

## Middle-class projects in modern Malaysia

Fischer, Johan

*Published in:*  
Asian Anthropology

*DOI:*  
[10.1080/1683478X.2016.1270030](https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2016.1270030)

*Publication date:*  
2017

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Fischer, J. (2017). Middle-class projects in modern Malaysia. *Asian Anthropology*, 16(1), 54-69.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1683478X.2016.1270030>

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [rucforsk@kb.dk](mailto:rucforsk@kb.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## **Middle-class projects in modern Malaysia**

### **Abstract**

Within the last two decades or so there has been increased scholarly focus on the emergence, consolidation and future of the middle class in developing Asia. This is also the case with the Malay Muslim middle class in Malaysia, but how this class is developing over time is not well understood even if the Malays constitute the largest and fastest growing section of the middle class in Malaysia. Based on research projects I have carried out from the mid-1990s to the present, this article argues that an unpacking of the Malay Muslim middle class over time is important in order to understand the broader picture surrounding this class and its relationship to Malaysian national repertoires such as Islamic revivalism, politics, consumer culture, social mobility and the state-market nexuses. I understand middle-class projects to be the making of local class culture in Malaysia and explore these in four research projects that each in their own way examine how Malay Muslim informants understand and practice “middle-classness” in different spatial and temporal contexts. In short, my findings show how Malay Muslim middle-class projects such as Islamic consumption shape local class culture in Malaysia.

Keywords: Middle class, Malaysia, state, market, Islam, consumption, technoscience, companies

### **Introduction**

During my fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur in 1996 the Astro Company launched a direct broadcast satellite that introduced a wide range of TV and radio programs. These developments were of major interest to the Malay middle-class informants of this study. In the national media, censored and in large part owned by the state, the launch was hyped as propelling Malaysia into the media-driven globalization of the next millennium. In this new world modern individuals are equipped with enhanced powers of empathy stretching far beyond the local context. What is more, the number of Internet users in urban Malaysia has exploded. A large majority of subscribers live in and around Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, the state surrounding the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur (International Telecommunication Union, 2002). Of the Malaysian population of around 28 million in 2010, about 67 percent are indigenous Malays (virtually all Muslims) and tribal groups, also labeled *bumiputera* (literally, sons of the soil); 25 percent are Chinese; and 7 percent are Indians (<http://www.statistics.gov.my>). At the same time, Malaysia’s outspoken Prime Minister from 1981

to 2003, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, leader of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant political party in Malaysia since independence from Britain in 1957, was concerned about the influx of Westernization in the form of a multitude of TV and radio programs, Internet and “yellow culture” (*budaya kuning*), that is, unwanted Western social values such as materialism, hedonism and individualism. Even if the whole atmosphere surrounding the liberalized media market was euphoric, a large number of concerns were raised.

An important theme runs through this article and my subsequent research projects on the Malay Muslim middle class: the intricate relationship between the desire for the availability of a wide range of consumer products due to state support of the Malays and expanding markets in the context of steady economic growth; and the moral and Islamic concerns among the Malay Muslim middle class. Malaysia has sustained rapid development within the past three decades during which the meaning of Islam has become ever-more contested. The more markets are liberalized the more prominent the call for moral protection of the Malays becomes. These calls are often Islamic in nature and this points to how Malay middle-class consumption is understood and contested as a particular mode of Islamic practice over time. Due to intense political, religious and social contestation, Islam in Malaysia is increasingly being transformed into a “discursive tradition” (Bowen, 1993) and its capacity to construct, maintain and identify “proper Islamic” practices over time is central to this article. Thus, the primary argument of this article is that an unpacking of the Malay Muslim middle class over time is important in order to understand the broader picture surrounding this class and its relationship to Malaysian national repertoires such as Islamic revivalism, politics, consumer culture, social mobility and the state-market nexuses. Controversies over what Islam is, or ought to be, are intensifying the more cultures of consumption assert themselves and urban Malay middle-class projects (Liechty, 2002, 255), that is, the making of local class culture in Malaysia, are shaped by these controversies. I use middle-class projects as a conceptual framework to capture the diversity involved in the constitution of the Malay Muslim middle class (Kahn, 1996). In each of the research projects below I will examine informants who are representative of the broad middle-class terrain. The central research question here concerns how Malay Muslim middle-class projects have taken shape in Malaysia since the 1990s. The first project explores Malay middle-class responses to globalization and media liberalization of the 1990s; the second project continues this theme by exploring the relationship between Islam and new forms of consumer culture in the early 2000s; the third project examines social/physical mobility as part of middle-class projects by exploring the Malay diaspora in London in the mid-2000s; and the

last project focuses on Malay Muslims employed in the Islamic economy in the late 2000s.

The basic methodological approach for the four research projects is qualitative and ethnographic in nature and the projects use urban Malaysia (as well as London in the case of project three) as the setting for a detailed, intensive and complex analysis. Altogether I have carried out fieldwork on the Malay middle class for over three years since the mid-1990s. These research projects employ and combine participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, life biographies and group discussions. In each of the research projects discussed below about 10 informants were selected to obtain a good representative spread in terms of age, gender and education/income among various middle-class groups. Education, occupation, and income in particular were crucial indicators for defining informants as middle class. Sample data supported Embong's (2001, 88; 2002, 2) quantitative research on middle-class income in the Klang Valley in which metropolitan Kuala Lumpur is situated. Embong's data showed that new middle-class groups are relatively affluent in that they have on average a monthly income above RM 4,000 (one Malaysian Ringgit (RM) equals app US\$0.25). Obviously, there is no immanent conceptualization of class in Islam, but class, or more precisely classing projects, are essential to Malay Muslim middle-class projects in modern Malaysia. When asked about self-definition in terms of class, many informants referred to themselves as "middle class" (*kelas pertengahan*).

More specifically, four months of fieldwork for the first project, an MA thesis, was carried out in 1996 among middle-class groups that were at the center of the media revolution so this project also included reception analysis of TV programs (Riese, Koefoed and Fischer, 1998). The setting for the second project was suburban Malaysia among Malay middle-class families (Fischer, 2008) and fieldwork was carried out for 12 months in 2001–2002. The third project was multisited in nature and included fieldwork among Malay middle-class groups, entrepreneurs and state institutions in both Malaysia and in the UK (Fischer, 2011) for 10 months in 2006–2007. The final research project built on more than one year of fieldwork carried out between 2010 and 2012 focused on Islamic production, trade and regulation around Malaysia among Islamic organizations; companies/shops/restaurants; Islamic universities as well as Islamic activists (Fischer 2015b).

### **What are middle-class projects?**

The focus on middle class projects involves assumptions about "performativity of social practices" (Bourdieu, 1990). Debates over proper Islamic consumption are of particular significance in the Malay middle class, that is, Malay middle-class projects are given shape in the interfaces between

revivalist Islam, consumer culture and the blurred area of everyday respectability. In Malaysia there is a tension between how the state and civil society organizations on the one hand and people in their everyday lives want to create and maintain cultural, religious and social cohesion (Hoffstaedter, 2011). Middle-class projects come into being as mental and social negotiations between the luxury/excess of elites and the economic necessity of the lower classes and as we shall see this is reflected in the discussion over what can be considered “balanced” or proper Islamic consumption. Recent studies of the global middle class (Marsh and Li, 2016; Heiman, Freeman and Liechty, 2012) tend to focus on the construction of meanings and lifestyle practices of the middle class in rapidly transforming economies, but little research focuses on middle-class projects in the interfaces between the material and the spiritual over time. Following Lamont (1992) this article argues that 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) are essential to classing projects. Moral symbolic boundaries are drawn on the basis of honesty, work ethic, personal integrity, consideration for others, charity, egalitarianism and sincerity and religious groups tend to defend traditional values such as family life, neighborhood, community and a religious lifestyle based on moral choices against materialism, individualism, elitist meritocracy, secular humanism and cosmopolitanism (Lamont, 1992, 56).

Class projects are also given substance by specific practices in everyday life, and hence class can be conceptualized as something that occurs in human relationships (Thompson, 1963, 9). Class happens when people due to common experiences “feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from and usually opposed to theirs” (Thompson, 1963, 9). My exploration of Malay middle-class projects is focused on how to make sense of class as personal class experiences (Kessler, 2001, 35) to move beyond the blurredness and imprecision of the middle-class concept and its ability to explain the origins of the modern world (Wallerstein, 1991, 143). Hence, the middle class occupies a mythical place in the advent of development and modernity and my analysis is inspired by King’s (2008) call to explore the richness of class analysis by focusing on values, outlook, lifestyles, moral perspectives, perceptions of social change and political choices. In Malaysia, the middle class has become a mythical national signifier of mental and material development and it is to this aspect I will now turn.

### **The Malay middle class in Malaysia: between state, market and Islam**

I now explore the emergence and expansion of the Malay middle class in Malaysia with specific focus on the interaction between state, market and Islamic revivalism. Constitutionally Malays are only Malays if they are Muslims, speak the Malay language—*Bahasa Melayu* or Bahasa Malaysia—and follow Malay customs. The Malay middle class section is the largest and fastest growing in Malaysia and Malay middle-class projects are inseparable from commercial interests and current debates over the shape and meaning of Islam. The New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced by the state in the 1970s and its main objective was to improve the economic and social situation of the Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese in particular. Malay ownership of production rose and preferential quotas in the educational system increased the number and proportion of Malays engaged in the economy – these transformations constitute essential aspects of middle-class projects. The state succeeded in creating an educated, entrepreneurial and shareholding Malay middle class necessary for economic, national and social cohesion. While the state may be a major ideological driving force behind the manufacturing of a Malay middle class (Kahn, 1991), the force of the market and capitalist relations of production should not be downplayed (Embong, 1998, 86). Simultaneously, many Malaysian middle-class groups are increasingly dissatisfied with the state of governance and democracy in the country (Embong, 2013, 63–77). The coining of the new term *Melayu Baru* or New Malay by Mahathir was not only an attempt at manufacturing an entrepreneurial vanguard of Malay middle-class modernity, but also a national middle-class project in its own right. The New Malay embodies an aggressive, entrepreneurial, and global “we can” mentality (Teik, 1995) as well as an emerging Protestantized middle-class work ethic. These new middle-class Malays are modern individuals and groups aware of practicing middle-classness through Islam, consumption and legitimate taste (Embong, 2002).

Virtually all Malays are Muslim and speak the Malay language, but even so the contestation of Islam produces a range of diverse lifestyles. Islam, or more accurately, the social and moral meaning of what is properly Islamic, is contested and there are competing attempts to incorporate it into both state institutions and a multitude of everyday practices. A number of divergent *dakwah* (literally, invitation to salvation) groups emerging in the context of the wider resurgence of Islam in Malaysia starting in the 1970s generated new types of middle-class projects, that is, the rise of divergent *dakwah* groups in the wider resurgence of Islam in Malaysia challenged the secular foundation of the Malaysian state. *Dakwah* is both an ethnic and a political phenomenon transforming Malaysia for both Muslims and non-Muslims and from the 1970s onward, Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS), the Islamic opposition party that still enjoys widespread popularity, together

with *dakwah* groups, criticized the policies of the government led by UMNO for being un-Islamic and secular (Sundaram and Cheek, 1992, 79–106). Conversely, the state sees dogmatic forms of *dakwah* as the decline of Islam due to the arrogant rejection of secular knowledge by *ulama* (religious functionaries) (Mauzy and Milne, 1999, 84)

Over time it is becoming clearer how the Islamic way of life is put into practice. An example of this could be to prefer certain locally produced and certified halal goods. Halal is an Arabic word that literally means “permissible” or “lawful” and conventionally halal signifies “pure food”, particularly in relation to meat, subject to proper Islamic practice such as ritual slaughter and pork avoidance. A particular issue explored in three of the research projects below is halal practices in Malay Muslim middle-class projects. In the modern world, halal is no longer an expression of esoteric forms of production, trade and consumption but part of a huge and expanding globalized market and nowhere is this more evident than in Malaysia. In the modern food industry around the world, a number of Muslim requirements have taken effect, such as an injunction to avoid any substances that may be contaminated with porcine residues or alcohol. The Malaysian state has systematically regulated halal production, trade and consumption since the early 1980s and state bodies such as Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia or the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia (JAKIM) regulates halal in the interfaces between Islamic revivalism, the state, and consumer culture. Moreover, Malaysia aspires to be a world leader in global halal markets and these points resonate with Gupta’s (2003) argument that agriculture, food production, modernity and nation building are inseparable. Halal consumption and Islamic consumer culture more broadly is an expression of a relatively new and Islamic popular culture that appeals to devout middle-class groups of Muslims who seek alternatives to traditional and strict images of Islam on the one hand and Western products on the other (Heryanto, 2011). In essence, the class analysis suggested here is one that aims to connect specific social actions in the local context to wider structural and temporal processes and transformations – in short, middle-class projects.

### **Project one: Media, modernity, morality**

When the Astro Company launched a direct broadcast satellite in 1996 it was hyped in the national media as propelling Malaysia into the media-driven globalization of the next millennium. The introduction of multiple TV and radio channels in Malaysia was a real media revolution. In 1991, Mahathir unveiled Vision 2020, imagining Malaysia as a fully developed nation by the year 2020. Mahathir and the political elite in Malaysia saw Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

as signifying an information revolution that was best left unregulated in order not to disturb its enormous business and globalizing potential, for example to attract multinationals to Malaysia in order to increase direct foreign investment. In the broader perspective, network society and ICT have affected significant shifts in Malaysia's political and economic positioning from the 1990s onwards, most notably in setting up a zone, the Multimedia Super Corridor or MSC in 1995. This "high tech" zone stretches southwards from Kuala Lumpur and aims to turn the nation's main metropolitan area into a "node" or "hub" in transnational social and economic networks (Bunnell, 2004, 144)

Kuala Lumpur in many ways embodies the quintessential modern and prosperous Asian metropolis. Within the past 30 years, industrialization, urbanization and economic growth have produced a city that expands both vertically and horizontally as a visible manifestation of the Malaysian miracle of the Tiger Economies essentialized in and through monumental and visible urban and national hypermodernity. The question I will turn to now is how my Malay Muslim middle-class informants understood and practiced this media revolution taking place between the euphoria of Malaysia partaking in global media modernity and concerns about the subversion of local tradition, authority and values that called for a novel kind of inner censorship among the Malay middle class (Riese, Koefoed and Fischer, 1998). The first informant is Kartini. She is in her forties, married with one adult son, who is studying in Australia, and has lived in a condominium flat in a middle-class suburb. She was educated as a teacher in Malay Girls' College. Kartini's husband holds a senior position in a bank. There was no indication in the condominium flat in the form of Islamic paraphernalia that Kartini was Muslim. She welcomed the increased openness and transparency media globalization and liberalization could potentially provide to a political system in Malaysia, which is characterized by graft and authoritarianism. Western values in the form of democracy and transparency could help "check" and reinvigorate the political system in Malaysia. Kartini describes the political system in Malaysia as a "guided democracy" that could learn from Western processes of democratization. However, in the eyes of Kartini, the Malaysian mentality is more easily "influenced by emotions" as opposed to the West and she therefore understands that the government is concerned about local values and traditions in the context of liberalization. On the one hand, Kartini idealizes democracy, rights and openness and on the other she shares the political system's concern about national values and stability. In this kind of narrative, Islam and Islamic identity played no role.

Conversely, in narratives of other informants Islam and Islamic values were central. Azril is



in his 20s and is studying to become a pilot in Kuala Lumpur. He lives with other students at the pilot academy. He is sharply dressed and has travelled extensively, especially in the UK where his mother and father, who are divorced, currently work. Azril's narrative is characterized by a desire to preserve traditional values, customs and religion as Malaysia develops, especially in connection with the introduction of new media technologies. "We don't want to be like other developed countries, like America", he argued, as these countries were developing economically while overlooking the damage done to family relations in particular. Many informants argued that Japan was a good example to follow, in that the country developed economically while "remaining loyal to their ancestors' customs and being self-disciplined, respectful", as Azril put it. These narratives follow the Malaysian state's idealization of Japan as a development miracle that should be emulated. In all this, Islam works as a "moral guide" that can preserve spirituality in modern Malaysia where the quest for material wealth is essential for the elite and middle class. The centerpiece of this type of narrative is how to combine "spiritual" and "material" values in Kuala Lumpur. Inspired by the state's modernist ideal Azril states that the Malay mentality must change "...because you can't afford, you don't want to be left behind. Tradition shouldn't be an obstacle for improving your lifestyle, your economic standing. Tradition is there to guide you along the right path, not to make you suffer." This quotation is telling for how many informants ambivalently negotiated between spiritual and material values in the context of urbanization and wealth. Informants in this study felt that modernity and modern life were not something external or monumental. Rather, the modern was signified as an intimate feeling one not only lives with, but something that resides inside of one as nationalized culture. In the mid-1990s urban middle-class projects among the Malays were to a large extent centered on coming to terms with liberalized media policies and globalization in the form of intensified flows of goods and ideas on the one hand, and a plethora of individual and national responses to these transformations. This study evoked a number of questions that were explored in three larger research projects.

### **Project two: Proper Islamic consumption**

While skyscrapers may be a very visible manifestation of the Malaysian miracle of the Tiger Economies, Kuala Lumpur is to a large extent expanding in the form of suburbanization, creating vast new residential areas and thus the fieldwork for this study took place in an affluent middle-class suburb outside Kuala Lumpur between 2001–2002 (Fischer, 2008). This study explored a field of contradictory Islamic visions, lifestyles and debates articulating what Islam is or ought to be that

frame the everyday organization and justification of consumer behavior within Malay middle-class households. The malls and the mosques that surrounded this suburb comprised two central spheres of modern suburban middle-class projects, that is, such projects can fruitfully be examined in the interfaces between Islam as a worldview and a performance of acts of piety and a range of consumer practices and lifestyle choices.

In the wake of *dakwah* the domain of food in particular was increasingly subjected to Islamic understandings of halal and as we shall see these ideas have deepened and widened in Malaysia to be inscribed into a large number of other domains. Thus, capitalism is adjusting to the recent requirements of a growing number of Muslims in Malaysia and the Islamic market is expanding, but also increasingly regulated by the state. Jeti, a woman in her early 20s who held bachelor's degrees in English and linguistics and currently worked as a research assistant, explained that previously it was very difficult to go to a restaurant and ask if products were halal or not because there were no halal "signs" or "logos."

I suggest that the constitution of public distinctions between two Malay middle-class groups is an uneven process reflecting two types of middle-class projects: one group performs proper Islamic consumption as a localized form of purism while another group is more orientated towards a pragmatic approach to the performance of proper Islamic consumption. This distinction between the purist and more pragmatically inclined middle-class Malays was evident from the empirical material gathered in my fieldwork and for the most dedicated among the purists, halal requirements are by no means fixed or stable, but instead elastic and expansive. For these Malays, halal products must also be produced by Muslims in order to be acceptable in Islam and ore broadly proper halal consumption is morally given. Conversely, pragmatic Malays either reluctantly accept the imposition of halalization or simply reject it as a material and thus shallow display of belief – as Islamic materialism or excess. These Malays can be said to be "ordinary Malays", that is, Malays who are not at the forefront of contemporary religious or political developments and who are somewhat ambivalent about these (Peletz, 1997: 231). This type of resistance was summed up by a woman informant: "Islamic belief alone should be fine." – she made the case that the whole idea about Islam in consumption was insufficiently argued and altogether unconvincing.

Yasir is a man in his 40s who worked with IT development. He embodied the power and purism of halalization involved in consumer preferences in everyday life by dividing Malays into segments according to their adherence to extremely elaborate ideas about what was considered acceptable in Islam and what was not. These distinctions produced and maintained a polarity

between purity and impurity and legitimate Islamic taste. If accidentally eating food that was not halal certified he would instantly throw it away. Contrary to himself and his family many Muslims were quite indifferent to these requirements, he explained by drawing attention to groups of Malays that lacked knowledge of and dedication to proper Islamic practices. These ideas and ideals about particularity involved in Malay halal food preferences work as one of the clearest examples of ethnic and religious distinctions and social boundaries that together give shape to a particular kind of middle-class project. Moreover, this informant also stressed that as a principle he would buy a minimum of 10 per cent of the family's goods in local *bumiputera* shops to support Muslim businesses.

To sum up, purist Malay middle-class projects embody the stretching of properly certified halal food to involve proper preferences, taste, handling, presentation and context whereas more pragmatically inclined or ordinary Malays reject or negotiate these notions. However, among all informants there was a general adherence to halal principles and this point demonstrates that Malay middle-class projects to a large extent is about food consumption. It was this point that made me focus on the Islamic marketplace in urban and suburban Malaysia – for example by far the most food products in urban/suburban super/hypermarkets are fully halal certified by JAKIM. This tells us that Malay social mobility reflects concerns with “getting consumption right” and that this has helped shape new forms of ethnic and religious Malay middle-class projects. These concerns and confusions are deepening as more and more foreign-produced halal as well as non-halal commodities enter the Malaysian market, but little research focused on how physical mobility or migration are conditioned by or condition Malay middle-class projects and it is to this aspect I will now turn.

### **Project three: on the halal frontier**

This project studies modern forms of halal understanding and practice among middle-class Malay Muslims in London, that is, the halal consumption of middle-class Malays in the diaspora (Fischer, 2011). Focusing on Malays in multiethnic London allowed me to explore the Malaysian state's vision of and commitment to promoting halal that specifically identifies London as a center for halal production, trade and consumption. Secondly, London is home to a substantial number of Malays and Malaysian organizations such as UMNO and Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE), Malaysia's national trade promotion agency, that promotes halal globally. Intimate connections and exchanges between the two countries have existed since

Britain's colonization of Malaysia meaning that Commonwealth migrants from Malaysia could legally settle in Britain. During fieldwork in London in 2006–2007, I spent a great deal of time in halal restaurants, in butcher's shops, grocery stores, super/hypermarkets selling halal products. Most importantly, perhaps, this study shows that the global mobility of the Malay Muslim middle class is an essential aspect of middle-class projects on the one hand, but also diaspora strategies of the Malaysia state on the other (Fischer, 2015a). Halal is highly visible in signs and logos in the urban landscape of London and there are hundreds of halal butchers as well as super/hypermarkets selling halal products in the city. Compared to Malaysia where halal is highly regulated by the state the secular government in the UK is not actively regulating halal. Halal in the UK is mainly certified by the Halal Monitoring Committee (HMC) ([www.halalmc.co.uk](http://www.halalmc.co.uk)) or the Halal Food Authority (HFA), the two major certifying bodies in Britain that are competitors in the field of halal certification.

Thus, the main project for middle-class Malays in London who are accustomed to a highly globalized, multiethnic, and cosmopolitan food market in urban Malaysia, is to negotiate their fastidiousness about halal in the diaspora where they are outside the direct protection of the Malaysian state. As long as the food consumed is considered halal, these Malays would cook a wide variety of dishes in their homes. Most of all it is meat that is subjected to halal/haram judgments, but alcohol and gelatin are also sources of concern. Often Malays will shop for ingredients used in Malaysian cuisine in Chinese supermarkets such as Loon Fung in Chinatown or elsewhere or Thai grocery stores. A plethora of Muslim groups with divergent understandings and practices of halal compete over and consume halal in this expanding market in Britain and globally.

Comparable to what we saw in Malaysia, the empirical material from London suggests two registers of understanding and practice of halal certification among Malays in London. The first group is relatively strict or purist about halal consumption, whereas the second group is more pragmatic about these contested questions – all of these informants are acutely aware that halal understanding and practice is very different in the diaspora. Most of these middle-class informants are in London to work or study and they feel that it is a privilege to be able to further their career or skills in the global city of London. Consequently, they are aware that some level of pragmatism is part of everyday life in the diaspora.

The first informant is Nazli. He is a single man who came to London in 2001 to study and he is also a student councilor with an Islamic student organization. His narrative illustrates the sentiments toward halal certification among the first group of informants. In relation to halal

certification in London Nazli complained that shops and butchers' shops simply put up a sign displaying the word "halal" in Arabic and/ or English. To this group of Malays in the diaspora, marking such products and premises in this way represents insufficient certification by a trustworthy certifying body that can be held accountable. Nazli further argues that "anyone" could put up a sign in Arabic that indicates halal: "I worry about local halal certification sometimes because you can see people we don't even know creating their own halal signs and putting them up." Even if halal is not regulated by the state in the UK, Nazli accepts halal certification by HMC or HFA as reliable and trustworthy. Thus, in the eyes of Nazli, proper halal certification with a convincing logo is sufficient proof that products are fit for consumption by Muslims. As in the case of most other informants, Nazli shops for meat at a local halal butcher's shop and this requires trust in the Muslim butcher because, in most cases, there is no visible certification in such facilities. This group of middle-class Malays is relatively strict about the halal/haram binary that requires proper certification and thus this type of middle-class project revolves around their interest in the certification of not only meat but also a whole range of other products. In this way, they support the current proliferation of halal and its regulation that they know so well from Malaysia. In other words, this register of Malay middle-class Muslims understand and practice halal as a religious injunction that should inspire a particular form of Muslim lifestyle.

Edgware Road in central London is a center for halal and it was in a Malaysian halal restaurant here that the informant Binsar and the researcher discussed halal. Binsar is a single man in his 30s and moved to London to study in 1995. Binsar and other more pragmatic Malays are relatively relaxed about their understanding and practice of halal certification. Thus, compared to the more purist Malays discussed above fastidiousness about halal does not play a major role in the middle-class projects of these diaspora Malays. For example, Binsar explains to me that he basically trusts producers and sellers to live up to halal requirements, and that it is not his responsibility as a Muslim consumer to mistrust their intentions and that there are no significant differences between various types of certification, such as JAKIM and local certification in London: "I would take both, JAKIM and local certification in London, there's not too much of a difference anyway." Thus, signs in Arabic stating that products in butchers' shop or restaurant are halal are perfectly acceptable to Binsar and he concludes that "in our belief if someone says it's halal, we just take it. So if anything is wrong, we just blame the producer or trader."

Binsar's friend Abdul is also present in the Malaysian halal restaurant in Edgware Road this evening and reflects similar sentiments. Abdul is a 29-year-old man who moved to London to study

in 1996 and now works as an accountant. He lives with his wife and their child in north London. Compared to Binsar, Abdul is even more relaxed or pragmatic about halal understanding and practice in London, “I’m just not too concerned. I couldn’t be bothered. I am a bit ignorant, so if I see a halal sign I wouldn’t do more research.” Abdul is involved with United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) work in London, but the Malaysian state’s halal vision to dominate the global market for halal seems to be insignificant and distant in his everyday life with his wife and child in London. He feels that “when you live outside Malaysia and can’t really get what you need you just have to shut one eye.” Informants in this group indicate that everyday pragmatism becomes the order of the day when living abroad and without the imagined safety of state-certified products and that everyday halal consumption is characterized by multiplicity and ambiguity:

I actually find it a bit confusing when I see halal products such as biscuits and sardines. I am sure that there are different interpretations in our religion, but the way that I have been taught at school is that halal only applies to meat. So these new products are confusing (Fischer, 2011, 100).

Abdul acknowledges that the Malaysian state discourse on halal is overwhelmingly about business and profit and not Islamic devotion: “There is a lot of profit to be made on halal. Personally, I’m more liberal about eating non-halal, but the market is still very untapped. Even if I’m not very strict I would support halal as business.” This type of critique of the massive commercialization of Islam and halal was rare to see among my informants. It demonstrates, firstly, that “ordinary” or pragmatic Malays may be critical about Malaysian state discourses as well as the halal hype in London and, secondly, that financial or patriotic support for Malaysia through halal consumption becomes the driving force behind practice. Among my informants halal discourses were often transmitted during state schooling in Malaysia. Thus, education, which is one of the key aspects of middle-class projects, was formative of basic and extended knowledge of halal as part of school experiences. For example, informants would explain that knowledge of halal was taught as a natural part of “a national curriculum”, as “a common understanding”, “general knowledge”, or “a syllabus”.

My study shows that although halal is important in middle-class projects in the diaspora it also requires the constant and shifting engagement among these Malays. Even the most relaxed middle-class Malays in London experience multiplicity and ambiguity as halal spreads into new

types of commodities and marks spaces in supermarkets, hypermarkets, and advertising. Informants preferred Malaysian state-certified products by far if they were readily available and these were described as “familiar,” “trustworthy,” “reliable,” and “convincing.” Most importantly, this study demonstrated that physical and social mobility condition Malay middle-class projects – Malaysia’s efforts to develop and dominate a global market in halal commodities is a type of diaspora strategy in its own right and Malaysian state institutions, entrepreneurs, restaurants and middle-class groups in London respond to and are affected by this effort. Thus, Malay middle-class projects in the diaspora should be explored in the interfaces between Islam, state and market.

#### **Project four: global halal zones**

This research project starting in 2009 explores “the bigger institutional picture” that frames everyday halal consumption discussed above – the contact zones or interface zones between Islam and markets through techniques like production, trade and regulation. More specifically, I explore how middle-class Malays are involved in these sectors and I use “zones” to explain how the global markets for halal are comprised of divergent zones inside and between which regulatory institutions and markets interact (Fischer, 2015b). I argue that education/occupation are essential aspects of Malay Middle-class projects and explore four types of middle-class workplaces which, each in their own way, are related to the Islamic economy in Malaysia and beyond: global networks of Malay entrepreneurs (Sloane, 1999); Islamic universities and halal laboratories as well as manufacturing companies.

I now explore how Malay entrepreneurs network to strategically promote halal in the global market with state backing. During fieldwork in Malaysia and London I met Altaf – a Malay woman, who in many respects reflected the ways in which networking is practiced in Malaysian halal. She held degrees in accounting and business studies from the UK and was currently involved in promoting halal for the Malaysian state by organizing trade promotions on the one hand and selling her own company’s halal products on the other. Altaf also runs several consultancy firms that help Malaysian companies with the process of halal certification and regulation both in Malaysia and globally. Being in London allowed Altaf to explore the lucrative UK market that she knew from her studies here. She envisaged halal as giving Malaysia an edge and a “niche trade network” and this point was supported by the news that Nestlé had entered into a halal business deal with Malaysia. To Altaf this was proof that only by cooperating with multinationals and using their existing trade networks a country such as Malaysia could succeed.

Altaf was confident that the emerging halal trade was forging new Malay “community networks” on a global scale backed by political will in Malaysia. In essence, these last points reflect not only the materialization of an entrepreneurial New Malay mentality that to a large extent is a product of the NEP as a sort of ethnic network policy of the Malaysian state, but most importantly, perhaps, that Malay middle-class projects exist in the interfaces between state support and networking in the Islamic economy: social and physical mobility among Malay middle-class women that practice networking between state institutions, Islamic organizations, and companies. In Altaf’s everyday consumption she was not very particular about halal and she was not wearing the *tudung* (long headscarf) on any of the occasions I met her. She is not a *dakwah* activist, but rather a modern entrepreneur that tries to optimize Malaysian halal performance on the global scale and make the most of this in her own company.

On the one hand Altaf works with companies that produce sauces, pastes, herbal products, baby food and dried fruit, among other things and she takes on clients and products to “tap into the global halal market” and “pushes” them to become “fully certified”. On the other hand, an essential part of Altaf’s work consists of cooperating with JAKIM and MATRADE. She advises these bodies and “gives them feedback on what’s happening out there”, building on her extensive experience with halal in the European market and in the UK in particular – for example the workings of the local halal certifiers in Britain. Malay middle-class entrepreneurs such as Altaf play an essential role in the Malaysian halal network by promoting Malaysian halal and certification in markets where the Malaysian state has little or no authority. The Malaysian state promotes its vision of a halal network enabling Malaysia to sell halal commodities through the business of Malay Muslim middle-class entrepreneurs globally.

#### Islamic technoscience

Islamic Science University of Malaysia (USIM) houses the Institute of Property Management & Islamic Finance, the Institute of International Fatwa Management & Research, the Faculty of Syariah (Syariah is the local spelling of “Shari’a” in Malaysia) & Law, as well as the Institute of Halal Research & Management (IHRAM), which is a center of excellence in USIM for Islamic-based education, research, training, services, consultation and laboratory analyses with issues regarding halal. During fieldwork in 2010 IHRAM’s brand new laboratory used technology and techniques to locate alcohol, pork, and other types of contamination in food and drink. This section explores a particular form of Malaysian Islamization of knowledge and technoscience, that is,



material technology and specialized social expertise (Ong and Collier, 2005, 3–21) that exist in the interfaces between Islamic revivalism, state regulation and markets. Dakwah in Malaysia was to a large extent driven by Malay Muslim middle-class groups and the Malaysian state's Islamization efforts included Islamic education and research. This led to increased numbers of government-funded primary and secondary religious schools and tertiary Islamic education also expanded (Aziz and Baharuddin, 2004, 341–356) and it is in this context Islamic technoscience and halal in the Islamic Science University should be seen. Thus, middle-class projects in Malaysia are to a large extent shaped by these efforts to make Islam, education and research compatible.

The woman Director of IHRAM was educated in food science and nutrition and she explains to me about the Institute's research – for example halal services and Islamic finance that seek to avoid *riba* (interest) are part of on-going research that supports the national vision to make Malaysia leading in halal. The Director argues that several areas of research and planning are important for realizing this halal vision: government halal standards; Islamic finance; the development of Syariah audit procedures and services monitored by a Syariah committee that looks into whether institutions are Syariah compliant; social security to increase the “Muslim economy”; marketing and traceability; as well as “extension of reach”, for example through publications for the *ummah* (community of Muslims); cooperation with industry players; and *fiqh* (the human attempt to understand Syariah) issues. The core values and objectives of IHRAM build on the compatibility of science and technology on the one hand and Islamic knowledge on the other meet in the education of BAs, MAs, and PhDs with critical knowledge that can be put into practice in IHRAMs brand new laboratory that makes use of haram detection technology and techniques to locate alcohol, pork, and “minerals contamination such as lead and mercury” in food and drink. The research in IHRAM and its laboratory also focuses on broader issues such as health and hygiene, contaminants, heavy metals, cholesterol, and edible products that can cause allergies. My fieldwork at USIM for the most part took place in laboratory facilities and I met BA, MA, and PhD students and lecturers, many of whom had come from other Muslim countries, doing research on halal. As a sign of IHRAM's international outlook, the institute receives visitors from various national and international laboratories, universities and trade organizations wishing to learn about the halal research activities at USIM.

IHRAM is an example of how a rationalized Syariah-compliant science department inscribes Islamized knowledge into education, research, training, services, consultation and laboratory analyses, but most of all it shows how middle-class projects emerge in the context of Islamic

technoscience. My study demonstrates how technoscience and research is a major focus area for the state on the one hand, and on the other hand, halal science institutions cooperate with companies in terms of product development, innovation and testing. This research is valuable to Muslim consumers in their everyday consumption and middle-class projects more broadly.

### Manufacturing halal

During fieldwork in an industrial estate in Malaysia I visited a European multinational company that produces food ingredients, enzymes (a substance that acts as a catalyst in living organisms) and bio-based solutions. The company specialized in offering manufacturers new opportunities to meet growing consumer demand for halal-labeled products and thus all the company's raw materials comply with halal requirements. This example from a manufacturing company in Malaysia illustrates the relationship between middle-class Malays and Islamic technoscience. I understand such companies to be types of sociological laboratories with histories, cultures, structures, hierarchies and values to observe and analyze. Employees in many manufacturing companies are to a large extent part of teams – for example Halal Committees, as we shall see below. Ideally, team members complement each others' capacities; are productive/high-functioning; make great decisions; resolve conflict; gain consensus; and communicate/collaborate fluidly. Thus, the team as a paradigm of productivity and organizational control is internalized through the reconstitution of expertise and redistribution of worker responsibility (Urciuoli, 2008, 211–228.)

Halal certified companies rely on JAKIM and Halal Industry Development Corporation (HDC), an organization established in 2006 by the Malaysian government to co-ordinate the overall development of the halal industry. A Senior Manager I met at the HDC headquarters is an example of a middle-class employee that received his tertiary education in Britain. The Senior Manager was not directly involved in *dakwah*, his office did not in any way display any Islamic paraphernalia such as plaques with Islamic calligraphy and he was wearing ordinary office dress. Contrary to earlier generations of *dakwah* revivalists the current stress on halal is more “managerial”, that is, regulative rather than strictly theological and the Senior Manager's main vision and responsibility in HDC was to develop halal “integrity”, “branding”, and “to take halal to the next level” and this project shows how the well-educated Malay middle class plays an essential role in the proliferation and regulation of the halal market.

The company mentioned above shows how middle-class Malays fit into Malaysia's Islamic economy (Sloane-White, 2011, 304–334) and it is to that example I will now turn. I am discussing

halal with two representatives from the Halal Committee, which is mandatory in all halal-certified companies. The first representative is a male chemistry graduate who has been working for the company for 19 years. He was initially involved in production and then shifted to work on implementing system requirements on safety, health and standards in environmental management. In his own words, he is the plant's "Halal Manager". The company focuses on Good Manufacturing Practices and food safety (internationally recognized) instead of the local Malaysian standard for halal MS 1500 (production, preparation, handling, and storage of halal food). The Halal Committee member is responsible for managing halal compliance and certification, including application for and renewal of certificates with JAKIM. Encouraged by JAKIM he has also participated in training to enhance knowledge of halal technology and management. His colleague is a woman who has worked for the company for 13 years and she is responsible for handling JAKIM halal online registration and certification as well as quality control, product services, product specification, and customers' requirements. The company's Halal Committee comprises five Malays, who are "appointed from executive level".

The company is faced with two groups of officers from JAKIM: a group specializing in technical knowledge with particular reference to food and another group with an Islamic background is more focused on religious aspects such as the binary halal-haram. Both these groups can be considered middle class and an important aspect is that company representatives and JAKIM officers not only exchange knowledge, but also develop relationships that helps smooth cooperation. A company such as this one is subjected to increasingly strict halal requirements by JAKIM and HDC, but they also develop more refined processes to comply with such requirements – these processes are based on knowledge that employees acquired during their education and experience from working in the Islamic economy, not least interaction with other middle-class individuals that in many cases are part of teams with specialized knowledge of the Islamic economy and bureaucracy.

## **Conclusion**

This article explored continuities and changes in the formation of Malay Muslim middle-class projects in Malaysia and beyond. I have shown how an unpacking of the Malay Muslim middle class over time is important in order to understand the broader picture surrounding this class and its relationship to Malaysian national repertoires such as Islamic revivalism, politics, consumer culture, social mobility and the state-market nexuses. Around the time of the first research project in the

1990s multinational companies such as McDonald's were fully halal certified in Malaysia (Fischer, 2015b) and this was to a large extent because of pressure from Malay Muslim middle-class groups. In contemporary Malaysia middle-class projects are intimately linked to the Islamic economy as exemplified in the research on halal production, trade, regulation, research and consumption. This article shows that even the most "ordinary" or pragmatic Malays are faced with and have to negotiate the force of this economy in their everyday lives. Thus, Malay middle-class projects to a large extent take consumption in all its forms as the starting point of material, ethnic and religious distinctions. Malay middle-class projects have become more and more compatible with religious capitalism and modernity over the last couple of decades or so. As a consequence of the growing Malay middle class in Malaysia, Muslim consumption has been subjected to state and business intervention in the form of extensive market research and the political institutionalization of consumption and this is now spreading to other Muslim countries – for example my study of Islamic education and technoscience showed that many Muslim students come to Malaysia to learn about Islamic economies and research.

Halal understanding and practice among these middle-class Malays are inseparable from how the Malay middle class emerged in the interfaces between Islamic revivalism, state and market and (halal) consumption is entangled in evermore-complex webs of political, ethnic and national significance in modern Malaysia. At the same time, notions of the sacred in Malaysia have taken on more political meanings over time and I propose conceiving of the proliferation of halal as a type of national standardization that attempts to achieve legibility and simplification. Food consumption and its religious, social, and cultural context may be the closest one can come to a core symbol in Malay middle-class projects. Globally, capitalism is adjusting to the recent requirements of a growing number of middle-class Muslims, and the Islamic market is expanding rapidly, that is, in the second millennium, halal also signifies a type of globalized religious market that covers new types of commodities and services.

Halal understandings and practices among informants suggest a religious and ethnic identity that increasingly is impersonal and technological in nature and the four research projects discussed demonstrate this point. Many Malay middle-class consumers face moral multiplicity and ambiguity in an expanding halal market, that is, the seemingly boundless expansion of halal and its certification into ever more commodities can be seen as excessive and unnecessary. However, even the most pragmatic Malays acknowledge that a whole range of powerful political and business discourses condition modern forms of halal.

## References

- Aziz, Aziz and Baharuddin, Shamsul A. 2004. "The religious, the plural, the secular and the modern: A brief critical survey on Islam in Malaysia." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 5 (3): 341–356.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bowen, John R. 1993. *Muslims Through Discourse: Religion and Ritual in Gayo Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bunnell, Tim. 2004. *Malaysia, Modernity and the Multimedia Super Corridor*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon.
- Embong, Abdul A. 1998. "Social transformation, the state and the middle classes in post independence Malaysia." In *Cultural Contestations: Mediating Identities in a Changing Malaysian Society*, edited by Ibrahim Zawawi, 83–116. London: Asean Academic Press.
- Embong, Abdul A. 2001. "Beyond the crisis: the paradox of the Malaysian middle class". In Abdul Rahman Embong (ed.), *Southeast Asian Middle Classes. Prospects for Social Change and Democratisation*. Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, pp. 80–102.
- Embong, Abdul A. 2002. *State-led Modernization and the New Middle Class in Malaysia*. Houndmills and New York: Palgrave.
- Embong, Abdul A. 2013. "Responding to globalization and the state: Negotiations and contestations by the middle class in Malaysia." In *Globalization and Social Transformation in the Asia Pacific: The Australian and Malaysian Experience*, edited by Claudia Tazreiter and Siew Yean Tham, 63–77, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fischer, Johan. 2008. *Proper Islamic Consumption: Shopping among the Malays in Modern Malaysia*. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies Press.
- Fischer, J. 2011. *The Halal Frontier: A Global Religious Market in London*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fischer, J. 2015a. Malaysian diaspora strategies in a globalized Muslim market. *Geoforum* 69: 169–177.
- Fischer, Johan. 2015b. *Islam, Standards and Technoscience: In Global Halal Zones*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Gupta, Akhil. 2003. *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Heiman, Rachel, Freeman, Carla and Liechty, Mark. 2012. *The Global Middle Classes: Theorizing Through Ethnography*. Santa Fe: SAR Press.
- Heryanto, Ariel. 2011. Upgraded piety and pleasure. The new middle class and Islam in Indonesian popular culture. In Andrew N. Weintraub: *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia*. Routledge 2011: 60–82.
- Hoffstaedter, Gerhard. 2011. *Modern Muslim Identities: Negotiating Religion and Ethnicity in Malaysia*, NIAS 2011.
- International Telecommunication Union. 2002. *Multimedia Malaysia: Internet case study*. Available on-line: <http://www.itu.int/asean2001/reports/material/MYS%20CS.Pdf>
- Kahn, Joel, 1991. Constructing culture: towards an anthropology of the middle classes in Southeast Asia, *Asian Studies Review* Volume 15, 1991 - Issue 2
- Kahn, Joel L. 1996. “The middle classes as a field of ethnological study”. In Muhammad Ikmal Said and Zahid Emby (eds), *Malaysia: Critical Perspectives. Essays in Honour of Syed Husin Ali*. Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Sains Social Malaysia, pp. 12–33.
- Kahn 1996) have noted that a conceptual framework that can capture the diversity involved in the constitution of the middle classes should be conceived. is exploration of Malay Muslim consumption tries to provide such a framework.
- Kessler, Clive S. 2001, “Alternative approaches, divided consciousness: dualities in studying the contemporary Southeast Asian middle class.” In *Southeast Asian middle Classes: Prospects for Social Change and Democratization*, edited by Abdul Rahman Embong, 31–45, Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- King, Victor. 2008. The Middle Class in Southeast Asia: Diversities, Identities, Comparisons and the Vietnamese Case”, *International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies*, Vol. 4, 2008, pp. 73-109
- Lamont, Michele. 1992. *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and American Upper-Middle Class*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Liechty, Mark. 2002. *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Marsh, Leslie L. and Li, Hongmei. 2016. *The Middle Class in Emerging Societies: Consumers, Lifestyles and Markets*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Ong, Aihwa and Collier, Stephen J. 2005. "Global Assemblages, Anthropological Problems." In *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*, edited by Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier, 3–21, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Peletz, MG. 1997. "Ordinary Muslims" and Muslim Resurgents in Contemporary Malaysia. Notes on an Ambivalent Relationship, in *Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Revival in Muslim Southeast Asia*, Robert W. Hefner and Patricia Horvatich (eds.). Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press; 231–273.
- Riese, Astrid, Koefoed, Lasse and Fischer, Johan. The End of the Western World: Modernity and Identity Formation in Malaysia. Roskilde University: Unpublished MA Thesis.
- Sloane, Patricia. 1999. *Islam, Modernity and Entrepreneurship among the Malays*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press.
- Sloane-White, Patricia. 2011. "Working in the Islamic economy: sharia-ization and the Malaysian Workplace." *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 26(2): 304–334.
- Sundaram, Jomo K. and Ahmad Shabery Cheek Cheek. 1992. "Malaysia's Islamic movements." In *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia*, edited by Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah, 79–106, North Sydney: Asian Studies Association of Australia in association with Allen & Unwin.
- Teik, Khoo Boo, 1995. *Paradoxes of Mahathirism: An Intellectual Biography of Mahathir Mohamad*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Urciuoli, Bonie. 2008. "Skills and selves in the new workplace." *American Ethnologist*, 35(21): 211–228.
- Thompson, Edward P. 1963. *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: A. A. Knopf.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1991. "The bourgeois(ie) as concept and reality." In *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, edited by Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein. London: Verso.