

# Religion, Communication and Social Change: A Comparative Study of Two Malay Generations

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## **Abstract**

*Among the Muslims in Southeast Asia, the Malaysian Muslims (Malays) are the ones who have been challenged with a different experience of the process of modernization in parallel with religious awareness and ethnic competition. Today, the Malays are not only one of the most modernized, but also one of the most devoted groups of Muslims in the world. This article is a study of the extent in which Islam plays a role in the communication processes of urban Malays who have been confronted with modernization and the western values that come with it. It pays particular attention to the manner in which changes have occurred as the family unit shifts over time. It examines the behavior of young and elderly Malay couples as well as their attitudes towards mass media, recreation and ethnic relations. The study indicators reveal that the young generation who has been more influenced by religious awareness is less resistant to change than the elderly one.*

**Keywords:** Malays, modernization, communication, religious belief, mass media, recreation, social change, ethnic relation.

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## **Introduction**

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, the Malays faced a rapid rate of economic growth, ethnic competition, and religious revivalism. This period of time also witnessed a significant internal migration of Malays from the rural to the urban areas; a phenomenon which had two consequences: the behavioral change in the lifestyle of the Malays and the demographic change in ethnic groups living in urban areas from being predominantly Chinese to becoming less so with the increase in Malay population. To simultaneously experience rapid modernization and a religious movement was not only something new in contemporary Malay history but also unique among Muslim nations. The question is how such secular growth and religious revivalism in a Muslim society would affect people's communication processes.

The urban middle income Malay families are deeply religious families. They are committed to Islamic ethics, rituals and practices as well as in dealing with individual and social affairs mainly with an Islamic world-view. For them, Islam has much to do with their identity.

In reality, the Islamic movement in Malaysia is a passive one. It is trying to defend an Islamic identity that had begun to dim. The present trend of Islam in Malaysia indicates that there are many efforts being carried out to improve Islamic awareness. The attempts vary in source: from non-governmental organizations such as the da'wah groups (which have been intensifying religious awareness since the early 1970s), the community groups (mosque and surau groups), to radio and television programs on religion which have increased, as well as the organizing of various Islamic seminars, dialogues, festivals and other activities both at national and

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international levels. Despite these efforts, there is still a gap between the speed of the modernization process and the speed of the penetration of changes into Malay society.

About Theoretical Background, it should be said that, theories on resistance to change are proponents of the notion that in traditional and semi-traditional societies there is usually resistance to any innovation or element of change, particularly when it is going to challenge the beliefs and customs of that society. The trends of socio-economic and political change put forward the secularization thesis which asserts that modernization brings in its wake 'the diminution of the social significance of religion' (Wallis, 1992:8; Smelser, 1992:381). The relationship between religion and secularism is one of the major issues in the sociology of religion which is considered a product of modernization. Some scholars do not see any major conflict between religion and secularism. They believe that religion, indeed, has not been succeeded by secularism. To quote Cipriani (1994:277), "religion never really stops playing its part in society and has reappeared beneath the surface of secularization". In elaborating on the status of religion in modern society, Parsons views religion as a subsystem of a more complicated system of society. He uses the term 'differentiation' for a society which is undergoing a process of secularization in the sense of a 'decline of religion' (Shiner, 1972:476). Therefore, seemingly the possible 'decline' of religion occurs, but Parsons says that no decline happens. He implies that a particular social value for clarification of religion is not declining in a modernized society. Therefore, secularism is not able to put an end to religion.

On the other hand, the doctrines and moral demands of a faith, according to modernist reinterpretations of religion, are as Gellner (1992:4) says, then turned into something which when properly interpreted is in astonishingly little conflict with the secular wisdom of the age, or indeed with anything. Thus, being a permanent phenomenon of society, religion plays different roles in different societies and under different circumstances.

### **Methodology**

The Method of this research is applied-oriented and data collection method is descriptive. The survey population was randomly selected from a range of middle income groups in five localities in Kuala Lumpur particularly among the young and elderly Malay families who were living in this city. The sample was limited to those couples who got married in the sixties (the year before the uprising) or earlier and to those who got married in the eighties or after. The former would be referred to as elderly families and the latter, the young ones. To better identify the differences between the two generations, there is a minimum gap of fifteen years separating both. Both husband and wife of each sample family were interviewed. A total of 476 couples, 241 young and 235 elderly ones, answered the questionnaire.

There are certain facts on the religiosity of the respondents which have been noted. First, each generation has its own characteristics and its own circumstances; therefore, it is not possible to judge the exact level of religiosity from one generation to another. There were more motivations, inducements and opportunities for change in the 1990s compared to the 1960s. These elements of change are not all related to modernization and economic growth but also to other sources of change such as politics, ideology and religion (such as the da'wah movement). Second, when people get older they usually become more other-world conscious. This is particularly true for Muslims who believe in judgment in the hereafter. Consequently, elderly people usually become more religious compared to when they were younger.

Although religious awareness among the Muslims of Malaysia goes way back in history, the uprising of May 1969 was a reinforcing event. Different Malay groups, from the religious extremists to the moderates, felt the need to challenge the strength of their religion; a need

which arose from their fear of losing their identity and faith because of the increasing economic power of Chinese immigrants (and to a lesser extent, of the Indians) and the significant attainment of political power by non-Muslims in the 1969 parliamentary elections. Since the uprising, the parallel patterns of economic growth and religious revivalism have become deeply entrenched in the everyday life of the Malays, particularly in the urban areas. Furthermore, the process of rapid economic growth since the 1970s has changed Malaysia from an agrarian society to an industrial one.

## Results and Discussion

The young and elderly participants of the study responded differently to factors of change. The indicators in focus were recreational activities, mass media and ethnic relations.

Recreational activities: Among the many kinds of recreational activities, the respondents were asked to identify the frequency of being involved in the following selected activities: visit to the park, involvement in family club activities, going to the movies or theatre, playing or listening to music and playing or watching sport. They are social and mostly communicational activities. Going to the park was a hobby for young families; they 'almost sometimes' spend their time getting fresh air in a park (table 1). The elderly families went to the park, but less than the young families; that is, 'more than seldom'.

Table 1: Recreational Activity by the Young and Elderly Families\*

Respondents	Park	Club	Cinem a/theatre	Playing music	Listening to music	Playin g sport	Watchin g sport
Young families	1.80	0.51	0.58	0.70	2.12	1.88	2.10
Elderly families	1.35	0.32	0.32	0.48	1.72	1.43	1.90

\*The mean scores include: never = 0, seldom = 1, sometimes = 2, and usually = 3.

Clubs were not popular places for urban middle class respondents. One important factor is that the membership was expensive. Going to the cinema or theatre was also not a common activity for couples of both generations. The young families 'less than seldom' and the elderly families 'almost never' went to these places.

Playing music was not a common hobby among young and elderly families. They play 'less than seldom' an instrument during their free time. Although in most of the respondents' families there was a lack of knowledge on how to play a musical instrument, most young and elderly families listen to music. The young couples 'more than sometimes' listen to music, and the elderly ones 'less than sometimes'.

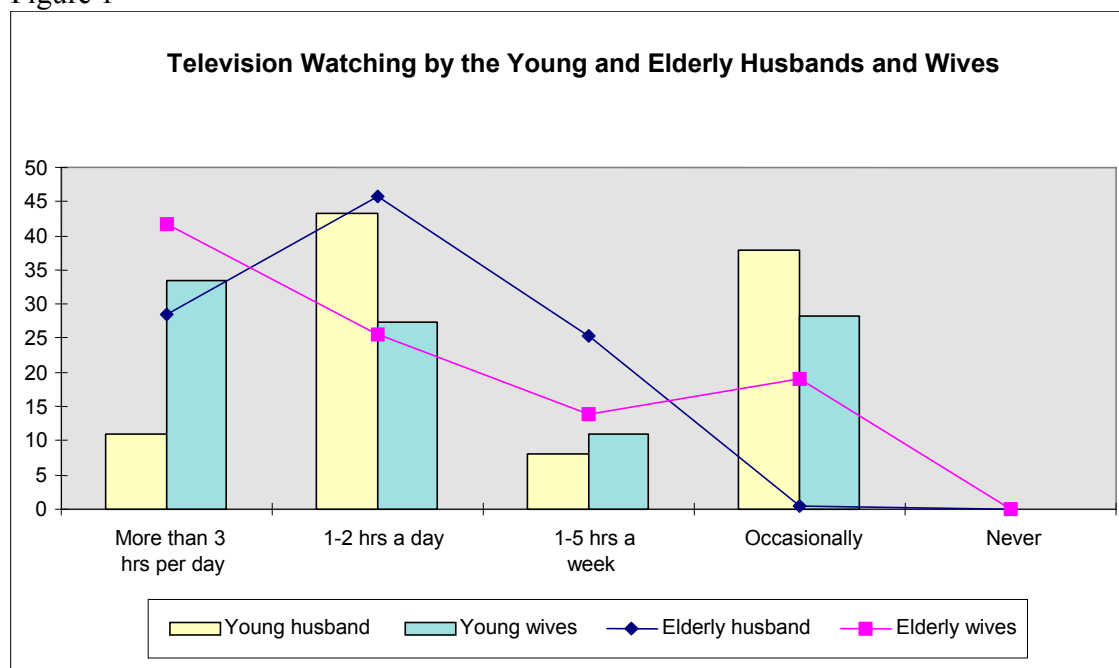
The young families were interested in playing sports; and the elderly families were not alienated from sports either. The young couples used to play at least one kind of sports more than the elderly ones. Both generations 'sometimes' liked to watch sports, the young families slightly more than the elderly ones.

Thus, the elderly couples were less interested in indulging in recreational activities such as going to a park, going to a cinema or theatre, participating in club activities, listening to and playing music, and watching and playing sports compared to the younger ones.

Mass media: In this study, mass media includes television, video, and magazine. The couples were asked about their television and video viewing habits and the types of television programs or video films they usually watched. About 99.2 percent of young families and 99.6 percent of elderly families owned television, and 74.5 percent of young families and 64.2 percent of elderly families had a video player.

Television: The elderly husbands and wives were more interested in watching television than the young couples. The elderly couples watched television more than two hours a day, while the young ones watched it less than two hours (Figure 1). The elderly husbands more than their wives spent their time watching television. Between young couples the wives watched television more than their husbands.

Figure 1



Television programs: The respondents were asked to respond to eight kinds of television programs, namely: news, information and education (local and foreign productions), movie (local and foreign productions), entertainment (local and foreign productions) and religion. News was the most popular television program watched by both generations (more than "sometimes") followed by programs on religion ("sometimes"). For both generations, local and foreign movies were more popular than programs on "entertainment" and "information and education"(Table 2).

The young couples, more than the elderly ones, were used to watching programs on news, foreign information and education, foreign movies, local and foreign entertainments. Television programs on religion and local movies were more popular among elderly couples than among the younger ones. Thus, the young couples, more than the elderly ones, were keen in watching foreign television productions.

Table 2: Television programs watched by young and elderly couples\*

Programs	Young couples		Elderly couples	
	Wives	Husbands	Wives	Husbands
News	3.17	3.57	3.02	3.51
Information and education (local)	2.07	2.06	1.99	2.07
Information and education (foreign)	2.08	2.88	1.92	1.98
Movie (local)	2.66	2.31	2.85	2.45
Movie (foreign)	2.64	2.34	2.44	2.10
Entertainment (local)	2.27	2.11	2.07	1.93
Entertainment (foreign)	2.08	2.04	1.79	1.75
Religion	2.78	2.80	3.09	3.09

\*The mean is the result of the following scores: never = 1, seldom = 2, sometimes = 3, and usually = 4.

The wives of both generations watched programs on news and foreign information and education less than their husbands, but watched local and foreign programs on movies and entertainments more than them.

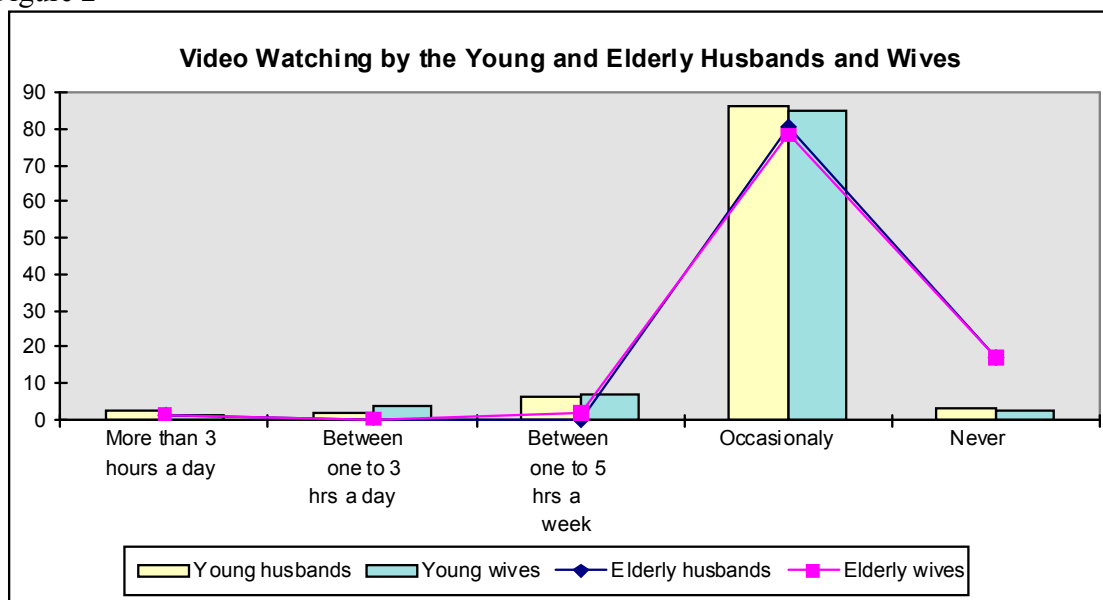
Video: The video was less popular compared to the television among the respondents. But amongst those who watched it, there was not much difference in viewing patterns (Figure 2). Both young and elderly families occasionally watched video<sup>3</sup>.

Film Types: Respondents were asked to express their interest in seven types of video films which included films on religion and local and foreign film productions on: information and education, movies, and entertainment.

The young couples watched foreign video movies, local and foreign video production films on "information and education", and "entertainment" slightly more than the elderly ones. But for watching video films on religion, the elderly couples were slightly more eager than the younger ones. Therefore, there were no significant differences between the young and elderly couples with regards to watching video films (Table 3).

<sup>3</sup> M = 1.19 for young husbands, M = 1.20 for young wives, M = 1.07 for elderly husbands, and M = 1.10 for elderly wives.

Figure 2



Likewise, between husbands and wives of both generations, there was not much difference in watching different types of video films. But the young wives were slightly keener to watch local films on information and education than their husbands. The elderly wives liked to watch local movies and entertainment more than their husbands although they were less interested in watching video films on religion compared to their husbands.

Table 3: Video programs watched by young and elderly couples\*

Programs	Young couples		Elderly couples	
	Wives	Husbands	Wives	Husbands
Information and education (local)	1.86	1.68	1.65	1.64
Information and education (foreign)	1.69	1.68	1.56	1.55
Movie (local)	2.47	2.41	2.54	2.40
Movie (foreign)	2.70	2.64	2.40	2.39
Entertainment (local)	1.87	1.84	1.78	1.56
Entertainment (foreign)	1.85	1.82	1.53	1.49
Religion	2.02	2.01	2.07	2.36

\*The mean is the result of the following scores: never = 1, seldom = 2, sometimes = 3, and usually = 4.

Printed Materials: The respondents' attitudes towards eight types of printed materials commonly published in magazines were assessed. They include issues on women, youth, science, religion, news, entertainment, information and education, and socio-politics. Those

respondents who read newspapers or magazines were asked to identify the kind of materials they usually read.

The study revealed that printed materials such as newspapers and magazines were popular among all the groups of respondents. Over 98 percent of young couples and 98.1 percent of elderly husbands and 94 percent of elderly wives read different kinds of magazines and newspapers.

News was the most popular printed material read by the respondents. They read it more than "sometimes", followed by printed materials on religion. All kinds of printed materials were read by the young couples more than the elderly couples except printed materials on religious subjects. The significant differences of printed materials read were on women, youth, and entertainment. These subject matters are socially in a changing process which could affect their attitudes.

The wives in young and elderly families read printed materials related to women and youth more than their husbands did, while subject matters such as news, information and education, and socio-political issues were read by the husbands of both generations more than their wives did (Table 4).

Table 4: Printed Materials Read by Young and Elderly Couples\*

Type of Printed Materials	Young couples		Elderly couples	
	Wives	Husbands	Wives	Husbands
Women	2.80	1.43	1.83	1.18
Youth	1.91	1.69	1.34	1.32
Science	1.83	1.87	1.47	1.56
Religion	2.75	2.80	2.96	3.07
News	3.29	3.56	3.12	3.45
Entertainment	2.13	2.02	1.58	1.56
Information and education	2.25	2.41	1.95	2.14
Socio-political issues	2.03	2.43	1.79	2.17

\*The mean is the result of the following scores: never = 1, seldom = 2, sometimes = 3, and usually = 4.

Thus, the elderly husbands and wives spent more of their time in watching television than the young couples, but the younger ones were more interested in diverse programs. In addition, printed materials were more popular among the young couples than among the elderly ones. There were no significant differences between both generations in watching video films. However, the younger generation was keener in watching foreign television productions and foreign video films. The young couples were also more interested in reading materials on recreation, youth and women. These kinds of magazines are very influential on the development of attitudes.

Ethnic relations: Ethnic relations collectively consists one important aspect of Malaysian society. Relationships between Malays and non-Malays are examined here with respect to public eating-places, neighborhoods, and friendship.

In 1957, when Malaysia gained independence, the capital city of Kuala Lumpur was mainly populated by Chinese. But the composition of the population of the city has gradually changed in favor of the Malays. The Malay new comers have mostly migrated from the rural areas, where they had few opportunities to live or deal with non-Malays. Therefore, having as neighbor's people from other ethnic groups was something new for many of them.

Living in a busy urban center implies intensive communication with different groups of people, mostly for business purposes and sometimes for interpersonal friendly relations. Every Malay living in Kuala Lumpur, in one way or another, needs to communicate with non-Malays in his or her everyday life. The degree of getting along with each other indicates the degree of social distance between them.

In the 1990s, restaurants and eating places were found all over in the urban areas, especially in Kuala Lumpur; and urban Malaysians often dined out. Malays, as Muslims, are particular about halal food, and because non-Malay restaurateurs are mostly non-Muslims, the phenomenon has become a contributing factor in the social distance between Malays and non-Malays. Thus, Malay restaurants have no religious limitations; meanwhile, some Indian restaurants and most Chinese restaurants are regarded as non-halal because they have non-Muslim chefs, they serve alcoholic drinks, and they cook with pork. The fast food restaurants, although mainly serving "halal" food, may not be popular among some Malay families because they are not confident of the "halalness" of the food served.

Patronage of Eating Places: The respondents were asked about four types of restaurants - Malay, Indian, Chinese, and fast food - to find out whether there is any relationship between eating place and ethnicity. Malays are keener to go to Malay restaurants more than any other type of restaurants when they dine out. Over 80 percent of the respondents went to Malay restaurants whenever they ate out. However, the pattern was more discernible among elderly families than among the young ones (Table 5).

Indian restaurants were not favored by over three-quarters of the respondents. More than 70 percent of them never went to Indian restaurants when they dined out. This negative attitude was slightly less among the husbands compared to the wives, and among the young couples compared to the elderly ones.

Table 5: Types of restaurants patronized by the young and elderly Husbands and wives\*

Respondent	Malay restaurants	Indian restaurants	Chinese restaurants	Fast food restaurants
Young husbands	3.78	0.30	0.17	2.0
Young wives	3.66	0.25	0.12	1.94
Elderly husbands	3.84	0.23	0.03	1.14
Elderly wives	3.67	0.22	0.02	1.12

\* The mean scores include: never = 0, seldom = 1, sometimes = 2, usually = 3, and always = 4.

The respondents had more negative attitudes towards Chinese restaurants than they had for Indian restaurants. About 89 percent of the study population said they never go to Chinese restaurants. The young couples were slightly less particular though, as about 10 percent of them did patronize Chinese restaurants occasionally compared to about 5 percent of the elderly husbands and wives who reported doing so.

Fast food restaurants have made inroads into many Malaysian urban centers. As a modern eating place, this type of restaurant was more popular among the younger couples.



Neighborhood: The issue of neighborhood in Malaysia's multiracial society is a sensitive one, since there is much dissimilarity between the different ethnic and racial groups in terms of customs and beliefs, language, occupation and skills and world-view. Of the total sample, 71.8 percent had non-Muslim neighbors.

The percentage of having non-Muslim neighbors, in both young and elderly families, was nearly identical. It showed there was a strong presence of non-Malay neighbors in the respondents' localities.

Having Non-Malay Friends: The respondents were asked to identify which among the non-Malays they have established friendships with. Both young and elderly husbands and wives were more acquainted with the Chinese than with the other groups, closely followed by Indians.

Table 6: Having non-malay friends by the young and elderly husbands and wives (%)

Respondent	Chinese	Indian	Eurasian	Foreigner	Others
Young husbands	85.6	79.4	15.4	8.2	15.4
Young wives	84.5	79.2	11.1	9.4	15.9
Elderly husbands	80.3	74.6	3.8	0.9	15.0
Elderly wives	79.7	72.2	2.8	1.4	15.1

As the table above illustrates, about 85 percent of the young couples and 80 percent of the elderly couples had Chinese friends (Table 6). The young couples also had more Indian friends than the elderly ones. The young and elderly husbands got along with Chinese and Indians more than their wives did.

To summarize, the examination of the social behavior and attitudes of urban Malays has revealed differences in their inter-generations and inter-gender attitudes.

The young couples, more than the elderly couples, went to the park and the cinema, got involved in club activities, listened to music and played or watched sport; but, the former watched television less than the latter. There were also differences between the two generations in terms of eating places patronized, neighborhood issues and friendship with non-Malays. The negative attitude towards non-Malay eating places (Chinese and Indian restaurants) was stronger among elderly couples, while the positive attitude towards friendship with non-Malay Chinese and Indians was stronger among the young couples.

The wives watched television more than the husbands, particularly in watching movies and entertainment programs. The wives had weaker inter-ethnic relationships compared to the husbands and had more negative attitudes towards non-Malay eating places.

Therefore, the elderly couples were more resistant to change in matters related to recreation, relations with non-Malays, and printed materials compared to the young ones. Both generations were identical in video watching habits but the elderly couples watched television more than the young couples.

## Conclusion

The process of modernization in Malaysia has been so fast that the challenge from Islamic revivalism and identity can hardly curb it. The idea of progress has created a 'culture of consumption' (Calhoun, 1994:580); a culture which is produced, motivated, and encouraged by the mass media and the manufacturers. Many of the products of this culture alienate or weaken the religious beliefs of the consumers or to a lesser extent, keep them busy with too much amusement; and gradually, the keeping of religious duties and responsibilities is affected.

Islam in Malaysia is not a barrier to change; but, because Islam and Malay society are interrelated and considering that Malay society is strongly traditional, Malay Muslims may slow

down the speed of modernization. But then again, they do not serve as obstacles to the phenomenon of change. In Parson's words, "there has been no decline of religion" in Malay beliefs and this is despite the rapid rate of economic growth and social change confronting urban Malays. The present study supports Gellner's theory that religion is astonishingly in little conflict with the secular wisdom of the age. Furthermore, it supports Weber's thesis on the influence of beliefs on social actions.

The problem that the new generation has with Islam is not related to its rituals but more to the religion's values and ethics that are intertwined with the Malay traditions on how Muslims are to implement Islamic values in their daily lives. The problem lies in the 'Islamization' of new forms of social behaviour, such as communication, in the context of a more complicated form of social structure.

The study reveals that resistance to change come mostly from the elderly generation than from the young one. Since the above mentioned variables are mainly influenced by, or related to, tradition, then it follows that tradition is one of the main factors of resistance to change. Since the early 1970s there has been an Islamic resurgence in Malaysia and the young generation has been more influenced by the Islamic movements (da'wah) than are the elderly couples. These two facts prove that contrary to what "Lee" believes, it is not Islam that mainly leads to a resistance against change but that there are other important sources of resistance to change as well, such as the strong traditions of Malay society. In addition, resistance to change in Malay families which was mainly demonstrated among the elderly generation, supports the theories of "Rostow" and "Smelse". "Rostow" believes that tradition is a barrier to rapid economic change; and, "Smelser" refers to the clash between tradition and modernization and points out that in a traditional society, the modernization process is not an easy one.

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