Islamic Mobility: Car Culture in Modern Malaysia

Abstract

In a modern and respectable middle-class suburb outside Kuala Lumpur, the overtness of cars evokes intense speculation about the nature of the make-up of covert middle-class homes and the formation of Malay Muslim identities more generally. I argue that the more ‘Islamic’ cultures of consumption assert themselves in modern Malaysia, the more the growing Malay Muslim middle-class is split between desiring cars as positional commodities on the one hand and claims for piety through consumption on the other. An important question is how Malay Muslim middle-class identity is practised through divergent forms of car consumption. Discussing ethnographic material from fieldwork among Malay middle-class families, I show how car consumption not only generates distinctions, practices and moral symbolic boundaries, but also ideas about Islam, nation and excess.

Keywords: Islam, cars, mobility, middle class, Malaysia

Introduction

In May 1983, the Malaysian government established the car manufacturer Proton or the National Automobile Enterprise and this brand dominates the Malaysian automobile market. Proton is the most common car in the streets of Malaysia, but the company is experiencing difficulties as the Malaysian government has allowed more foreign cars to be imported, abolishing its prior Approved Permit (AP) system. At the time of my fieldwork in urban Malaysia (2001-2002),[[1]](#endnote-1) Proton cars were still exempted from the high import duties that are placed on other cars, and the government was able to offer these cars at a price that undercut imported vehicles that attract between 140 per cent and 300 per cent in taxes. As could be expected, this type of protectionism strengthened Proton’s position in the Malaysian car market.

Over the last three decades Malaysia has witnessed rapid economic growth and rising incomes among urban Malay Muslim middle-class groups and these developments are driving forces behind car ownership. In that period the meaning of Islam has become ever more contested. The rapidly expanding car market in and around Malaysia’s capital, Kuala Lumpur, is a product of this economic performance and ‘the huge economic role such areas play to the general development of Malaysia.’ (Mohamad and Kiggindu, 1997: 70). The state in Malaysia views the auto industry as a strategic sector that needs support and protection. Simultaneously, rising car sales are important signs of positive and strong consumer sentiments important to the Malaysian economy (Mohamad and Kiggindu, 1997: 72).

 I explore how cars have emerged as one of the most significant markers of physical/social mobility and status among the Malay Muslim middle class in Malaysia. The central focus of this article is class distinctions and practices (Bourdieu) and moral symbolic boundaries (Lamont) in car consumption. What is more, I shall briefly review the emerging literature on ‘Islamic consumption’ as a frame for exploring Malay Muslim middle-class consumption of cars.

The ethnographic focus of the paper is on a relatively affluent middle-class suburb outside Kuala Lumpur. Building on 10 months of fieldwork in suburban Malaysia, I have argued (Fischer, 2007, 2008a, 2008b) that the more ‘Islamic’ cultures of consumption (of housing, dress, food, banking and media) assert themselves, the more controversies over what Islam is, or ought to be, intensify. As new consumer practices emerge, they give rise to new discursive fields within which the meaning of Islam and Islamic practice are being debated. One key effect of these transformations is the deepening and widening concern for halal (literally ‘lawful’ or ‘permissible’) commodities among Malay Muslims that I label halalization. Halalization signifies a major preoccupation with the proliferation of the concept of halal in a multitude of commodified forms. Out of halalization new forms of Malay aesthetic communities have emerged based on different taste preferences of various middle class fractions. This proliferation of halalization in suburban Malaysia has incited a range of elaborate ideas concerning the boundaries and authenticity of halal purity versus haram impurity. I am not arguing that halal or halalization is essential to understand car culture among middle-class Malays, but that cars, similar to a wide range of halal products and practices, are subjected to moral and religious discourses in the everyday lives of middle-class Malays (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A Mercedes parked in front of a halal restaurant in central Kuala Lumpur.

My informants in the suburban setting were selected to obtain a good representative spread. The initial selection was made on the basis of a survey covering 241 households in my suburban fieldwork site designed to specify in particular indicators such as family size, income and consumer behaviour and as an introduction to the theme of consumption in the wider resurgence of Islam in Malaysia. 10 Malay families were then selected for interviewing and participant observation on the basis of two criteria: their relative statistical weight in the survey, and their appearance, style of decoration of the house, cars, dress et cetera that I could observe when visiting families. More specifically, I looked for material markers of ‘Islam’ such as the *kopiah* (skullcap) and a *janggut* (beard) for men and *tudung* (headscarf) for women, but also objects such as stickers and plaques with Islamic calligraphy. Both informants who displayed and did not display these material markers of Islam were selected.

Of the Malaysian population of around 28 million in 2010, about 67 per cent are indigenous Malays (virtually all Muslims) and tribal groups, also labelled *bumiputera* (literally, sons of the soil); 25 per cent are Chinese; and 7 per cent are Indians (http://www.statistics.gov.my). An important question is how the consumption of cars conditions divergent Malay middle-class status groups and this problematic highlights a whole range of issues central to my focus on cars among middle-class Malays: the ever expanding market for ‘proper Islamic consumption’; consumption of locally produced cars as what I call shopping for the state or patriotic consumption against the excesses of foreign luxury cars; middle-class Malays split between positional commodities on the one hand and claims for morality or piety through consumption on the other, and cars as signifiers of a dualism between public and private consumption in the suburban setting. These themes will be explored on the basis of four Malay middle-class groups or registers of modern Muslim consumption that each in their way uses car consumption in everyday status games and morality.

I argue that Malay households in their houses are crucial spheres in Malay middle-class formation in contemporary Malaysia: that is, styles of Islam and styles of consumption as markers of class position. With specific reference to the understandings and practices of car consumption, I explore a field of contradictory Islamic visions, lifestyles and debates articulating what Islam is or ought to be. These controversies frame the everyday organization and justification of consumer behaviour within Malay middle-class households.

Malay Muslim middle-class mobility

The Malays constitute the largest and fastest growing section of the middle class in Malaysia and are the object of both commercial interests and current debates over the shape and meaning of Islam. In the 1970s, the state, dominated by United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant political party in Malaysia since independence from Britain in 1957, launched the NEP (New Economic Policy) to improve the economic and social situation of the Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese in particular. The NEP entailed a number of benefits for the Malays and other indigenous groups such as increased ownership of production and preferential quotas in the educational system. The number and proportion of Malays engaged in the modern sector of the economy rose significantly as a product of these policies. Ideologically, the overall objective was to produce an educated, entrepreneurial and shareholding Malay middle class, which the state elite views as a necessary prerequisite for economic, national and social cohesion. To my Malay informants, the NEP was vital for the economic progress of the Malays, and it had a crucial impact on their social standing and emergence as modern consumers.

The NEP has unquestionably actively drawn Islam into the economic sphere through the proliferation of a multitude of Islamic institutions starting in the 1980s. Simultaneously, the NEP transformed Malay dominance into Malay hegemony within the notion of a plural society so that Malay culture became synonymous with ‘national culture’ (Shamsul, 1998a: 146). While the state may be a major ideological driving force behind the manufacturing of a Malay middle class, the force of the market and capitalist relations of production should not be downplayed (Embong, 1998: 86). In the 1990s, Kuala Lumpur and the urban region in which it is situated were exposed to ‘unprecedented attempts by federal authorities to discursively and materially reconstruct urban space and subjectivities in “global” ways’ (Bunnell, 2003: 65). This fascination with global ways includes increased access to the electronic media such as satellite television and the Internet as well as the availability of a wide range of consumer goods due to expanding markets.

 The increased influence of Islam in Malaysia has produced a range of competing visions of what Islam is or ought to be – for example a number of divergent *dakwah* (literally salvation) groups which are part of the wider resurgence of Islam in Malaysia which started in the 1970s.[[2]](#endnote-2) The state’s attempt at moulding a modern form of Malayness is intimately linked to these challenging Islamic discourses or *dakwah*, each having particular ideas and standards concerning how to combine consumption and Islamic practice. In order to pre-empt these confrontations, the state aggressively engages in a re-conceptualization of consumption that envisions the amalgamation of Malay ethnicity, consumption practices and Islam. This ongoing project, which started in the early 1970s, is intensifying in the context of economic growth and globalization. In the early 1970s the state embarked on a wide range of measures symbolizing its dedication to Islamic values. The economy thus fused with a politics of ethnicity that in itself was defined in terms of religion (Shamsul, 1999b: 43). More specifically, the state has institutionalized and regulated Islamic banking, savings, insurance, education as well as halal standardization and certification of local and international goods.

Malaysia’s Prime Minister since 2003 Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (2006: 6–7) argues that

The Malays, UMNO and Islam in this country cannot be separated. Together, the three elements form a distinct culture and identity. Through its words and actions, UMNO has the responsibility of building an Islamic culture that balances the needs of this world and the next, an Islam that balances fardu kifayah (the collective responsibility of providing the needs and well-being of Muslims in this world), and fardu ‘ain (the individual Muslim’s obligation to perform his religious duties towards Allah, such as the mandatory five daily prayers).

Car consumption among middle-class Malays takes place in the interfaces between this-worldly practices of class mobility, privilege and status on the one hand and practices orientated towards next-worldly piety and proper Islamic consumption on the other.

Car distinctions, practices and moral symbolic boundaries

Before exploring car consumption empirically in the local Malaysian context I discuss how the seminal works of Pierre Bourdieu and Michèle Lamont serve as constructive and complimentary approaches to an analysis of car consumption and Malay Muslim middle-class constitution. What is more, I review some examples of the emerging literature on status consumption in the context of developing Islamic societies showing how Malay car consumption fits this literature. The argument for discussing these studies is that even if Muslim consumption is becoming a major field of scholarly interest no study so far focuses on cars and Muslim class constitution.

 When asked about self-definition in terms of class, all my informants without exception, but for different reasons, referred to themselves as ‘middle class’ (*kelas pertengahan*). To informants, the term ‘middle’ appeared to be a convenient way of signifying social mobility attained through education, occupation, and family background. At the same time, ‘middle’ was a workable expression of a rather indistinct or intermediate class belonging.

 This exploration of classing focuses on how objective parameters of class such as cars are involved in status games, class constitution and everyday morality. Debates over car consumption are of particular significance in the Malay middle class as it is within this intermediate group that the question of what constitutes proper Islamic practice or legitimate taste (Bourdieu, 1984:60) is most imperative. In other words, Malay middle-class identities are given shape in the interfaces between revivalist Islam, consumer culture and the blurred area of everyday respectability.

A number of different types of capital (economic/cultural/social) and social factors (residence/gender/age/marital status) make up the ‘specific logic of the field, of what is at stake and the type of capital needed to play for it, which governs those properties through which the relationship between class and practice is established’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 112–3). For Bourdieu (1984:55) social class is a practised set of values. Middle-class identity comes into being as mental and social negotiations between the luxury/excess of elites and the economic necessity of the lower classes. This type of negotiation is reflected in the discussion over what can be considered ‘balanced’ or proper Islamic consumption. The cultural predicament of the Malay new rich emerges from the double moral relation to consumption that the last twenty years of political history and economic growth has instilled. On the one hand, consumption has become a national virtue or project supported by the state as a practice in line with the coveted identity as a New Malay. On the other hand, consumption is being questioned from a religious and moral perspective.

 Middle-class knowledge of manners or styles as symbolic manifestations constitutes one of the key markers of class and is an ideal weapon in distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984: 66). The concern for the symbolic, appearance, pretension and bluff are all genuine marks of the middle class (Bourdieu, 1984: 253) to which my informants belong. Aesthetic choices in terms of cars are significant markers of intra-class struggle, as we shall see. It is mainly against the groups closest in social space that the struggle for recognition through legitimate taste is most fierce (Bourdieu 1984: 60). Social identity, Bourdieu maintains, is defined, asserted, and practiced through difference (Bourdieu, 1984: 172).

I use Bourdieu’s (1990) take on practice as a general framework for the analysis of the relationship between class, cars and consumption. Such a practice-theoretical perspective involves assumptions about ‘performativity of social practices’ (Bourdieu, 1990). Practice theory is particularly constructive in the study of consumption: consumption occurs as items are appropriated in the course of engaging in particular practices and being a competent practitioner requires appropriation of the requisite services, possession of appropriate tools, and devotion of a suitable level of attention to the conduct of the practice (Warde, 2005).

 In the context of less industrialized countries (with Turkish upper-middle-class-women as case) it has been shown in a Bourdieu-inspired study that the boundary of the consumption field is contested, that is, lower and higher middle-class segments compete to define the scope of the field (Üstüner and Holt, 2009). My study in Malaysia supports these findings. However, Bourdieu’s theories of distinction and practice are not able to capture the immense complexity involved in modern religious consumption. Michèle Lamont has critiqued Bourdieu’s theory of distinction and I show how this critique is valid in the analysis of the empirical material below. Lamont explores symbolic boundaries (types of lines individuals draw when they categorize people) (Lamont, 1992: 1) and high-status signals (the keys to our evaluative distinctions) (Lamont, 1992: 2).

Lamont argues that Bourdieu’s theories of cultural capital and habitus exaggerate cultural and socioeconomic boundaries and consequent hierarchies of power while ignoring moral (religious, for example) status signals and national repertoires (history, mass media, state-market nexus, educational system, demographic mobility, stratification systems as well as ethnic diversity among other things). Lamont also argues that Bourdieu’s method of studying status signals in questionnaires misses important qualitative aspects such as practices involved in the construction of symbolic boundaries between different middle-class groups. Based on his research among the upper-middle class in France and the US, Lamont calls attention to the complexity involved in mapping several and often overlapping forms of symbolic boundaries (Lamont, 1992).

 Lamont studies what it means to be a ‘worthy person’ by analyzing types of symbolic boundaries between self and other (Lamont, 1992: 4). The most important type of boundary for this present study is moral and drawn on the basis of honesty, work ethic, personal integrity, consideration for others, charity, egalitarianism and sincerity. Religious ‘fundamentalists’ tend to draw these moral boundaries defending not only a religious position but also traditional values such as family life, neighbourhood, community and a religious lifestyle based on moral choices against materialism, individualism, elitist meritocracy, secular humanism and cosmopolitanism (Lamont, 1992: 56). This moral boundary supplements Bourdieu’s theories that do not explore morality or religion and draws attention to the broader aspect of Islamic revivalism and politics of piety in Malaysia.

Scholarly interest in Islamic markets is growing and Maris Boyd Gillette’s *Between Mecca and Beijing. Modernization and Consumption among Urban Chinese Muslims* (2000) and Yael Navaro-Yashin’s *Faces of the State. Secularism and Public Life in Turkey* (2002) are fascinating examples of this. From an interdisciplinary and more recent perspective, the edited volume *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption* (Pink 2009) argues that, in spite of the intensifying globalization of markets and consumption, these processes have received modest scholarly attention.[[3]](#endnote-3) More specifically, this volume explores issues such as the changing spaces of consumption, branding, and the marketing of religious music as well as the consumption patterns of Muslim minority groups. My own exploration of the global market for halal also contributes to this literature (Fischer 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010a, 2010b, 2011). However, a general trend in much of this literature is the focus on dress (covering the body) and food (the edible/inedible) and not so much large, expensive and technological products such as cars.

A global trend in recent years has been a thriving business in Islamic goods. Everything from stickers, rugs, holiday cards and plaques with Islamic calligraphy, to special types of holidays aimed at a Muslim audience, watches displaying prayer (*salat*) times and other features, logos and ringing tones on mobile phones and clothes touch upon and Islamicize virtually every aspect of life (D’Alisera, 2001: 97).

Islamic commodities and services are advertised globally as religious necessities that fulfil private desires such as piety, purity and health – all intimately linked to the ‘market for identities’ (Navaro-Yashin, 2002: 11). Below, I shall explore how car consumption among divergent Malay status groups is conditioned by class distinctions, practices and moral symbolic boundaries in Malaysia’s market for Islamic identities. In other words, in the eyes of different Malay middle-class groups, Islam should ideally be internalized as a national-cultural consciousness or as deeply embedded beliefs manifest in a distinct lifestyle.

‘The car is number one’

In the empirical exploration of class, Islam and car consumption it is suggested that the constitution of public distinctions, practices and moral symbolic boundaries between four Malay middle-class groups is a highly uneven process full of ambiguities and contradictions. What is appearing, then, are four Malay registers of modern lifestyles. The discussion of each of these registers of car consumption varies in length according to the number of informants that fitted into these.

Before moving to the empirical analysis of distinction, practices and moral symbolic boundaries involved in Malay middle-class car consumption I shall briefly look at the literature on cars as positional goods in Malaysia. In Kuala Lumpur and its surrounding suburbs, the number of expensive and highly taxed luxury cars produced by BMW, Mercedes, and Volvo, for example, is impressive. In the context of the fieldwork, sample data showed that about 60 per cent of middle-class respondents owned one car, 30 per cent two, 6 per cent three, and a small percentage more than three cars. The Malaysian-produced Proton was the most popular brand by far.

Other popular brands were Honda, Toyota, Nissan, Mercedes, Ford, Volvo and BMW in that order. Cars in developing Malaysia have been explored as potent symbols of social status and identity:

The cars for the rich and upper middle class are largely European made, such as Mercedes, BMW and Volvo, or high-end Japanese brands. These different brands were further used to create differences among the high-end segment of the middle classes. Thus, businessmen favoured Mercedes, highly educated and younger professionals desired BMW, and the civil servants wanted the Volvo – in part because these were the cars given to them by the state as part of their remuneration. […] Further down the line were locally produced “national” cars. (Talib, 2000: 43)

I explore relations between types of cars and social status on the one hand and claims for proper Islamic consumption on the other. Unsurprisingly, men were more explicit about car consumption compared to women. At the time of the fieldwork, the state’s approved Permit (AP) system allowed only up to 10 per cent of vehicles in Malaysia to be imported.

The quotation above is from an informant, Ahmad who clearly makes material distinctions based on car consumption. Ahmad was a man in his late twenties and an accountancy graduate from the UK working as a Business Accountant. He was living with his sister, her husband and children in their one-story terraced house. Recently graduated and living with his sister, Ahmad can be said to belong a lower middle-class group. Ahmad, who owned a modest Proton, reasoned: ‘If you want to show your friends that you are rich, a prestige car follows your financial situation and chandelier lights and wallpaper in the house.’ Besides this explicit concord between car and interior, to Ahmad the car assumed special significance in a Malaysian context or national repertoire as it were: ‘The car is number one.’ To Ahmad a ‘good’ car such as Mercedes was the quintessential status marker – a ‘prestige’ car was the most effective way to show your friends that you are rich and have a high social standing. At the same time, cars also modified the home of its owners, that is, a Proton car would signify a modest type of house and its interior. Ahmad desperately desired a Mercedes or BMW. In this narrative driving a Proton is premised on economic considerations rather than explicit claims for piety or moral boundaries. In a broader perspective, informants would often evoke Proton cars as a form of proper or patriotic Islamic consumption. In the eyes of this informant car consumption is essential for practising middle-class belonging and identity, but also distinctions within this class. Informants such as Ahmad fully accept the status game based on imported luxury cars, that is, car practice in the eyes of Ahmad is formative of material and economic distinctions.

 Mascud and his wife are in their mid-40s. The family lived in a large bungalow. They moved from a *kampung* (village) to Kuala Lumpur and then to this suburb in 1986. Mascud held a bachelor’s degree in economics and after working in a bank he started his own business specializing in security printing. Mascud can be said to belong to the economic elite and not the middle class. Mascud owned eight cars, a Volvo, its price comparable to that of Mercedes, for himself and one car for each of his seven children. In Mascud’s eyes, the car was a public measure of one’s success that people actively play on: ‘Some have very moderate houses, but then a very big car.’ He added that ‘The car you can move everywhere whereas people have to come to your house.’ So the overtness and mobility of cars make them perfectly suited for display when the suburban audience is often unsure about the position of the other’s residence. Similar to what we saw in the case of Ahmad, Mascud fully accepts the status game involved in car consumption, that is, he makes distinctions based on car consumption. Mascud’s situation, however, is quite different from that of Ahmad in that he can afford a number of luxury cars for himself and his family. However, actual car practices are quite different between these two informants.

‘A car is a matter of convenience’

Another group of middle-class Malays simply reject the dominant status game involving cars. Mazlan aged 45 and his wife, Noor, 39, have two children and have lived with Noor’s mother since 1999. Mazlan is trained as a building contractor, but is currently unemployed. Noor is at home taking care of the children. Both these informants found that the individualism and arrogance of the privileged in their bungalows were unbearable and they were disillusioned with social life in the suburb. Interestingly, while these informants are acutely aware of the status game that forms distinctions between divergent groups they do not link this to car consumption in any way. Consumption in the family was heavily oriented towards rejection of what was seen as state and elite encouraged excessive consumption giving in to Western consumer culture, materialism and teenage loitering. This couple was very explicit about the shopping habits of the upper class and the political elite and hence makes distinctions as well as moral boundaries between themselves and other groups, but not based on car consumption. Mazlan explains: ‘We intend to get a car in the nearest future once we get our economy stable. Our family is growing. A car is a matter of convenience. Public transport is difficult.’ In the eyes of these informants it was the type and size of house that determined social status. Interestingly, informants in this group do not have the ‘economic capital’ to buy an imported luxury car and at the same time they do not really partake in the dominant car status game. While they draw moral boundaries this is not based on notions of an idealized proper and pious Islamic lifestyle, but rather in terms of socioeconomic inequalities and uneven distribution of resources in Malaysian society. In other words, informants in this register do not have the economic capital to partake in the car status game, but more importantly they deliberately choose not to do so for a number of moral and political reasons.

‘We can afford a luxury car, but we drive a Proton’

A quite different narrative emerged with the informants Irfan and Murni, a couple in their forties that had lived in a two-story semi-detached house with their four children since 1986. This couple can be said to be higher middle class, that is, high in economic, social and cultural capital. The husband, Irfan, had an education in mechanical engineering and Murni has retired from her work in accountancy to be with the children at home. Irfan was actively engaged in missionary work with the local mosque. The couple was very alert to the moral perils of modern society, and, most of all, the complex relationship between Islam, class and consumption in Malaysia. Irfan: ‘What you can show to people is a car. Second is the house because people don’t visit it that often.’ Murni commented that the tendency is that when one sees somebody driving a Mercedes one reasons this person must be well off: ‘So, when you have this car he’s probably living in a big house. When he comes out you do another assessment according to dressing. He’s got a Rolex. Stuff like that.’ Cars, dress and brands are primary fronts in the performances of identity, taste and distinction, but among middle-class Malays cars are also often seen to be the most reliable marker of moderation, piety or excess, that is, moral boundaries. Irfan and Murni drove a Proton, and were quite aware of the piety involved in this specific choice. As Murni explained: ‘We can afford a luxury car, but we drive a Proton’. Not desiring or driving a Mercedes was determined by the proper pious attitude and lifestyle against the excesses of the materialistic elite obsessed with brands ‘to maintain status.’ Above all, Murni linked to the choice of car the distinction between middle and upper class strata. Driving a Proton signified a clear distinction between a pious middle-class lifestyle and the quest for material status among the upper class indifferent to proper Islamic consumption. Compared to the previous narratives, driving a Proton is the proper moral choice of the pious Malay whereas European luxury cars are understood as excessive, unnecessary and un-Islamic.

 Yasir was a 37-year-old man working with IT development and a leading member of a local Islamic organization. He lived with his wife and young son in a condominium. The family moved into their flat in 1995. Yasir can be said to belong to a higher middle-class group. He was acutely aware of the value and status that might be ascribed to cars. He confided that a car is what people tend to judge your status by: ‘If you drive a Mercedes, even though it’s not yours, they will look at you.’ This may be the quintessential showing off – employing, ‘taking on’ or handling a specific kind of expressive equipment to convey social messages to a large audience in public.

For this suburb, Yasir explained to me that

The upper class in the bungalows is the elite, really untouchable. When they come to the shop they walk like that... [showing-off] then we know that, oh, this person is from up there. They drive Mercedes. You park your car wrongly, they horn like mad. Then there are people who live in the one-story terraced houses.

The excesses of the other that guide informants and their families in classing are to a large extent dependent on the visible, even overt, consumption of cars. Yasir was explicit about defining middle-class identity through both material distinctions and moral boundaries. He practises his middle-class identity by stressing that he is a well-to-do middle-class individual overly conscious of the family’s place in social space who simultaneously escapes the traps of materialism, showing-off and indifference by being a pious Muslim who does not take part in this status game. This narrative is similar to the previous one except that Yasir did not own a car.

 The last narrative within this group of informants is that of Izura and her husband, Yusof, a couple in their fifties. In 2001, they moved from their bungalow in this suburb to a huge and newly built house in a prestigious estate outside Kuala Lumpur. Economically, this couple is more elite than middle class even when maintaining that they were essentially ‘middle class.’ Izura was educated as a teacher and Yusof in Electrical Engineering. After that he came back and worked for a while before doing his master’s degree in Australia. As an example, Yusof mentioned that a prestigious car such as a Mercedes was ‘wasteful’ compared to a smaller Proton, for example. Some time back, the couple sold their Mercedes and now instead drove three Protons and a Volkswagen. In essence, this is pious consumption and an attempt to avoid being classified as excessive by others when you are well aware of the status game involved in car consumption. Izura and Yusof repeatedly told me that while their younger days had been focused on material gain and career, they had now progressed into the realm of the spiritual and religious. Having sold their Mercedes and stressing moral boundaries in the form of wastefulness in cars legitimated living in a mansion that was not seen to be excessive in any way.

Common to informants in this group is that they are high in economic, social and cultural capital and acutely aware of the status involved in luxury car consumption, but reject this in moral and/or Islamic terms – none of these informants owned a luxury car. These informants belong to what I consider a particular Malay group of modern Islamic lifestyles. They perform proper Islamic consumption as a localized form of purism – these more puristically orientated Malays are concerned about excessive and un-Islamic consumption and they articulate a whole range of puritan ideals that tend to circle around ‘balanced consumption.’

‘We need a Multi-Purpose Vehicle’

One last narrative, comparable to those we just saw, stands out in this discussion of cars. Binsar and his wife, in their thirties, moved into the one-story terraced house in 1997. The couple have three children. Binsar moved to Kuala Lumpur to attend Maahad Tahfiz, an institute for Koran studies. He and his wife operated an Islamic school in their terraced house. This couple can be said to be high in cultural and social capital, but not so much in economic capital. Binsar had purchased an expensive Nissan MPV (Multi-Purpose Vehicle). When we were discussing the advantages of this vehicle, Binsar was much more talkative and elaborate than usual, and seemed eager to legitimize the purchase of it. This is his explanation when we discussed his purchase of the MPV one day:

First of all, it’s practical and functional. We need a Multi-Purpose Vehicle. Because sometimes we bring the children for a trip during the weekend, and also it’s useful if we arrange activities like sports days and other activities. It’s easy to bring all the things and equipment. Last time we had to rent or borrow someone’s van to bring all the things or equipment. In terms of design, I think it’s okay. The price is not cheap and not too expensive. It’s good value for money. I like the engine because I think it’s better than a normal one. The difference between a Multi-Purpose Vehicle and a van is that the van engine is under the front seats. So, in time, the seat will get hot. But for this MPV, the engine is in front like a normal car.

In Binsar’s eyes, everyday considerations regarding design, functionality, family and the work in his Islamic school explained why he chose this particular car – multiple purposes as it were. This preference ultimately seemed to signify balanced consumption. The MPV thus worked very satisfactorily as a piece of expressive equipment involved in the practice of perfectly moderate consumption. It has to be mentioned that among informants I consider most focused on moral boundaries Binsar was the owner of the most luxurious car, and this might help explain his somewhat defensive attitude towards this particular and public type of consumption.

 The narrative of this informant is a good example of a Malay middle-class group that often draws moral boundaries and at the same time struggles to legitimate what can be seen as excessive car consumption. This analysis shows how Malay middle-class groups strategically use cars to compete in the status game. Each of these groups in complex ways redefines the status game in the interfaces between different and often overlapping types of distinctions and moral symbolic boundaries. An important question is the actual practice of car consumption, that is, the extent to which articulated ideas or intentions and actual practices correspond or conflict. In other words, the tension between intentionality and practice is prominent in the empirical data*.* An example of this is the way in which some Malays articulate or stage a fascination with and modelling of a pious lifestyle, that is, the Islamic way of life that is unattainable and almost impossible to put into practice.

Cars, Islam, nation, excess

I will now discuss some broader perspectives that frame car consumption in modern Malaysia. This discussion resonates with Lamont’s call for attention to national repertoires and histories.

In depth D’Alisera explores how and why Muslim Sierra Leoneans in Washington DC inscribe religious identity onto their cars by means of a variety of Islamic commodities e.g. bumper stickers displaying Koranic verses in Arabic. This type of decoration ‘serves to reflect the ways they bridge the gap between various, sometimes competing modes of reference, and thus define their place in the community.’ (D’Alisera, 2001: 100).

In Kuala Lumpur and my suburban fieldwork site, it was common to see Islamic and other religious paraphernalia used as ‘labels’ or ‘tags’ on cars – always in smaller and inexpensive cars such as Protons (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Islam in the rear window.

I could not help hypothesizing that this type of branding in and on cars that generally were considered relatively low in status and thus not a ‘positional’ commodity effected some form of compensation or fulfilled a lack in their owners bringing out a sort of patriotic piety in a ‘national car’. However, this type of branding of cars is not uncontested in Malaysia. While some middle-class Malays Islamicize cars, others argue that these practices are shallow displays of a kind of Islamic materialism that tells you little or nothing about inner devotion.

 Another aspect emerging from the fieldwork is what I have called shopping for the state and patriotic consumption (Fischer, 2007, 2008a). The global economic downturn and insecurity following 9/11, when the fieldwork was taking place, moderated consumer sentiments in Malaysia. Consequently, the state launched a campaign in the media (*The Star*, 13 November 2001)[[4]](#endnote-4) aimed at boosting the consumption of, especially, domestically produced goods such as cars. Under the caption ’Tis Season for Spending, Consumers Told’, a newspaper article encouraged patriotic shopping for the state. As a consumer you are advised not to be: ‘stingy about spending for the festive season as this will not help to stimulate the economy’. Consequently, relatively expensive commodities such as Proton cars were resignified as the proper and patriotic choice for Malays. I call this relationship of overlapping and overspilling loyalties, compliances and dependencies ‘shopping for the state’, that is, ways in which particular forms of consumption have come to represent novel modes of state reverence for Malays who are supported by the state.

Similarly, in South Korea ‘consumer nationalism’ (Nelson, 2000) signified a public movement to buy local products and ‘as consumers encountered an increasingly complex market, they brought to this context their sense of identification with the nation. At a deeper level, consumers set themselves the larger task of making consumer choices that were in the best interest of the nation’ (Nelson, 2000: 25) in a car market that was a product of state-directed industrial policies (Nelson, 2000: 93). In Malaysia state-owned car manufacturers were successful in expanding the domestic market and the state ensured the urban development of roads, bridges and parking facilities. My suburban fieldwork site is an example of a space that is entirely dependent on private transportation and urban infrastructure and it is in this context my informants discussed and practiced car consumption.

 In Malaysia, however, it was not only the car industry that was nationalized. From the 1970s onwards, the state was ethnicized to become a signifier of Malayness and unambiguous Malay identity. Hence, a state-controlled company such as Proton also symbolizes this form of Malay Muslim ethnicized state. It is these diverse forms of transformations that together comprise what I call the nationalization of Islam, that is, the increased centrality of Islam as a national and ethnic signifier in Malaysia. The logic of this nationalization is to equate Islam with Malayness and see it as the naturalized core of the Malaysian nation. The nationalization of Islam in Malaysia has both produced and is in itself infused by a fascination with the morally proper Islamic way of life. This tendency embraces the consumption of specific goods, which may be seen to have a beneficial impact on domains such as the family, community and nation. An example of this could be to prefer certain locally produced goods such as Proton cars.

 Obviously, the problem is the understanding and definition of luxuries and excess vis-à-vis Islamic piety central to what informants often would call ‘balanced consumption’. The local Malaysian example below provided by a former civil servant in the Malaysian government is striking in its effort to identify and establish ‘the proper’ and non-excessive in Malay Muslim consumption. In his book Islam and Wealth. The Balanced Approach to Wealth Creation, Accumulation and Distribution (2001) Nik states that

Extravagance means exceeding the limits of what is beneficial in the use of what is allowed in Islam. The definition of goods considered overly luxurious depends on the overall standard of living in a country. In a very poor country, expensive sports cars can already be considered as too luxurious. In a very rich country, chartering a big aircraft to bring the whole family for shopping in London or Paris is obviously excessively luxurious (Nik, 2001: 132).

In the eyes of informants, Mercedes consumption in Malaysia was seen as far more excessive compared to the state perspective above. The reasons for this may be many, but in general the consumption of luxury cars is often seen by middle-class Malays to be inseparable from some sort of illicit access to the state. My fieldwork shows that in the everyday lives of middle-class Malays, luxury cars often evoke the UMNO-driven channelling of funds to some privileged Malay groups of cronies as a sort of party materialism. Zizek writes that ‘We always impute to the “other” an excessive enjoyment: he wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our way of life) and/or he has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment’ (1993: 202–3). In other words, social and physical mobility as enjoyment tends to be premised on access to the ethnicized state. In many cases these forms of critiques among informants were articulated in ‘Islamic’ terms as wastefulness and materialism.

Cars and dualism in suburbia

In suburbia, where there is limited direct visual access to the intimacy inside bungalows, condominiums and one and two-story terraced houses cars inevitably become signs of what life could be like behind closed doors. Not surprisingly, cars were a favourite topic with male informants in particular. The nature of the affluent Malaysian suburb is ‘deep’ in the sense that it is intimately private. Such a suburb in many ways embodies the idealized middle-class suburb at a safe distance from urban noise, crime, pleasures, excess and crowds. A suburb like this is planned to be clean, constructed around family values, and focused on recreational facilities such as parks and playgrounds. This type of modern and affluent suburb monumentally symbolizes the progress of the Malaysian nation in a postcolonial context, the celebration of the growth of the middle class, and the ordering of space into manageable and exploitable form.

In the suburban context, cars work as one of the most prominent examples of overt commodities that are seen to straddle and weave in and out of public and private domains. Consequently, the overtness of cars evokes speculation about the nature of the linkages between the above spheres on the one hand, and the make-up of the covert middle-class home on the other. In other words, cars shape ideas and practices of status, boundaries, and (social) mobility.

The car can signify a form of dualism, and embody distinct values formative of images of person and nationhood (Miller, 1994). This dualism is what I refer to as the convertibility of cars as ‘convertibles’. In different ways, the three types of cars discussed above express complex relationships between individual car performances in a particular national setting. Cars are capable of incorporating and expressing ‘the concept of the individual’ (Miller, 1994: 237), and the most valuable insight in all this is that while a public audience notice car owners’ ‘aestheticization’ of cars, this is surely not always the case with the money and time invested in the interior of the house (Miller, 1994: 239). Thus, covering the upholstery with plastic, for example, suggests links to home furnishing and may evoke interiorization (Miller, 1994: 243). This example is similar to tagging or labelling a Proton car with a bumper sticker displaying Islamic calligraphy. Consequently, cars may be expressive of

a contradiction, a replication of the aesthetic of the interior which then has the potential for protecting the values of transcendence by maintaining them in the ‘outside’ world. Equally, the car provides an ideal objectification of individualism and mobility, to be used in opposition to any association with the home (Miller, 1994: 244).

Especially in the case of the interior of homes of middle-class Malays, one often finds an abundance of Islamic paraphernalia. There has been a marked change from craft production to the mass production of religious commodities (Starrett, 1995). These points reflect the domestication and individualization of Islam, meaning the import of Islamic paraphernalia, ideas, and practices into middle-class homes.

A major focus in the fieldwork was informants’ ideas about status acquisition. It was in these discussions with informants that it became apparent that cars were expressive of not only ideas of status, but also dualism, confusion and a spillover between the public and private domains and the way in which these were constantly charged and recharged with excess and frugality. Many informants explained to me that a car is ‘what you can see’ whereas assessing the material or social status of others by judging from their interior decoration is difficult or impossible in the suburban setting where there is limited social interaction. Cars would supposedly, or rather hopefully, replicate this interior, the everyday spending power of the household as well as this household’s strategies of display or concealment.

Another point reflecting the dualism of the car is the way in which suburban houses are all designed to protect, fence in and encompass cars no matter how limited the space that might be available. The tendency is that as one moves upwards class-wise (one-story; two-story; semi-detached; condominiums; bungalows), the security of cars becomes more and more urgent, elaborate and organized as a natural part of architectural design and aestheticization – domestication of cars as cherished objects that are part of middle-class households.

Concluding remarks

Islam, morality and patriotism condition car distinctions, practices and moral boundaries in contemporary Malaysia. The empirical material shows that when lower middle-class groups cannot compete with more privileged (excessive) segments of the middle class or elite they tend to redefine the status game in complex ways. Even the more puristically orientated Malays, who tend to belong to the upper middle class, are acutely aware of how to play the status game involving cars. The majority of these informants that promote an Islamic lifestyle chose not to own a luxury car thus translating intentionality into actual practice. Conversely, the informant Binsar, who belonged to this group of puristically orientated middle-class Malays, worked hard to legitimize his ownership of a luxury car. Each of these groups redefines the status game in the interfaces between different and often overlapping types of distinctions, practices and moral symbolic boundaries. In many of the narratives of informants the ownership of expensive cars evoke proper or balanced Islamic consumption, piety, morality and patriotism as ideal values and lifestyles for modern Malay Muslims. In that process Western luxury cars are considered excessive against the moderate and patriotic Proton. However, the four Malay middle-class groups I have discussed above often straddle between material status and based on car consumption of self and other.

 Cars are principal signifiers or modifiers expressive of status in and between public and private domains in urban Malaysia. Classifying the car consumption of others gives rise to charging and recharging these domains with pretence and frugality. In most cases, informants did not regularly access the interior of the homes of members of their own or other class groups. Exterior thrift in cars can signify concealment of excessive and irreverent practices behind closed doors. Conversely, what may appear as materialistic and extravagant in public can signify a moderate lifestyle in the home. Mostly, however, middle-class Malays believe that cars replicate the interior of the house they are a part of and that protects them. The car as the ultimate suburban status symbol personalizes the house for the outsider or neighbour. Imported luxury cars may be ‘un-patriotic’ compared to the locally produced Proton, but were essential ‘positional’ commodities with respect to showing-off in public – either in terms of wealth or access to state privileges. Miller makes the case that ‘More than any other item of mass consumption the car has become that classic instrument of modernity: the means of enabling contradiction without anxiety’ (Miller, 1994: 245).

I have shown how proper Malay middle-class consumption of cars is subjected to critiques and distinctions that are equally political, religious and social in orientation. To informants, there was an element of national pride in Malaysia’s capacity to match the quality of Western technologically advanced commodities. Still,

Western produced cars such as BMW and Mercedes, for example, were seen to embody more status, and thus excess, compared to local brands and Proton was an example of this sentiment. In other words, locally produced commodities were seen as inscribed with a national ‘surplus’, that is, a form of economic and symbolic devotion to the Malaysian nation.

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1. This fieldwork was followed up by shorter visits and extended periods of fieldwork in 2004, 2006, 2009 and 2010 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For broader perspectives on *dakwah* in Malaysia see for example Ackerman & Lee 1997; Jomo & Cheek 1992 and Nagata 1984. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. An exception to this trend is the extensive literature on Muslim women’s dress. See for example Nagata 1995, Tarlo 1995, Werbner 2007 and Sandikci and Ger 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *The Star* is a widely popular English-language newspaper generally considered to be relatively balanced in terms of political ideology in spite of government censorship. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)