

## The Image of Japan in Malaya: A Case Study of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Malay Press, *Al-Imam*

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### Abstract

While the dynamics of the reformist movement in Malaysia have always been attributed to external influence particularly that of the Middle East, the influence from Japan, a non-Middle Eastern country, is relatively notable. Japan was even viewed as a model by some Malay reformists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century where news regarding Japan often found its way into the Malay press such as *Al-Imam*. The reasons leading to such a positive insight hence, are worth looking into. Using historical methodology and content-analysis approach, the study made of various historical documents including newspapers or newsletters published during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with the aim to investigate the correlation between the news on some major developments in Japan and the zealous call for change and reform by Malay scholars and intellectuals in Malaya during that time. The findings of the study demonstrate that several major events in Japan, namely the fruitful modernization of Japan and the country's military success against China and the imperialist Russia were the most impactful resulting in the Malay reformists' call to the people of Malaya to follow the footsteps of Japan in order to free their minds as well as their nation from foreign imperialism. For future research, later developments involving Malaya and Japan could be assessed to see how the formed perception changed over time, and the factors that led to the change, if there was any, particularly as globalization set in.

**Keywords:** Malaya, Japan, Image of Japan, Malay Press, *Al-Imam*

### Introduction

The call for change and reforms was undoubtedly a global phenomenon that took place across the globe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Malaya was no exception. The 19<sup>th</sup> century also coincided with the time when powerful Western Powers such as Britain, France, Russia, Germany, and the United States to name but a few, were aggressively seeking colonial possessions beyond their borders, either implicitly or explicitly. To put this into perspective,

Malaya was already firmly under the indirect rule of Britain at least since the 18<sup>th</sup> century with little power reserved to ruling elites consisting of Malay Sultans and local Malay chieftains. As Britain strengthened its grip over Malaya, some far-sighted Malay groups, who had the chance to further studies as well as those who performed their hajj in the Middle East or acted as *Sheikh Haji* (Hajj supervisor), had been exposed to the idea of reformism and renewal by reformist figures like Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida while they were in the Middle East. Upon their return to Malaya, they urged their fellow Muslims, especially the Malay-Muslims to wake up from such a lethargic state that they were currently in by pursuing reforms and renewal in society.

In doing so, these Malay reformists had followed Rashid Rida's approach in calling for reforms among the Muslims in the Middle East by way of publication. In this respect, Rashid Rida had founded *al-Manar* (The Lighthouse) in 1898 to articulate and disseminate reformist ideas to his Muslim readers in Egypt and worldwide. Likewise, the Malay reformists such as Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin, Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, and Haji Abbas bin Muhammad Taha, having imbued with similar vigor and enthusiasm, called for their fellow Malay-Muslim brothers to free themselves from a backward state and pursue changes. In doing this, these Malay reformists founded a periodical called *al-Imam* (the Leader), as they perceived it to be the best medium or way to spread ideas about the dire need for changes and reforms within the society.

### Literature Review

In an attempt to investigate the above subject matter, one work written by Ibrahim Abu Bakar entitled *Islamic modernism in Malaya: The life and thought of Sayid Syeikh al-Hadi 1867-1934* provides extensive notes concerning the figure's life biography and his major ideas concerning the calls for reforms and advancement among the Malays in Malaya. He traced the roots of Malay-fashioned nationalism to the literary writings written by Syed Sheikh al-Hadi and his fellow reformists published in *al-Imam*. Undoubtedly, the author proposed in his work that Syed Sheikh al-Hadi emerged as the foremost proponent of socio-religious reforms among his contemporaries in Malaya, which was evidently seen in his adamant call for reforms and criticisms within the Malay society. Nevertheless, as far as the image of Japan in Malaya was concerned, there seems to be a noticeable absence of discussion regarding al-Hadi's chosen image of Japan (besides Turkey and the West) which he occasionally referred to whenever he discussed the needs for reforms, progress, and advancement within the Malay society. The researchers argues that the existing lacunae in discussions about Japan prevented us from fully grasping the reasons or motives behind al-Hadi's implicit preferred model of Japan in *al-Imam*.

An edited work by Alijah Gordon, entitled *The Real Cry of Syed Shaykh al-Hady with Selections of his Writings by his Son Syed Alwi al-Hady* is indeed significant literature for this study as it contains several excerpts of Syed Sheikh al-Hadi's own writings. The credibility of the work is of high quality given the author's consultations with the figure's contemporaries such as Zainal Abidin Ahmad and Raja Haji Muhammad 'Arif besides her own interviews with Syed Alwi al-Hadi himself. One may notice Syed al-Hadi's critical views on the state of backwardness experienced by the Malay society in his writings while at the same time he offered solutions for the Malays to lift up their living circumstances by way of education through resorting to active use of reasoning and *ijtihad* in social-religious realms. Although Syed al-Hadi at times mentioned the news on Japan in his writings, it seemed to the researchers that the contributors-authors did not deliberate much on such news in *al-Imam* and this is understandable since the edited work provides an overview of Syed Sheikh al-

Hadi's life biography and his selected writings instead of a special focus on certain news or discussions from certain countries.

A research article written by a prolific writer, Barbara Watson Andaya entitled from *Rum to Tokyo: The Search for Anticolonial Allies by the Rulers of Riau, 1899-1914* highlighted the rise of Japan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century inspired Asian nationalist leaders (both Islamic and secular nationalists) in their struggle against the colonial domination. She opined that the steady rise of Japan in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century prompted the leaders to believe that a strong Asian ally had now come into existence that would side with them in their struggle against Western encroachments. For instance, it was reported that the princes of Riau, rulers of Aceh, Deli, and Serdang sought Japanese support in their fight against the Dutch and that in response, the Japanese had smuggled gunpowder and weapons into Serdang and Batu Bahara. In another instance, four princes from Goa in Sulawesi were reported to have arrived in Singapore in September 1906 en route to study in Japan, and three months later, two prominent nobles from the court of Kota Waringin in Borneo also embarked in Singapore for Japan. Moreover, the author dwelled on the close connection between Raja Ali Haji and Syed Sheikh al Hadi of *al-Imam* as both shared similar views about the importance of knowledge in leading one's nation towards progress and advancement. In this way, she observed that *al-Imam* had spoken about Japan in its news column with positive remarks. This is indeed precisely what the researchers intend to highlight about the presence of the positive image of Japan in the minds of Malay reformists or modernists against the general backwardness of the Malay Muslims in Malaya and the Indonesian Islands that also coincided with the rise of nationalism in the region.

Another significant piece of literature in investigating the subject matter was a doctoral thesis written by Mohammad Redzuan Othman entitled *The Middle Eastern Influence on the Development of Religious and Political Thought in Malay Society, 1880-1940*. The author traced the presence of Middle Eastern influence in the Malay society during the said period through the socio-religious as well as political connections to the Muslim reformists from Egypt and Arab Hadramis hailed from Yemen that spread the ideas of reformism and Pan-Islamism in Malaya. Likewise, he has also made passing remarks about the initial connection established between *Kaum Muda* (Malay reformists) and the Egyptian reformist figures like Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida by way of studies, pilgrimage or visits to the Middle East. The author has also observed that this connection was further cemented via shared views of the need for reform and renewal within the society by way of publication and literary writings (*al-Manar* and *al-Imam*). All these remarks, however, were made without investigating further any country model that the Malays could emulate in undertaking such reform and renewal.

In addition, Abdul Aziz Mat Ton's *Politik Al-Imam* examines the presence of political ideas of *Kaum Muda* in *al-Imam* that warrant our attention. At a larger spectrum, the author suggests that noticeable political expression of certain discussions and articles in *al-Imam* indicated that the 'business' of Malay-Muslims in 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial Malaya was now to include discussions about growing non-Malays control and influence in government and business sectors on one hand and reinforced British control over Malayan political-administrative realms on the other. While the Malays were steadily left behind in these sectors, *Kaum Muda* through *al-Imam* made it known of their saddening situations in comparison to others by actively calling their fellow Malay-Muslims to wake up from this current state of affairs and march forward to reforms and advancement. Nonetheless, the author however left discussions as to why *al-Imam* seemed to give attention to the news from Japan (besides on

Turkey and the West) whenever they attempted to motivate the Malays about the need for reform and advancement in the society.

Furthermore, a few articles written by Hafiz Zakariya concerning reformism in the Malay world are also worthy of discussion here. In his particular article on *Colonialism, Society and Reforms in Malaya: A Comparative Evaluation of Shaykh Tahir Jalaluddin and Syed Shaykh Ahmad Al-Hady*, the author traces the lives and thoughts of Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin and Syed Sheikh al-Hadi by comparing the two together. He suggested that while Syed Sheikh al-Hadi seemed to be more prolific than Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin through his voluminous works on diverse topics, ranging from romance novels, and education to the translation of Abduh's works on tafsir and Islamic history, Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin confined his writings mainly on those related to astronomy and Islamic *akhlaq*. Given the article's nature and scope of study, there is no discussion on the contents of al-Iman nor are statements regarding Japan in the newsletter mentioned.

Azyumardi Azra's article on *The Transmission of al-Manar's Reformism to the Malaya-Indonesian World: The Case of Al-Imam and Al-Munir* investigates the connection between the Egyptian reformist figures especially Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida's enthusiasm for reform and renewal, and the development in the Malay Archipelago where there eventually appeared their adherents among the Malay reformists of Malaya and Netherland East Indies. Such a strong connection between the two worlds was traceable in the case of *al-Imam* (1906-1908) in Malaya and *al-Munir* (1911-1916) in West Sumatra which were heavily inspired by the Egyptian reformist paper, *al-Manar*. In this way, the author examined various channels of transmission of Egyptian reformist ideas to Malaya and West Sumatra. However, given a different focus and emphasis of the work, it did not cover explicitly the subject matter concerning the frequent news of Japan in *al-Imam*.

Abu Bakar Hamzah has also examined al-Imam's contents, objectives and its influence on Malay society in his work entitled *Al-Imam: Its Role in Malay Society, 1905-1908*. Like other Malaysian scholars, he believed that *al-Imam* had triggered and facilitated a timely awareness among the Malays about their socio-political plights at the expense of other races. His closer study of *al-Imam* periodical revealed the centrality of *Kaum Muda's* adamant call for reforms and renewal in Malay society in the early 1900s. However, the author did not explicitly discuss news relating to Japan and its stimulating impact on raising Malays' awareness of the need for reform and advancement in society.

Last but not least, Mohamed Mustafa in his doctoral thesis, titled *From Plural Society To Bangsa Malaysia: Ethnicity And Nationalism in The Politics of Nation-Building In Malaysia* considered *Kaum Muda* of *al-Imam* as the first organized nationalist movement that planted the seeds of Malay nationalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century through their prominent leaders such as Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin and Syed Sheikh al-Hadi. This coincided with what they saw as an increasing dominance of the immigrant races in the socio-economic life of the country. Nonetheless, there was an absence of discussion on the image of Japan appearing in *al-Imam* in its leaders' call for change and advancement among the Malay-Muslims in Malaya.

## Method

The study uses a qualitative research approach through historical research and content analysis method. Specifically, it analyses textual and visual information gathered via analysis of primary and secondary sources. That being said, the researchers use analytical constructs or inferences, making sense of texts found in contexts where the current study is conducted.

Finally, the researchers arrive at conclusions by looking at the texts and contexts of the given data (Marilyn Domas White and Emily E. Marsh, 2006; and Gilbert J. Garraghan, 1946).

### **Discussion**

As a matter of analysis, among those above-mentioned Malay language periodicals and newspapers, *al-Imam*, *Lengkongan Bulan*, and *Neracha* were found to have dedicated a special emphasis on the news about Ottoman Turkey and the Middle East. According to Azziaty (2016), one of the focal points of their discussion is the success and prosperity of Ottoman Turkey. The interest in Turkish affairs was covered in Malay newspapers when the papers began to be published in the late 19th century. There seems to be a variety of topics identified in the Malay press. One common theme, as observed by Redzuan (1994); Azziaty (2016), was regarding the development and progress of the Ottoman Caliphate (Othman, 1994; Rozali, 2016; Zain, 2009).

As the general Malay-Muslim society at that time never took such things as reforms and the pursuit of advancement seriously, the Malay reformist writers must have thought that they needed some sort of model through which they could portray it in the newly created periodical so that the Malay society as a whole could be inspired and eventually to undertake this path of reform with diligence and determination. It seems thus, logical that the Malay writers considered Asian countries like Japan (besides Ottoman Empire) to be a role model for the Malays by looking at least from two dimensions namely, education and military. In addition, it also looks sensible to take Japan, an Asian country as a model because of the prevalent Western colonialism where the Western powers driven by their economic and military superiority, dominated and ruled over vast areas in Asia and Africa at the expense of the colonized societies amongst which Malaya was one of them. On top of that, there was also a steady rise of Malay nationalism against Western imperialism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The interplay of these factors must have, explicitly or implicitly, underlined the Malay writers' preference over Japan (Mustaf, 1999; Roff, 1967; Soenarno, 1960; Kim, 1991; Ahmad, 1995, 2003).

Firstly, by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Japan had already catch-up so remarkably vis-a-vis the Western Powers, economically and militarily. The people previously adhered to a feudalistic way of life before the Meiji Government came into existence in 1868. With a reform-oriented leadership now in power, a series of reforms had taken place which touched almost all walks of life. To ensure long-lasting reforms could be sustained and taken up by the next generation, a greater emphasis was given among others on educational restructuring. With that, Japan saw to the establishment of schools and universities modelled after the West, though at the same time maintaining some basic values that were unique to the Japanese tradition. On top of that, education was made compulsory for all segments of the population. Western learning, by default, became an essential part of the people's pursuit as the country marched itself forward to become a modern nation-state.

Secondly, Japan was admired by the people of Southeast Asian countries because of its victorious war stories against China and Russia in 1895 and 1905 respectively. China and Russia, despite their huge territories and armies, were defeated by a small country like Japan mainly because of the latter's advanced military equipment and better-trained army and navy (the Japanese warships were purchased from the West and later manned by the Japanese themselves having been trained by foreign instructors at home and abroad. Most importantly, the Japanese soldiers were high-spirited towards their cause. Having won these two great wars, Japan was recognized as a great Asian power in the East Asian region (while at the same

time it had already acquired some colonial possessions in China and Korea). These two events had earned Japan both respect and admiration from within and beyond (Kim, 2012; Koda, 2005; Hacker, 1977; Kublin, 1949; Fröhlich, 2014; Beasley, 1989).

Given this development, Malay reformist writers must have sensed that the root of such remarkable achievements of Japan modernizing reforms and military undertakings must lay in the country's policy that devoted much energy towards education and building up of people's nationalistic feelings. Coincidentally or not, the Malay reformist writers had also put much emphasis for the Malays to get access to education that became Syed Sheikh al-Hadi's outcry. He had reasoned and envisioned that education will serve as a formidable tool through which one can elevate his or her social standings. To reflect his conviction on this, he had also established schools, though with little success, besides engaging actively in literary activities to promote modern education to his fellow Muslims. His affiliation with one religious modern school in Penang (Al-Mashoor), however, survived until today. Many consider that the pen is sharper than the blade and for Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, he must have believed so, otherwise, he would not have been so into literary activities, voicing out his criticisms and persistent calls for the Malays society to wake up from their sluggish state.

It is also equally important to note here that the Malay reformers (particularly those of Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin and Syed Sheikh al-Hadi) were greatly influenced by the Middle Eastern reformist figures like Muhammad and Rashid Rida Abduh when they were in the Middle East (particularly Egypt) for their studies and hajj activities. These Malay reformers subscribed to the idea of the need for social change within one's society and one of the indispensable means to achieving this was through the education. In addition, though Malay reformers looked at Japan as a sort of inspiration or role model for Malays to follow, nonetheless, the underlying influence and motivation that shaped their minds and actions was originally coming from those Muslim reformists from the Middle East. This was evidenced by their own official organ, *al-Imam* which was heavily influenced by *al-Manar* in its form and content (Zakariya, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011; Othman, 1994; Hamzah, 1991; Mustajab, 1975; Abu Bakar, 1994).

Now let us briefly analyze *Al-Imam*; as mentioned before, it was published in July 1906 by a group of young radical Muslims. Those responsible for the edition and publication were mostly educated in the Middle East. They came into contact with the reformist movements in Saudi Arabia and later Syed Jamaluddin al-Afghani. The latter had two famous students, namely Sheikh Muhammad Abduh and Syed Muhammad Rashid Rida. They were based in Cairo, and they later founded their own periodical, called *al-Manar* which intended to be their main tool in calling the Muslims worldwide towards reforms and renewal. According to Mohd Fiah, *al-Imam* was greatly influenced by *al-Manar* in terms of its form and content.

According to Sarwan, Mansoureh Ebrahimi, and Kamaruzaman Yusoff (2020), the publication of *al-Imam* was managed at two levels, namely management as well as editorial groups. Its editorship was under the responsibility of Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin, Syed Sheikh Ahmad al-Hadi, and Haji Abbas bin Muhammad Taha, while the management level was in the hands of Salim al-Kalali, Haji Mustafa bin Ismail, Muhammad bin 'Aqil bin Yahya, and Syed Hasan bin Syahab (Sarwan et al., 2020; Hamzah, 1991; Roff, 1967; Abu Bakar, 1994; Ton, 2000; Azra, 2006). *Al-Imam* had also been distributed widely to Malay-speaking countries such as Indonesia and Thailand through magazine agents and correspondents throughout these places. As noted by Azra (2006), *Al-Imam* took up substantial references and news excerpts from *al-Manar* to be incorporated in the periodical. In addition, news on Japan in the form of a book which was written by one Malay religious figure from Johore had also found its way inside the paper which will be mentioned briefly in later discussion (Rozali et al., 2011; Abdullah, 2010).

The Malay reformists' ideas on reformism and renewal along with their emphasis on the importance of education were clearly seen in the newsletter's contents and discussions. This was precisely what the Egyptian reformists had done through *al-Manar*. On the same note, Roff (1974) had pointed out that the *al-Imam* was also responsible for fostering the sense of nationalism among the Malays through several discussions and statements that touch on the natives' (Malays) saddening situations in their own soil. Sarwan et al (2020) commented that *al-Imam's* emphasis on the issue of education as published in the periodical indicated the Malay reformists' conviction and determination that the only viable way for any given society and nation to move away from the shackle of poverty and backwardness was through the acquisition of knowledge and its mastery. Thus, this precisely explains their strong emphasis on the importance of getting access to education among the Malays and the right attitudes in doing so (*Al-Imam*, 1906; *Al-Imam*, 1907; Gordon, 1999; Abu Bakar, 1994; Zakariya, 2009; Ton, 2000; Faisal Fiah, 2011).

To put in a clear context, these Malay reformist writers especially Syed Sheikh al-Hadi had narrated stories about how Europe had been able to detach itself from the Dark Ages in the 7th A.D. into a new world of enlightenment and advancement from the 17th century onwards. Such a breakthrough was made possible owing to a new interest developed by Western countries on the acquisition of knowledge via their connection to Muslim Andalusia (as many European students had the chance to study in Andalusia on one hand and the rigorous translation of Muslim works into European languages on the other in the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim rule). In line with this, Al-Hadi made a point that "Islamic value has become the foundation for European nations' advancement and modernization". In hindsight, Al-Hadi must have wanted this to appear to the minds of the Malays that they could excel too on the condition they must pursue the knowledge to its fullest extent (*Al-Imam*, 1906; *Al-Imam*, May-August 1907; Gordon, 1999; Abu Bakar, 1994; Zakariya, 2009; Ton, 2000; Faisal Fiah, 2011). In this respect, the Malay reformist writers looked upon Japan as a role model country as shown via a few news relating to the country in *al-Imam*. The periodical, for instance, used to remark that despite their shortage of natural resources, the Japanese were able to compete with powerful Western Powers since they used the knowledge to its fullest sense coupled with diligence and hard work. In hindsight, the Japanese's vigour for reforms and advancement could be attributed to their success in defeating two big powers in wars, the (Empire, 1895; Russia, 1905). In another instance, *al-Imam* had also made a point that the immigrant races in Malaya, particularly those of Chinese origin, though they came all the way from China without any single wealth or property, were able to accumulate much wealth and fortune mainly because they were diligent and hard-working. Therefore, supposedly, *al-Imam* argued that the Malay people were able to do the same if they have the right attitudes. However, as lamented by the Malay reformists, the Malay masses, in general, were not industrious and persistent enough, often dwell in daydreaming, constantly held belief in supernatural things, and being indifferent towards knowledge (*Al-Imam*, 1906; *Al-Imam*, 1907; Gordon, 1999; Abu Bakar, 1994; Zakariya, 2009; Ton, 2000; Fiah, 2011).

Accordingly, *al-Imam* writers criticized the Malays as having those traits which, according to them, became the ultimate hindrance to success and advancement. To reinforce their argument, *al-Imam* quoted some Quranic verses based on which, they maintained that "God will never change a human's life unless they try to change their own life seriously". This indicates how persistent the Malay writers were in urging the Malays to renew their motivation and spirit. To make the call for reforms and changes as the utmost priority among the Malay society, these prominent Malay writers had taken great efforts in incorporating

news on Japan's achievements in various issues of *al-Imam* so that the right impression could be made upon the minds of the Malays against the background of their saddening situations in their very own homeland in comparison to other races that were doing much better in the country (*Al-Imam*, 1906; *Al-Imam*, 1907; Gordon, 1999; Abu Bakar, 1994; Zakariya, 2009; Ton, 2000; Fiah, 2011).

To illustrate the economic disparity between the Malays and the foreign races in colonial Malaya, Muhammad (2014) pointed out that in colonial Malaya, "the two most lucrative industries were rubber and tin, and naturally, ownership and control were largely placed in the hands of British and European businesses, especially British agency houses and a small group of rich Chinese capitalists". He went on to note that in the early part of the 20th century rubber and tin generally contributed more than half of the colony's exports, and taxes on these industries were therefore highly profitable for the British government. In hindsight, as Drake (1979) observed, since the Malays were predominantly doing simple subsistence activities such as paddy cultivation and fishing, they were not exposed to these lucrative economic activities of the country and as a result, they could not benefit much (of course the Malays' 'reluctance' in these industries partly owed to the British policies as will be discussed shortly) (Abdul Khalid, 2014; Drake, 1979; Snodgrass, 1980; Shah, 2017).

Muhammad (2014) further mentioned in the early half of the 19th century, demands for tin deposit was increasing rapidly and as result, the Chinese started to invest more in the mining industry (using mainly human labourers) particularly in areas situated on Malaya's west coastal states. Much of Malaya's tin production came from the Kinta Valley in Perak, which was considered to be the world's richest tin field. By 1910, Chinese operators controlled over 70 percent of Malaya's mining industry and therefore, produced 78 percent of Malaya's total tin production. However, Europeans, mainly the British operators, with their heavy investments in capital-intensive dredging machines, gradually took over control of tin ore production from the Chinese operators who lost substantially their holdings, controlling only one-third of Malaya's mines by the 1930s. In hindsight, this fact shows that the Malays' participation in these main economic activities of the country was almost absent (Abdul Khalid, 2014; Abraham, 1997; Purcell, 1965; Fujimoto, 1983; Hirschman, 1975; Mah, 1985; Lim, 1977; Snodgrass, 1980; Shah, 2017).

The fact that the Malays were 'alienated' directly or indirectly by British policy, Muhammad (2014) observed, hindered the bulk of Malay masses from enjoying greater economic benefits created by high demands in tin and rubber industries. The author further observed that the British administration indirectly prevented Malay farmers, who were mostly concentrated in rice cultivation, from becoming commercially successful. In this way, the colonial administration consistently promoted the rice cultivation industry among the Malays although the Malays could have also been successful in the rubber cash-crop industry if they were encouraged to do so, which gave higher returns than *padi*. In addition, according to Lim (1977), "British policy on rice may be understood as a reflection of the hostility against peasants' rubber development" and this constituted "another major factor impeding their economic modernization." Consequently, this would prevent the Malays from keeping pace with the other races by entrenching them to their less lucrative economic activities (Abdul Khalid, 2014; Lim, 1977).

In perspective, there seems at hand, the interplay of socio-political reasons behind such unfavourable policy towards the Malays because being commercially successful would provide the Malays better access to government services like administration and education. In turn, this would accord the Malays with equal socio-economic status as the wealthy and



successful Chinese people in Malaya, if not higher than them. For British authority, this may sound injurious to their control over Malaya as unity among the Malay populace was something that must be avoided at all costs (given the fact that nationalism was also on the rise worldwide including in Malaya) and eventually prompted them to formulate such a policy that would strategically hinder the Malays from having such a considerable socio-political influence in the country.

Looking closely at the news on Japan covered by the periodical, most of it touched on the advancement of the Japanese people in various fields (agricultural and modern industries) that owed largely to the people's hard work and diligence. The paper mentioned that Japan advanced so remarkably that it was now able to withstand the challenges of world powers as proven in its victorious war stories against China and Russia. In hindsight, these triumphs were not certainly overnight endeavours, rather fruits of laborious and collective efforts of the Japanese who undertook a rigorous modernization and westernization programme starting from the late 1860s. This success was also made possible due to the Japanese government's emphasis on education across all segments of society which the Japanese people had pursued with diligence and enthusiasm (Beasley, 1963, 1973; Gubbins, 1911, 1922; Jansen, 1989; Jansen & Rozman, 2014; Ohno, 2019).

To briefly explain the progress of Japan in the field of education, Liu (2019) mentioned that efforts towards educational reform began following the proclamation of the Charter of Oath in April 1868, just a few months after the overthrow of the Tokugawa government in January 1868. The Oath aimed at "breaking the old bad customs" and "seeking knowledge from the world". One of the prominent Meiji figures, Kido Takayoshi observed the importance of education in Japan's path towards a modern nation-state by stating

The enlightenment of our people today is not really enlightenment. In order to prevent the shortcomings of ten years later, the only thing is to set up a real school... The foundations of an indestructible country are only human beings, while education is the only way to realize the continuous emergence of talents (Takayoshi, 1983; Beasley, 1963, 1973; Gubbins, 1911, 1922; Jansen, 1989; Jansen & Rozman, 2014).

Therefore in 1871, the Meiji Government had created a full-fledged Ministry of Education to monitor and oversee the management of science, culture, and education throughout the country. In the following year, the Education Ordinance was proclaimed that stipulated the mandatory enrolment of students into schools irrespective of their gender, social class, and parental occupation. This Ordinance created a *School System* modelled after the American schooling system with elementary, middle school, and university systems, while French educational administrative system and school districts system were adopted. The Government had also started to hire Western specialist teachers in further enhancing the absorption of Western learning in the country (Liu, 2019; Beasley, 1963; Burks, 1985; Hoare, 1994; Jones, 1980; Obispo, 2017). A revised Education Order was later issued in 1890. Under this revised Order, the central control over education was reinforced, and most importantly "the elementary school attendance requirement was strictly set at 16 weeks or more per year for a period of 3 years." In short, not only did such an education reform succeed to increase the literacy rate within the Japanese society but also at the same time instilled a deep sense of patriotism among the Japanese citizens (Liu, 2019; Flottman, 2012; Nagai, 2005; Norman, 1940).

Inspired by the progress of Japan, for example, in its 23 July 1906 issue, *al-Imam* emphasized the importance of knowledge by making a reference to the Japanese's achievements. In relation to this, Syed Sheikh al-Hadi wanted the Malays to pursue knowledge to the best of their ability as what the Japanese did. The paper states that

Those who know the affairs of the world realize that the Europeans could not have extended their rule from West to East without the weapon of knowledge. And the Japanese, fewer than 50 million people, could never have defeated her enemies who were hundreds of millions strong if they were not in possession of the same knowledge (*Al-Imam*, 1906; Gordon, 1999; Abu Bakar, 1994; Zakariya, 2009; Ton, 2000; Fiah, 2011).

While it is uncertain whether the Malay reformists had knowledge of the details of educational reforms in Japan, they must have noted the positive changes of the reforms on Japan as a nation-state in calling for the Malays to emulate the country in this particular area. To understand their concern of seemingly unsatisfactory state of Malays with regards to education, general background of the colonial education system is pertinent to be mentioned here. Under the British rule, the general Malay masses only received basic instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic for them to become better farmers, fishermen, and paddy planters than their fathers. This system known as vernacular education was mainly because the British authority was suspicious of 'over-education' that would turn the Malays to be mindful of their plights and eventually fight their cause against the colonial rule which the British tried to prevent from happening.

Coupled with the British economic policies, this had hindered the Malays from venturing into commercial industries like tin and rubber, thus further isolating them from enjoying greater benefits despite being the majority group in the country (Sua and Raman, 2009). Despite the special incentives given to sons of Malay elites, exemplified in the creation of Malay College of Kuala Kangsar in 1905 and Malay Administrative Service in 1910, the benefits for the Malays were minimal since the general masses which formed the bulk of the Malay population was still deprived of better education system. The incentives resulted in only a small number of Malays i.e., the elites to reap the benefits of the education as the British intended to recruit this group to become able administrators yet remained amicable towards them.

In this respect, Yao Sua and Raman (2009) observed that Malay vernacular education could only provide a limited educational experience to the Malays as they were confined to four years of primary education. The only available option for them to further their education beyond the basic level was by opting for, at the fourth grade for boys and third grade for girls at the Malay Special Classes in Government English schools. After two years of undergoing comprehensive learning in English, only then they were permitted to proceed to secondary education in English. Nonetheless, such opportunities were limited due to either lack of funds and poverty among ordinary Malays, logistic problems as well as lack of awareness among some Malays of the importance of education. Consequently, the education of Malay masses was largely confined to a short period of learning basic knowledge (Sua and Raman, 2009).

In rousing Malays to opt for changes, Syed Sheikh al-Hadi employed a condemnatory approach criticizing the Malays for their submission to colonial rule by arguing that sort of mentality hindered them from achieving success in their lives. Pointing out the emphasis placed by the Japanese on knowledge and strong nationalism as factors for progress as opposed to the inherent flaws imprinted in the minds of Malays of themselves, he contends,

We believed most faithfully that we, the peoples of the East, were created imperfectly with less than perfect minds and vision. We held fast to this belief until there came to us the Japanese, an eastern people endowed with knowledge and crowned with national pride and victory. They worked with their knowledge to extract the natural wealth from our soil, and both the Japanese and the Europeans took their shares and later joined their knowledge and resources in all fields (*Al-Imam*, 12 July 1907; Gordon, 1999; Abdul Aziz, 2000; Fiah, 2011).

The favourable view held by the Malay reformists towards Japan was conspicuously obvious where apart from the various statements on the progressive state of the country, *al-Imam* had also sponsored the publication of one book on the history of Japan written by Abdullah Abdul Rahman in 1907 entitled *Matahari Memancar Tarikh Kerajaan Jepun*, published by Matbaah al-Imam Company (al-Imam Printing Company) in Singapore. The book was a translation of an Arabic book entitled *al-Shams al-Mushriqah*, written by Mustafa Kamil Pasha (1874-1908), a prominent nationalist figure from Egypt who also shared the admiration towards Japan.

In brief, Abdullah Abdul Rahman was known as a prominent religious leader from Johor who later headed the Department of Johor's Religious Affairs in 1932. Azziaty (2011) further observed the figure was keen on promoting education and advancement within Malay society. This, therefore, made him on the same page with Syed Tahir Jalaluddin, Syed Sheikh al-Hadi, and Haji Abbas to name but a few. *Al-Imam* was not only helping the publication of the book but also at the same time promoting the book in its advertisement column. Quite unsurprisingly, *al-Imam* must have found a common ground with Abdullah Abdul Rahman's work that prompted the management of *al-Imam* and its editors to promote the book. In this respect, Azziaty (2011) has rightly mentioned that the book was instrumental in getting the Malays to acknowledge their backwardness and turn their situation around through the pursuit of knowledge and advancement. The author pointed out that the book discussed among others the stories relating to the Japanese war victories against China and Russia in 1895 and 1905 respectively. For Abdullah Abdul Rahman, these victories were remarkable given the fact that Japan was small compared to the other two countries (*Al-Imam*, 1907; 1907; Rozali et al., 2011; Gordon, 1999; Abdul Rahman, 1906).

In this regard, *Al-Imam* had provided passing remarks about the wars as the Malay writers intended this event, arguably, as a source of inspiration for the Malays to form a new attitude towards life and not to be content with their situation living under the British rule. *Al-Imam* in an article entitled '*Surat Kiriman*' urged local leadership to emulate Japan's efforts in producing high spirit and endeavour for progress. In the eyes of the periodical's writers, Japan deserved admiration and respect for raising the flags of justice and equating the status of all human beings as Russia was perceived as an imperial power or affiliated with Western imperialism. In highlighting the wars involving Japan, the writers apparently attempted to indulge the readers in an analytical discourse to closely observe how Japan, despite being a latecomer to the modern world, was able to defeat two great Powers, namely China and Russia. This brings about the writer's emphasis on Japan's open-minded leadership who saw the importance of reforms in the country in all walks of life that eventually spurred the efforts towards modernization in the country as early as the 1870s (*Al-Imam*, 1906; *Al-Imam*, 1907; Gordon, 1999; Abdul Rahman, 1906; Beasley, 1963; Gubbins, 1911; Jansen, 1980, 1989; Jansen and Rozman, 2014; Ohno, 2019).

In hindsight, this coincides with a statement issued by al-Imam concluding that Japan's successes over China and Russia were testaments of the steady progress underwent by the country, having been motivated by what the author described as the Japanese's attributes of "full freedom, vibrant, civilized rules, and wisdom." (*Al-Imam*, 27 September 1908). Elaborating further on the topic, the writers commented that Japan had successfully done so given its technological and military advancements which, in hindsight, were only possible through education and hard work. In this context, *al-Imam* must have found it enticing enough to help publishing the book so that the Malays, with the knowledge of the events, would be impressed with Japan's successes and eventually moved towards changes and reforms. This portrayal was important given the fact that there was only a handful of Malay Muslims who openly admitted such a sluggish state experienced by the Malay society (*Al-Imam*, 1908; Gordon, 1999).

It is noteworthy that although Sheikh Tahir Jalaluddin and Haji Abbas Taha subscribed to the idea of reforms and progress within the Malay-Muslim society as Syed Sheikh al Hadi did, nonetheless, the latter was at the forefront in his call for progress and reforms owed to his active role as editor and writer of *al-Imam* between 1906-1907 during which more frequent news on Japan found its way in the newsletter. Syed Sheikh al-Hadi was also critical of the leadership of Malay elites that disapproved or were not keen of social-religious reforms. In this respect, he blamed them for the slow march towards progress on the part of Malays, urging instead every single Malay-Muslim to undertake a proactive step towards reforms and progress without waiting hopelessly for instructions or initiatives from the Malay elites. In doing so, the Malay reformers urged the Malays to use reasoning in their social-religious life, for instance, instead of rendering to the so-called pre-destined fate as believed by their forefathers, the Malays should make relentless efforts to change their lives for the better. Only then they would achieve progress (Zakariya, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

It is safe to note that with regards to overseas events, the news on Japan had occupied a central place in *al-Imam* (besides foreign news on Ottoman Turkey and the West) that it became the underpinning point for Malay reformist writers like Syed Sheikh al-Hadi to call for reforms and renewal amongst the Muslims in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Malaya. Specifically, news on the advancement and modernization of Japan was highlighted with a special emphasis on the educational progress and high nationalistic spirit among the Japanese which, according to the *al-Imam* writers, contributed to Japan becoming a great Asian nation, almost at par with the powerful Western Powers. This was proven partly by the military successes against China and Russia. Therefore, it is understandable that the Malay reformist writers must have thought that the Malays too, through education, imbued with the same determination and diligence, would be able to follow the footsteps of the Japanese. If achieved, not only would this elevate the socio-economic status of the Malays but provide an impetus for Malaya and the people of the land to free themselves from Western imperialism.

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