



## Modernization and Westernization: A Never-Ending Discourse in Indonesia<sup>\*\*</sup>

Sjafri Sairin\*

*Faculty of Cultural Sciences of Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta & College of Law, Government and International Studies, Universiti Utara Malaysia*

\*Corresponding author; email: sjafri@uum.edu.my

### ABSTRACT

Ahead of Indonesian independence in 1945, the discourse on cultural and ideological orientation by Indonesian intellectuals became the foundation for the development of the nation. Sutan Takdir Alisyahbana, one of the Indonesian intellectuals at that time strongly believed that following the pattern of Western culture would lead Indonesia to the status of a developed country. Instead, Sanusi Pane and several other Indonesian intellectuals did not agree with the view of Sutan Takdir Alisyahbana. They considered that cultural values that have long held the nation could be used as a foundation for development of Indonesia. The discourse is then known as the Cultural Polemics. This discourse persists to this day but in a slightly different form, namely the discourse of modernization and Westernization. The progress in science and technology from the outside world created Indonesia a market for western products. The West seemed to be fascinating and the adoption of popular culture from the West, especially the U.S., became part of the lives of many people. The image of the West which was considered to be superior and as a role model became an obsession for many people.

**Keywords:** *discourse of modernization and westernization, Indonesian cultural value orientation, hybridization of the elements of value*

### INTRODUCTION

Every country that has been colonized by foreign forces, usually colonizers from developed countries (the West), will have to go through various obstacle in determining the course of development which begins when the independence being fought for is achieved. Determining the ideology that will become the blueprint of the nation's development process becomes very important because it is only with an ideology that a country will be able to develop in accordance with the aspiration of independence.

The problems faced in searching for the appropriate form of ideology will always result in a dilemma because during the colonization era people in a colonized country do not have the appropriate opportunity to discuss the ideology that would become the foundation for development of an independence country. The social distance between the colonizer and the colonized people is far stretched. This has caused people in a colonized country to live in local traditions full of myths about the supremacy and the invulnerability of feudal local leaders. The social structure is a result of the colonizer's social structure in

---

<sup>\*\*</sup> Presented at the XXX. Deutscher Orientalistentag. Germany, Freiburg/Brsg., 24-28 Sept. 2007 in the interdisciplinary panel on "Occidentalism or the Knowledge of the West" (Convenor: Judith Schlehe).

the colonized country. The establishment of local kings was often related to the interest to preserve the position of the colonizer. With different strategies planned, colonizers legitimized the existence of local kings who supported their interests. Various forms of traditions and value systems that were developed by kings and sultans became value standards for the life of the society and people saw the value system that was developed by the local ruler as a general value standard for their daily life. Value systems that are a part of the people's lives are one of the alternatives to choose from in determining the future state ideology. However, the superiority in various aspects of life shown by the colonizer also provided another option in determining the state's ideology. This dilemma then became a relatively popular discourse, both before and after independence.

## **DISCOURSE BEFORE INDEPENDENCE**

In order to help the Dutch administration in managing a variety of social economic activities of the colonized people, some young Indonesian indigenes were given the opportunity to study both in the Netherlands and in Indonesia. With their knowledge some of these scholars work to serve Dutch interests; while others worked in private sectors. Because of their knowledge, these scholars started to understand the importance of independence for a nation. The opportunity that was provided by the colonizer to the indigenous people to receive education had opened their eyes about the necessity for a colonized nation to fight for independence.

Some of them were involved in a discourse about the value or ideology orientation that should be used as the foundation of the nation's development. This discourse was revealed for example in the writings of these scholars before independence was gained in 1945.

Interestingly, St. Takdir Alisyahbana, one of the Indonesian scholars during that time, stated in his writings that the cultural values of the West which was inclined to intellectualism, materialism, dynamism, and individualism should be the model for the cultural value orientation of Indonesia. Only by following that cultural pattern, would Indonesia be able to become a developed country like Western countries. Also, it is with that Western value orientation that the orientation of Indonesia cultural values which tended to be static, feudal, and bound by old traditions could be altered. That was the only way for Indonesia to catch up with the Western world.

However, Sanusi Pane and some other scholars did not agree with what had been expressed by St. Takdir Alisyahbana. They considered Western cultural values as being inappropriate to be implemented in Eastern countries, including Indonesia. According to them, the value system that had long been owned by the Indonesians could be used as the foundation for Indonesia's improvement. The culture of Indonesia which put social solidarity and spiritualism above all is an importance strength that could be used as the foundation for the orientation of the nation's cultural values. The progress that was once achieve by Eastern countries, such as India and China, as well as Indonesia in the glorious era of the Majapahit Kingdom was the reason this group did not agree with St. Takdir Alisyahbana's idea. With their arguments, both groups tried to defend their own opinions and show the superiority of the West and East, respectively.

However, it can be said that the discourse that was compiled in the book "Polemik Kebudayaan" edited by Achdiat k. Mihardja (1977) had not profoundly discussed the concept of modernization, though the discourse was actually related to the modernization process that also came from the West.

## DISCOURSE AFTER INDEPENDENCE

After being colonized by the Dutch for hundreds of years and the Japanese for three and a half years, finally on August 17<sup>th</sup>, 1945, Indonesia succeeded in proclaiming its independence. The Dutch had enjoyed a long period of colonization and they were unwilling to leave the goldmine that had become a source of income for their country. Various efforts were taken by the Dutch administration to regain control of the newly independence country. With the assistance from some other Western countries, the Dutch used different strategies to reinstate their control, including both negotiation and war. The U.S. and the British who were considered to be Dutch allies in the quest to re-colonize Indonesia, became targets of the Indonesia struggle as shown by the formation of the slogan “Iron America, gouge the British” (America kita setrika, Inggris kita linggis).<sup>1</sup> Battles occurred in different places across Indonesia. Jakarta, the capital of the Republic of Indonesia during the early period of independence, had even been moved to Yogyakarta and then later on to Bukittinggi.

As the result of the political process, an anti-Dutch attitude developed among the Indonesians. The history of the modern world records the most colonizers are Western countries. Therefore, it was understandable that the Indonesian people during that time tended to have an anti-Western attitude. The West was considered as colonial and imperialistic, only taking advantage of colonized countries for its own economic and political interest without giving sufficient opportunity for access to resources was given by the colonizers, it was only intended for the nobles and the leaders of local society, which in the end was also in the interest of the colonizer.

Boeke (1954), an expert in Dutch economics, even stated that the export market that was developed by the Dutch administration in Indonesia did not give any social economic benefit to the indigenous people. The colonization era was marked by Economic Dualism. The capitalistic economy that was built by the Dutch through the development of export commodities did not involve the people's economy that was run by the Indonesian. Furnival (1948) also stated that the Dutch East Indies economy had indirectly formed a plural society in the colonized society. In the upper level there white people; in the middle there were Far East migrants, especially Chinese; and in the lowest level were the indigenous people of Indonesia.

This unfair treatment created a very negative view among Indonesians toward the Western world, represented by the Dutch, especially in relation to the political and economic policy of the Dutch.

During early independence, this negative view toward the Dutch was even stronger. This was caused by the reluctance of the Dutch to agree upon the handover of West Irian to the newly independent Republic of Indonesia (West Irian was part of the Dutch East Indian territory)

In order to fight against Western domination, the first large-scale Asian-African conference was held on April 18<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup>, 1955, in Bandung, Indonesia, also called the Bandung Conference. It was attended by newly independence countries in Asia and Africa and was organized by Indonesia, India, Burma, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Egypt. Twenty-nine countries representing over half of the world population sent delegations. Soekarno named this group the NEFOS (Newly Emerging Forces). The main consensus of the conference was that “colonialism in all of its manifestations” was condemned, implicitly censuring the West as well as the Soviet Union (Kahin 1956). With that political power, Soekarno started to distance himself from the Western Block and became closer to the Eastern Block. In the end he chose to form a close relationship with the People's Republic of China.

Under the leadership of Soekarno the antipathy feeling toward the Dutch resulted in the creation of a nationalization policy which was to affect every Dutch-owned company in Indonesia, including large plantation in East Sumatera in 1957. This was then followed by the nationalization of other foreign companies, such as British-owned plantation.<sup>2</sup> This nationalization of foreign companies was intended to

strengthen the Indonesian economy because with state control of foreign companies the nation's economy could be further developed.

Unfortunately, the plan did not go well, mostly because there were almost no indigenous people who understood the management system of the foreign companies. In the plantation companies during the Dutch colonization, for example, none of the indigenous people worked at the level of the plantation manager. The highest position that an indigenous person might have had was as foreman. As a result, no Indonesian was capable of managing the company well. Therefore, it was understandable that the nationalization of foreign companies did not benefit in developing the Indonesian economy.

This political economy policy failure resulted in a stronger antipathy among Indonesians toward the Dutch and the West. This attitude was also the political reason behind Indonesia's decision to resign from the United Nations.

Interestingly, this political decision also affected the political and cultural policy of the Soekarno administration. Anything that had Western influence was considered inappropriate to be adopted, including any political view or popular cultural, such as music, clothes, and dance. The effort to preserve Indonesian national characters was always emphasized as a form of opposition toward Western hegemony. It is understandable that the implementation of the political policy appeared to be exaggerated. The Koes Bersaudara, a music group, was put in jail because they played music that was similar to the Beatles' music. This popular music group was sent to prison on June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1965, and was released on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1965.<sup>3</sup> Western style dances were prohibited and replaced with social dance that were considered to reflect Indonesian characters, such as the Serampang Dua Belas a dance of Malay origin from East Sumatra. Indonesians who had Western names, especially Dutch names, such as Mince, Tience or Lince, were forced to replace their names with Indonesian names.

During the Soekarno administration which lasted until 1966, anything that was considered to be influenced by Western culture was completely taken out of the life of Indonesians. With its motto, *Kembali kepada kepribadian bangsa* (Return to The Nation's Character), the Indonesian government tried to discover its own value system. Dutch language was no longer taught in schools, though English was still allowed. Therefore, none of the young Indonesian generation was able to read books and documents written in Dutch. This is ironic because understanding Dutch is required if one wishes to do research on historical events in Indonesia before independence, as many documents from that era written in Dutch/

## **DISCOURSE DURING THE NEW ORDER**

After Soekarno handed over his throne to Soeharto in 1966, the anti-Western movement that was promoted by Soekarno immediately changed its course. The political and economic crisis that befell Indonesia was overcome by Soeharto by steering the country closer to the Western world. Many kinds of aid flowed from the Western world for the development of the Indonesian economy. The World Bank and several other international finance institutions started to provide financial loans, whether to finance economic infrastructure or to improve Indonesian human resources. At that time there were thousands of Indonesian university students who received an education either in the U.S., Australia, or other European countries. The program which sent Indonesian university students to Communist countries, significant in the Soekarno era, was stopped. All government policies were oriented toward the Western world.

During the Soeharto era the actual modernization discourse took place within society. Modernization was an effort to transform the traditional society into a society that could obtain a sufficient level of economic growth and have advanced technology and social organization. It became a very popular discourse among scholars and politicians. However, it was unavoidable that the modernization discourse was associated

with ‘Western’ discourse. The Western modernization concept that is rooted in the Western world is often compared to or associated with the Western culture itself. As a result, the modernization concept cannot be separated from Western value systems.

The success of the pro-West development program during the Soeharto period improved the wellbeing of society. However, only a few people were really able to enjoy it, namely the Indonesian elites. The majority of the people were still trapped in poverty. Modernization driven by Soeharto had change Indonesian from the closed country that it was in the Soekarno era to an open country. In a relatively short period, products from the Western world entered Indonesia.

The cultural policies of the Soeharto period forced Indonesian citizens of Chinese descent to change their names to ‘real’ Indonesian names. This policy was implemented on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1966.<sup>4</sup> A man of Chinese descent with the Chinese name Oey Tjin Ek, for example, change her name to Lana Setiawati. Even though most of the Chinese descendents in Indonesia change their names to Indonesian names, this policy was not followed by some Chinese Indonesians who kept their names. Among others were Prof. Dr, Mayling Oey, a professor at the University of Indonesia, Dr. Thee Kian Wie and Dr. Mely G. Tan, senior social scientists in Indonesia. Aside from that, newspapers and schools using the Chinese language were not allowed to operate.

## **POST-SOEHARTO DISCOURSE**

Following the Soeharto period, the post-Soeharto administration also chose a policy that opened Indonesia to the outside world. The progress in technology and communications from outside made Indonesia a market for Western products. The Western was also seen to be very fascinating. The lifestyle and adoption of popular culture from the West, especially the U.S., became a part of many people’s lives. The image of the West which is considered to be superior and therefore a role model became an obsession for many people. Having white skin which is one of the symbols of the Westerners became a dream for many young men and women (Yulianto, 2007). Various whitening products were offered on the market, promoting the ability of the products to change the color of skin to a lighter tone within several weeks.

The globalization process has brought new ideas to Indonesia, including ideas about democracy and human rights. However, when such ideas were implemented in Indonesian society, various problems occurred. This was particularly because the new ideas that often came directly from the West were in opposition to the local culture. For example, the implementation of democracy in the election of Head of Regions is not in accordance with local values which stress feudalism and have long been rooted in the life of the society.

Along with the transformation in political, economic, and social systems brought about by the distinct modernization values from the West through the globalization process, a particular kind of cultural opposition emerged. People within these streams are creating a model of local life that is considered to be in accordance with the religion that they embrace. Around 85 percent of the Indonesian populations are Moslems. Some of these Moslems from a cultural opposition toward the globalization process by showing their resistance toward the West. The success of Imam Khomeini in Iran in overruling the Western-supported Iranian Shah has turned Iranian revolution into a reference model for these Moslems. Many Islamic education institutions have started to improve themselves and have tried to influence their educational institutions to incorporate modern education based on Islamic values. The symbol of Islam expressed in the clothing pattern of the Moslems (hijab) has become a phenomenon of modern society in Indonesia. Many banks, including private banks, have started to become interested in opening banking systems that are based on Islamic learning (known as Sharia banking).

Hybridization between elements of Western and Islamic values is not a rare phenomenon. It can be seen in the education system, clothing, food, and settlement arrangement. Therefore, modernization in Indonesia is mainly understood as the main principle of the concept. Whether the concept is rooted in Western culture or not is not as important to today's discourse.

The West that has been the model for Indonesia's development has not always been supported by Indonesians, especially when considering the political policy of the West toward the Islamic world. In a milder form, opposition toward the West is shown by symbolically closing down several restaurants which are assumed to be related to the U.S., such as KFC and McDonalds. But most of the Moslems in Indonesia despise the terror carried out by a small number of Moslems in Indonesia, especially because they believe that terrorism is not in line with the foundation of Islamic teaching which is in favor of peace.

## CONCLUSION

The attitude of Indonesians toward the West is indeed ambiguous. On the one hand, the West is a model for the life of Indonesian society. The West is the reference for the development of sciences and technology. As a result, almost every higher education institution in Indonesia is oriented toward an education system which has been developed by the Western world. Lifestyle and popular culture from the West such as food, fashion and music, have become ubiquitous in the daily life of Indonesians. Various skin whitening products show that white skin (a symbol of the West) is seen as being more highly valued than dark skin, the skin color of Indonesians.

However, at the same time, the West is observed with antipathy. The West is considered to be continuing with its old tradition as colonizer by developing the concepts of liberalism, neo-capitalism, and secularism. Basically, Indonesians can accept the good values of modernization which have been transmitted by the process of westernization. However, they definitely refuse to accept the negative sides carried along with westernization such as the concept of free sex and any attitudes which blame most of the Moslem countries for any trouble happening in many parts of the world. The Western world is a 'longed for' world at the same time, hated. In this kind of situation, for the sake of peacefulness in this globalizing world, respecting each country's sovereignty is necessity. Cooperation in various forms is needed so that we are able to understand each other. We all dream of a happy and prosperous world for everyone, both in the East and West.

## REFERENCE

- Boeke, J.H. (1954). *Economics and economic policy of dual societies as exemplified by Indonesia*. New York: International Secretariat, Institute of Pacific Relations.
- Furnivall, J.S. (1948). *Colonial policy and practice: A comparative study of Burma and Netherlands India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kahin, George McTurnan. (1956). *The Asian-African Conference: Bandung, Indonesia, April 1955*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Mihardja, Achdiat K. (1977). *Polemik kebudayaan*. Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya.
- Thalib, Dahlan. (1962). The estate rubber industry of East Sumatra. In Douglas S. Paauw (Ed.), *Prospects for East Sumatran plantation industries: A symposium* (pp. 50-66). New Haven: Southeast Asian Studies, Yale University.
- Waspada* (1957, December 11). TT-I oper perusahaan<sup>2</sup> Belanda. Medan: A newspaper.

Yulianto, Vissia Ita. (2007). *Pesona Barat: Analisis kritis-historis tentang kesadaran warna kulit di Indonesia*. Yogyakarta: Jalasutra.  
<http://www.Kompas.co.id/utama/news/0410/13/142549.htm>; October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2004. *Koes Bersaudara dibeaskan*.  
<http://yulian.firdaus.or.id/2005/04/20/amerika-kita-setrika-inggeris-kita-linggis>.  
[http://www.mailarchive.com/budaya\\_tionghua@yahoogroups.com/msg17195.html](http://www.mailarchive.com/budaya_tionghua@yahoogroups.com/msg17195.html); *Soal ganti nama*. December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007.

### Endnote

- <sup>1</sup> This slogan is based on Soekarno's speech which was placed in Jawa News, no.2 April 1943; see <http://yulian.firdaus.or.id/2005/04/20/amerika-kita-setrike-inggeris-kita-linggis/>
- <sup>2</sup> Waspada, November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1957.
- <sup>3</sup> Kompas cyber media, October 13<sup>th</sup>, 2004.
- <sup>4</sup> [http://www.mail-archive.com/budaya\\_tionghua@yahoogroups.com/msg17195.html](http://www.mail-archive.com/budaya_tionghua@yahoogroups.com/msg17195.html)