of modern art is somewhat simplistic, but undeniably true. In the Introduction of *Modern Artists of Malaysia*, T.K Sabapathy explains that the visual arts in Malaysia are recent and do not emerge from any kind of subversion of traditional art form. He explains:

"The emergence of modern art implies the existence of a parent tradition. For one of the identifying of art activity is its challenge to (and according to some opinions its subversion of) the norms and values of traditional art practices. ...

However, by all admissions, there apparently does not exist a history of art in Malaysia which can be usefully considered as constituting a tradition from which modern art direction can emerge. In this sense it has been repeatedly stated that Malaysia lacks a tradition of plastics arts. And reasons have been suggested for this." (T.K. Sabapathy, 1983, p. vii)

Although the early water colour works by a few pioneer artists such as Abdullah Ariff and Yong Mun Seng in the early 20th century did not advance any formal or aesthetics directions, Sabapathy argues that these early works can be identifiable with modern art as it was later

enhanced by the institutional grounding of art education and art activities during that time. Debate on modern art and traditional art does not become a great polemic in Malaysia despite the fact that the concepts of visual works are still foreign among the local Malays. While activities such as drawing with pencil and ink, painting using watercolor or oil paint on paper and canvas surface were very new to the local Malays, illustrations perhaps have made an introduction much earlier that have helped in the acceptance of fine art works. The early illustration, for example, was first detected in *Hikayat Abdullah* published in 1849. The later establishment of Sultan Idris Training College in Tanjung Malim - now known as Sultan Idris Education University (UPSI), has also introduced the subject of drawing (Mohd Noor, 2007, p. 17-21, 115). The definition of 'modern art' in Malaysia has not been agreed or discussed comprehensively. Mohamed Ali Abdul Rahman (2000, p. 9) notes that although the term has been used very loosely to describe artistic activities such as oil and water colour painting as early as the 1930s; it has been adopted in describing the Western-based system modeled by the practice of eighteenth century arts. Therefore, modern art was produced alongside traditional art. Later on, in the 1970s, even modern art practices derived its subject matter or inspiration from traditional arts.

The early proclivities of both Indonesian and Malaysian artists are the local scenes such as landscape, day to day living of people of the villages, and early townscape. The painters of "Mooi Indies", such as Abdullah

Suriosubroto, Mas Pirngadie and Wakidi depict the natural aesthetics of the Indonesian landscape that cannot be denied as an important rendition of their own locality. Eventhough the naturalistic paintings that they produce could be seen as some sort of romanticism that satisfies the Dutch colonialist (as patrons and buyers), these naturalistic landscape can also be read as their appreciation of Indonesia's nature and land. Mas Pringadie's landscape in "Pelabuhan Ratu" (1927), for example, was a delicate, precise, and finesse work that reflects the landscape of Java's south coast.

Although the naturalistic paintings was only made by British officers such as Captain Robert Smith, William Daniell, William Westall and others, Malaysian artists who attained their formal art education overseas such as Abdul Latiff Mohidin also renders the regional localities. It can be argued that Abdul Latiff was stunned by the different realities of his home region and the four seasoned country. New experiences and landscapes in a foreign land must have prompted him to reminisce about the Malay archipelagos. Although Latiff Mohidin's early works and sketches were produced in Germany, his "Pago-Pago Series" demonstrated that he consistently derived his subjects from Southeast Asia. In the "Pago-Pago" series that he initially started when he was in German, Latiff experimented with expressive language of colours, gestures, forms, and various strokes. Forms derived from various motifs such as bamboo shoots rise vertically of interlocking units became the main subject matter. In the series, Abdul Latiff's drawings, etchings and even linocuts

consisted of simple forms of snail's shell, leaves, flowers, bamboo shoots, butterfly cocoon, and sea-shells.

Yeoh Jin Leng, another artist who was also trained in the United Kingdom noticed how exotic the local landscape was compared to that of England. In a dialogue session with T.K. Sabapathy, Yeoh (1995), explained, "But here I was looking again with new eyes at the harshness of the sunlight and the colour drenched natural surroundings." (T. K. Sabapathy, 1995, p. 82-83). Such acute observations can be seen in his expressive, powerful, dynamic, and spontaneous brushstrokes of "Rice-Field" (1963) and "Trengganu" (1968) that he produced when he came back to Malaysia after furthering his studies in the United Kingdom. The drenching strokes of "Rice-Field" (1963) for example, clearly reflect the sunny and tropical weather of the region. Although the art works produced by both Abdul Latiff Mohidin and Yeoh Jin Leng were abstracted, the local landscape and scenes are still the prominent subjects of early modern art.

The Immediate Realities and Collective Expressions of Modern Art

Although the artists were mostly rendering the images or subject matter close to them, their adoption of modern or Western style cannot be neglected. Most artists have had some sort of formal education in the (Western) arts; therefore they did not live in vacuum from what was happening in the international art scene especially in terms of their understanding of western or modern art styles. Esmerelda and Marc Bolansee in *Masterpieces*

of *Contemporary Indonesian Painters* (1997), for example, describe seven dominant styles that can be seen in the works of Indonesian artists:

1. Expressionistic figurative paintings—in the genre that highlights poverty, injustice, and struggle with independence such as Nyoman Gunarsa, Srihadi Soedarsono, Djoko Pekik, and Heri Dono.
2. Decorative and realistic figurative painting like the works of Widayat, Chusin Setiadikara, Sudarisman.
3. Naïve decorative painting using rich local imagery, numerous folktales and wayang stories in Java by Sukanto Dewi Susanto.
4. Islamic painting founded by A.D. Pirous.
5. Abstract painting by Bagong Kussudiardjo, Umi Dachlan, Nunung W.S., Sunaryo, Made Wianta, Nyoman Erawan, and Made Djirna.
6. Hyperrealism such as in Dede Eri Supria's social themes.
7. Surrealism imageries by Ivan Sagito and Lucia Martini who draw their inspiration from myths and popular stories.

Categorization by Western 'isms' is unavoidable as the modern art movement and styles has been well established and accepted within the field; but it must be argued that such categorization do not reflect the conditions, challenges, and preoccupation of non-Western artists in developing their own artistic approach. Therefore, the general categorization by Esmerelda and Marc Bolansee

(1997) were informed by their (Westerners) knowledge of modern art. As such, such general grouping according to Western art movement and styles does not reflect the preoccupation of non-Western artists in their interests and deep commitment in their expression of the society's collective feelings that could be exerted through various symbolic meanings, narrative content, and expressions of national and cultural identity usually persisted in their work.

Unlike Malaysian artists, a significant number of Indonesian artists chose to highlight the collective concerns rather than individual self-expressions that mostly preoccupied Malaysian artists. Jaafar Ajoeb claims that one of the definitive elements of modern Indonesian art is its ability to engage with a situational dialogue even during Raden Saleh's times. He claims that Indonesian visual artworks were not illustrated by the use of materials, methodology, approach, or even styles undertaken by the artists but the thought behind the work that makes the work qualifies as modern. The artworks has the modernistic stance and vision that is anti-colonialistic, democratic, and pro-people and also exuded the anti-feudalistic feeling, with deep empathy for human's right as *ummat* or society and artists as individuals. He argues further that Indonesian visual arts are not typified by the question of whether they employ Western or Eastern technology, mass or elitist, but are typified by a new and progressive stance and vision (Ajoeb, 1993, p. 5).

However, in institutions such as Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia (A.S.R.I.) in Yogyakarta and Institut Teknologi

Bandung (I.T.B) in Bandung, Western styles are prominent. In A.S.R.I, realism and expressionism are developed into various styles, such as surrealism, magic realism, decorative abstraction, and mythological symbolism led by artists like Affandi, Hendra, and Sudjojono. In Institut Teknologi Bandung (I.T.B) in Bandung, on the other hand, Spanjaard (1990, p. 55) noted that artists still go through a "Westernized" phase, in which they create cubist and abstract art.

The differences between these two schools and their products are: those from ASRI concentrate on the themes of people and community, with the belief that honesty/feelings/emotions should be the source of truth. For example, what moved Djoko Pekik to paint is the plight of people who are living in infertile regions due to endless deforestation, erosion, and overpopulation where work can be hardly attained and farming provided such a meager income (Wright, 1994, p. 196). In "Solidarity with the Driver of the Train" (1989), Djoko Pekik depicted what he saw at Bintaro/Kebayoran lama in Jakarta. The painting is filled with renditions of men carrying sledgehammers and sickles and behind them a platform full of people with minimal details, dark eyes, and basic silhouette of the nose and mouth. The other side of the track is also filled with people waiting for the train. The train is covered and congested with people, dangling from the windows and even on top of the roof. At the background, congested scenes of automobiles and the skyscrapers of the large metropolis of Jakarta can be seen. (Wright, 1994, p. 202-205)

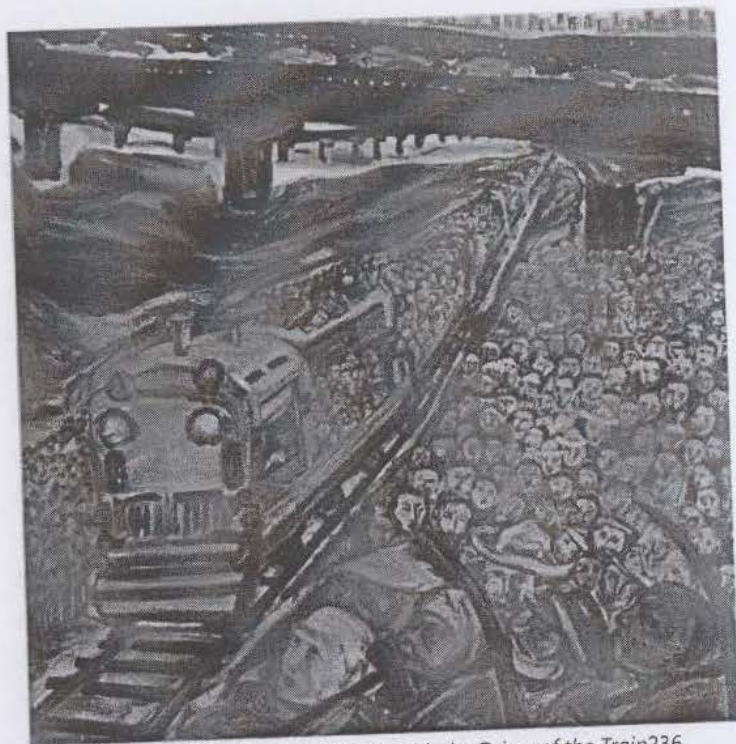


Figure 1: Djoko Pekik, *Solidarity with the Driver of the Train*²³⁶ (1989), oil on canvas, 150 x 150cm.

[Source: *Modern Indonesian Art: Three Generations of Tradition and Change 1945-1990* (1990)]

Djoko Pekik's work depicted the reality of life of the masses in modern Jakarta, the day to day life of the common small people and their social realities. Various feelings are combined with elements of cultural knowledge and personal memory in different ways to create a visual sense of impressions. A different sense of empathy for the

²³⁶ In *Modern Indonesian Art: Three Generations of Tradition and Change 1945-1990* (1990) the title of the work is written as "My Train Doesn't Stop Too Long" (*Keretaku Tak Berhenti Lama*)

people is often seen in Djoko's work, often depicted in an idiosyncratic and expressive realism. By combining what Djoko feels, sees, and how he imagines his subjects would feel and see, Djoko's art represents a communal rather than individual expression, a visual merging through empathy of the individual within the larger group.

Claire Holt claims that the dominant feeling among the Yogyakarta's painters is that their art was "national", indigenous, and genuinely Indonesian. This belief has little to do with the pursuit of a certain style in but it stemmed mainly from the painter's emotional or dogmatic identification with the land and its people. By painting Java's mountains, rice fields, markets, oxcarts, village courtyard, or other people's toys and amusement, by painting portraits of others and themselves, Holt (1967, p. 231) summated that they were nationalistic as much as their art was devoted to Indonesian life. This was because, even though they did not consciously imitate contemporary Western art but with the notion/believe of "tjari sendiri," the artists searched for him/herself.

Those who came from the Bandung school on the other hand, also could not escape from the notion of collectivity propagated to the people albeit in somewhat different form those of the Yogyakarta school. A.D Pirous developed his work which was based on Islamic calligraphy. Enrolled into the Fine Arts Department in Bandung in 1955 his early works are primarily exercises in cubist-inspired, breaking up the plane to depict fractured landscapes and figures and later would he used Arabic calligraphy in his paintings, thus exploring his potential in calligraphic-

abstract works.

In the work entitled "For the Sake of the Sparkling Morning Light" (1982), Pirous' awareness of the local art or mythology is evident. He combines abstract regular panels of color with a tall, upward-thrusting triangle filled with an inscription in Arabic script. The central background space of horizontal color panels, against which the triangle is set, is symmetrically framed by vertical panels—a composition which is at once modern and evocative of Islamic textile arts from Sumatra. Traditional head cloths in batik employ the triangle format and are often used as a central motif; which is directly relevant to the textile arts of Aceh itself. These are parts of the local aesthetic matrix that Pirous occupied (Wright, 1994, p. 72-73).

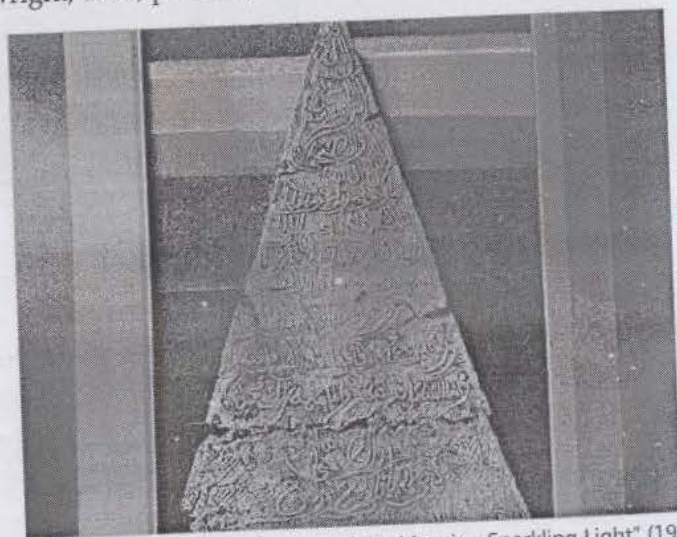


Figure 2: A.D. Pirous, "For the Sake of the Morning Sparkling Light" (1982), gold and acrylic on fiberglass, hardboard and canvas, 160 x 200cm. [Source: *Soul, Spirit, and Mountain: Preoccupations of Contemporary Indonesian Painters* (1994)]

Eventhough Pirous claims he never intended his works to be some sort of religious preaching, the shades of blue, mauve, and grey of the morning light referred to both in the title and *surah* (Quranic verses) depicted in the work tells people to read in the name of God. These messages of the *surah* indicate an important idea for Muslims to know how to read and understand the Koran – the key to being educated. The triangle which is depicted as a chipped and cracking stone is a symbol of transience set against the timeless purity of abstract form, representing a gesture that education and knowledge are timeless.

Eventhough the works by artists from Yogyakarta and Bandung schools had different preoccupation in styles and underlying ideologies, the artworks directly or indirectly still propagate immediate realities and collectivity and moral precepts for the people. Notably, this particular style, or subject or both that is chosen by the particular artist for the matter indeed portrayed the political climate, (or) ideological struggle or even artistic freedom that they are trying to achieve vigorously or subliminally. These factors, when examined on a larger scale, would eventually point towards the socio-cultural settings as well as the political transformation that were taking shape within the country.

Rather than the emphasis of the society or the empathy towards the people, the development of Malaysian art tends to be very individualistic in terms of its position. Although early Indonesian influences can be seen in the works of Hoessein Enas, however, his paintings lack the anti-colonialism, democratic pro-people, and

anti-feudalism that Jaafar Ajoeb noticed about Indonesian artists. Following that, T.K. Sabapathy (1983) discussed Hoessein Enas' realistic figures as: "the familiar was transformed into ideal or even heroic images, and crafted in a manner to ensure comfortable and legible reading" (T.K. Sabapathy, 1983, p. 64). In his further discussion, T.K. Sabapathy (1994, p. 58) notes that Hoessein Enas's human figures were also meant to create images which uplifted the Malays together with the notion of Tanah Melayu by symbolizing the nobility of the Malays as people as the people of the land. However, such attempt to portray the emotional or dogmatic identification with the land and its people stops short only producing the idealized portraiture and the Malays happily going about their daily activities such as in "Memetik Daun Tembakau di Kelantan" (1962).



Figure 3 Mohd Hoessein Enas
Memetik Daun Tembakau di Kelantan, (1962), oil, 95.5 x 121 cm
[Sumber: *Pengolahan Landskap Tempatan dalam Seni Moden Malaysia, 1930-1981* (1981)]

The reality of life of the masses, the rendering of life of the common small people and their social realities drawn with a sense of empathy for the people are rarely depicted in Hoessein Enas's work. Therefore, it can be argued, in comparison with Indonesian art, artworks by Malaysia artists are mostly reiteration of their interest in artistic, formalistic visual exercises rather than as a reflection of the society in general. Following that, Professor Ungku Aziz (1968) also commented:

"(t)here seems to be a relative lack of consciousness about social, economic, and political tensions, that in the national and international aspects, compose the matrix of the Malaysian nation. Socially conscious art is one thing, social protest is another. Patriotism or heroism or pessimism are another examples of emotional conditions that our artists and their patrons may yet arrive in their full maturity." (*Salon Malaysia Open Art Competition and Exhibition, 1968*)

Redza Piyadasa in *Rupa Malaysia* (2000) claims that Malaysian artists, until recently, have not been inclined to create works of art that speak of social or political issues. The occupancy of artists in realism and abstract expressionism were prominent since the early development of modern Malaysian art, as the works of most artists are only concerned with formalistic and stylistic issues. Besides that, realism and academy painting were promulgated by Hoessein Enas, whose style mostly followed by his followers

in Angkatan Pelukis Semenanjung (APS), Syed Ahmad Jamal and Tay Hooi Keat, who came back from abroad and introduced Western 'isms' in their work. Eventhough there was no stylistic agreement among artists in denoting their work as Malaysian, the works done are very Malaysian in the sense that their themes and subjects converse with local scenes. Local scapes, local people and local flora and fauna have inspired many Malaysian artists despite the style they adopted. Most artists during the 1950s and 1960s took up art lessons through the associations and clubs that they had encountered with, whereby the members were more interested in polishing their skills or experimenting with their styles than positioning themselves as social observers. (Piyadasa, 2000)

Only during the 1970s Malaysian artists began to question or search for their own identities albeit it is very rooted to the idea of a national identity. The National Cultural Congress in 1971 for example, promoted the Malay language and culture as the official language and classification of "bumiputera" (indigenous) and "bukan bumiputera" (non-indigenous) and this shifted the artistic discourse during the 1970s and 1980s. Malay artists started to search their own roots through tradition and religion for their artistic identity. In the plenary meeting prior to the 1971 National Cultural Congress, it was proposed that the "Art for Art's Sake" attitude in Malaysia should be changed to "Art for Society." The slogan "Seni untuk Masyarakat" (Art for Society) and "Seni untuk Seni" (Art for Art's Sake) was significant especially among literary scholars ASAS 50

(The Generation of the Literati Scholars of the 1950s). Some of the Malay literati believed in the concept of "Seni untuk Masyarakat" (Art for Society) in which they claimed would create a much more focused artistic work by uplifting the readers "consciousness" of the national identity based on the Malay supremacy. Thus, the success of any artistic work should be measured by its social consciousness and didactic function. However, it was only in the mid and late 1970s that such notion managed to shift the preoccupation of Malaysian artists that resulted in modern artworks based on Malay culture and Islamic aesthetics. This could be seen in the works that of several artists such as Jailani Abu Hassan, Din Omar, Amron Omar, Mad Anuar Ismail, Anuar Rashid, Tengku Sabri Tengku Ibrahim, Sulaiman Hj Esa, Zakaria Awang, Ahmad Khalid Yusof, Hamdzun Haron, and others.

Rather than exerting the immediate realities and collective feelings, material and culture became the main subject matter. Cultural objects such as *tepak sirih*, *sirih*, *pinang*, *lesung* became the central themes by some of these artists. Besides that, Malay traditional dance and theatre, myths and folk stories, linguistic elements of the Malay language, Malay worldview and even the Malay art of self-defense were examined through visual depictions. As a result, the traditional Malay culture was idealized in a modern form. A few Malaysian artists also re-examined the way that they were doing artworks and resorted to Islamic art. So rather than highlighting the plight or the feeling of the struggling society, "traditional art" and

Malay culture became the main subject matter. Besides that, Islamic art and aesthetics were also popular and well accepted and embraced in which the production of modern art adopted the Malay culture and Islamic art as part of its expression. Similarly, like A.D. Pirous' works, there were some Malaysian artists who felt strongly about producing art that could be accepted by Islam as they merged modern artistic practices with Islamic design conventions such as the Arabic Script or Jawi script, calligraphic motives and the Arabesque, the displays of verses from the Quran or the Hadith, and epithets praising God's supremacy that is further enhanced by the concept of Islamic spirituality.

Mastura Abdul Rahman's "Interior No. 29" (1987), for example, was derived from both Malay textile art and Islamic aesthetics. The artist merged the flattened decorative elements derived from the traditional textile - *batik* into the interior domain of the traditional Malay house. Imbued with a deep blue and purplish color, her work is filled with Malay flavor. The "Islamicness" of this work can be seen in the manifestation of unity, the patterns lead your eyes to nowhere in particular, trying to enmesh any focal point that screams for attention. The eyes have to adjust and absorb the pattern and colors of the surface before they begin to pick up, one by one, the architectural elements seen from the bird's eye view—the purple door, the window, the floor, and the wall of the house. Later, the eyes would establish a few rectangular mats and a circular mat placed in various positions of the room, a *congkak* (a traditional Malay game), and newsprint near the window. Since the decorative nature

of this work is more dominant and all-encompassing, the perspective of the interior is suppressed and flattened.

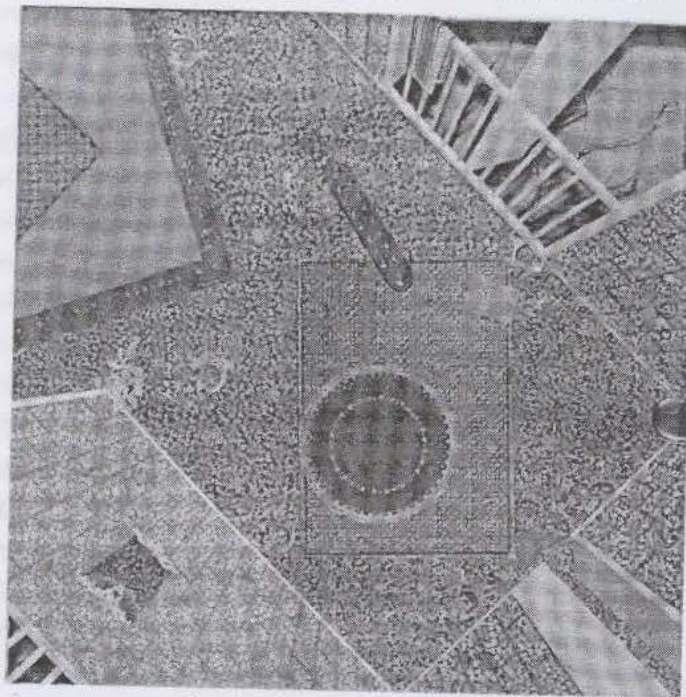


Figure 4 Mastura Abdul Rahman
Interior No. 29 (1987), Mixed Media, 115.6 x 115.8 cm
(National Art Gallery Permanent Collection)

Modernism in Art as National Identity

Based on the short discussion of both of these countries, it thus begs the question: What are the actual forms of modernity that persisted in the production of modern art? Jim Supangkat suggests that modernism can be seen through pluralist principles found in various nations, societies, or even groups of people. The pluralist principle he argues sees reality as actually having many

layers. Considering these premises, Supangkat argues that there are actually various layers of reality taking the various experiences into account in which the reality and its reflections consist of "oneness" and at the same time "manyness" (Supangkat, 1997, p. 10-11).

Therefore, this paper would contend that the Indonesian and Malaysian modern art was formed and developed based on the constant state of flux and transition of experiences not only by the individual artists but of the society as well or "oneness" and yet "manyness". The notion of "national identity" has always been engaged by Indonesian artists that consistently reflect on traditionalism, preservation of indigenosity and cultural heritage. As Indonesia is a pluralistic society with the amalgamation of various cultures and religions, it is inevitable that many diverse styles and themes of Indonesian paintings oppose one another. This, therefore, makes the projection of the term "national identity" becomes more complex, and conflicting.

In comparison to Malaysia, the National Cultural Congress was an attempt to form a synchronized Malaysia identity. After two decades, younger Malaysian artists decide not to pursue the pursuit of national identity despite the emphasis on the Malay-Islamic based art making that supported institutions such as Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). Since the late 1980s, art works that were produced have begun to become more diverse, resisting the Malay-Islamic artistic approach. Multi-dimensional art forms such as installations, performances and videos were produced

using various technological devices.

Is the modern art as a national identity project successful? Of course, in search for a national identity, there is danger for both Indonesia and Malaysia alike. This is because, Indonesia has more than three hundred ethnic groups, while in Malaysia there are many immigrant races with various generational experiences that was passed down from one generation to another. This interpolation and variety of the social fabric mix, hence makes a single identity for the nation even more challenging. We do not want and must not fall into the trap of Benedict Anderson's "imagined community." Anderson discusses the concept of 'an imagined community' which relies on the idea that although citizens are often strangers to one another, they share the idea of the nation and what it stands for, hence "imagined" (Anderson, 1991). As Apinan asserts, when the national culture is seen as part of a political formulation, it becomes not only a process of production but also a product of the political formulation itself (Poshyananda, 1996, p. 26). The production of the "national identity" if it could confirm and ensure the stability and security of the nation, it cannot go smoothly without any contestation or either direct or indirect marginalization one's culture over the rest. Therefore, even though Indonesian modern artworks seem to be more spiritual and in harmony with its ancient culture, beliefs, and use ancient representations and techniques, old myths and epics with various references to traditional Indonesian art; this search for identity cannot be seen as a depiction of "national identity," but rather as

focused on the microcosmic level of local form and cultural identity instead.

Unlike Indonesia, although Malaysian artists have long grappled on the search for the search of national identity but in reality, it must be noted that the National Cultural Policy as an ideological production of the state was not successful and it has been highly contested. Therefore, in the late 1990s, despite the National Cultural Policy, Sheila, N. (Nair, 1999) highlighted that the government still called for the preservation and protection of Malay language and culture and raised concerns over the possible erosion of Malay cultural values.

To conclude, this paper attempts to unfold or present how modern art that was accepted and developed in both Indonesia and Malaysia as a further examination on how modern art that is situated or developed outside the West needs to be examined as a form of an ongoing discursive field. As both countries posit such a vast heterogeneity and cultural differences, it has become essential for us to understand that artists as individuals also assimilate, adapt, and resist various cultural values that they come in contact with, be it locally, nationally or internationally. As the first section of this paper has discussed, the artists openness towards external or internal transmission of culture within the society (i.e. Western/modern art) have reflected the formations of an ever changing situational visual dialogue that subscribe to the different localities and temporalities in both countries. As such, modern art and modernism between the Western world and non-Western world should not be compared on a linear model due to the differences

of socio-cultural settings, geographical location – which provide resources to art making as well as inspiration or subject to the art work and more importantly the history of the populace. The complexity of Asian region must be taken into account and acknowledged for its own essence.

Or perhaps scholarly research on non-Western art perhaps should step out from Western-centric classifications of the art historical field, be it traditional, modern, or certain 'isms.' Moreover, perhaps artistic works should only be appreciated, acknowledged, examined and referred to art for what it is – Art? The more important question is, why would art need to be classified and labeled according to the Western Art Historical convention? Is the intention of the artists or creator or is it us as scholars who can't accept art for what it is?

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