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Johan Fischer
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Chapter I

Grounding Malay Muslim Consumption

HERE WE ARE: TAMAN TUN DR ISMAIL

From my 14th floor condominium balcony in Taman Tun Dr. Ismail (TTDI), a middle-class suburb about 15 kilometres West of Malaysia’s capital, Kuala Lumpur, I have two quite distinct views beneath me: to one side TTDI, my fieldwork site, and to the other side a view over the lush greenery of Sungai Pencala (Picture 1). The overriding focus of this dissertation is ‘proper Islamic consumption’ among Malay middle-class families inhabiting the suburb of TTDI (Picture 2). Sungai Pencala has status as a Malay reserve meaning that only Malays can inhabit this area. A fence marks the real and imaginary boundary between the respectable middle-class suburbia of TTDI and Sungai Pencala.

Picture 1: Sungai Pencala and the Darul Arquam Commune.  

Picture 2: The suburban fieldwork site of the dissertation.

1 Locals mostly refer to Kuala Lumpur as ‘KL’.
Sungai Pencala is also the home of the commune of Darul Arquam. Darul Arquam or the House of Arquam is an Islamic group whose believers seek to follow the behaviour of the Prophet Muhammad in everyday life. Followers appear to engage in an ascetic lifestyle and deny themselves Western luxuries such as furnishings, television, radio, and other amenities, rejecting what Nagata in her study of Arquam called ‘items of progress’ (1984: 113). In spite of the fact that TTDI and Sungai Pencala are quite distinct and distinctive spatialities, the physical and mental presence of Sungai Pencala and Darul Arquam is vital for Malays living in TTDI and thus for the central arguments throughout this dissertation.

Established in 1971, Arquam developed into a commune comprising about 40 houses on eight acres of land. The group set up its own surau (prayer house), medical clinic, school, and a number of workshops. Arquam members represent a distinctive visibility in everyday life in TTDI, in particular due to their dress style, Arab turbans for men and veiling for women. Most of the Arquam followers were middle-class university graduates sharing many of the social characteristics of Malays in TTDI. Among Arquam devotees there was a small number of ‘highly placed civil servants’, who during the day worked as ‘Western style’ bureaucrats and, after office hours, returned to Arquam and transmuted into pious followers in Arab dress (105). The question of how divergent Islamic lifestyles or registers of consumption are shaped by and shape the ‘overtly public’ (subjected to the gaze of others) versus the ‘covertly private’ (family intimacy) are central to Malay middle-class life, as we shall see in the following.

Of the greatest interest to Malay families in TTDI and elsewhere in Malaysia, however, is Arquam’s cultivation and marketing of an Islamic vision of Malay independence and prosperity through the production of a wide range of halal (lawful or permitted) food products, but also products such as toothpaste, talcum powder, medication and notebooks. Ideally, this vision was to ensure the group full independence from any kind of non-Muslim (Chinese or foreign) control (107). Arquam successfully promoted this vision of communal self-sufficiency, and their halal goods were traded throughout peninsular Malaysia.
The Malaysian National Fatwa Council banned the organisation in 1994, reasoning that the movement and its leader, Ustaz Ashaari, believed in the imminent appearance of the Mahdi (or hidden Imam), a key idea in Shia belief. From the viewpoint of Malaysian Sunni orthodoxy, this notion implies unseen power and sectarian secrecy (Ackerman and Lee, 1997: 49-51). In the everyday lingo of the state and press in Malaysia, this is labelled ‘deviationism’, persistently staged as an outside other threatening the nation and state nationalist visions of modernity. In the eyes of state nationalism, Arquam seemed to signify a kind of regressive, subversive, and excessively ritualistic way of living. Furthermore, allegations of polygamy and sexual perversion in Arquam fuelled the hype surrounding the organisation. In other words, deviationism in Malaysia was evoked as the other of the pure and modern national Islam promoted by state nationalism.

The banning of the organisation, its lifestyle, and activities were still very much of significance to the Malays in TTDI, as we shall see in this ethnography. Several aspects of the life of Arquam both concerned and fascinated informants: they expressed concern over the authoritarian leadership of Ustaz Ashaari as well as rumours of polygamy and the general secretiveness of the organisation. At the same time, informants were fascinated by Arquam’s asceticism and piety. Most of all, however, there was appreciation of Arquam’s enterprise in promoting halal goods and successfully marketing these.

The anxiety regarding ubiquitous forms of deviationism became ever more pronounced after 9/11, where both national and international pressure intensified in order to identify so-called fundamentalists, Islamists, radicals, and, as it were, deviationists. Arquam is only one of numerous revivalist or dakwah (lit. meaning salvation) organisations that emerged in Malaysia in the 1970s. Of all these organisations, Arquam most clearly represented an inclination towards Shia ideas.

I first visited this condominium, Villa Flora, next to Sungai Pencala and Arquam, to be shown the flat before starting my fieldwork in September 2001. The Chinese realtor, with a somewhat uncomfortable facial expression, referred to this view over Sungai Pencala and Arquam as ‘a village view’. The Chinese owner of the apartment, who accompanied the realtor, added that ‘Malays are so lazy’. Thus, TTDI and
Sungai Pencala comprise a potent field that brings out a number of social, religious, ethnic, and spatial ambiguities and conflicts in contemporary Malaysia.

Seen from the Villa Flora condominium balcony, middle-class suburbia stretches far into the horizon with its one and two storey terraced and semi-detached houses, bungalows and condominiums housing Malays, Chinese, and Indians (Picture 3).

In the Malaysian population of around 20 million, about 55% are indigenous Malays (virtually all Muslims) and tribal groups, also labelled bumiputera (lit. sons of the soil), 34% Chinese, and 9% Indians. Quite contrary to Sungai Pencala, TTDI is truly the space of ‘items of progress’. On the surface, suburbia seems to embody extreme homogeneity, i.e. standardised and mass-produced housing types with only little visible external variation, orderliness, clear demarcations between houses, and cleanliness. I shall argue that Malay households in their houses are crucial spheres in Malay middle class formation in contemporary Malaysia: i.e. styles of Islam and styles of consumption as markers of class position, gender, ethnicity, and generation.
When you reach the *Nissan*-sponsored welcoming sign (Picture 4) by the highway you can enter by one of two routes. You can go straight, passing the mall, *One Utama*, which is currently in the process of being considerably expanded to become one of Asia’s largest shopping complexes (Picture 5).\(^2\) Then you turn right and you are in TTDI. *One Utama* houses a large number of shops, supermarkets, fast food chains, restaurants, and entertainment outlets such as cinemas and playgrounds. This is also the home of *IKEA* in Malaysia, a widely popular store for lifestyle products and living. Nevertheless, *One Utama* is at the same time an object of concern to families in TTDI because of growing traffic and the pluralisation of shopping and entertainment options. Hence, moral panic in connection with *lepak* (loitering) by teenagers is deeply felt among many families in TTDI. In addition to *One Utama*, there are quite a number of smaller shops, a wet market, cafes and restaurants in TTDI testifying to the increase in the range of consumer choices in everyday life.

\(^2\) Before retiring in 2003, Malaysia’s Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad, with perfect symbolic timing, inaugurated this new mall.
The other route to TTDI, if you turn right by the Nissan welcoming sign and follow Jalan Tun Mohd Fuad, takes you past the largest of the mosques in TTDI, the At-

Taqwa mosque.
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Taqwa (Picture 6) - the primary mosque of choice of the majority of my informants and Malays more generally in TTDI. There is, however, one more mosque in TTDI, Balai Islam, and a third one on the fringes of TTDI. While the At-Taqwa is ideologically as well as financially dependent on the state and the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant political party in Malaysia since independence from Britain in 1957, the Balai Islam mosque is ‘independent’ (of direct state intervention) in relative terms, and therefore requires private funding for its operation and activities. This funding is to a large extent covered through donations, advertising Islamic products, and services such as seminars, excursions and hotels that are marketed as living up to Islamic requirements. Lastly, the Al-Mujahideen mosque situated between TTDI and One Utama on the Selangor side is largely influenced by the Islamic political party PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia). In October 2001 in this mosque, I found an announcement that encouraged boycotting American goods because of the war in Afghanistan and American support of Israeli oppression of the Palestinians. Most graphically, the announcement included a picture of an Israeli plane crashing into the Kaaba, presumably during the fasting month of Ramadan. The particular site of TTDI is in this sense encircled by mosques of different religious and political orientations conditioning the lives of residents in TTDI.

In the micro-social context of the homes of Malays in TTDI, squeezed in between the mosques and the mall, the choice of which mosque to attend thus also reflects these broader religious and political issues. This dissertation explores a field of contradictory Islamic visions, lifestyles, and debates articulating what Islam is or ought to be. These controversies frame the everyday organisation and justification of consumer behaviour within Malay middle-class households.

The mall and the mosques in TTDI are signs of two central spheres of modern suburban life in which identity performances and politics are staged. TTDI is located as an outpost on the frontier between the Federal Territory (Wilaya Persekutuan) on the one side, and on the other the state of Selangor, stretching all the way to the Strait of Malacca. As could be expected, there are latent as well as overt points of tension between the level of

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3 The Kaaba is the square building inside the great mosque in Mecca, containing a sacred black stone presumably given by God.
4 As could be expected, there are latent as well as overt points of tension between the level of
is outlined how the history of the development of TTDI started in 1974, when a
government body for urban planning and a private developer who owned this old
rubber estate joined forces (Picture 7).

Thus, suburbia expands into land that was previously occupied by rubber
estates synonymous with a colonial agrarian political economy and
underdevelopment. All this may be the most visible sign of Malaysian urbanisation.
As a consequence, it was pivotal for the above-mentioned planning bodies to
conceive a distinct suburban design - a ‘social statement’:

‘If Malaysians of various races are brought together in pleasant communities, with
plenty of opportunities for neighbourly interaction, they will come to be more aware
of the things they have in common and less conscious of the aspects in which they
differ. If their children grow up together, and mix freely in schools and on the playing
fields, they will think of themselves and of each other as Malaysians rather than
Malays, Chinese or Indians.’ (op. cit).

TTDI was intended to accommodate the diversity of these ethnic groups. But it was
not only the question of race and ethnicity that was of significance in this new
community. Ideally, TTDI should provide model housing for what I shall call the
new ‘national Malaysian family’.5

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the Malaysian state apparatus, the local state government and that of the local government
apparatus in which the fieldwork site is situated. This type of tension can be said to be
universally prominent in any nation - i.e. local municipal authorities, secular as well as
religious, both challenge and are challenged by upper levels of government. While
recognising the relevance of such considerations for research into public administration and
similar matters, these issues are not essential to the key problems of this dissertation. When I
refer to e.g. the certification of halal products by the state below, informants did not in any
way ‘localise’ or question the state as an authority involved in certification or legislation.
Conversely, on a local scale, the tension between mosques of divergent political and religious
orientations was of considerable interest to informants as well as the central questions of this
dissertation. Most of all, however, the overt conflict between PAS state governments and the
federal UMNO-led government captured the attention informants. This struggle has assumed
‘…universal, cosmic dimensions, making it a clash between the faithful and the sinners. What
was once a local drama has been transformed into a celestial pageant.’ (Noor, 2003a: 220).
This conflict, much more than the tension between various levels of government, was of
concern in the everyday lives of informants, i.e. in this conflict seemed to be inscribed much
larger political and religious issues of prominence to the future direction and development of
the Malaysian nation.

5 The term ‘family’ in the singular here denotes national and ideological essentialisations. In
the discussion of Malay families later on, I am aware of the contested, deconstructed, and
discursive nature of the term. Consequently, families are discussed as primary sites for the
contestation of gender, generation, class, and ethnicity.
…with the belief that it is not good sociology to group families of differing means into separate enclaves, the pattern of development was based on the neighbourhood concept with each neighbourhood containing a mixture of house types spanning a
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A wide price range, served by a local commercial centre and having its own landscaped park.’ (op. cit).

As is evident from the above, the elements of planning visions have obvious centrality in ordering the space that came to be TTDI. TTDI in many ways embodies the idealised middle-class suburb at 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 symbolises the progress of the Malaysian nation in a post-colonial context, the celebration of the growth of the middle class, and the ordering of space into manageable and exploitable form. Moreover, the suburb is distinctly different from the ‘rural’ (Sungai Pencala, Arquam and the kampung (village) from which many of the suburban residents migrated) and the ‘urban’ (Kuala Lumpur with its spectacular and even vulgar architectural symbols of urban modernity hyped as the national signifier in the national and global media).

The nature of the suburb is ‘deep’ in the sense that is it is intimately private. It is in the private realm of suburban nuclear family houses that the spirit of the modern suburb is produced. The emergence and proliferation of suburbia as the specific style and form that the expanding city produces in the Malaysian context should therefore be examined as a particular urban form in its own right. As previously mentioned, TTDI enjoys the convenience of modern local mosques and shopping facilities, and, eventually, has come to experience the tension that arises between Islam and what is seen as excessive consumption in this local context.

On the basis of survey data from 241 households in TTDI, the following is intended to give the reader an idea of ethnicity, migration, and social differentiation in the neighbourhood.
TTDI as such is a clear example of an ethnically mixed residential area. Below, Indians are not included as they are statistically insignificant. Only when significant differences between indicators of the various ethnic groups materialise is this indicated.

Migration patterns show that the vast majority of residents moved to TTDI between 1980 and 99.
For the most part, respondents listed that their primary motivation for moving to TTDI was employment and family. Secondly, buying a house, friends living in the area etc. were reasons for moving, while the remainder listed education and other reasons. Respondents typically, in that order, migrated from the bordering state of Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Johore, and the island of Penang. The remaining respondents migrated from all over Malaysia, including the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak and in a few cases from abroad. The statistics testify to the fact that migration into TTDI largely takes place from an urban or semi-urban environment, while direct migration from rural areas to TTDI takes place rarely. Comparatively, Chinese more often than Malays and Indians moved from an urban or semi-urban area to TTDI.
Sample data supported Embong’s (2001: 88) 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 fractions are relatively affluent in that they have on average a monthly income above RM4,000. Data in Figure 5 testify to the fact that 60% of the Malays in TTDI earned a high monthly income ranging from RM4,000 to over RM10,000. Interestingly, more Chinese than Malays and Indians fitted into middle income groups, while Malays dominated in the category above RM10,000 in which the Chinese were virtually absent.

In terms of educational level, the vast majority of respondents listed that as their highest level of education, they had received either A-levels or tertiary education.

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*Per 18 November 2004, one Malaysian Ringgit (RM) equalled US$ 0.26.*
While more Chinese than Malays listed A-levels as their highest level of education, Malay respondents were far more prominent in respect of tertiary education. In sum, we can say that Malays in TTDI possess the highest level of education.

Unsurprisingly, there were relatively more business owners among the Chinese, while more Malays than Chinese worked as professionals.

Summing up on the socio-economic strata and differentiation, we can say that TTDI is composed of ethnically mixed and diverse age groups whose primary motivation for migrating was employment and family. Above all, and especially in case of the Chinese, residents moved directly from an urban or semi-urban environment. Income distribution showed that while Chinese are most prominent in the middle to high income groups, Malays dominate in the highest income group. Malays possess the highest level of education and this fact may explain why Malays relatively more often are employed as professionals. Conversely, the Chinese possess a lower level of education and are more often business owners. Despite informants’ stress on ethnicity and distinctions throughout the dissertation, ethnic discrepancy in the above indicators was relatively narrow. In other words, ethnic distinctions are far more pronounced in the ethnographic material when this is compared to the sample data.

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7 In Malaysia, A-levels equal Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM) or Malaysian Certificate of Higher Education, which is a necessary qualification to enter public universities.
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The fieldwork scope was, however, not confined to TTDI. The particularity of the ethnographic and survey data from TTDI was contextualised and supplemented with material from newspapers, magazines and websites as well as material from and interviews with government and other organisations. Moreover, a number of younger informants from elsewhere in Kuala Lumpur were selected to put the material from TTDI into perspective. Through examining the above sources of information, it was apparent that the ethnography in TTDI represents broad tendencies and logics in contemporary urban Malaysia.

THE TEXTURE OF THE PROBLEM

Quite literally, the mosques, the mall, and the homes of Malay middle-class families squeezed in-between make up the stage on which the central theoretical and empirical problematics of this dissertation are played out. Mosque and market in Malaysia are not ‘...’merely’ stages for the acting of preordained parts; they are rather potentially ‘fields of force,’ highly charged and full of social energy.’ (Gilsenan, 2000: 173). Malay middle-class identity formation, I argue, should be examined in the interfaces between these highly symbolically charged domains: on the one hand, the invocation of Islam as a worldview and performance of acts of piety; on the other hand a range of consumer practices and lifestyle choices made by, and within, families.

One specific research question informs and shapes the entire dissertation: How is Malay middle-class consumption from different perspectives and positions understood and contested as a particular mode of Islamic practice? Due to intense political, religious, and social contestation, Islam in Malaysia is increasingly being transformed into a ‘discursive tradition’. The central question is this tradition’s capability to construct, maintain and identify ‘proper Islamic’ practices. Thus, the primary argument is that controversies over what Islam is, or ought to be, are intensifying the more cultures of consumption assert themselves. As new consumer practices emerge, they give rise to new discursive fields within which the meaning of Islam and Islamic practice are being debated.

In scholarly literature, more radical Islamic groups and discourses, e.g. Arquam, are conventionally seen as rejecting consumption per se. On the contrary, I
argue that modern Malay Muslim identity in Malaysia is unimaginable outside the context of the emergence of a wide range of conflicting understandings and practices of consumption. Consequently, the question of what constitutes a typical Malay Muslim consumer is infused with confusion and uncertainty.

Contested understandings or valorisations of the morally proper and socially appropriate forms of consumption inevitably evoke the problem of excess or when what is excessive to whom. In the mother tongue of the Malays, Bahasa Malaysia, excess or immoderation is expressed in the word lebihan. This word denotes that which exceeds due limits, or the amount by which one quantity exceeds another. At the same time, the word can also signify overspill, surplus, and that which is left over when what is necessary, sufficient or needed has been expended.

The above problematics may appear to refer only to a private and micro-social ethnographic context. However, I will show how the state, or more precisely, a particular state nationalist vision of a high-consuming yet Islamic modernity is omnipresent as authoritative discourse in contemporary Malaysia. The state’s attempt at moulding a modern form of Malayness is intimately linked to challenging Islamic discourses or dakwah, each with particular ideas and standards of how to combine consumption and Islamic practice. In order to preempt these confrontations, the state aggressively engages in a re-conceptualisation 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 globalisation. It will be clear how nation-building and conflicting types of nationalism emerge as products of these immensely potent, but also confusing and ambiguous developments. All these transformations are of acute concern to the rising middle class in Malaysia, and particularly in the Malay middle class. This new middle class has actively been produced by the state and is promoted as a class of modern entrepreneurial, hard-working and consuming Malays.

In all this, a critique of the generally held idea that consumption essentially is intimate and ‘beyond the state’ is unfolded. In fact, I argue that the Malaysian state’s presence in consumption is not only ubiquitous, but also constitutive of everyday compliance, authority and authenticity of state reach and power. This line of reasoning contradicts, for example, Chua’s (2000: 18) contention that through the
privatisation of everyday life, material consumption to a large extent is beyond regulatory measures of the state, suggesting relatively free choices in this private sphere. On the contrary, the privatisation, domestication, and individualisation of proper Malay Muslim consumption is intricately linked to ‘effects’ of the state. I shall call this relationship of overlapping and overspilling loyalties, compliances and dependencies ‘shopping for the state’, i.e. ways in which particular forms of consumption have come to represent novel modes of state reverence and domination on the one hand, and, on the other, state delivery of spending power and privileges to some Malays.

It is constructive briefly to consider some relevant assumptions about ‘shopping’ for the discussions to come. Supportive of what I shall address as patriotic consumption in Malaysia, Zukin (2004: 14) contends that shopping has become a patriotic duty in mass culture. Therefore, a number of moral imperatives involved in shopping link the shopping of individuals and groups with national sentiments and discourses. Ironically, our decisions about where and what to shop separate us from others, and at the same time, shopping exposes us to the presence and gaze of others (2). In this sense, shopping as a public activity is inescapably linked to the performance and spatial context of proper Islamic consumption. This ethnography takes seriously Zukin’s insight that shopping is ‘…the zero point where the whole economy of people, products, and money comes together.’ (14).

I now turn to a more detailed outline of the problematics in the individual chapters of the dissertation. At the end of each outline, I pose one or more central research questions to summarise and guide the discussions to come. In this first chapter of the dissertation, **Grounding Malay Muslim Consumption**, it is argued that what has been taking place in Malaysia for the past three decades is what I call ‘the nationalisation of Islam’. In a few words, this process encompasses the increased centrality of Islam as an ethnic and national signifier of a modern Malaysia. Concurrently, new ways of discussing Islam in Malaysia are both shaped by and shape divergent cultures of consumption. In this chapter, I also familiarise the reader with the trajectory of the Malaysian state as well as the major political actors in post-colonial Malaysia, PAS and UMNO. Then follows an outline of methodological
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reflections and a presentation of key informants. An ethnographic exploration of class and Malay Muslim consumption ends this chapter. In Chapter I, I argue that while the Malay middle class conventionally has been construed as a product of objective parameters such as education or income on the one hand, and class contention, relations of production or colonialism on the other, contemporary ideas about class are mainly compelled by divergent ideas and practices of consumption. In other words, consumption and distinctions are deeply involved in everyday classing strategies of middle-class Malays, and these questions cannot exclusively be reduced to or explained by conventional sociological reasoning. The central research questions addressed in Chapter I are as follows: In what way has the nationalisation of Islam given form and substance to specific modes of proper Malay consumption? How are ideas of class conditioned by practice?

In Chapter II, Kampung, City and the Suburbanisation of the Malay Middle Class, I argue that the cultural logics of Islamic middle-class consumption in Malaysia are incomprehensible outside the distinctive context of the suburb. The contention is that ‘the urban’ has been significantly overrepresented in studies of the middle class and ‘national culture’ at the expense of ethnographically weighty descriptions of the suburb in middle-class identity formation. The particularity of suburbia vis-à-vis the urban and the rural gives rise to a novel and profound type of familial intimacy in the Malay middle-class house. The fundamental research question asked in this part of the dissertation is this: How are Malay middle-class identities shaped by and shaping the modern Malaysian suburb?

The lengthy Chapter III entitled A Taste and a Touch of Islam plunges into a theoretically as well as ethnographically infused exploration of proper Malay Muslim middle-class consumption. Theoretically, the concept of consumption is ‘unpacked’, grounded in ethnographic evidence, and suggested to be formative of Malay middle-class identities. The main argument presented is that the materializing of an ‘ontology of consumption’ in Malaysia is a highly ambiguous and uneven process. In the commodity form and its context of consumption, handling, and presentation, divergent groups of middle-class Malays search for ‘what is proper’ in Islam. It is shown how the performance of identity through consumption is embedded in a range of ritualistic practices that strongly inform ideas of what can be
considered sacred and profane as meaningful and workable everyday categories. An obvious example of this is the expansion and proliferation of extremely elaborate ideas of what is considered halal and haram (unlawful or prohibited). I shall call these sets of ideas halalisation. Halalisation signifies a powerful and growing preoccupation with the proliferation of the concept of halal in a multitude of commodified forms. Halalisation has helped shape whole new forms of aesthetic Malay communities based on different taste preferences in various middle-class fractions. This proliferation of halalisation has incited new and elaborate ideas of the boundaries and authenticity of halal purity versus haram impurity.

‘Getting consumption right’ socially in a Malay Muslim context has everything to do with the body of, and within, consumption. Thus, diverse understandings of proper Islamic consumption subject Malaysian middle-class bodies to new forms of order and disciplining - a point that has largely been overlooked in the Malaysian context. Especially in the case of dress and food, bodies are disciplined by sentiments of purity/impurity, decency/indecency, modesty/excess, and piety/irreverence.

I propose to view Islamic consumption in the light of present processes of domestication and an overriding concern for the moral and social integrity of families. Excess and its opposite, moderation/balance, are explored as essential to the emergence of proper Islamic consumption. The primary research questions of Chapter III can be formulated as follows: What are the cultural and social implications of the emergence of an Islamic ‘ontology of consumption’ in Malaysia? How do Malay middle-class identities materialise between practice (performance) and intentionality in everyday consumption?

In the succeeding Chapter IV, Consumption, Moral Panic and the National Family, it is shown how the Malaysian national family has come to work as the primary model of social and moral identification in the lives of middle-class Malays. Rather than community or other models of identification, there is an inherent ‘moralistic familism’ to Malay middle-class existence. At the same time, the family as metaphor is actively reshaping the way politics, state, and the nation are imagined. This chapter is heavily informed by my extensive reading of family and women’s magazines. From the reading of these magazines spanning three decades, it was
obvious that the Malay family has been subjected to ever more calls for the production of a new ‘familial-national’ ontology. This type of idealisation involves the family as a forceful and resistant urban/suburban social unit that should live up to national responsibilities as patriotic Malays. The research question put forward in this chapter is the following: How has the national family in Malaysia taken on meaning as the essential model of identification among middle-class Malays?

Chapter V, Consuming the Hand that Feeds You, is an ethnography of the state in Malaysia and pinpoints how this state has assumed the role of architect and protector of a multitude of Malay privileges. Parallel to this exercise of power, it is discussed how the state has been bureaucratised and politicised along Malay ethnic lines. In fact, the state has engaged in a grand project of promoting and incorporating Islam into all imaginable aspects, e.g. economy, history, and legislation, of the daily lives of Malays. I am particularly interested in how shopping for the state and halalisation have produced advanced forms of reverence for the state that have disfigured more traditional sources of loyalty. Moreover, I argue that modern rituals of the state may clash with more traditional and personal forms of ritual in Islam, and these divergences represent different imaginings of the Malaysian nation. In fact, processes of nation-building in contemporary Malaysia are strongly informed by this uneven economy of rituals. Once more, the question of proper Islamic consumption stands out as a highly contested and symbolically charged field in which the state desires to concentrate its legitimacy and exercise of power. The research questions asked in the chapter are these: Why and how has the question of Malays’ proper Islamic consumption become a key concern for state nationalism in Malaysia over the past three decades? How is the contested issue of ritual between state and individuals conditioning new imaginings of the Malaysian nation?

Chapter VI, Consumptions, Conclusions and the Wider Picture, takes up the main findings in the dissertation and a number of wider issues and perspectives. These are, firstly, the particular syncretic ‘thingness’ infusing and inciting modern streams of Islamic thinking and practice in the Malaysian version of Southeast Asian Islam. This signification of Islam can generally be distinguished from e.g. Middle Eastern Islam. Secondly, the emergence of the family as metaphor for a novel global absolutist religious moralism that is inherently national, patriotic and irreverent of
the state is discussed.

**THE NATIONALISATION OF ISLAM**

In James Siegel’s monograph *Fetish, Recognition, Revolution* (1997) on Indonesia, he argues that the nation’s capacity through the state to confer national recognition essentially transcends persons. National recognition ‘...seems to come, mystically enough, from the nation itself. The nation seems to have found one...’ and then a profound mode of belonging arises. Histories of postcolonial nations such as Malaysia come into being as products of the effects of immensely complex connections between colonialism, nationalism, and emergent communication systems. The complexity of these connections forges identities that emerge under immense confusions and contradictions (9). As the sum of all these influences transpires what Siegel calls the ‘fetish of appearance’. This fetish signifies the desire for a power that ‘...cannot be appropriated but which, nonetheless, one feels one possesses.’ (10). The fetish as a magical instrument ‘claims false relation to an origin’ (91), and at the same time it is a ‘fetish of modernity’ (93).

Modernity in Malaysia makes itself felt as the foreign element that has been domesticated – the process of Malaysianising foreign influences. The most powerful quality of the fetish depends on its ability to compel someone to recognise ‘...within ‘me’ something I did not know I had and making me think it might be possible to have a new identity.’ (245). All this poignantly echoes the whole Malaysian national project of producing new identities amidst the confusion over expanding markets, state formation, nationalism, and revivalist Islam. In other words, to identify what is properly Islamic is all about guiding or disciplining the excess of possibilities.

In 1991, Mahathir unveiled Vision 2020\(^8\), imagining Malaysia as a fully developed nation by the year 2020. The ubiquity and grandeur of this vision ironically enough

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\(^8\) At a later stage, Vision 2020 was defined as ‘First, establishing a united Malaysian Nation made up of one Bangsa Malaysia. Second, creating a psychologically liberated, secure and developed Malaysian society. Third, fostering and developing a mature democratic society. Fourth, establishing a fully moral and ethical society. Fifth, establishing a mature, liberal and tolerant society. Sixth, establishing a scientific and progressive society. Seventh, establishing a fully caring society. Eighth, ensuing an economically just society, in which there is a fair and equitable distribution of the wealth of the nation. Ninth, establishing a prosperous society with an economy that is fully competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient.’ (Kassim, 1995: 68).
mask its central idea that a uniquely moulded Malaysian modernity can only
materialise as an intimately mental project in the form of instilling proper ethical and
moral values in Malaysian citizens. This type of recognition evokes Siegel’s point
that the power in the nationalist ethos lies fundamentally in the nation’s own
mystical recognition of national subjects. In turn, this recognition incites a profound
sense of national belonging. On a larger scale, national and global recognition of
Vision 2020 was one of its main objectives. Moreover, the recognition, support, and
success of such a vision can only be forged in the context of ‘guided’ or disciplined
political stability as the price that has to be paid for progress.

Almost universally, national recognition and education of subjects is essential
to greatness and self-perfection. These ideas are strongly resonant with the German
philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s idea that the devotion of national subjects must
be internalised as a form of national culture:

‘…national education is that of ‘the whole man’, (...) sensible and spiritual, physical
and intellectual, in the perspective of an identification of patriotism with pure
morality, or of each individual’s interiorization of the patriotic community as the
community of human freedoms, the site of the moral progress of generations.’

(Balibar, 1994: 82-83).

Nationally as well as globally, in the hierarchies of nations, the growing middle class
embodies all these qualities and fantasies of a self-made national modernity. In spite
of these attempts to recognise and realise national subjects, Malaysia is imagined
(Anderson, 1991) on the basis on a multitude of particularistic visions or ‘nations-of-
intent’ (Shamsul, 1998a). The trouble with the authoritative state nationalist
imagination of the Malaysian nation is that in nature it is fundamentally an
expression of Muslim Malay ethnic interest masked as ethnic unity in diversity. Ong
(1999: 226) points out that the novel Islamic ethos in Malaysia is tied to allegiance to
the state evoked as a form of cultural kinship through religion.

In Michael Billig’s notion of banal nationalism (1995), the argument put
forward is that the daily reproduction of nations and nationals is dependent on the
reproduction of ‘…a whole complex of beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations
and practices.’ Banal nationalism works as ‘ideological habits’ enabling the nation to
exist on daily iteration of the ‘flagging’ of nations (6). Identities are formed as
‘embodied habits of social life’. (8). In this way, visions of the nation are produced routinely (16) so that national identities are forms of social life (24). National space is thus ‘…imagined as homely space, cosy with its borders, secure against the dangerous world.’ (109). Billig does not really provide us with specific empirical observations other than certain readings of newspapers to fully substantiate his ideas. But his argument is constructive in order to understand the drive behind the uneven nationalisation of Islam in Malaysia, and the subtlety of linkages, loyalties, and dependencies between the micro-social, the state, and the nation.

Islam, or more accurately the social and moral meaning of the properly Islamic, is contested and there are competing attempts to incorporate it into both state institutions, but also into a multitude of everyday practices. It is these diverse forms of transformations that together comprise the nationalisation of Islam meaning increased centrality of Islam as a national and ethnic signifier in Malaysia. The logic of this nationalisation is to see Islam equated with Malayness being the naturalised core of the Malaysian nation. Balibar (1991: 95) explains the logic of this nationalisation as the fusing of national and religious identities. He argues that

‘…national ideology involves ideal signifiers (first and foremost the very name of the nation or ‘fatherland’) on to which may be transferred the sense of the sacred and the affects of love, respect, sacrifice and fear which have cemented religious communities; but that transfer only takes place because another type of community is involved here. The analogy itself is based on a deeper difference. If it were not, it would be impossible to understand why national identity, more or less completely integrating the forms of religious identity, ends up tending to replace it, and forcing itself to be ‘nationalized’.

At the core of the nationalisation of Islam lies the question of proper Islamic practice. Especially with regard to the explosion of everything considered halal, the proper Islamic has taken on equal significance as signifier in the nationalisation of Islam in Malaysia.

To my mind, the nationalisation of Islam more accurately than simply evoking ‘Islamisation’ covers the processes crucial to this dissertation. Islamisation has come to be a ubiquitous and elusive expression of Islamic fundamentalism. The
main trouble with the concept of Islamisation driven by ‘Islamists’ is the inference that a globalised and homogenous Islamic force is emerging. This notion of a unified Islamic tradition and practice that clashes with anything else clouds the existence of national, ethnic, social, or religious diversity, which may be the single most vital impetus in Islamic thinking and practice. Most of all, however, the nationalisation of Islam specifically targets the Malaysian context while keeping broader issues and perspectives in mind.

Systematic examinations of consumer behaviour in the nationalisation of Islam have been neglected. Similarly, in scholarly literature, there exists a clear tendency to isolate studies of identity to focus exclusively on identities emerging in connection with either consumption or religion. By now, Asian consumption and the construction of middle-class fate have been explored in an extensive body of literature. Through discussing a selection of these works, I shall place this ethnography on consumption and class in Malaysia in a wider comparative context.

In Moeran’s (2005) ethnography on Japan, consumption is analysed from the perspective of strategic exchanges formed between ordinary people and things in business. The central arguments of the author are that ‘Social life is largely (...) formed around things of some sort or another.’ (193) and that ethnographic methods are essential tools in the exploration of material culture. The author provides ethnographic evidence from diverse contexts such as an isolated rural community of potters and an urban advertising agency. In the study of proper Islamic consumption below, I try to show how a wide range of ‘things’ in contemporary Malaysia help form Malay middle-class identities. Moeran stresses that

‘...it doesn’t matter what things we study, or where we study them. We will still find ourselves embraced by a social world of one sort or another. And it is the thing (together with its surrounding technology) and not a set of national cultural

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dispositions (for want of a better phrase) that usually inflects the form the social world around it takes.’ (194).

Unlike Moeran, I believe that a number of ‘national cultural dispositions’ in contemporary Malaysia are formative of what I shall call Malaysianised consumption. Moeran’s emphasis on the ability of things to shape the social world is comparable to Clammer’s (1997) argument that the study of consumption is particularly constructive when trying to uncover cultural patterns and forms of economic organisation. Therefore, the study of consumption is integral to the understanding of social life in Japan (3). While Clammer rightly argues that consumption is not exclusively about economic behaviour, there does not seem to be any substantial or systematic evidence presented in the study to support the author’s insistence on the social, ritual, religious and historical significance of consumption (9). Likewise, it is surprising that insights of the author such as the relative insignificance of Puritanism and moral connotations attached to acquiring material goods in Japan are not elaborated on or detailed within a broader religious framework (14). I agree entirely, however, with Clammer’s conclusion, as we shall see in Chapter V of the dissertation, that forms of capitalism vary cross-culturally and that this divergence should be taken seriously as a significant field of study (152).

I now turn to two books that address the construction of fate of middle-class groups. In a comparative perspective, it is rewarding to address how similarities and differences inflect on middle-class identity formation The first of these studies is O’Dougherty’s (2002) informative work on the politics of middle-class consumption in Brazil. Similar to ways in which middle-class identities are explored in this dissertation, the author locates and conceptualises this particular middle class through their everyday practices, performances and discourses. Moreover, the study ‘...identifies consumption and discursive claims of ‘cultural’ and ‘moral’ superiority as foundational to the attainment, maintenance, and performance of middle-class identity and boundaries’ (4). At the same time, middle-class experience is described as ‘immaterial, a state of mind’ (9). The author insists that even though the study specifically focuses on Brazil ‘...it addresses debates concerning middle classes and everyday life in capitalist modernity elsewhere.’ (4). In the Malaysian context, as I
shall try to illustrate, however, Malay middle-class formation is not merely shaped by
the consumption of groups or individuals, but also by a particular version of state
nationalist modernity in which Islam plays a crucial.

For Nepal, Liechty (2002) similarly argues that the concept of class most
suitably accounts for new sociocultural patterns in modern urban life in Kathmandu,
and the author focuses on the formation of class through practice and performativity.
However, I am not entirely convinced that class as a framing principle has largely
replaced caste, kinship, and ethnicity to inform sociocultural experience (5). Whereas
class and consumption are obviously mutually constitutive cultural processes, the
place of caste and religion more broadly does not seem to be insignificant in modern
forms of middle-class formation. In the urban Nepalese context, I am wondering if
Hinduism in politics, nationalism, advertising or consumption should be excluded
from such an analysis of modern class formation – especially when middle-class
consumption insightfully is argued essentially to be about ‘being’ and ‘belonging’
(34). In the end, one could suspect that if more ethnographic attention were given to
the complementarity of class formation, caste/religion and consumption, a more
nuanced picture would come out.

Gillette (2000) explores the way in which the consumption of commodities among
urban Chinese Muslims ‘…showed that they wanted to modernize and were capable
of modernizing themselves.’ (2000: 223). In this analysis, attention is paid to how
consumption activities effect possible changes in production, distribution, ownership
and resource generation produced by Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms. In the post-
Mao era, the state was no longer the central and monopolised provider of consumer
goods and this fact changed the relations between objects, people and state.
Consumers now consumed in order to modernise themselves on an individual basis
instead of allowing the state to dictate or impel a particular form of modernisation
(223). To that end, ‘Islam provided an index of civilization that differed from the
state’s paradigm.’ (227), and that index was signified by the purity of the Islamic
civilisation – a purity affecting all kinds of consumption and social practices in
general. More specifically, urban Chinese Muslims increasingly desired goods and
fashions of the Islamic heartland bringing consumers closer to this sacred centre as
they inscribed commodities with Islamic authenticity (233). While many of Gillette’s findings are comparable to the developments in Malaysia, proper Islamic consumption in Malaysia is becoming increasingly regulated by the interventions of the state, but, ironically, these interventions take place in the context of intensified globalisation and neoliberal capitalism.

In trying to bridge the gap between studies of religion on the one hand, and consumption on the other, I will show how modern forms of capitalism materialise in the interfaces between class formation, religious revivalism and consumer culture. In a comparative religious perspective, Islam seems to invite the formation and consolidation of religious consumption, as it is the case in contemporary Malaysia.

In his article, *The One-Dimensional Malay: The Homogenisation of Malay Identity in the Revisionist Writing of History in Malaysia*, Noor (2001) argues that a central political objective of the Islamic revivalist movement in Malaysia has been to reinterpret or recast the pre-Islamic past. He demonstrates that the subject of Malaysia’s history within Islamic discourses was the site of defining Malay history and Malayness. Islamists redefined Malay identity as being unimaginable without the Islamic history and heritage of Muslims. Effectively, this type of revisionism both relegated and demonised the pre-Islamic past of the Malays against the religious awakening of the present (2). Historically, this process of othering the pre-Islamic Malaysia of the dark ages can be traced back to Malay-Muslim reformers, who despised the pre-Islamic past because it was not in any significant way unlike the present (9). Their primary aim was to introduce and maintain distinctions between Malay-Muslims of the present and Hindu-Buddhist ancestors of the past (op. cit). The heyday of this revisionist project was in the 1970s and 1980s. In university departments and especially within *dakwah* groups such as ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia or the Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia) and Darul Arquam, the idea was that the past was inhabited by heathens and infidels (19). This demonisation of the pre-Islamic past places a radical break between the profane past and the sacred present as an effect caused by the inception of Islam.

ABIM is the major *dakwah* group in Malaysia. In spite of this fact, none of my informants indicated that they had ever been, were presently or intended to become
members or active supporters of ABIM. The organisation was formed in 1971 and has traditionally retained its strongest support among students in the campuses of the larger universities in Malaysia. Nagata (1984: 104) has described ABIM as a ‘…fairly 'this-worldly', universalistic religious organization, transcending national and some ethnic boundaries at the level of its leadership.’ The central message of the organisation is that Islam is a self-sufficient way of life that contains the answer to all human universal problems (Shamsul, 1994: 104). The ritualistic aspects of the faith are not of vital importance so that it is acceptable for the men to wear Western-style shirts and pants. In comparison with earlier generations of revivalists, ABIM emphasises a direct engagement, in line with the modernist tradition, with holy texts bypassing the received wisdom of ulama (religious functionaries) (Ong, 1995: 174).

From 1974 to 1982, the leader of the organisation was the charismatic Anwar Ibrahim. In the 1970s, ABIM, together with PAS, critiqued policies of the government led by UMNO for being ‘…un-Islamic colonial traditions and secular practices which separated religion from political, social and economic issues.’ (Jomo and Cheek, 1992: 85). When the PAS-ABIM relationship deteriorated in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Mahathir invited Anwar to become an UMNO member and on 29 March 1982 Anwar resigned as President of ABIM and joined UMNO.

Thus, since 1982 ABIM no longer retained its independent and critical stance as an opposition organisation. Increasingly, PAS assumed that role in questions of politics, culture and religion. Anwar rapidly ascended within UMNO to become Minister of Finance in 1991 and Mahathir’s Deputy Prime Minister in 1993. It came as a shock to most Malaysians when Mahathir removed Anwar from his post as Deputy Prime Minister on 2 September 1998, and Anwar’s dismissal spurred one of the most severe political crises in the country’s post-independence history. I shall address some of the underlying implications of the sacking of Anwar in Chapter V.

During fieldwork in 2002, I visited ABIM’s headquarters. The President of ABIM had worked for the organisation since 1991. He held degrees in public administration and business administration from universities in the U.S. and had worked two years for the Malaysian government. One particular question dominated our discussion (Interview 24 January 2002) of Islamic revivalism and consumer culture in contemporary Malaysia. The President posed this questioning in the
following manner: ‘How do you transform ABIM, the movement, into a modern one with all the latest management techniques and tools, and at the same time ensure it is rooted in religion and traditional values?’ Within this modernist position, ‘balance’ is a keyword that reflects the relative compatibility of modernity and Islam - i.e. that there is no insurmountable difficulty between Islam and modernity. The more complex question, however, is how to work out or translate this compatibility into proper Islamic consumption in everyday life.

While *dakwah* has mainly been described as a more or less homogenous movement, it seems more productive to adopt a more diverse optic in that *dakwah* are highly diverse with quite different objectives. Nevertheless, they share the concern to ‘…revitalize or reactualize (local) Islam and the (local) Muslim community by encouraging stronger commitment to the teachings of the Koran and the hadith* to effect a more Islamic way of life.’ (Peletz, 2002: 10). It is, however, by no means clear how this Islamic way of life is put into practice, and *dakwah* devotion has undergone relatively unnoticed processes of individualisation and domestication, which are most often expressed through certain consumer practices.

*Dakwah* is both an ethnic as well as political phenomenon, which has transformed Malaysia for both Muslims as well as non-Muslims and actively drawn the country into ‘…the center of the Islamic social movement, economic innovation, and political activism in the world today.’ (Shamsul, 1994: 100). While Islamic political and moral force has intensified over the past three decades, reshaping Islam into becoming a religious signifier or ethnic ‘identity marker’ (113-114) with immense effect on all Muslims, the outcome has been intense debating over the true nature of Islamic doctrine and practice.

*Dakwah* is intricately linked to higher educational institutions in particular. While Islamic education and studies have a long tradition in Malaysia as elsewhere in Muslim societies, the proliferation of Islamic educational institutions and the intense interest in Islamic studies at the campuses in Malaysia especially is a sign of what Shamsul (1995: 112) calls ‘educational conditioning’ - these educational institutions are central in the transmission and promotion of Islamic ideology.

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10 Traditions concerning the life and works of the Prophet Muhammad.
Chapter I: Grounding Malay Muslim Consumption

Kuala Lumpur is in particular a centre for educational institutions in Malaysia. The country’s largest university, the University of Malaya (UM), is situated close to the city centre. Kuala Lumpur has a number of other universities including the International Islamic University Malaysia. Traditionally, the Malay middle class has been supportive of *dakwah*. Once again, to take Darul Arquam as an example, middle-class university lecturers, academics, and students, founded this organisation as a study group.

In connection with this fieldwork and previous fieldwork conducted in Kuala Lumpur, I lived in the University Malaya campus. In this setting, Islam is an immensely public and visible influence on all aspects of campus life. Practically all female Malay students and lecturers wear the *tudung* (long headscarf), and a large number of their male fellow students wear the *kopiah* (skull cap) and grow a *janggut* (beard), symbolising piety. These public manifestations have all become signifiers of modern Islamic identity in the urban campuses and elsewhere. The role of ethnic identity in the campuses, furthermore, seems to play a significant part in the inter-ethnic relations in this context. For example on UM campus you rarely see Malay students socialising with Chinese and Indian fellow students, who mingle with each other more freely. I learned from both Chinese and Indian students in UM and informants in TTDI that the increased role of Islam within the last 30 years is felt to be encroaching on the lives of non-Muslims and setting up new boundaries that limit ethnic interaction.

A key feature in the construction of these boundaries is the deepened Malay Muslim concern with halal against that which is seen as haram or impure, and directly or indirectly associated with non-Muslim groups. Another point of tension regarding education is the debate over Islamic studies felt by the government to be overshadowing other more secular fields of study for the Malays. This debate was at its height in 2002 when a series of newspaper articles and features in the electronic media proclaimed that the Malay obsession with Islamic studies was a hindrance for partaking in globalisation and modernity.\footnote{Under the heading *More Than Just Religious Studies*, an article in *New Straits Times* (NST) asserts that ‘The Government will make it compulsory for all students of religious studies to sign up for at least one other subject in a different field of study, such as accountancy, law or...}
There are observable overspills between state nationalist and *dakwah* discourses. This is obviously the case with regard to the demonisation of the pre-Islamic past. Mahathir (2001: 161) depicts the inception of Islam and the radical break with the pre-Islamic past as turning away from the dark ages:

‘And so the animistic ancestors of the Malays embraced Islam with such enthusiasm and faith that they destroyed all their old idols and temples. Today, Malays are constitutionally only Malays if they are Muslims. The progress of the Malays after conversion and presently owes much to Islam as a way of life. There had been lapses of course but by and large Malay civilisation and its progress in the arts and sciences, in the systems of government, the concept of justice and the rule of law, have been the result of attempts to adhere to the teachings of Islam.’

This break was total in its disavowal of the sacred sites symbolising the superstition of the past, and the rejection of Malay cultural heritage to turn to Islamic modernity and enlightenment. This is a precise replay of Balibar’s idea that national ideology encompasses signifiers on to which the sacred is transferred.

Balibar further (1991: 87) shows that the nation is subject to myths of origin and national continuity, and that this is particularly evident in the case of young nations emerging with the end of colonialism. These myths function as an effective ideological form in which the national, not unlike Billig’s ideas of banal nationalism, is constructed on a daily basis in the form of historical imaginations (op. cit). The inception of Islam in Malaysia marked such a mythologisation. Through emphasis on the paradigmatic break the inception of Islam represented, the nation is now open to a particularly deep and unbreakable type of imagination. The nationalisation of Islam thrives on this imagining, providing the nation with a specific and unambiguous trajectory. The construction of the essentially national operates at a symbolic level positioned in the interfaces between the traditional and the modern (Nairn, 1977). Of specific significance in constructing the national is the imagination of the shared past and the birth of the nation. Nairn’s notion of the *Janus-headed* nature of the nation symbolises a safe passage away from the paganism and superstition of the pre-Islamic past into modernity in certain Islamic imaginations.

economics.’ (*NST*, 29 April 2002). *NST* is one of Malaysia’s two leading newspapers in English. Many Malaysians consider NST a somewhat conservative pro-government paper.

The nationalisation of Islam in the sense of bureaucratisation and institutionalisation through state control moulds and orders the imagination of the Malaysian nation wielded through common history.

The nationalisation of Islam in Malaysia has incited a broader fascination with the proper and correct ‘Islamic way of life’. For example, this Islamic way of life entails consuming specific halal goods, which are seen to have a beneficial impact on domains such as family, community, and nation. An example of this could be to prefer certain locally or nationally produced goods. In the heyday of Darul Arquam, their locally produced halal products anticipated the wave of halalisation. One male informant from TTDI, Yasir, in admiration of Arquam’s promotion and production of halal products, noted that

‘Everything is produced in the house and consumed in their house. They started a very good economic model for the Muslims, actually, and until today, they followed that. They produce halal fish balls, ketchup, tomato sauce, drinks. 20 years ago these things did not exist. So, they came out with that model and it was a good model.’

Conversely, other types of goods on ideological grounds are perceived as protective of the above domains. In general, political and Islamic discourses are deeply involved in the daily question of getting consumption right or buying into the properly Islamic in Islam.

MALAYSIAN STATE FORMATION: ISLAM, MALAY KINGSHIP, COLONIALISM AND MODERN FORMS OF GOVERNMENTALITY

In the following, I shall illustrate how mass consumption in modern post-colonial Malaysia has become integral to processes of state formation. In doing so, I argue that the modern state in Malaysia should be seen in the light of forms of cultural continuities that stretch back into the pre-colonial and colonial particularities of Malaysian history. Moreover, I argue that Islam and consumption together have played significant roles in the trajectory of the state in Malaysia – most importantly ways in which the state within the past 30 years supports and institutionalises both ‘Islamic’ regulations and consumption. At the same time, modern forms of state

12 An example of this type of idealisation is Nik’s (2001: 20) contention that ‘Islam regards a Muslim community as an essential social and economic entity where individuals who constitute the community are economically interdependent of each other.’
governmentality reinforced existing ethnic patterns of distinction between Malays, Chinese and Indians.

Hence, the discussions to come provide a broader historical framework for the ethnographic material presented throughout the dissertation – the ‘larger picture’ surrounding and contextualising the ethnographic material. This discussion of the genealogy of the Malaysian state, in itself somewhat conventional, however, serves an additional purpose. The reason for introducing the state at this point in the dissertation is to herald the extensive ethnography of the state in Chapter V. While this section examines the consolidation and transformation of the Malaysian state, Chapter V is exclusively an investigation of the contemporary state in Malaysia as it figures in the lives of my informants.

It is worth situating the discussion of pre-modern state formation in Malaysia in a wider historical perspective. Essentially, I sympathise with Geertz (1968) when he, in agreement with a standardised viewpoint, recognises the enormous impact of Western colonialism on colonised territories such as British Malaya (officially the Federation of Malaysia was formed in 1963) - i.e. that within the past 100 years the moving force of the metamorphosis towards modernism has been industrial Europe and its dynamism. Concurrently, he points to the fact that only a minority among the populations of the colonised was in direct or frequent contact with their colonisers, and concludes that ‘Whatever its outside provocations, and whatever foreign borrowing may be involved, modernity, like capital, is largely made at home.’ (21). Consequently, I shall argue that the trajectory of the modern state in Malaysia owes at least as much to the cultural continuities of pre-colonial past as it does to British colonisation.

Islamic ideas shaped the early history of Malay political culture from the arrival of Islam in the 14th and 15th centuries onwards (Milner, 1981). The Raja or ruler was an

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13 Hansen and Stepputat (2001: 37) call for an ethnography of the modern post-colonial state. They argue that ‘...state, governance, and the effects and subjectivities shaped by languages of stateness of our time need to be denaturalized and studied in rich ethnographic detail as an integrated part of the cultural economy of postcolonial societies.’ Chapter V functions as such an ethnography.
in institution with roots in animistic and Indianised traditions. Inseparable from the rule of the *Raja* was his *kerajaan* (state/government) (lit. ‘...the condition of having a *Raja*’), which was the overriding object of loyalty in the lives of Malays. At the earliest stages of Islamisation, this form of reverence by far overshadowed that of the *umma* or community of Muslims (49). Nevertheless, the *Rajas* in Islamisation found Persianised traditions and ideas of kingship as well as mysticism and Sufi doctrines appealing – especially the notion of the ‘Perfect Man’ as a saint-like and spiritually all-encompassing figure. The blend of traditional and new ideas on the one hand, and, on the other, novel accessibility and routes of trade introduced by Muslim traders allowed the Malay ruler ‘...to describe his ancient functions in terms which his new subjects would understand.’ (58). These new ideas were diffused through complex trading networks stretching from Africa to China in which the Malay Peninsula was conveniently located. To sum up, we can say that Islam in the medieval world became a religion of the state through trade, and at the same time, the ceremonial state gradually lost its force for many Malays. I shall return to the appeal of the reified and modernised ceremonial state in Chapter V.

It is to the more modern and functional forms of state I will now turn – more specifically to the transformation of the Malaysian state in the colonial era (1819-1957). In spite of cultural continuities from pre-colonial times, the colonial state in Malaysia introduced and developed particular tools of governmentality that produced, institutionalised and reinforced existing ethnic divisions – particularly with regard to the indigenous Malays versus imported Chinese and Indian labourers. I shall address this question in greater detail below.

Moreover, colonial policies produced an equation between Islam, royalty and Malayness (Nagata, 1994: 66), and these forms of identification often replaced various types of customary and Islamic laws inherent to each of the states. Hence, Islam and royalty became essential symbols of Malayness. At the same time, the colonial era witnessed the rise of a novel type of what Milner (1993) labels ‘discourse of politics’ being ‘...a product of the administrative and ideological forces of imperialism. Malays themselves, however, were architects of the new politics and it is in this sense that we might speak of a creative or inventive process.’ (2). Milner
concludes that the ideological struggle in colonial Malaysia fed into a hitherto unresolved conflict between various groups inherited by the modern Malaysia state. These ideological struggles can be seen to have led to the formation and consolidation of various political parties such as UMNO and PAS and fuelling a whole range of contestations. Today, more than ever, Malaysian politics and parties seem to be obsessed with the past and to assume a proper and praiseworthy role in the history of nationalist anti-colonial struggle (Noor, 2002a: 70).

Another aspect of colonial identity politics of the state is that of race. The ethnic categories of ‘Malay’, ‘Indian’ and ‘Chinese’ were to a large extent colonial constructs that have survived and filtered into both the discourse of the modern post-colonial state in Malaysia and been formative of stable, naturalised and perfectly workable everyday categories as we shall see subsequently in the ethnography. Indeed state discourses of ‘race’ qualify as what Hansen and Stepputat called a ‘language of stateness’. In other words, the colonial power codified, fixed or ‘immobilised’ already existing distinctions between the British, Malays, Chinese and Indians.

Since the colonial era, race has been inseparable from census taking. Due to the colonial import of foreign labour, mainly Chinese and Indians, the 1921 Population Census in Malaya proved Malays to be a minority group comprising less than half of the entire population (Mutalib, 1993: 20). In two valuable articles, Charles Hirschman studies the ideology and practice of British censuses in colonial Malaya. Hirschman (1986) demonstrates that the rigidity of modern ‘race relations’ after 1850 in Peninsular Malaya was largely a byproduct of British colonialism – in itself a standard interpretation of contemporary ethnic divisions in plural societies. The central argument is that in the latter part of 19th century Malaya, a qualitative shift in ethnic relations and ideology was taking place. While Hirschman acknowledges that not all racism is of European origin, direct colonial domination widened its scope and deepened it institutionally (332). This point suggests that even though racial classification was subjected to new forms of colonial governmentality it simply re-signified a pool of indigenous forms of knowledge or cultural continuities. The wave of Chinese and Indian immigrant labour imported by the colonial administration produced wholly new demographic circumstances in which these
groups were segregated geographically, socially and economically from the indigenous Malays (356).

In Malaya, the evolution and refinement of census taking from around 1870 was closely linked to the expansion of the colonial administration (Hirschman, 1987: 559). Eventually, as census officials realised that race could not be defined consistently, their strategy was to apply classification according to respondents’ subjective view of identity (565). After independence in 1957, census authorities acknowledged controversies over ethnic definitions and ‘race’ was abandoned and officially replaced by ‘community’ and ‘ethnicity’ (565-566). The following point supports the notion that cultural continuities were governmentalised to become effective tools of the colonial state:

‘Although observers may believe that census data on ethnicity in Malaysia are official – in the sense that they conform to government policy or constitutional criteria – the reality is much more fuzzy. Census data show ethnic identity as people perceive themselves. In spite of the problem of reliability there is really no alternative.’ (566).

In a wider perspective, identity formation mostly takes place as interaction between two social contexts – the ‘reality-defined’ on the one hand and the ‘authority-defined’ on the other. These two fields of social signification are rarely identical as the first is experienced while the latter is observed and interpreted (Shamsul, 1997: 33).

In the course of the fieldwork, I was acutely aware of the way in which ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ as stable, perfectly workable and ‘meaningful’ identity categories were constantly negotiated between the authority-defined and everyday-defined in the lives of informants. In all this, the state plays a crucial role, as I shall return to in a minute. In Chapter III of the dissertation, I will try to show how the categorisations and classifications of Self and Other are intimately tied to the everyday performance of identities.\(^\text{14}\)

To sum up, we can say that in the course of the colonial period, racial census categories became evermore stable, visible and naturalised displacing classification according to e.g. religion. At the same time, relatively intact racial categories, which

\(^{14}\) With the risk of preempting my points in Chapter III, I provide an example of this type of everyday performance of identity. A Malay woman informant, Siti, who cherished Chinese antiques and decoration in her home explained to me that ‘When people look at my home they say it’s very Chinese. In fact, somebody asked me, are you a Chinese convert? They came to my home when I was sitting at the table eating these noodles with chopsticks. No, I’m Malay!’
materialised on the background of local ideas of ethnic distinction, were transferred to the post-colonial state in the shape of the three major categories in existence in contemporary Malaysia – ‘Malays’, ‘Chinese’ and ‘Indians’.

In a wider perspective, what took place in the latter part of the 19th century was a popularisation of a ‘scientific’ theory of racial difference (Hirschman, 1987: 568). Similarly, Shamsul (1999b: 138) shows that in a colonial perspective, anthropology was an integral part of the administrative science of the colonial state and formative of the colonial imagination and its knowledge about the ‘natives’ of Malaysia. Moreover, the colonial construction of the categorisation of Malay and Malayness transpired through the educational system and literature (Shamsul, 2000). In other words, the colonial, and later on post-colonial, state was what Foucault (2000) calls governmentalised according to a ‘scientification’ of these complexes of knowledge. So with colonialism in Malaysia were imported new forms of governmentality. A particular expression of such colonial governmentality was the way in which the British indirectly or in a ‘decentralised’ manner governed through local Malay rulers, whereas the Chinese and Indians were subjected to far more centralised logics of government. In British Malaya, the cornerstone of the Residential system was indirect rule. The Residential system was based on the governance of a representative of the British administration in Malaya through local rulers, princes and local chiefs. These groups were compensated for the income they lost due to the abolition of slavery and the introduction of a central treasury (Andaya and Andaya, 1982: 172). Ironically, while British colonial rule united ‘...the disparate political units administratively, the British contributed to the hardening of ethnic divisions which were to plague all subsequent governments in Malaya/Malaysia.’ (204).

To Foucault (2000: 219-220), governmentality means three things. Firstly, ‘The ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses, and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercises of this very specific albeit complex form of power...’ Secondly, the historical development in the West of a tendency towards the pre-eminence of ‘government’ i.e. specific government apparatuses and the accumulation of a whole complex of knowledges. Lastly, the transformation of the state into one that gradually becomes ‘govermentalised’.
In a way, Mahathir’s post-independence bid to ‘modernise’ the Malays can be seen as an attempt to subjecting Malays to a modern and state-driven national type of governmentality on the one hand, and, on the other, the shaping of the ‘New Malay’ personality – the embodiment of modernity, as I shall return to later in this chapter. Nevertheless, this bid to modernise the nation and Malay individuals reflects a deeper paradox. While Mahathir rages against the feudalism and mysticism of the past, modern leadership in Malaysia also points towards continuities that stretch back into the pre-colonial history of Malay political culture and the rulerruled relationship.

As James Siegel argued, histories of postcolonial nations are constituted through complex connections between colonialism, nationalism and novel communication systems. Hence, it was not ‘change’ as such which makes the 19th century special as the Malay world had absorbed and responded to outside influences for centuries, but ‘…the pace of change, itself part of a global phenomenon.’ (114). The accelerated pace of change produced vast new possibilities for identity formation. One such field in which colonial influence was clearly felt was education, and this area can be said to have opened up new opportunities for groups outside the traditional elites in Malaya. In contemporary Malaysia, the gradually increased access to educational systems is a key element in the country’s economic success and this process has contributed to the formation and consolidation of the middle class. To a large extent, this new middle class owes its existence to the Malaysian state, which has exerted greater and greater state intervention since the 1970s in order to manufacture such a high-consuming Malay middle class and capitalists (Gomez, 2004: 157).

In sum, since the 14th century, the Malaysian state has been conditioned by two broad influences. Firstly, the arrival of Islam with Muslim traders that helped consolidate the first forms of state formation built on Islam and Sufi ideas. In this medieval world, Islam consolidated the ceremonial state. Reverence for the state in pre-modern times could be said to be a question of submission to a ruler-ruled relationship within a feudal framework. Secondly, British colonisation, accelerating in the latter part of the 19th century, brought in novel ‘scientific’ ideas and discourses
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of government and race. In this era, subjects’ reverence for the state may be found in the colonially produced equation between Islam, royalty and Malayness. In the post-colonial period, the last three decades of economic growth and the rise of consumer culture have enabled a large number middle-class Malays to practice consumption in a hitherto unseen manner. These processes have helped shape new forms of reverence for the state. At the same time, this period has witnessed the emergence and consolidation of an UMNO-driven ethnic state nationalism.

In contemporary Malaysia, modern forms of governmentality seek to balance and amalgamate mass consumption in all its forms against the forceful revitalisation of Islam. Indeed, Malaysia qualifies as what Cohen (2004) with regard to the U.S. has dubbed a Consumers’ Republic. The Consumers’ Republic embodies a post-WWII strategy emerging in order to reconstruct the nation’s economy and to reaffirm its democratic values through promoting the expansion of mass consumption. Policymakers, business, labour leaders and civic groups all tried to put mass consumption at the centre of their plans for a prosperous nation. The health of the economy itself is measured according to indicators such as consumer confidence, spending and housing starts (401). More interestingly, the state in the Consumers’ Republic recognises individuals as both consumers and citizens so that in the 20th century we have witnessed the intertwining of the rights and obligations of citizenship. In this century, citizens in developed countries ‘...merged their aspirations for an adequate material provision and a legitimate place in the polity expecting the two to go hand in hand or the former to encompass the latter.’ (408). Consequently, political citizenship was about the entitlement to material enjoyment (op. cit). I will try to show how some of these developments and tendencies are being localised and given actual shape in Malaysia, i.e. how certain forms of consumer behaviour the state sees as either desirable or unwanted, patriotic or unpatriotic.

Islamic consumption and halalisation in Malaysia have been subjected to state and business governmentality in the form of extensive market research and political institutionalisation of consumption, e.g. the setting up of The Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs. Clearly, this is a sign of the state’s bid to become an apparently ‘honest broker’ of consumption (Zukin, 2004) that protects the entitlements of Malaysian consumers against what the state and consumers
increasingly see as confusing and excessive consumer culture. Consumers’ trust in and dependence on the state as an honest broker in consumption legitimate state intervention regarding the right ways to shop as well as guidance in terms of public debates about value (32).

Not unlike census taking, this type of market research is aimed at the classification and definition of segments. Lastly, the state now recognises and institutionalises the power residing in the commodity form. It seems as if the idols and idolatry of the animistic and Indianised traditions of the pre-Islamic past, abandoned and demonised, have been purified and sanitised to return in state-recognised form. Indeed, this can be said to qualify as a novel and powerful language of stateness.

WHAT IS PROPERLY ISLAMIC?
Islam in Malaysia has been and increasingly is subject to not only intense political, but also cultural and ethnic transformation and contestation individually, socially and collectively. In John R. Bowen’s monograph *Muslims Through Discourse* on Islam among the Gayo in highland Sumatra, Indonesia, he employs an approach to the diversity of Islam that draws attention to the debates about what Islam is or ought to be and the divergent responses produced by these controversies. Bowen’s focus is ‘…on the field of debate and discussion in which participants construct discursive linkages to texts, phrases, and ideas held to be part of the universal tradition of Islam.’ (Bowen, 1993: 8). He applies discourse to stress its centrality in regard of ‘social pragmatics’ in the Gayo context, namely ‘…speech events; the cultural importance of commentary on those events; and the heterogeneous, ‘dispersive’ quality of religious discourse…’ (9) he finds in Foucault.

In much the same manner, I take Islam in current Malaysia to be a discursive tradition, especially with regard to the way Malay consumption is contested and debated in everyday life. Geertz’ (1968: 107) observation that the religious perspective is mostly adopted, even by religious experts, sporadically in the everyday world of practical and down-to-earth terms is valuable in this context. The discursiveness of tradition and practice within modernist Islam is, in fact, constitutive of the dynamics and vitality of the umma.
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Within modernist Islam in Malaysia and elsewhere in the Muslim world, traditional or ‘folk’ Islamic learning based on memorising and reciting verses from the Koran is being critiqued for its overemphasis on the power or magic of words. Modernist positions maintain that possessing, but not understanding meaningfully ilmu or esoteric knowledge is excessively mystical and secretive. While modernist positions emphasise the meaningful or hermeneutic, folk and Sufi traditions, with reference to tradition and knowledge handed down, assume that words possess magical properties with healing powers in the hands of the ritual specialist. Translating and debating the Koran has proliferated Islamic knowledge among the laity in the last decades, which further has contributed to the erosion of magical powers of the word concentrated in the religious specialist.

The logocentrism of modernist Islam encompasses modern, sensible, and socially contextualised readings of the Koran and Hadith. Consequently, discourse in the highly educated Malay middle class, is a way of coming to terms with and legitimating Islamic ideas and practices of modern life that are constantly subjected to contestation and distinction.

The idea of Islam as a discursive tradition is not recent, but rather an immanent feature of the history of Islam. Asad (1986: 14) argues that an anthropology of Islam should be built on the central concept of Islam as a discursive tradition. This tradition involves diverse interpretations of the Islamic past and future with a reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present. Consumption as a point of debate in current Malaysia can be seen to constitute such a new domain of contestation.

Furthermore, the contestation of Islam is highly visible in party politics, as reflected in the intense controversies between UMNO and PAS over being the true defender of the faith. UMNO accuses PAS of wrong teachings while PAS blames UMNO for giving in to Western values and materialism.

The reader is now familiarised with the history and discourse of these two major political actors in Malaysia, UMNO and PAS. I shall try to show how the discourses of these parties differ and give rise to a number of tensions and conflicts. These two parties have been and still are integral to the post-colonial political, economic and
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cultural trajectory of Malaysia. As in the case of ABIM, none of my informants indicated that they had ever been, were presently or intended to become members or active supporters of either UMNO or PAS. In Chapter V, I shall elaborate on informants’ understanding of the way in which ‘the political’ is performed in contemporary Malaysia, and, more specifically, how the discourses of PAS and UMNO are weighed against one another, negotiated and given meaning in everyday life.

At the time of UMNO’s foundation in 1946, the party was communal in nature and mainly served to protect Malay interests (Crouch, 1996: 36). Ever since, UMNO has insisted on the inescapable bonds between nation, state, Islam and Malayness. Crouch (43) writes that ‘Insofar as UMNO could be said to have an ideology, it was expressed in terms of Malay privileges and domination and therefore won almost universal approval from the entire Malay community.’

UMNO accumulated deference from its anti-colonial campaign starting in the 1950s. However, UMNO failed to uphold this type of deference and loyalty, as has been the case in a multitude of other post-colonial societies. From the 1970s onwards, ‘money politics’ (‘lobbying’/’vote-buying’) (Milne and Mauzy, 1999: 26) on the one hand and, on the other, capital accumulation by a minority of elite ‘links’ managing firms that supply UMNO with funding were not uncommon (59).

When Mahathir took office in 1981, two themes came to permeate government policies. Firstly, a ‘balanced’ view of this world and the next, and, secondly, the ‘Look East’ policy involving the inculcation of desirable economic values from countries such as Japan and South Korea and at the same time to improve Malaysia’s economic ties with these countries (55). Khoo (1995: 10) explores a number of paradoxes in Mahathir’s ideology, e.g. that as ‘The ideologue of state-sponsored constructive protection, he became the advocate of capitalist competition and, secondly, ‘In the name of work, he extols Islam. In the name of Islam, he casts work as an imperative. His is the religiosity of the self-made man.’ This field of tension between state-sponsored constructive protection and capitalist competition on the one hand, and Islam and a modern ethics of work on the other is central to the key questions of this dissertation.
Forcefully, Crouch (1996: 5) argues that the Malaysian political system since the 1970s has been subjected to processes of simultaneous authoritarianism and democratisation:

‘On one hand, the state exercised strong authoritarian powers to preserve political stability and the continued domination of the Malay elite. On the other hand, it was faced with countervailing forces in society that limited its power while regular competitive elections, although loaded against the opposition, forced the government to be sensitive to popular pressures.’

Essentially, the ruling political coalition, Barisan Nasional (National Front or BN), is dominated by UMNO and a number of peripheral parties of which the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) is the most prominent. Since its formation, UMNO within the BN alliance has strived to maintain government control exercising combined ‘…repression, manipulation, and responsiveness to popular demands.’ (246). It is essential to grasp this deep-rooted ambivalence in order to understand the rise of proper Malay middle-class consumption in its historical and institutional context.

In the riots taking place in Kuala Lumpur and its environs on 13 May 1969, about two hundred mostly Chinese and Indians were killed and about 400 injured. These events fuelled both the authoritarianism of the state and responsiveness in the form of a new type of ethnic politics most strongly associated with the Malaysian Prime Minister to come, Mahathir.

Most of all, perhaps, Mahathir became the proponent of the New Economic Policy (NEP), which from the 1970s onwards was a major scheme of social engineering devised to improve the economic and social situation of the bumiputera through the manufacturing of an urban educated entrepreneurial, shareholding and high-consuming Malay middle class. In Chapter V, I shall try to illustrate how this piece of grand social policy is essential in the everyday lives of my informants - who are the embodiment of this class.

After several years of careful preparation and spectacle, Mahathir resigned in October 2003 after 22 years as Prime Minister. Mahathir’s resignation occurred in the middle of a political storm of accusations by President Bush and Western leaders of
having incited messages of hate and anti-Semitism in his speeches about global Jewish financial dominance.

In the Malaysian post-colonial context, UMNO in the Mahathir era re-signified the role as protector of the Malays. Convincingly, Chandra Muzaffar (1979) makes the case that UMNO and its leader in many ways came to replace and embody the unquestioned loyalty or reverence accorded to leadership in the form of sultans and the *kerajaan* in turn for protection – especially against the non-Malays. He writes that ‘…unquestioning loyalty is something that a Malay protector expects from the Malays and from UMNO in return for what he sees as the political, economic, cultural and psychological protection provided to the community and the party.’ (129-130).

We have seen that since independence money politics and patronage were common practices in the ruling political party in Malaysia. In spite of the dramatic transformations the Malaysian society has witnessed throughout its pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history, there are recognisable continuities involved in the way in which the ruler-ruled relationship produces and maintains certain forms of political culture. In all this, Mahathir performed the role of the concerned yet harsh national educator seeking to compel Malay subjects to achieve greatness, self-perfection and devotion internalised as national culture as it were. Nevertheless, Khoo (1995: 9) rightly points to the paradox that while he was ‘Anxious to secure the survival of the Malays, Mahathir seemed prepared to see the end of ‘Malayness’.’ (9).

In other words, at all times, the protection of a plethora of Malay privileges was accompanied by an unswerving critique of their laziness and traditionalism. Apparently, proper Islamic consumption in the Malay middle class has been and still is instrumental to modern workings of the political. This tendency is recognisable in other societies in which a culture of consumption is developed or developing. In more generalised form, Zukin (2004: 33) identifies shopping as the driving factor behind a turn away from collective deference for authority and reason:

> ‘If royal authority was the moral keystone of premodern society, and reason played the same role in parliamentary democracy, then the source of morality in today’s public sphere is the self – implying, at best, our right to both selfish satisfaction and human equity.’ (33)
It is exactly this coupling of materialism with individualism PAS sees promoted and practiced by UMNO state nationalism and forms of identity politics in contemporary Malaysia.

Under the heading ‘Battle for Islam. UMNO and PAS are Locked in a Struggle for the Malay Soul. The Outcome May Irrevocably Change Malaysian Society’ an article in *Asiaweek* 16 June 2000 describes the latest development in the ongoing rivalry between UMNO and PAS. In the general elections held on 29th of November 1999, PAS won a large segment of the Malay vote, which traditionally is the basis for UMNO’s power:

‘PAS views UMNO as a waning party that has sold out to materialism and Western values; UMNO accuses PAS of deviationist teachings. The battle lines have been drawn and the fight is on to determine who is the true defender of the faith.’

The above is an example of a standardised view of political and religious conflict and its causes in contemporary Malaysia. Moreover, Peletz (2002: 10) notes the significance of ethnicity in the fact that PAS has accused UMNO of selling out to Indians and Chinese as well as foreign capitalism, leading to Malaysia’s ‘...underdevelopment and ongoing dependence on foreign markets and to its decadence and spiritual bankruptcy.’

Unlike UMNO and other parties in the BN coalition, which rely on massive financial state support and the politics of patronage, PAS has demonstrated that as a Malay-based party it is possible to both formulate and communicate an independent agenda that appeals to broader segments of the Malay population. Noor (2002a: 128-29) writes that UMNO could learn from PAS’s determination and hard work instead of playing on the ‘worthlessness’ of the Malays and the neo-feudal political culture that is still in existence.

What is more, Scott (1985: 58) shows that PAS has retained strong support among Malays ‘...despite the fact that it cannot offer any of the material incentives that UMNO’s control of the government provides.’ PAS’s political opposition ‘...reflects a popular amalgam of class and ethnic and religious protest...’

In spite of UMNO’s dominant role in the post-colonial political landscape and nation-building, PAS has formulated an ongoing critique of the UMNO-driven
version of state nationalism since its foundation in 1951. The foundation of PAS occurred due to internal conflict in UMNO. Dr Burhanuddin al-Helmy led and developed PAS from 1959 to 1969 to become a nationalist and anti-colonialist party to promote a popular and activist form of Islam. At the same time, this leader of PAS, unlike the more traditionally inclined ulama that became dominant from the early 1980s, recognised that the universalism of Islam was a particular universalism that could not easily be applied to e.g. political thought (Noor, 2002a: 57). The driving force behind PAS in the pre-independence context was the setting up of an Islamic state after independence and that Islam, unlike UMNO’s much more secular position, should also encompass political life (Jomo and Cheek, 1992: 93).

The tafsir (Koranic exegesis) of PAS’s spiritual leader at present Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat explores a number of approaches to the interpretation, contextualisation and communication of the Koran to the Malays in the state of Kelantan (Noor, 2003a: 195). It is to a large extent the religious lectures, classes and tafsir of the ulama that account for PAS’s success from the early 1980s onwards. In these grass-roots activities, organisation and the communication of political ideology seem to come together.

Concurrently, there has been a marked radicalisation of PAS’s discourse since the 1980s. The discourse in the 1980s and 1990s was radicalised due to the state’s policies to nationalise Islam as well as events abroad such as the Iranian revolution in particular (Noor, 2003b). The outcome has been that PAS today is caught in its own religio-political discourse (230). Moreover, the radicalisation of PAS’s discourse and its politics of identity were fuelled by expanding consumer markets and globalisation intensifying from the 1980s onwards.

When interviewing the Chief Editor of PAS’s newspaper, Harakah, (28 November 2001) shortly after 9/11 and in the light of the case against former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, the tension between UMNO and PAS was heartfelt. The Chief Editor explained that Harakah was PAS’s ‘party organ’ that ‘...should portray PAS as a good, friendly party, the sincere party for this country and the Malaysian people.’ The ‘basic difference’ between PAS and UMNO was PAS’s insistence on Islam as ‘the root of the movement’ against UMNO’s feeble and diffuse Malay nationalism:
‘The layout plan is very clear in our Koran, the constitution of Muslims - unlike UMNO that is always changing tactics and style depending on the move at that time or election. PAS is always quite the same and very controlled because we follow the written law of the Koran and Sunna.\textsuperscript{16} That’s why Malaysian Muslims are becoming more Islamic and UMNO has to follow this track - UMNO starts to develop Islamic brands - for example the International Islamic University and banking because they know if they don’t they will lose the confidence of the Malays. This thing has become more tense after the Anwar Ibrahim case, our beloved Deputy Prime Minister who is sacked by the government. More and more people realise that UMNO tactics is about using the religious for their own purpose and vote. UMNO now follows us closely to make the party more religious than PAS - for example declaring that Malaysia is already an Islamic state.’

In the eyes of PAS, UMNO’s campaign to nationalise Islam, take in or brand more and more institutions and functions signifies ‘infidel’ and encroaching state nationalism. PAS sees this as a form of appeasement of the Malays that ‘secularises’ or ‘un-Islamises’ more and more fields.

The failure of many of the state-sponsored programs and projects that try to nationalise Islam is due to their conventionality: ‘In the hands of statist-developmentalist elites, the discourse of Islam was merely used as a convenient ideology to justify and rationalize developmental projects that were often costly, counter-productive and of little social value.’ (Noor, 2004: 115). Ironically, while the effort to nationalise Islam was relatively unrewarding in itself, it fuelled the controversy over the nature of what is properly Islamic according to UMNO’s version and vision of state nationalism versus PAS’s insistence on an Islamic foundation.

Post-9/11, PAS encouraged Muslims worldwide to fight against the Americans in Afghanistan. As could be expected, this encouragement became a highly controversial issue in Malaysia. As we shall see, this encouragement draws on and contests a range of understandings of globalisation. The Chief Editor of Harakah explained that

\textit{When the West introduced globalisation or the borderless world this did not contradict the Islamic principle - as Muslims we are brothers whether we are in}

\textsuperscript{16} The life, actions and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.
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Malaysia, in Indonesia, in Iraq, in Algeria or in Afghanistan. That is why when America bombs Afghanistan we go there, we have to fight that because there is no border in Islam. But Islam did not agree with the attack on WTC and Pentagon.’

In the local Malaysian political sphere, these events directly fuelled intense political debate. More accurately, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 spurred further political mobilisation between UMNO and PAS. While Mahathir sought to downplay the effects on foreign investment and political stability, PAS President Ustaz Fadzil Noor claimed that the American invasion of Afghanistan reflected a direct attack on Muslims in general (Noor, 2002). This heightened radicalisation of Islamic politics in Malaysia should be seen against the backdrop of the ‘Islamisation race’ between UMNO and PAS (Noor, 2003: 179). My ethnographic data give evidence that this type of PAS rhetoric was, at best, received and interpreted with a high degree of apprehension among Malay middle-class informants. Most of all, informants were anxious that in a world that was increasingly seen as borderless, PAS’s discourse would mean that Malaysia would be isolated economically, i.e. foreign investments would drop. These sentiments are in accordance with state nationalist fears at the time that Malaysia could be drawn into the web of ‘Islamic Terror’: ‘Nothing was spared in the effort to ensure the Malaysian (and international) community that the Malaysian state would remain on its secular, moderate and capitalist course…’ (Noor, 2001b: 18). These are some of the themes that are explored in Chapter V.

A central object of otherness within both PAS and Islamic revivalist discourses is the construction of Western influences as ‘Westoxication’ (Stivens, 1998a: 91) inspired by Ayatollah Khomenei’s ideas. My ethnography will seek to illustrate the way in which moral political and religious models of ideas and practices within these more authoritative discourses may filter down to be contested and given more dispersed forms in everyday life.

I shall argue that diverse Islamic understandings and practices of consumption should be embedded in a framework of performance and performativity. In Navaro-Yashin’s (2002) insightful study Faces of the State. Secularism and Public Life in Turkey, she argues that secularists’ fantasies about Islamists in public life have actively produced and maintained versions of Islamism (7). Consequently, Islamists’
compulsions to gender segregation and veiling are not essential features of Islam. Instead, Islamists ‘...began to know themselves and to take action upon the world in assuming, internalising, reversing, and upholding what secularists had demonized.’ (42).

The politics of identity within these groups has been deeply influenced by an expanding consumer market in the context of the globalisation of the 1980s and 1990s. Consumerism developed into a mantra or ‘politics of culture’ (79) that ‘...organized, expressed, and mediated...’ political conflicts. In this context, Islamists moulded an Islamic consumer ontology emerging in this new market for identities (111). In all these trends, there is a striking resemblance to what will be analysed as halalisation and material Malayness. Navaro-Yashin perceptively captures the public dynamism of social group constitution between the two groups. To my mind, however, there is a danger in merely accepting the commodification of public appearance, e.g. the deepened significance of the veil, its production and marketing, as the face value of the production and maintenance of stable and uncontested identities.

In this ethnography, it is suggested that the constitution of public distinctions between two Malay middle-class groups is a highly uneven process full of ambiguities and contradictions. What is appearing, then, are two Malay registers of modern lifestyles. Firstly, purists perform an orientation towards Islam, morality, and the Islamic way of life. Against this, pragmatists are more focused on individual consumer choices, pragmatism, and national identity.

This distinction between purists and pragmatists materialised from the empirical material in the course of the fieldwork. Naturally, this distinction is the researcher’s categorisation or ordering of the chaotic reality of proper Islamic consumption in the Malay middle class. These categories, nevertheless, capture everyday distinctions in the lives of middle-class Malays. Most of all, the applicability of this particular form of distinction in the Malaysian context lies in the recognition, of the researcher and informants alike, that taste and lifestyles are formative of everyday difference. To Bourdieu (1984), distinction can refer to difference or recognition of difference between, firstly, objects or people or, secondly, excellence in quality, talent, honour or respect. I shall show how purists and pragmatists reflected
on class and Islamic consumption through the desire to construct a wide range of material and mental everyday distinctions. In other words, rather than being deep-rooted or fundamental conflicts, distinctions give shape to the understanding and handling of proper Islamic consumption. As could be expected, there is internal variation in the two groups, and everyday straddling among these groups is not uncommon - this type of straddling is for the most part conditioned by context and performance, as I shall return to below. Nonetheless, the stability of these groups was remarkable, i.e. informants possessed the necessary capability to recognise distinctions between Self and Other according to taste distinctions involved in proper Islamic consumption.

The following example illustrates a specific point of tension or distinction between purists and pragmatists. While halalisation is morally given among the purists, pragmatists either reluctantly accept the imposition of halalisation or simply reject it as a material and thus shallow display of belief - as Islamic materialism or excess. A woman informant, Azmi, who clearly represented the more pragmatically inclined group, explained the distinction between her personal position and ‘the other group’. She emphasised that Islamic consumption in all its forms had become expressive of an unbearable moralism among those who through proper Islamic consumption tried to perform the role of perfectly pious Muslims. In other words, to Azmi, this moralistic attitude was merely a public performance intended to display proper and balanced consumption and taste. Indicative of her more pragmatic stance, she concluded that ‘Islamic belief alone should be fine.’

These two styles or registers of Islamic consumption may materialise as relatively stable groups through sets of distinctions, but cannot be reduced to strict cultural logics on the basis of ‘Islamism’ and secularism. As previously argued, these conceptualisations sit uneasily with the complexity of Islam as a discursive tradition in Malaysia and elsewhere. Most of all, perhaps, ‘Islamism’ versus secularism appear to be analytically convenient, but empirically vague categories, especially in terms of everyday practice.

In Ackerman and Lee’s monograph, Sacred Tensions - Modernity and Religious Transformation in Malaysia (1997), secularisation together with rationalisation is
evoked to perform a key role in religious transformation in Malaysia. In this Weberian approach, the supposition is that

‘Secularization does not mean the decline of religion per se but rather emphasizes the plausibility of differing religious and nonreligious worldviews, each with its own social base feeding the production of systematic ideologies. The growth of this pluralism is possible because a social system becomes structurally differentiated under secularization so that religion becomes merely one area of social activity among others that are equally or more rationalized.’ (5).

Moreover, cultural traditions and religious beliefs become objects of reflection in the middle class in a way so that participation in religious revivalism ‘…suggests a voyage of cultural rediscovery within a context of secularization and rationalization.’ (7). In this analysis, Islamic ethical rationalism of secularists is always ‘…carefully tailored to the technological rationalism of the state without causing any extreme imbalances.’ (56). Secularists and traditionals seem to embody smooth and functional characteristics that, in turn, are taken to be constitutive of the ideas and practices of these groups. In this dissertation, it is suggested that purists and pragmatists should be regarded as performative registers.

I now turn to the aspect of performance with specific reference to the work of Erwin Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1971). Like we have just seen in the case of the two Islamic registers and styles of consumption, performances in everyday life become constitutive of more conventional structural ones such as middle class:

‘When an individual or performer plays the same part to the same audience on different occasions, a social relationship is likely to arise. Defining social role as the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status, we can say that a social role will involve one of more parts and that each of these parts may be presented by the performer on a series of occasions to the same kinds of audiences or to an audience of the same person.’ (27).

In its most simple form, I take performance to be particular kinds of reflexive and strategic practices. The force of the dramaturgical metaphor of performance lies in its applicability along three axes.
Firstly, intentionality versus practice. While especially the purists among informants strongly supported the boycott of US goods encouraged by some mosques and Muslim organisations, their actual family practices differed radically. Their idealisation of a non-materialistic lifestyle is not directly reflected in clear-cut practices of boycotting and modest consumption. Thus, while these Malays articulate or stage a fascination with and modelling of the pious lifestyle of the Prophet as described in Hadith, the embodiment of the Islamic way of life is unattainable and almost impossible to put into practice.

Secondly, there is the complex element of spatiality, in Goffman conceptualised as front and back regions. The performance of different parts is premised on these two types of regions. First, a front region referring to the place where the performance is given, a setting where different types of fixed ‘sign-equipment’, e.g. the veil of Islamists as it were, is in place in order to convey the idea that the performer’s ‘…activity in the region maintains and embodies certain standards.’ (110). Second, a back region or stage where performances are produced and illusions and impressions constructed (114). While public manifestations or representations (again veiling provides an example that reflects this point) may appear overt and demonstrative, such practices cannot be analytically divorced from their preparation in the back region. In the spatial context of suburbia, the linkages between private and public are essential in order to explore Malay middle-class identities. In the private sphere, for example, kelas agama (religious classes) inviting an ustaz (religious teacher) or study groups are commonplace. These classes are subject to intense debate in TTDI as informants strongly disagreed about the legitimacy of ‘competing’ with activities that should ideally take place in the mosque. A number of informants felt that it was subversive to Islamic authority to relegate Islam to the domestic sphere.

The public domain or the front region, I maintain, is inconceivable without its social base in the back region, secluded from the direct gaze and power of the state. To Herzfeld (1997), cultural intimacy works as ‘…the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality…’ (3). It is in the ‘intimacy of a nation’s secret spaces’ we should look for the ‘original models of
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official practice': ‘People recognize as familiar, everyday phenomena some of officialdom’s most formal devices, and this generates active scepticism about official claims and motives.’ (4). It is in the intimate sphere of the home that the potential to escape and rework state power may arise.

In multicultural Malaysia, cultural intimacy provides a constructive way of comprehending the linkages between the public and private. It is in public that Malays most visibly perform class and status according to certain internalised moral, social, and religious scripts. This is also the sphere in which consciousness of ethnic and class distinctions become most pronounced. At the same time, the public is a field of latent exposure, i.e. a space where you are most vulnerable to being unveiled as excessive, and thus ‘materialistic’, or to falling through as being hopelessly unfashionable. In essence, performing in public is altogether about delivering the proper impression to meet the real and imaginary gazes of the ethnic other - the front region as the space of inter-ethnic exposure. Finally, the public is where performers practice divergent understandings of the nationally proper, e.g. in relation to the two forms of Islamic lifestyles articulated above.

Conversely, the back region, the essentially intra-ethnic domain, works as a haven in which the audience for performances is the family itself or occasional guests and relatives. There is no clear-cut, functional or workable way of distinguishing between these two interconnected or parallel spheres, which may thus most fruitfully be seen as both semi-private and semi-public.

Lastly, consumption of fronts as ‘expressive equipment’ in Goffman’s phrase, e.g. houses, cars, or dress, works as the setting for performances. Fronts function in general and fixed ways to define the specific situation for observers. The front can be identified as

‘...the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance. (...) First, there is the ‘setting’, involving furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, upon it.’

Secondly, there are ‘personal fronts’ referring to intimate and personal items and characteristics of the performer such as ‘...insignia of office and rank; clothing; sex,
age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like.’ (32-34). Front, physical and mental, is closely connected to status and position, both publicly and in private. Informants mostly discussed social status as being a question of public appearance through consumption of a multitude of commodities.

Performances are always embedded in actual events with antecedents rather than being mere expressions of highly individualised strategic behaviour. Performativity is conditioned on iterability and regularised repetition of norms. Performances, Butler rightly argues (1993: 95), work under constraint with the force of prohibition and taboo shaping their production. An example of this is the way in which Malay middle-class women’s dress in public is subjected to strict Islamic requirements as well as fashion and experimentation.

Thus, bodies in performances reflect the conflict between individuality as agency and social constraint. It is in this context that both purists and pragmatists seem to be constituted on the basis of different performances and staging. To both groups, Islam should ideally be internalised as a national-cultural consciousness or as deeply embedded beliefs manifest in a distinct lifestyle. Halalisation is an example of embedding Islam in a series of everyday practices that necessitate reference to fundamental principles or a moral codex. Obviously, the inner coherence of such principles is fragile and therefore calls for constant reiteration and intellectual elaboration.

I show that even though a certain correlation between social indicators, religious stance etc. exists, quite a number of consumer practices escape existing theories and conceptions of consumption (one young female Malay informant, Maslina, who received her education in a respectable Islamic school told me that her favourite movie of all times unquestionably was the horror movie *Nightmare on Elm Street*).  

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17 Dramaturgical metaphors such as performance and staging seem to have fed into Islamic discourse as a natural part of Muslim self-understanding. The website *Islamicity.com* explains that ‘...it may be stated that the performance of hajj (The pilgrimage to Mecca, which is a principal obligation of adult Muslims) is a simultaneous show or exhibit of many things. It is a show of creation. It is a show of history. It is a show of unity. It is a show of Islamic ideology. It is a show of Ummah, the community of Muslims. (...) Just as in any other good show or movie or theatre-play, the following conditions prevail in hajj. Allah is the stage Manager. (...) Lastly, the player of the show is - YOU - the Hajji. You are the main feature of the performance.’ [http://www.islamicity.com/articles/Articles.asp?ref=IC0401-2197].
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Street Part 1-5). Often theories of consumption seem to be sociologically reductive: if you consume A that will lead you to construct identity B.\textsuperscript{18} Instead, I will capture the complexity, even arbitrariness at times, involved in Malay consumption and how this contributes to individual and group identity formation.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

In the problem formulation, a number of research questions were outlined. In its most generalised form, the overall problematics of the dissertation can be boiled down to one central question: \textit{How do divergent understandings and practices of proper Islamic consumption shape middle-class identities in suburban Malay families?} In the following, the quantitative and qualitative fieldwork methodologies involved in resolving this question are examined.

According to Hansen (1996: 489), the fieldwork as ‘case’ works as ‘…a slice of the chaotic reality carved out, ordered, bounded and neatly arranged by the researcher to make this reality available for a particular analytical perspective, or language, that makes the slice of reality intelligible through explicit or implicit comparison with other examples, or as illustration of a larger argument.’

The larger argument of the ethnographic fieldwork is explored mainly on the basis of narratives of Malay middle-class families. These narratives are plotted storylines, narrations, or sequences of events in the lives of informants. Narratives, however, are not neatly informing and structuring practices in everyday life. Instead, narratives are performed and given meaning by informants in the presence of the researcher and his inquiries. The scene where these narrations emerged was predominantly the intimacy of the suburban middle-class house. Family narratives emerging in this homely realm also embraced the history of the family - the ‘larger picture’ in terms of narratives of migration and urbanisation. Hence, these narratives were truly what de Certeau (1984: 115) calls ‘spatial trajectories’.

This linking and thus distinction between different spatialities (rural, urban and suburban) are prominent in family narratives. A typical cycle in these Malay

\textsuperscript{18} An example of this type of theory is the argument put forward by Mary Douglas (1996: 82) that ‘The basic choice that a rational individual has to make is the choice about what kind of society to live in. According to that choice, the rest follows. Artefacts are selected to demonstrate the choice. Food is eaten, clothes are worn, cinema, books, music, holidays, all the rest are choices that conform with the initial choice for a form of society.’
middle-class migration narratives is moving from a *kampung* or provincial town (backward, rural, intimate, remote, traditional, modest, familial, harmonious, poor, pre-colonial) to a modest habitat in Kuala Lumpur (modern, monumental, spectacular, noisy, polluted, immoral, bustling, chaotic, colonial), often in connection with studies, and finally to one of the newly constructed and affluent middle-class suburbs (clean, planned, orderly, respectable, family friendly, impersonal, excessive, tranquil, affluent, post-colonial) after graduation and newly won social mobility. Informants clearly distinguished between the characteristics of these divergent spaces and the way they were ‘practised’ (117).

In Jerome Bruner’s acclaimed book *Actual Minds Possible Worlds* (1986a), he argues that narrative knowledge is a legitimate form of reasoned knowing. He develops this line of thought further in a later work (1990), arguing that the principal property of narrative is its sequentiality in terms of events, mental states, or happenings (43). The insight within social science that people ‘narrativize’ their experiences has subjected the research interview to more than merely extracting information - it is also aimed at capturing the narrations of the informants.

To sum up, narratives are performed as changeable expressions of how we as individuals narrate everyday life. It is a plotted story or narration that delineates our life trajectories in respect of past, present, and future. The narrative comes into being through autobiographical accounts of wider temporal and spatial transformations. In the end, ethnographies can be seen to be guided by implicit narrative structures in the form of stories told about the people studied. As a tool, narrative more constructively than, for example, metaphor or paradigm captures order and sequence for the study of transformations and life cycles (Bruner, 1986).

In October 2001, the central part of the fieldwork started. At that time, I was ready to hand out questionnaires and subsequently start to interview informants. But the context of the fieldwork had changed dramatically since my arrival first of September. The aftermath of the attacks on World Trade Center 11 September was felt strongly in Malaysia: here, as everywhere else, speculations and reflections dominated the media completely. Politically, religiously, economically, and, not
least, consumption-wise the context was suddenly another.\textsuperscript{19} The question was what impact this would have on the focus and methodology of the fieldwork. Shortly after the attacks, Zygmunt Bauman (2001) pointed to the power of symbolism present in the incidents.\textsuperscript{20} Obviously, the attacks signified a reaction against not only the materiality of the structures in New York, but also the symbol of globalisation realised through global trade. Furthermore, when the US government decided to invade Afghanistan in search of Osama bin Laden during Ramadan, this had severe repercussions in Malaysia as in most Muslim countries. These issues obviously filtered into discussions with informants and, ironically, seemed to highlight the actuality of the study, e.g. the debate about boycotting US products.

The initial stage of the fieldwork was quantitative in outlook. Informants were carefully selected on the basis of the TTDI survey (see Appendix). The design of the survey primarily served to specify in particular the ethnic composition of the households, indicators such as family size, income, and consumer behaviour, and as an introduction to the theme of consumption and my general purpose in the project. At a later stage, this information served statistical purposes in order to broaden the perspective regarding the ethnographic outlook of the project. In practical terms, the procedure of the questionnaire was as follows: Firstly, the questionnaire was distributed to the 241 households in TTDI with a letter of introduction. I handed out the first 100 questionnaires personally in order to meet the families in person. Sometimes I was invited in while the questionnaires were being completed and in other cases it was completed in the small garden or yard in front of the house or in the street. This procedure provided me with a first impression of the neighbourhood and its residents. Upon completion of the questionnaire, I asked respondents if I could return for a discussion of the answers just given, and only a few claimed to be too busy too agree to a second meeting. Then, the addresses of the informants were

\textsuperscript{19} Less than one month after the attacks, T-Shirts with Osama bin Laden prints on them were available in Chinatown and elsewhere in Kuala Lumpur, as observed in the article \textit{Osama T-Shirts Go On Sale} (\textit{The Star} 9 October 2001). \textit{The Star} is one of Malaysia’s two leading newspapers in English enjoying widespread popularity.

\textsuperscript{20} Bernard Lewis (2002: 151) argues that during the twentieth century it had become clear to the majority of Muslims worldwide that the ‘…primacy and therefore the dominance of the West was clear to see, invading the Muslim in every aspect of his public and - more painfully - even his private life.’ This imbalance of excess between East and West, simultaneously desired and demonised, was obvious in the symbolism of 9/11.
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noted on the back of the questionnaire so that if selected for in-depth interviewing, the households could be contacted again. Research assistants distributed the following 141 questionnaires and this merely for statistical purposes. Respondents were informed that the survey was anonymous and that this information was only for my personal use.

In this early stage of the fieldwork, the material from the questionnaires, impressions from meeting informants and their residential environment enabled me to formulate qualitative interview guides. The specific data obtained in the survey were thus translated into a more qualitative format.

On the basis of the survey, adults in 10 Malay, two Indian and two Chinese families were selected for interviewing and participant observation. Moreover, I kept one detailed fieldwork diary for each of the families selected and a general one for the entire fieldwork. Photographs, some of them included in the dissertation, were used as documentation to support the participant observation since the dissertation focuses on the dialectic between visibility in public and the private sphere of the home. Participant observation was crucial in order to capture any discrepancies between the intentionality and practice involved in performances. Informants were chosen on the basis of two criteria: their relative statistical position in the survey, and their appearance, style of decoration of the house, dress etc. that I could observe when visiting families. Interviews and participant observation almost always took place in the living room, the most presentable, decorated and semi-public site of the back region. Thus, the living room is both the primary site of intimate family living and the location where guests, neighbours, and relatives are entertained. Moreover, this in-depth knowledge of the private realms of families enabled me to compare their ideas and practices to those expressed in public when I accompanied them on their shopping sprees or occasionally encountered them in my 10 months of fieldwork in TTDI. Crossing back and forth between these blurred boundaries allowed me to explore the interconnectedness of what I have called the semi-public or semi-private. In this manner both survey material and ethnographic methods informed the selection of the single family for in-depth interviewing.

In most cases, someone other than the individual completing the questionnaire was present during the three interviews in the house of the informant.
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Often teenage children participated together with their parents. In many cases, my son of three accompanied me to the homes of the informants, especially if there were children his own age in these households.

Three interviews were carried out with each of these families. The first round of interviews served a number of purposes. Firstly, it established a relationship of confidence between the families and the researcher. Secondly, the questionnaire outlined both very specific questions pertaining to consumer behaviour and social and demographic indicators such as occupation, education, and trajectories of migration. The focus here was on consumer priorities and budgeting, i.e. priorities concerning the house and its decoration, cars, electronics, clothes/fashion, savings/credit, children’s education, and mass media. In the interview, the stress was on what was important to members of the families in terms of these consumer decisions and how these priorities were played out in everyday decisions and practices. We discussed which objects/goods/things are preferred and avoided and the rationales behind these choices. As such, this first interview introduced the researcher and the topic of research, and it simultaneously provided in-depth knowledge of the family and gave me an impression of the household, its decoration, furnishing and utilisation.

The second round of interviews was designed to elaborate on points of interest from the first interview with the informants. I carefully read the transcript of every first interview to extract themes for further discussion. In this way, the second interview was personalised in accordance with the informants’ narratives in the first interview. In order to make the 14 interviews in the second round comparable and to bring in more abstract and theoretical points for discussion, an interview guide structured the interviews. In this way, the second interview was personalised while at the same time retaining its comparative outlook regarding the other interviews conducted. The third and final interview served the purpose of complementing and elaborating the themes of the two first interviews. If anything was missing, this final interview could cover these issues.

In addition to the interviews with families in TTDI, interviews with four younger Malay, two Chinese and two Indian informants from other suburban residential areas were conducted. These informants were included because of
difficulties in covering this younger age group in TTDI, in order to put the material from this residential area into perspective, and, finally, to discuss the themes of the dissertation with younger informants without their parents being present.

A general observation is that when informants were contacted through handing out questionnaires in their homes, it seemed natural for these informants that the later interviews were conducted here. The personal contact established a mutual confidence that ensured that I could return three or even more times, and I was often invited for celebrations or family gatherings in the homes. As participant observation, these recurrent visits over the 10 months of fieldwork proved to be invaluable in addressing the central research questions of the dissertation.

In sum, the primary purpose of the three rounds of interviewing was to ensure that these empirical inputs covered the overall thematic and theoretical arguments of the dissertation. To a large extent, these ideals were met during the 10 months of fieldwork in TTDI and Kuala Lumpur. Moreover, the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods proved to be a highly rewarding approach to addressing this particular field of study.

A second type of interview was background interviews with scholars, newspapers, the TTDI Residents’ Association, representatives from government organisations, Islamic organisations, and members of the mosque committee (jamaat) at the At-Taqwa mosque in TTDI.

I contacted the Taman Tun Dr. Ismail Residents’ Association and attended their meetings, and I followed their work, and the issues they addressed in the local context. The association also contributed material such as historical documents covering the development of the area and older issues of their newsletter, Masyarakat TTDI.

The following government and Islamic institutions were interviewed:

- The National Population & Family Development Board (NPFDB) under the Ministry of Women and Family Development (This institution provided me with material and statistics on family issues in Malaysia).
- The Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs.
- ABIM (the Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia).
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- Sisters in Islam - an Islamic support group for women and women’s organisations.
- To cover the local level in TTDI, two interviews were conducted with members of the mosque committee - one Deputy Chairman and one member in charge of their publications - at the At-Taqwa mosque. These interviews aimed at discussing the work of the committee and the tension between more commercial interests and Islam in the local context.

Altogether 10 background interviews were conducted. Both types of interviews, in-depth and background, were taped, and subsequently transcribed.

In the questionnaire, the informants outlined the magazines they normally read. When I learned about the name of family, interior design, Islamic, and lifestyle magazines, these magazines were contacted with the intention of gaining access to their archives. The following monthly magazines were scrutinized:

- *Wanita* (Woman) from its beginning in 1969 up to the present.
- *Ibu* (Mother) from its beginning in 1984 up to the present.
- *Muslimah* (Islamic women’s magazine) from its beginning in 1984 up to the present.
- *Female*. A women’s magazine with focus on fashion, design, and interior decoration. Specific issues of interest were selected.

In connection with reading through the magazines, I had the opportunity to obtain statistical information on mass media in Malaysia in general, which was relevant in a comparison with the results of my own survey on consumer behaviour in TTDI.

Overview of the types of material collected in Kuala Lumpur/TTDI: Interviews, in-depth and background; magazines; statistics from TTDI survey; newspapers; fieldwork diary; Masyarakat TTDI; photographs; media statistics; Taman Tun Residents’ Association’s website; statistics from National Population and Family Development Board Malaysia and Ministry of Women and Family Development; JAKIM material (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia or The Office for Islamic Development established by the government in 1997); Sisters in Islam material;
ABIM material.

To sum up on the processes of interviewing, three levels were covered: Firstly, the intimate level of the informants in their houses; Secondly, the local level in TTDI involving the Residents’ Association, local Islamic organisations, and the three mosques; Thirdly, the more authoritative discourses of Ministries and other national organisations. A general experience during the fieldwork was great openness when interviewing both organisations and individuals.

Other methodological concerns include that of language skills. I acquired a fair level of oral proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia. Nevertheless, one characteristic of the middle classes in Malaysia is their high level of oral proficiency in English. Hence, discussions took place both in Bahasa Malaysia and English, often in the company of my Malay research assistant.

PRESENTATION OF KEY INFORMANTS
The informants are introduced in greater detail below in order to familiarise the reader with their lifeworlds and narratives. Throughout the dissertation these informants are of vital significance to the wider discussions and arguments. Before I enter into the self-presentations of informants, the reader will be introduced to four types of homes in suburbia housing informants. These are the one and two-storey terraced houses, the semi-detached house, the condominium, and the bungalow in that order. All names of informants have been changed.
Mascud

‘My wife and I both came from the same state, Kelantan. East coast of Malaysia. We were married in 1977. We have six children plus one adopted child.’ Mascud and his wife are in their mid-40s. The family lives in a large bungalow. He holds a Bachelor’s Degree in economics, and after working in a bank, he started his own business specialising in security printing, including bank notes. In connection with this work, he travels widely in both Asia and Europe. The monthly income of the household is above RM10,000.

Yasir

‘My name is Yasir. I am right now 37 years old. My wife is a Singaporean. She just finished her degree in marketing from a university in Australia. And I have one child, coming to be two years. I received my primary education in Singapore up to primary six. I finished my O-level in Kuala Lumpur. I am one of the few who decided not to pursue my study to university. I was young, thinking that I could conquer the world - I can be as successful as any intellectual person. I think until today, I still regret that move. In terms of work, my force is sales and marketing. At the moment, I am holding a position of head of business development of an IT company.’ The family lives in a condominium in TTDI. Besides this business, he is secretary to an Islamic organisation in TTDI. The monthly income of the household is RM5,001-10,000.

Irfan and Murni

Irfan: ‘I did my degree in Kuala Lumpur, mechanical engineering.’ Murni: ‘I was schooling in KL. And after O-level I got a scholarship to further my studies in the UK. After that I did
my degree in accountancy. Then I came back and worked for 14 years in Shell Malaysia. I resigned to take care of my four young kids.’ Irfan and Murni are in their 40s, and live in a double storey terraced house, which they moved into in 1986. Irfan is actively engaged in missionary work with the At-Taqwa mosque in TTDI, and together with his wife travels extensively both in Malaysia and abroad. Their monthly income is above RM10,000.

**Izura and Yusof**

Izura: ‘I come from a family of six, three brothers and two sisters. My husband and I are from Kelantan. I have four kids, two boys and two girls. They are all overseas trained or graduates. All of them are working.’ Izura and her husband are in their 50s. In 2001, they moved from their bungalow in TTDI to a newly built house in a prestigious estate outside Kuala Lumpur. Izura was in a Malay Girls College, after which she went to Teacher’s College before starting to teach. Yusof went to Military College and was educated in England in electrical engineering. After that he came back and worked for a while before doing his Master’s degree in Australia. The monthly income of the household is above RM10,000.

**Siti**

‘My parents are from Kedah. My husband’s family is from Ipoh. I retired about ten years ago, I was teaching all over the place. I was in eight schools because my husband was posted in Penang, Ipoh, in Malacca.’ Siti is in her 40s, married with one adult son, who is studying in Australia, and she has lived in this condominium flat since moving to TTDI from the state of Ipoh in 1992. She was educated as a teacher in Malay Girls College. Siti’s husband holds a senior position in a bank. The monthly income of the household is above RM10,000.

**Ahmad**

‘I was born in Perlis. Now I’m working as a business development executive. I’m an accountancy graduate from the University of Hull, UK. Due to the economic recession I had to change jobs.’ Ahmad is in his late 20s, and moved to TTDI around 1996 to live with his sister, her husband and children in their one-storey terraced house. Ahmad hopes
to advance in terms of career so that he can establish a home of his own. The monthly income of the household is above RM10,000.

**Udzir and Nur**

‘My name is Udzir. I grew up in Kota Bharu. I did my primary and secondary school also in Kota Bharu.’ Nur: ‘My family originally is from Alor Setar, Kedah, but we have lived here all my life. My parents migrated to KL in the early 70s.’ Udzir and Nur are a couple in their 30s. They moved into their one-storey terraced house about six years back, and live here with their two young boys. They moved to TTDI from Petaling Jaya because they wanted to live closer to relatives already living in TTDI. Udzir was trained as an architect in both Malaysia and the US, and now teaches architecture. Nur holds a degree in mass communication and works as a public relations consultant. The monthly income of the household is between RM5,001-10,000.

**Henny and Azmi**

Henny: ‘I’m 39 years old. I’m a fulltime housewife. I have four kids, two boys and two girls. My hobbies are gardening, serving and cooking.’ Azmi: ‘I’m 45 years old. I’m from Kuala Langat, Selangor. I was trained in building construction. That’s why I started working as a supervisor in a developer company.’ The family moved into the one-storey terraced house in 1999 to live with Henny’s mother. They plan to find a place of their own in the near future. Henny took a part time secretary course, worked as a secretary in a company, but now is at home taking care of the kids. Azmi is currently unemployed. The monthly income of the household is RM1,001-1,500.

**Sardi**

‘I grew up in a village. Then I attended Malay school until standard four. I didn’t have a chance to attend boarding school because of financial problems. My wife and I have one girl and four boys.’ The family have lived in this one-storey terraced house since 1980, moving from Kuwait where Sardi was posted for three years as a civil servant for the government. Altogether, he has worked for the government for 36 years. After retiring, Sardi was offered a position as a contract officer. Sardi’s wife is a housewife.
For several years, Sardi has been an area representative in TTDI Residents' Association. The monthly income of the household is RM1,501-2,000.

Binsar

‘I was born in Kampung Simpang Pelangai, Bentong, Pahang. I grew up and got my education there. Then I went for my secondary school in Temerloh. After that I continued doing my degree in Koran studies. My wife is from Butterworth, Penang. She was a religious teacher in a religious school under the government for about 8 years. Then we opened this school together.’ Binsar and his wife, in their 30s, moved into the one-storey terraced house in 1997. The couple has three children. Binsar moved to Kuala Lumpur to attend Maahad Tahfiz, an institute for Koran studies. The monthly income of the household is RM4,001-5,000.

YOUNGER INFORMANTS

Jeti

‘I come from a family of seven. I’ve got 5 brothers and sisters. My parents still live in Terengganu, but I live in a family house in Kajang. My dad is a lecturer.’ Jeti is a woman in her early 20s. She moved into the two-storey terraced house she is living in now with her family in 1986. At that time they returned from Scotland, where her father taught. Jeti holds a Bachelor’s Degree in English and linguistics, currently works as a research assistant, and was going to London to do her MA. The monthly income of Jeti’s household is above RM10,000.

Hazan

‘I was born in Terengganu. I grew up in a small fishing village. I got my education, primary and secondary education there. I moved to KL in 1992, purposely pursuing my studies.’ Hazan is a 25-year-old man. He moved into the flat where he is living now a couple of years ago. He holds a Master’s Degree in Southeast Asian Studies and an advanced Master’s degree in history. He now works as a researcher. Both his parents live in the state of Terengganu. His monthly income is RM2,001-3,000.
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Jomono and Maslina

These two informants were interviewed together as they lived in the same building and attended the same university. Jomono, a 24-year-old man: ‘I came from Batu Pahat, Johore. We lived there since 1954. And then after that I go for further studies in KL.’ Maslina, a 23-year-old woman: ‘I’m from Penang. My father is an ex-prison officer. My mother is still working. She’s a clerk. I have seven siblings. Before I studied here, I worked as an instructor in a school in Lumut for one year and now study here for a degree in computer science.’ They are both in their early 20s. Jomono shares a flat with 8 fellow students. In the same complex, Maslina lives with five fellow students. Their monthly income is RM1,001-1,500.

THE MARKETING, STATE AND PERFORMANCE OF THE MALAY MIDDLE CLASS OF 2001

At some point in the fieldwork, a Malay scholar renowned for his work on the Malaysian middle class warned me that Malay informants would not openly agree to the existence of social class distinctions because, the argument went, in the eyes of God, everyone is equal. Obviously, there is no immanent conceptualisation of class in Islam, but class, or more precisely classing practices, are essential in order to explore how Malay Muslim consumption is understood and practised in contemporary Malaysia.

When asked about self-definition in terms of class, all 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 in an objective sense. Informants would agree that fixed class distinctions should have no place in Islam, and being middle class seemed to indicate a somewhat pious position before God. The logic of this internalisation of middle classness in self-definition so obvious among informants
necessitates an ethnographically detailed analysis that systematically links class understandings, experiences, and practices.\textsuperscript{21} I argue that while the growing number of studies on the middle class in Malaysia so far assume that class is something etic or \textit{an sich},\textsuperscript{22} class should also be treated as an emic and performative category. Thus, this exploration of classing focuses on how objective parameters of class are involved in class practices or performances. The iterability of performances is highly formative of social relationships such as class (Goffman, 1971: 27). Consequently, class experiences are also given substance by specific practices in everyday life, and hence class can be conceptualised as something that occurs in human relationships (Thompson, 1963: 9). According to Thompson, 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.’ (op. cit). Class consciousness is the product of the way in which the above experiences are handled culturally, in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutionally (10).

Balibar (1991: 180) rightly points out that ‘…the ‘substantial’ identity of the classes was only ever a secondary effect of the practice of classes as social actors.’ As I shall show, explaining class has everything to do with making sense of class and personal class experience (Kessler, 2001: 35). This form of making sense of class and class experience is a precondition for being able to perform class in social space.

Debates over proper modes of Malay consumption are of particular significance in the Malay middle class, as it is within this intermediate group that the

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  \item See, for example, texts on women and class processes by Stivens (1998a) for Malaysia and PuruShotam for Singapore (1998).
  \item According to international practice, Malaysian statistics (Crouch, 1996: 181-182) analyse the evolution of class structure in Malaysia on the basis of seven main occupational categories. Firstly, ‘upper or solid’ middle class comprising ‘professional and technical’, ‘administrative and managerial’. Secondly, lower middle class: ‘clerical’ and ‘sales’ workers excluding the ‘services’ category. Thirdly, working class comprising ‘production, transport and other’. Finally, the ‘agricultural’ category covers agricultural workers and fishermen. At the time of independence, 56.4 percent of the work force was employed in the agricultural sector with a very small urban middle class except within professional and technical categories such as schoolteachers, nurses, and higher-level civil servants, bringing their share to 35.1 percent. 1990 statistics show that the Malay share in the middle-class categories was 48.1 percent: ‘By 1990 less than two in five Malays were involved in agriculture while one in four was employed in a white-collar middle-class occupation.’
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nature of what Islam is or ought to be is most strongly contested. This contestation, nevertheless, does not assume the character of overt conflict or controversy in contemporary Malaysia. Rather, as Geertz (1968: 61) phrases it with reference to Muslims in Morocco and Indonesia, the contestation takes the form of doubt regarding ‘…their belief – its depth, its strength, its hold upon them – not its validity.’ The question of proper Malay Muslim consumption and halalisation evokes a new range of doubts and ambiguities. Thus, the emerging ontology of consumption in Malaysia is all about ‘getting Islamic consumption right’ – what informants referred to as ‘balanced consumption’. Ideally, balanced consumption signifies modes of Malay consumption that convey social mobility and status without being excessive.

The ethnography substantiates that various styles or registers of consumption work as expressions of different interpretations and orientations of Islam in everyday life. Scholars (see e.g. Kahn 1996) have noted that a conceptual framework that can capture the diversity involved in the constitution of these classes should be substituted for the elusive nature of the concept of the Malaysian middle class. This exploration of Malay Muslim consumption tries to provide such a framework.

Wallerstein (1991) insightfully observes the paradoxical blurredness and imprecision of the middle-class concept on the one hand, and on the other its universally held force ‘…in explaining the origins of the modern world.’ (143). Hence, the middle class occupies a mythical place in the advent of development and modernity in that ‘The middle classes rose, expanded the realm of monetary transaction and unleashed thereby the wonders of the modern world.’ (op. cit). The explanatory validity and value of this myth may be limited. It is, nevertheless, obvious that for a developing economy such as Malaysia, the emergent middle class has become an almost mythical national signifier of mental and material development.

This myth is very much alive and has been internalised as a significant point of self-understanding in the Malaysian middle class and political elites. The state elite views the creation of such a class as a necessary prerequisite for economic, national, and social cohesion (Embong, 1998: 85). More specifically, the coining of the new term *Melayu Baru* or New Malay by Mahathir should be seen as an attempt at
According to Mahathir (1995: 1), the New Malay embodies an aggressive, entrepreneurial, and global ‘we can’ mentality, abandoning feudalistic values of traditionalism, excess, luxury, and privilege. In this way, the New Malay can be seen as a product of an emerging Protestantised middle-class work ethic. These new middle class Malays are modern individuals and groups acutely aware of practising middle classness through Islam, consumption, and legitimate taste.

More specifically, their 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 middle class (253). Thus, the Malay middle class is being performed as a class für sich. Time and again, informants would refer to themselves and their children as New Malays, meaning that in terms of education and occupation, they were the living sign of this new Malay entrepreneurial spirit. This again enabled these individuals to practise New Malay consumption.

Moreover, the ambiguities and confusions involved in classing strategies must be situated in their local context. The Comaroffs point out that class ‘…contrasts are mobilized in a host of displaced registers, its distinctions carried in a myriad of charged, locally modulated signs and objects.’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000: 306).

Before entering into the particular classing strategies of informants, I will briefly discuss the historical emergence of the Malay middle class within a national Malaysian framework as the stage where middle class is being performed. Embong (1998) shows that before the British colonial era, the three major classes were the aristocracy, the peasantry, and a merchant class. From the beginning of the 20th century under British economic domination, rudiments of new classes began to appear. These new class formations consisted of a ‘European bourgeoisie, Chinese compradors, Indian moneylenders, a small group of European officers, junior Malay administrators, Asian white-collar employees, and a growing proletariat (mainly Chinese and Indian).’
With the exception of the Malay administrative elite and non-Malay white-collar and technical workers, other groups materialised as a consequence of the demands of expanding colonial capitalism. Eventually, class formation became more pronounced in the post-independence context (91-92). 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 (86). Similarly, it has been demonstrated that the British middle class emerged in and through the market place that provided proper moral and religious lives for middle-class families. With regard to production and consumption, middle class was a function of the market (Davidoff and Hall, 1987: 21).

I now proceed to the question of class taste and preference in a micro-social context. Bourdieu (1984: 111) writes that the relationship between practice and social origin is caused by two effects – effects exerted by the single family and wider social trajectories. This distinction is functional in order to account for individuals from the same fraction or family’s divergent religious and political inclinations. He argues that the ‘trajectory effect’ blurs the ‘…relationship between social class and religious or political opinions, owing to the fact that it governs the representation of the position occupied in the social world and hence the vision of its world and future.’ (op. cit).

This blurring effect is most pronounced in the middle class, and in particular in its newer fractions or grey areas composed by individuals with highly scattered trajectories (112). Aesthetic choices are significant markers of this intra-class struggle. It is mainly against the groups closest in social space that the struggle for recognition through legitimate taste is most fierce (60). Social identity, Bourdieu maintains, is defined, asserted, and practised through difference (172). The ‘practice-unifying’ and ‘practice-generating’ principles are both internalised types of class conditionings and themselves conditioners. It is these principles that comprise the class habitus (101).

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.’ (112-113). The above factors constitute the objective building blocks of classness with its inherent cultural, social, and economic logics.

Middle-class identities may be shaped in the interfaces between the luxury/excess of elites and the economic necessity of the lower classes. This type of negotiation is reflected in the discussion over balanced or proper Islamic consumption. The cultural predicament of the Malay new rich is materially motivated through questioning the ‘excesses of the Malay royalty’ represented by the Malaysian king and the sultans of nine peninsular states (Shamsul, 1999: 105).

To my mind, classing processes in Malaysia cannot exclusively be reduced to stringent sociological reasoning à la Bourdieu. More intangible effects of class such as religion and ethnicity are excluded from Bourdieu’s analyses. In Malaysia, class distinctions between Malays and Chinese in particular often materialise in the grey zones between religion, ethnicity, and modes of consumption.

Classing in Malaysia is obviously not reproduced in a strictly deterministic, symmetrical or functional universe as put forward in some Marxist inspired analyses. In Jomo’s classical account of class formation in Malaysia, A Question of Class. Capital, State, and Uneven Development in Malaysia (1986), class contention is the ‘…main motive force of history. (…) The existence of class contention does not always involve collective self-consciousness, nor does it necessarily entail organized activity.’ (283). To understand class formation in Malaysia, Jomo argues, one must look at the ‘…relations of production which arose as a consequence of colonialism, from Malaya’s integration into the world economy.’ (op. cit). In this type of conceptualisation, class is something strangely deterministic, distinct, objective, stable and etic that seems to escape direct human influence or practice. Only through radical breaks (revolution) with the forces of class production and reproduction can class contention be reconceptualised, i.e. mainly as fixed ‘scripts’ rather than agency or performance conditioning classing.

The paradox is that ‘Classes are certainly for Marxism historical agents; but they are structural, material formations as well as ‘intersubjective’ entities, and the problem is how to think these two aspects of them together.’ (Eagleton, 1994: 187). In essence, the class analysis suggested here is one that aims at capturing what Geertz (1993) called ‘deep play’, i.e. connecting specific social actions in the ethnographic
context to wider structural processes and transformations. Class experience in
Malaysia is informed by a myriad of changeable and intangible factors that do not
seem to be reducible to sheer economic or sociological reasoning. Goffman’s
metaphors, most notably performance, precisely capture all this elusiveness, the
strategies and the ambiguities involved in Malay middle-class practice.

I now turn to informants’ ideas of class and the way in which these inform practices
in everyday life. I will not apply a stringent and neat graduation of class fractions as
Bourdieu does according to socio-occupational categories, but instead explore the
way in which informants map the full range of middle-class practices and then plot
themselves in.

The performance of class in the first type of narrative starts with education and
family background. Combining academic education within social science and the
humanities and a family background of economic and social capital promises a safe
passage to middle classness. This is the logic in the case of Jeti and Hazan, who both
worked in academic positions at University Malaya. While Hazan saw himself as
lower middle class, Jeti as the sole informant described herself as ‘At least middle
class because I can afford many things and have a lot of privileges.’ This exceptional
feeling of being higher than middle class in social space can be related to the fact that
Jeti’s father, a university lecturer, is the parent with the longest education among all
informants.

The general tendency by far is that the younger generation has advanced in
terms of social and economic capital in comparison with their parents. In spite of the
significance of education in the self-understanding of the above informants, there is
another and deeper plot that permeates virtually all accounts. This plot encompasses
consumption and distinction as tangible effects or conditioners of classing through
education. Consequently, education provides one with an income that allows one to
perform in a middle-class way through consumption of a multitude of commodities.
Distinctions in terms of education are crucial to Hazan, who remarked that

‘People see you according to education. It plays quite an important role now in
Malaysia to classify which group you belong to. And then, I guess, it’s quite natural
Chapter I: Grounding Malay Muslim Consumption

as a human being you try to associate yourself to the same group, communicate with others.’

Education, consumption, and distinctions together with the ideal of Islamic piety is the stuff Malay middle-class identities are made of. Jeti explained that ‘I know people with my background who tend to live a more lavish lifestyle than I do.’ Accordingly, Jeti felt that she was probably not seen as excessive or materialistic by others. Sardi likewise fitted into this fraction, associating education with income that could be invested in consumption as the prime class conditioner.

In general, informants were interested in discussing and concerned about education. The purist group was more focused on Islamic education than pragmatists and their children more often attended such education which was to be expected. Pragmatists, however, did not directly reject Islamic schools as dogmatic and repressive. They were keen to emphasise that schooling, like all other commodities, should be balanced between Islamic values and other values such as mastering English or science to attain a more global orientation. Even though the purists’ primary ambition was to inculcate proper Islamic values in their children, they acknowledged that this type of education possessed the danger of overemphasis on Islamic doctrine at the cost of more mundane career aspects. For pragmatists, Islamic schooling was, at best, seen as a supplement to existing educational facilities. In this group, Islamic education evoked ideas of Koran schools in which recitation and memorisation of texts were mandatory.

Another idea about class points to income as a class determinant. Ahmad is the most apparent informant in this type of account encompassing the young, aggressive, and entrepreneurial New Malay accountancy graduate who plots himself into the class map strictly according to income:

‘At my age I should earn around RM3,000, that’s lower middle class. But I have a plan, it’s a ten-year, maybe fifteen-year plan. I want to stop working for people by the age of 45 and build my wealth on property. I started already. I should be a millionaire by the age of 40.’

Moreover, Islam has a central place in Ahmad’s entrepreneurial vision: ‘In Islam, it’s the same way. You have to find your wealth. It’s like you’re not going to die. But you
know that you’re going to die. Be moderate and create wealth.’ Ahmad thus negotiated the division between this world and the next in terms of the moral acceptability of becoming wealthy. Ahmad, however, did not trust in hard work in itself providing wealth – there was an invisible hand involved in economic success. Therefore, he repeatedly said commendable prayers hoping to be blessed with instant divine wealth. Hopefully, the invisible hand would shortly place him comfortably in the New Malay middle class.

To Ahmad, TTDI was a typical middle-class area in terms of education, income and social background, but eventually also mentality of especially the upper class: ‘They don’t want to mix, maybe because of attitude.’ Ahmad’s mother was a housewife not working away from home, his father a retired teacher. The grandparents came to Malaysia from Sumatra, Indonesia, as poor immigrants: ‘We want to live a better and more secure life than our parents and grandparents.’

The vast majority of understandings of class, however, emerge as far more material plots in class mapping. Typically, informants would invoke suburbia as the quintessential stage for excessive upper class consumption against which they practised balanced middle-class consumption. One example of this type of distinction is Mascud’s account. He describes himself as ‘Middle class. Middle middle.’ Moreover, his class affiliation matched his spending, he felt. Against this image Mascud, living in his large bungalow, assessed that ‘My neighbour is upper class; he is very rich and owns a publicly listed company.’ Thus, the house was the most prominent object domain into which class belonging through distinction was inscribed.

Correspondingly, Yusof, who had just moved from TTDI with his wife, Izura, to a mansion in an estate further away from Kuala Lumpur, argued that ‘We are just middle class, lower middle class.’ In Malaysia, more generally, he saw the middle class stratified into lower middle class, middle middle class, and upper middle class, and added that ‘We cannot become upper class.’ He explained that Malaysia has a dual class structure. On the one hand, royalty and Malaysian titles are institutionalised by the state. On the other hand, there are competing classes determined by one’s wealth. Yusof pointed to an even larger mansion than his own
across the street inhabited by a Chinese businessman: ‘When you’re wealthy you are on top of everything, like this fellow over there.’ To Yusof, he was situated in this latter category where social mobility is determined by hard work: ‘We struggled. Even now we are struggling. Life is a struggle. Depending on your social and material success others will eventually try to classify you.’ These social class inscription practices are ultimately tied to consumption, ethnicity, and lifestyle. Yusof’s father-in-law worked in the government service collecting taxes and revenues, but started his own business building houses and as a goldsmith at a later stage. His mother was a businesswoman, but had received no formal education.

Udzir, for example, plotted his family in as lower middle class because they lived in a relatively modest one-storey terraced house. Another class set of ideas encompasses the intricate links between residence and consumption in constituting class. Murni explained that

‘Taman Tun would be slightly in the upper class, but we are more in the middle. Maybe because we live in a link house. The middle is mostly in the link houses. The upper more in the semi-d or maybe the condos. It has more to do with religious attitude. We don’t have Mercedes. And most importantly, our lifestyle is very simple; we don’t have branded goods, go in for expensive hotels or restaurants.’

Against this image, upper class Malaysians are excessive ‘…wearing branded goods to maintain status.’ The distinction between middle and upper class strata Murni also linked to the choice of car. Irfan added that

‘Our way of living is moderate. So, even if we were earning much more I don’t think that our lifestyle would change. We want to be just like this. And anything extra it is our duty to give others as we have been asked to do. Otherwise, we are not just. So, even though we would want to earn much more, then we are still at this level.’

This is a typical account of the purist group articulated through Islam as model guide in everyday life.

Siti’s self-definition of class emerged almost exclusively in contradistinction to the excesses of the upper class:

‘We are mostly middle class. If you’re a wage earner, you should be middle class. We cannot be upper class. Because the upper class they earn so much. They live in a
bungalow. They go on holiday overseas most of the time. I don’t put myself into that group. I think I’m classless. Neither up, down or middle.’

Regarding class positions in TTDI, she stated that ‘I think Taman Tun is more mixed. If you want to see people who are really upper class, Damansara Heights and Ampang are the places to go.’ Informants generally associated certain residential areas with particular classes and their type of consumption contributing to the emergence of quite specifically bounded and demarcated geographies of spending.

Yasir and Azmi/Henny of all informants were most explicit about defining middle-class identity through material distinctions. When asked about his personal class affiliation, and after recovering for a second, Yasir replied:

‘Wow… I think we belong to the middle class, it’s not nice to say this. Everybody in our salary group belongs to the upper class. RM5,000 and above is considered upper class, am I right? But we try not to show it. Nothing wrong there. We still mingle around also; people I don’t know, I say hello to. People working in the streets, I say hello to them. Instead of me expecting them to say hello to me. I still practise that in order to downturn where I belong. If not, you feel like everybody needs to respect you instead of you respecting the rest of the people.’

To my mind, this is the ultimate performance of a pious and morally intact middle-class identity within the purist group. Yasir’s strategy is to play two parts simultaneously: firstly, that of a well-to-do middle class individual overly conscious of the family’s place in social space; secondly, escaping the trap of materialism, showing off and indifference that to him as a pious dakwah Muslim go hand in hand with the former part. These contested parts are negotiated through material distinctions. For TTDI, 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... 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 single storey terraced houses. They probably earn about RM3,000-4,000.’

The excesses of the other that guide informants and their families in classing are to a large extent dependent on visible, even overt, consumption of houses and cars. Perhaps more importantly, as we saw with Yasir, certain materialist identities are
seen to emerge from the excesses of the other. This is evident in the case of Azmi and Henny, who in their present situation as relatively disadvantaged financially and professionally, were very explicit about the shopping habits of the upper class. Henny:

‘They’ll tell us to buy Malaysian products. So, all these middle-income people will buy Malaysian products, but they themselves go to buy Italian sets; they go all the way overseas to do their shopping. But when they come back again they will say buy Malaysian products.’

According to Henny, the resourcefulness of the upper class produced a fake patriotism through consumption of foreign goods in urban overseas destinations. This group of affluent cosmopolites in actual fact reject patriotic consumption for materialism and excess. The tendency towards stratification, according to Azmi, is even further pronounced in the national context where the class gap is obvious and growing due to government complicity.

In sum, the strategies involved in classing take consumption in all its forms as the starting point of material, ethnic, and religious distinctions in the suburban universe. Inscribing the other with excess in social space is maybe the most pervasive factor of individual and group class constitution. At the same time, one’s class identity is constructed through the gaze of others. Interestingly, conventional parameters such as income and education are not prime conditioners of understandings and practices of class with informants. At the same time, there is a clear tendency to see that both female and male informants have received a higher level of education, and thus higher income, compared to their parents’ generation. More exactly, informants’ ideas reflect a deep-rooted fixation on how social and financial resources as forms of surplus are invested in terms of consumption as material evidence of social standing. The main objection of all informants alike to the improper or excessive consumption of other class groups is that these groups more or less convincingly perform a false and unmerited role.

Naturally, defining the other as excessive has the effect of producing oneself as a balanced and moderate Malay Muslim consumer in the context of the nationalisation of Islam. Interestingly, there does not seem to be any significant
discrepancy between the strategies the purist group and the more individually inclined employ to map Malay middle-class practices and then plot themselves in. Discursively, however, the purist group seems to adopt a more concerned attitude towards consumption as a class conditioner. The question, of course, is to what extent they invest or translate this anxiety into specific everyday conceptualisations and practices of consumption. Several informants explained that overt and unambiguous consumption against such formal parameters as education or occupation is ‘what you can see’. Therefore, consumption works as the most lucid indicator of the way in which (licit/illicit) incomes are invested in social status through consumption. Consumption in all its forms has materialised as the most pervasive plot or script in class narratives in contemporary suburban Malaysia. It is to the nature of the suburb I will now turn.
Chapter II

Kampung, City and the Suburbanisation of the Malay Middle Class

INTRODUCTION

In Taman Tun Residents’ Association’s monthly (No. 2 October 1998), the Chairman explains on the front page that TTDI generally is considered ‘...a well laid out residential estate for mainly upper middle income residents.’ This remark points towards two broader features of suburban life: firstly, that a spatiality such as TTDI is the aesthetic product of careful planning and entrepreneurial intervention in the ordering of space. This point is crucial to understand the nature of the middle-class suburb vis-à-vis its spatial others, the kampung and the city; secondly, the suburb as a place where class is essential to the way space is practised. In Chapter I, I introduced TTDI as a specific spatiality encompassing certain characteristics. Here, I am more interested in establishing the historical and social context of suburbia as the stage on which Islamic consumption in Malay middle-class families is performed.

Urbanisation in contemporary Malaysia and the growth of its capital city, Kuala Lumpur, encompasses an overlooked transformation: the expansion of suburbs surrounding the city, extending suburbia into new territory. Traditionally, urban monumentality is associated with public architectural representations of modernity. Conversely, I argue that the middle-class suburb functions as a symbolic monument embodying imaginaries of the authentically quotidian core of the nation. The emergence and proliferation of suburbia should be examined as a particular urban form in its own right. In the eyes of informants, the middle-class suburb is distinctly different from the ‘rural’ and the ‘urban’. Consequently, suburban Malay middle-class identities come into existence in a negotiation between precisely suburb, kampung and city. The suburb may be monumental in its physical organisation, but, contrary to the monuments of the city, it is intimately private and
‘familistic’, i.e. designed so that families could turn in on themselves as the primary model of social and moral identification.

Kuala Lumpur in many ways embodies the quintessential (conception of a) modern and prosperous Asian metropolis. The standard view of Southeast Asian urbanisation takes as its natural starting point the ‘urban’ as mirroring ambivalent hypermodernity. Gullick (1994: 73) argues that the transformation of Kuala Lumpur is most visible in the form of the appearance of a skyline in the city centre and the massive rise in private transportation and thus pollution. He writes that

‘Yet there is no going back. (...) This is the Kuala Lumpur of the modern age. If its citizens groan a little at some of its features, this is their lifestyle. The city could not be the capital of a prosperous and progressive nation in any other way.’

This quote from an authority on Kuala Lumpur and its history in several respects captures the rapid growth and transformation of not only Kuala Lumpur, but also broader societal processes of development in Malaysia. Within the past 30 years, industrialisation, urbanisation and economic growth have produced a city that expands both vertically and horizontally. Skyscrapers are, indeed, a very visible manifestation of the Malaysian miracle of the Tiger Economies essentialised in and through monumental and visible urban and national hypermodernity. Horizontally, however, Kuala Lumpur is expanding in the form of suburbanisation, creating vast new residential areas.

The nation is embodied in and embodies the spaces of the city as a primary national symbol. Architects, developers and the state all attempt to embed the national in the urban and vice versa. Abidin (2000: 97) writes that the negotiation between city and nation is preconditioned on representation of architecture and urban design. This negotiation, in turn, produces ways in which ‘...the nation imagines its body – the shape of the people it rules, the legitimacy of its age, and the geography of its domain.’ Urban design thus works as a ‘...technique for turning cities into fields of social, cultural, and national identity production.’

In the form of suburbs, the city now encroaches on land that was previously farmland, tin mining areas or rubber estates as in the case of TTDI. Mentally, the city also encroaches, shapes, and bends rural, urban and suburban identities.

The effect of the monumental form of architecture in central Kuala Lumpur is that the urban is equated with this particular form of visibility. I shall argue that the
private sphere of the household in Malay middle-class families as an optic for understanding the city and urbanisation, more accurately highlights how the city is lived and transformed in everyday contexts. Moreover, in the majority of cases studies of house culture in Southeast Asia are carried out in kampung. The interplay between the imaginary and real Malay house in the kampung and the suburban house intimately links urban growth and migration from kampung to Kuala Lumpur as an almost mythical narrative of mobility for the middle class. Focusing on the intimate space of Malay nuclear families in their houses in the suburb puts emphasis on how urban space and its transformations, and even the nation, is produced and understood in contemporary Malaysia.

Connor (1995: 45) rightly argues that ‘The myth is that the city is just what practicality wants and not what a culture constructs.’ Especially when looking at suburbs, there is a tendency to see that this type of locality is associated with universal features such as extreme homogeneity, ubiquity, sterility, or rigid planning deriving its form from Europe in a colonial context.

PRODUCING THE CITY

In this section, I examine the materialisation of Kuala Lumpur as a primary city, a city qualitatively different in size and significance from other urban settlements in Malaysia. More specifically, Kuala Lumpur developed from being a tin mining village in the 1850s to a modern metropolis of economic growth, trade, and a major population centre. From 1860 onwards, Kuala Lumpur became an administrative, commercial, political and institutional node in the Malaysian nation. This status has been further consolidated within the last 30 years.

In *The Consumption of Kuala Lumpur*, Sardar (2000: 46) argues that understanding Kuala Lumpur is preconditioned on deeper knowledge of the history of the region, Malay life and history:

> ‘As the capital city of an independent nation Kuala Lumpur has gathered into itself all the strands of which Malay life and Malaysian history is composed and reflects, more than anywhere else in Malaysia, all the consequences, effects, contradictions

1 The urban environment at a later stage encouraged the formation of three contending forms of nationalism: firstly, Arab educated religious reformists, secondly, a mainly Malay educated radical group, and, lastly English-educated administrators from the traditional ruling class (Roff, 1994: 211).
Kuala Lumpur, in Bahasa Malaysia meaning muddy river junction, began as a minor settlement between the rivers Klang and Gombak. As early as the 1820s, sources mention Malay villages in the area (Gullick, 1994: 1-2). Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the Klang Valley, in which Kuala Lumpur is situated, was still scantily populated by the indigenous Malay population. Not until alluvial tin was first commercially exploited and a profitable business emerged around 1860, did immigration from especially southern China commence. To this population of Malays and Chinese, were added Indian labourers, who arrived at the end of the century, primarily as workforce in the rubber plantations. From the washing of tin in riverbeds and streams on a very limited scale to the 1857 party of 87 Chinese miners sent by Raja Abdullah, a Malay chief governing most of the Klang Valley of the time, to mine for tin in the upper valley (2) we see the emergence of the valley and Kuala Lumpur as a systematised commercial centre. Simultaneously, this new industry and trade with tin bring out the key question of ethnicity between Malays and Chinese, so pertinent to an understanding of subsequent Malaysian history and urbanisation in particular.

As seen in this first organised mining party of Chinese arranged by Raja Abdullah, the Chinese appeared to embody forcefulness, expertise, and efficiency. Bringing in the Chinese as labourers caused Malay venturers difficulties as these labourers rose against their Malay employers on several occasions (3). Therefore, the Malay ruling class offered concessions to Chinese capitalists, who managed their own businesses as long as these paid export duty to local Malay chiefs. Again, in terms of ethnicity, this case draws attention to a central relationship between Malays and Chinese in Malaysia: Malay royalty, politicians or bureaucrats naturally positioned within state authority in the urban context on whom the dynamic Chinese capitalist or entrepreneur is bureaucratically dependent. In his brilliant discussion of Mahathir’s classic text *The Malay Dilemma* Yao states that ‘Malay frailty has to be seen against the strength of the Chinese who came from a tough environment which truly
tested the fit and stout-hearted, weeding out the weak and turning them into ‘hardened and resourceful’ people.’ (2000: 73-74).

The significance of ethnicity and ethnic identities in Malaysia is especially prominent in the urban context where widely different patterns and logics of migration between the ethnic groups have produced more ethnically mixed residential areas such as TTDI. In the stereotyping of Chinese resilience discursively produced, the Chinese emerge as perfectly equipped to practise their natural urban and suburban habitat contrary to the somewhat naïve kampung Malay. Ethnic tension runs all the way through modern Malaysian history. The in-migration of Chinese and Indians and migration from rural areas caused Kuala Lumpur to grow from a population of 3,000 in 1880 to about 100,000 in the 1920s. The population in the 1980s was 1.2 million, reaching 1.7 million in 1990 (Forbes, 1996: 86). As a consequence of the importation of labourers from China and India, at the turn of the 20th century the population of the Klang Valley had become multi-ethnic (Brookfield et al., 1991: 9).

In 1896, Kuala Lumpur was made capital of The Federated Malay States (FMS), encompassing the states of Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Perak, and Pahang (Andaya and Andaya, 1982: 82). The FMS states were administered by the emerging European dominated bureaucracy in Kuala Lumpur (Roff, 1994: 93), giving impetus to Kuala Lumpur’s newly acquired status as the country’s administrative capital. The status as capital of the country was confirmed at independence in 1957 and, finally, in 1974 when Kuala Lumpur was given the status of Wilaya Persekutuan or Federal Territory. The urban fabric of the Federal Territory was broadened and diversified to include new specialized shops and supermarkets, high-rise office buildings and hotels, educational facilities, and industrial estates. Most importantly perhaps, Kuala Lumpur has developed into the intellectual centre for the nation (Brookfield et al, 1991: 10).

Industrial growth and large-scale manufacturing supported by government policy, which started in the 1950s and has been accelerating since 1970s, is vital to the development of the Klang Valley. The contemporary landscape of this urban region is generated by industrial estates developed by government agencies and private companies (Forbes, 1996: 86).

There is a long tradition of maritime trade between Southeast Asia, China, India, and Europe, and this is clearly reflected in the emergence of Kuala Lumpur as
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a historical market city in Malaysia. Writing about the emergence of Kuala Lumpur, Sardar (2000: 76) says that ‘In a city and a country formed by trading connections, shopping is the connective tissue, the lifeblood and essential ingredient that makes all apparent and comprehensible.’ Furthermore, there is an intimate relationship between trade and the spread of Islam in island Southeast Asia as in the case of peninsular Malaysia in the 13th century (Andaya and Andaya, 1982: 52). Kuala Lumpur’s status as a market city and commercial centre is today more evident than ever before. At the same time, Kuala Lumpur is a centre for religious, educational, and political institutions in Malaysia. To my knowledge, however, no study so far seriously addresses the question of Malay Muslim identities in the suburban context of growth and transition.

Kuala Lumpur is the stage for powerful Islamically inspired symbolism such as Masjid Negara\(^2\) (National Mosque) representing the merging of state, nation and Islam embedded in architectural and monumental modernity as a specifically public form produced by and producing the nationalisation of Islam; the massive Menara Dayabumi (lit. the tower of native power or ability), the government complex in central Kuala Lumpur that also houses the Central Post Office (Picture 8); Menara KL (KL Tower) as a focal point for mass communication and globalisation (Picture 9); and Petronas Towers and KLCC, arguably the highest buildings in the world with Kuala Lumpur’s most luxurious mall below them (Picture 10). These monuments are standard signifiers of the modern, bustling Asian metropolis to such an extent that instead of seeing these constructions as signs of unambiguous progress, they can be seen by some urban Malaysians as misrepresenting Malaysian identity as overt, materialistic, ahistorical, and shallow.

In previous fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur (Riese, Koefoed and Fischer, 1997), identity strategies and modernity were explored in the Malaysian middle class. 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 in, but something that resides inside of one as nationalised culture.

\(^2\) Negara, however, as I shall return to in Chapter V on state spectacles, signifies a wider range of meanings. According to Geertz (1980: 262) negara can embody ‘State, realm, capital, court, town. A general term for superordinate, translocal political authority and the social and cultural forms associated with it.’
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Picture 8: Menara Dayabumi.
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Picture 9: Menara KL.
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Picture 10: The tallest of them all? Petronas Towers and KLCC.
Centralized planning through government intervention has not been able to control the rapid urban growth fulfilling visions of the importance of Kuala Lumpur in processes of nation building and structured urbanisation. Early British colonial governments did little to control or plan Kuala Lumpur’s growth and expansion and were far more interested in centralising economic growth as well as social and administrative functions in the city (Lee, 1983: 76). Simultaneously, the colonial administration encouraged the compartmentalisation of the various ethnic groups in line with British colonial tradition. In this way, the Chinese lived in the town centre, the Malays to the north of this, and the British across the river Sungai Klang.

The first attempts to control the growth and formation of the city were made in 1931 with the first simple zoning plan, followed by the General Town Plan in 1939. In the post-independence context of the mid-1960s, it was realised that the expansion by now had got out of hand. In 1970, it was clear that the Comprehensive Development Plans had been relevant in controlling and guiding the development of Kuala Lumpur. However, these were not sufficiently comprehensive with only limited focus on the element of time or objectives. In effect, the plans consisted of three sets of maps that could by no means accommodate the massive in-migration supported by industrial job opportunities in the post-1970s (77-78). In 1974, Kuala Lumpur extended its territory from 93 to 243 square kilometres, which was now called the Federal Territory. The inadequacy of the Comprehensive Development Plan necessitated the writing of the Draft Structure Plan in 1982 establishing the broad policy framework for the planning of the Federal Territory from 1980 to 2000 (78). According to the Draft Structure Plan, the city core is to provide specialized metropolitan services; national and international commercial, administrative and central government activities; and specialized shopping for city-centre residents.

Other activities were to be relocated to alternative peripheral self-contained areas such as Sungai Pencala, bordering on TTDI. The city centre was designated as Rank I and given priority in development because of its enhanced employment potential. Obviously, the city centre was seen as the commercial core while ‘…accelerated growth of the outlying Rank II sub-areas which are to act as development nuclei or counter-magnets to the centripetal pull of the city core…’ was seen as desirable (op. cit). The Draft Structure Plan Envisioned that planning should weaken ethnic segregation, but in most areas it actually encouraged social and ethnic
enclaves. Thus, through centralised planning the state expanded the city towards the frontiers of the Federal Territory bordering on the state of Selangor. In the case of TTDI, which is situated on this frontier in the North Eastern corner of the Federal Territory, the ideal of ethnic diversification did come into existence.

PRACTISING SUBURBIA

At one point Mahathir was asked about which problems gave him the biggest headache. He answered that

‘The biggest headache comes from trying to balance the development of the indigenous people with the non-indigenous Chinese and Indians. The Chinese are used to urban living, and to wealth. So they are able to deal with prosperity. But the Malays are rural people, very poor people and suddenly they have moved to the towns. In the urban area the lifestyle is different. And they have more money. They cannot handle these changes in a way that is productive.’ (Mahathir, 2002: 124).

Moreover, broader anxieties over economic development, urbanisation and globalisation are prominent in both state nationalist and challenging Islamic discourses in contemporary Malaysia. The integrity of the family unit in particular is seen as threatened by the above forces (Eighth Malaysia Plan 2001-2005: 18).

Historically, cities such as Singapore, Malacca, and Penang were mostly dominated by Chinese. The tendency, as we shall see, is for in-migration from rural areas to increase the number of Malay urban dwellers and thereby modify the configuration of Kuala Lumpur in an ethnic perspective. Roff (1994: 253) shows that in the vernacular literature of the 1920s ‘...the town was sometimes portrayed as a place of opportunity for those clever enough to thrive in its economically competitive life but almost always as a source of moral peril and cultural alienation for good Malays and Muslims.’ Not until the 1970s, did Malays account for a substantial part of the in-migration to Kuala Lumpur. Mixed Chinese-Malay areas are mainly found in the middle and upper class residential areas in which the quality and location of the dwellings are more important factors of residential selection (Lee, 1976: 45-47). This is a clear tendency in the fieldwork. TTDI is ethnically mixed in terms of Malays, Chinese and, to a lesser extent, Indians. After WWII, the urban axis of Kuala Lumpur began to transform in accordance with rapid development, and Petaling Jaya, in which TTDI is situated, was designed according to the concepts of the British
new town movement of that time with complete residential, commercial, and industrial functions (Brookfield et al., 1991: 11). Simultaneously, Petaling Jaya was constructed as a model of an ethnically mixed town pursuing heterogeneous occupations attractive to middle and upper class groups (12). So these new residential estates catered for new segments that became significant as national and socially progressive subjects.

What I found in my fieldwork site was that ethnically mixed estates with an increased emphasis on class affiliation through consumption are becoming more and more significant in terms of Malay self-perception and boundary construction of individuals and groups. Moreover, ethnic distinctions are fuelled by halalisation. In TTDI, for example, many Malay restaurants advertise their food as halal certified on their façades. These establishments are often neighbours to Chinese restaurants selling non-halal food, alcohol, and pork served to customers with more individualised and challenging dress codes.

Gullick (1994: 22) notes that as early as the 1890s, affluent groups of all ethnic communities were leaving the city for the surrounding areas as Kuala Lumpur now was ‘…crowded, noisy, and sometimes smelly.’ About 100 years later, with reference to the massive urban expansion in the Klang Valley, Lee (1989: 156) remarks that traffic congestion together with housing and environmental problems had led to the general deterioration of the urban environment. This deterioration was a primary reason behind the creation of suburbs around central Kuala Lumpur and new forms of urban expansion, encroachment, lifestyles, and types of planning.

The suburban universe encircling and confining Kuala Lumpur is now discussed in relation to a number of assumptions about suburbia in Robert Fishman’s book, Bourgeois Utopias. The Rise and Fall of Suburbia. Suburbia materialized as an archetypal middle-class invention and a new way of considering the relationship between residence and the city (1987: 3). The history of suburban design is not so much the product of professional architects as a collective creation of the bourgeois in the late eighteenth century outskirts of London (9). The element of planning so evident in my fieldwork site of TTDI is closely linked to planning as the form and style the suburb took when exported and proliferated through British conquest and colonization. Still, ethnographic specificity is required to illuminate the
representation and responses of the local. This insight links the influence of colonialism and the particularity of space: ‘...through attending to the local, by taking the local seriously, it is possible to see how the grand ideas of empire become unstable technologies of power which reach across time and space.’ (Jacobs, 1996: 158).

The encroachment of Kuala Lumpur on agricultural land, primarily former rubber estates and forest encircling the existing city, follows a distinct pattern of expansion and developmental optimism. The suburban idea is built on the transformation of cheap agricultural land into highly profitable building plots. The bourgeoisie craved land for their ‘...visions of the ideal middle-class home.’ (Fishman, 1987: 13). Hence, each single middle-class house regardless of its modesty represents a collective assertion of the wealth and privilege of class (10) and constitutes the core of middle-class society. The process of encroachment signifies a commodification and consumption of both rural land and the suburban house as objects of middle-class family fantasies of ‘the good life’. These imaginaries and desires then feed the real estate housing industry in its attempts to construct a modern nation in contradistinction to the surrounding environment of the city and the kampung.

The division between the rural, urban and suburban has its root in the suburban world of exclusion - work excluded from the family house, segregation between middle and working class housing, and suburbia’s greenery contrasting the annoyances of the city (4). In terms of social distinctions, these were preconditioned on physical segregation between social groups, their behaviour and personal cleanliness (32). The positive ideal of family life of the middle class in union with nature exists in interplay with ‘...their deepest fears of living in an inhumane and immoral metropolis.’ (27). The city was not only seen as ‘...crowded, dirty and unhealthy, it was immoral. Salvation itself depended on separating the woman’s sacred world of family and children from the metropolis.’ (38). The immorality is most clearly visible in terms of the excess of consumption, enjoyment and pleasure threatening religion and the integrity of the family. Furthermore, the fear of crime in contemporary Kuala Lumpur seems to stress the immorality and depravation so central to the creation of the historical suburb: in the government censored newspapers and the electronic media, crime in every form has a most prominent
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place in the everyday coverage. Crime mostly materialises in the form of offences against property, prostitution, rape and drug addiction. Offences against property in particular are a concern among residents in TTDI. The house form and style of the terraced and semi-detached houses, bungalows and condominiums seem to emphasise the house as an arena of everyday tension, the house as a ‘public’ and ‘political’ space, especially when the outside world is perceived as divisive and threatening (Carsten, 1997: 282-83).

In Caldeira’s (2000) insightful study of what she calls ‘fortified enclaves’ in Brazil, these new residential forms emerge in response to what is seen by the affluent classes as outside crime and evil. A whole new model of aesthetic security is shaped by the expansion of condominiums especially, and thus transforms newer forms of housing and the prestige invested in and signified through these (257). In TTDI, the author, Yasir and Siti all lived in such fortified enclaves in the shape of condominiums. This house form, Caldeira argues, is radically changing the way the affluent classes ‘…live, consume, work, and spend their leisure time. They are changing the city’s landscape, its pattern of spatial segregation, and the character of public space and of public interclass interactions.’ (258). As private property, fortified enclaves are inherently private restricting and devaluing the public of the city: ‘They are physically demarcated and isolated by walls, fences, empty spaces, and design devices. They are turned inward, away from the street, whose public life they explicitly reject.’ (op.cit). Demarcation through physical barriers and distancing, most importantly perhaps, ‘…is complemented by a symbolic elaboration that transforms enclosure, isolation, restriction, and surveillance into status symbols.’ (259). The home occupies an almost universal place as the conditioner of symbolic systems that shape individual sensibilities.

Five fundamental elements (security, seclusion, social homogeneity, amenities and services) figure prominently in advertising the suburban lifestyle (264). All these features are clearly detectable in TTDI as the quintessential frontier suburb squeezed in between and demarcated by the Darul Arquam commune inside Sungai Pencala and Kuala Lumpur. This type of urban environment is intensely advertised by the real estate industry playing on the high safety standard in protection of the family and its property. Residents outside the condominiums, in their one or two storey terraced and semi-detached houses and bungalows, often
have an even deeper need for isolation and control by fortressing their houses against external fears in the form of undesirable social interaction and crime (283). Consequently, house living in comparison to serviced and guarded life in the condominiums stresses an individualised form of inner, self-maintained aesthetic of security. Caldeira notes that living behind walls and fences ‘...constitute a language through which people of every class express not only fear and the need for protection but also social mobility, distinction, and taste.’ (291). This is most visible in the field of the aesthetic of security.

In TTDI, fences, walls and bars become elements of decoration and the expression of personality and invention in the constitution of social class (Picture 11). Outside the house, space itself is ordered so that streets are built for cars, making pedestrian circulation difficult. In effect, desolate streets evoke suspicion, isolation, and anxiety. There is a striking resemblance between Caldeira’s fieldwork experiences and those of the author in TTDI. For several months I walked the streets of TTDI in order to hand out questionnaires to respondents and contact prospective informants. It was somewhat strange to be the object of the surveillance the deserted suburban streets invited (Picture 12).

Before a breakthrough with informants, what I noticed in these suspiciously empty streets were the echoes of the domesticated life of families inside their houses and occasionally the expressed curiosity towards the outside in the form of a curtain discreetly lifted. In my own condominium, daily life was deeply structured by the constant supervision by armed guards in their guardhouses. When I visited informants living in other condominiums, it usually proved problematic to pass their security check, and the same was the case when friends were to visit my condominium. In addition, the condominium as a fortified enclave embodies an unnoticed and much darker social side. In my condominium, there were constant rumours of the guards being in collusion with criminals, subverting any feeling of security and instead inciting anxiety about being trapped with outside evil on the inside. This rumouring climaxed when individual or groups of guards occasionally were replaced - residents felt sure that this was proof of some conspiracy either unravelled or in the making (Picture 13).
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Many foreign visitors to Malaysia, and even those who have travelled extensively overseas, have at one time or other commented on the dreary monotony of the houses (especially link houses) in our housing estates, all looking the same. Taman Tun is no exception.

For this article, our roving cameraman, went round the neighbourhood to see how some link house owners have added their personal touch to their gates and fences. The areas surveyed are the older phases in Abang Hj. Openg, Datuk Sulaiman, Zaaba, and Burhanudin Helmi.

Picture 11: The aesthetics of individual security (TTDI Masyarakat No. 2 October 1992).
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Picture 12: The streets of TTDI.
Below, I provide a few examples of the security hype presented and advertised in the national and local media. The heading of an article in the women’s magazine Wanita (November 1992) was Tinjau Dulu Bila Pintu Diketuk (Observe First if There is a Knock on the Door). In this infomercial it is argued that most crimes in the home are caused by residents’ carelessness. Steps to take are to carefully watch the appearance of strangers before letting them into the house. To that end, Doorscope is a new instrument introduced on the market to ensure a private kaleidoscopic view of the outside from the inside. Consequently, fighting crime is a question of being properly equipped in the market for security. In the local Masyarakat TTDI newsletter, security was a recurring issue. A few headings are: Burglaries in the Neighbourhood (No. 2 October 1992). Residents are advised to check if they are being followed when returning to their homes at night; Cooperate to Fight Crime in Your Neighbourhood (No. 3 December 1992). In the article it is stated that ‘One of the thieves has been apprehended and he is a local, not a foreign worker type, as widely speculated.’ The somewhat vague signifier ‘local’ brings crime even closer to the neighbourhood; In another issue (No. 2 July 1993) residents are encouraged to ensure that ‘...their
houses are properly secured and locked when they leave their homes and reporting to the Police any suspicious movements in their neighbourhood.’ Finally, this theme is replayed in the No. 1 August 1997 issue under the heading *Help Maintain Security in Your Home*. This type of crime ‘from within’ is, of course, much harder for citizens and authorities to contain, classify and thus address.

The tendency here is to portray crime as a city symptom that infects and pollutes suburbia. The cure, therefore, lies in correct security precautions for the home. Building up boundaries is of vital importance to protect family and possessions. For Indonesia, Siegel (1998: 3) shows with regard to media representations that the criminal is always on the edge of society and that fact makes him available for political discourse, which is obviously also the case in Malaysia. He writes that criminals are those who ‘...show the absolute necessity of the law because, once making themselves felt, and appearing the way ghosts appear, the law is bound to show up.’ As a consequence, criminals form the basis of legality because through their actions they summon the law and cause it to appear (88). The effect of media hype surrounding crime is that it calls upon the state, its spectacles, rituals and actions.

EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR CONVERTIBLES: OF PROTON, MERCEDES AND MPV

In Chapter I, I argued that there was no absolute division between the interconnected spheres of the so-called semi-public and semi-private. In the suburban context, cars work as the most prominent examples of overt commodities that are seen to straddle and weave in and out of these semi-territories. Consequently, the overtness of cars evokes intense 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 performances of status, boundaries, and (social) mobility.

In the history of the suburb we see that in the US from the 1920s and onwards, due to what Fishman (1987: 16) calls ‘interrelated technology of decentralization’, e.g. cars as a means of private transportation, urban institutions spread out over the landscape to form a more complex outer city with both jobs and residences located outside the city centre. The explosion of the city into the rural
areas is a revolution in transport varying according to one’s financial resources and social group (Brookfield, 1987: 167).

Cars imply much more than personal ownership, namely what Miller (2001: 15) calls ‘externalities’, that is ‘...aggregate effects, landscapes of roadways, patterns of work and patterns of pleasure.’ In the context of the fieldwork, sample data showed that about 60% of respondents owned one car, 30% two, 6% 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.

In both Kuala Lumpur and TTDI, the number of expensive and highly taxed luxury cars such as BMWs, Mercedes, and Volvos is impressive. In suburbia, where there is limited direct visual access to the intimacy inside the various kinds of fortified enclaves, the front region of the house and cars inevitably become signs of what life could be like in the back region. Not surprisingly, cars were a favourite topic with male informants in particular. Purists as well as pragmatists spread rumours about the way in which access to the state was an obvious avenue for acquiring expensive and foreign cars in spite of a relatively moderate income. Yasir, for one, explained to me that

‘The government allows Malaysian students overseas to bring in one tax-free car. So, a lot of used car dealers use the students to bring in cars. The government and car dealers target students. The student gets paid about RM500 or RM1,000. Students just have to give their name and sign a few documents, and the cars come in. In fact, lots of my friends buy Mercedes and not from the real dealer, but imported ones at half price. You can get a Mercedes for the price of a new Proton. So, no big deal.’

Obviously, a purist such as Yasir was acutely aware not only of these avenues for acquiring cars, but also the value and status that might be ascribed to this commodity. Yasir 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 performance – employing, ‘taking on’ or handling a specific kind of expressive equipment to convey social messages to a large audience in public.

In Miller’s (1994) monograph on mass consumption in Trinidad, the car signifies a form of dualism, and embodies distinct values formative of images of person and
nationhood. This dualism is what I refer to as the convertibility of cars as ‘convertibles’. Cars are capable of incorporating and expressing ‘the concept of the individual’ (237), and the most valuable insight in all this is that while a public audience notice performers’ ‘aestheticisation’ of cars, this is surely not always the case with the money and time invested in the interior of the house (239). Thus, covering the upholstery with plastic, for example, suggests links to home furnishing and may evoke interiorisation (243). 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.’ (244).

These points reflect what I shall call the domestication and individualisation of Islam meaning the import of Islamic paraphernalia, ideas, and practices into middle-class homes. While these trends in suburbia are mostly aimed at a family audience, the car is much more publicly expressive and convertible. In Kuala Lumpur and TTDI it was common to see Islamic and other religious paraphernalia used as ‘labels’ or ‘tags’ on cars - in all cases smaller and inexpensive cars (Picture 14).

I could not help hypothesising that this type of branding in and on cars that generally were considered low in status effected some form of compensation or fulfilled a lack in their owners. 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-storey; two-storey; semi-detached; condominiums; bungalows), the security of cars becomes more and more urgent, elaborate and organised as a natural part of architectural design and aestheticisation (Pictures 15, 16 and 17).

I now turn to a more ethnographic substantiation of the above points. A major focus in the fieldwork in TTDI 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 semi-domains and the way in which these were constantly charged and recharged with excess and frugality. Symptomatically of most informants, Udzir pinpointed the everyday difficulty in assessing the material or social status of others by judging from their interior decoration. 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:

![Picture 15]
Chapter II: Kampung, City and the Suburbanisation of the Malay Middle Class

Picture 16.

Picture 17.
‘You cannot see their items—it’s more or less inside the house. But an expensive car means it’s more expensive to maintain, high road tax, spare parts are expensive, the petrol it consumes. You don’t know about status inside the house. We can’t really see.’

Again, the car is much more overt and thus masters the capability of inscribing the interior of the house with certain imaginary qualities in the eyes of outsiders. Interestingly, it is not so much the cost price of cars that inscribes it with value, but rather the everyday maintenance and costs, e.g. expensive spare parts. Udzir and Nur drove both a *Peugeot* they liked for its design and a *Proton* that was far more economical to both purchase and maintain.

Mascud owned eight cars, (a *Volvo* 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 generally is unsure about the position of the other’s residence. Irfan and Murni concurred. 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 staying 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 have clearly replaced the role of the *kampung* residence as a traditional marker of identity, taste and distinction. Irfan and Murni drove a *Proton*, and were quite aware of the piety involved in this specific choice. They emphasised that even though they could easily afford a more luxurious car, it was a conscious decision on their part to drive a *Proton*.

Ahmad, who similarly owned a modest *Proton*, reasoned that ‘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 ethnic context: ‘The car shows I’m rich. Good car, *Mercedes*. My purse. The car is number one. Especially for Chinese because Chinese they buy *Mercedes*, but they live in a squat.’ Ahmad’s statements here replay what I take to be a commonly
held idea about the Chinese in Malaysia – they tend to live in a modest house even if they have acquired a substantial amount of wealth. According to this perception, Chinese superstition prevents them from leaving even a modest house in which they acquired wealth. This house would always represent ‘good luck’. Moreover, for a bachelor such as Ahmad, there is another interest in the status of your car: ‘Even girls are looking for guys who are driving Mercedes and not looking for me because my type is a cheap Proton. This is the Asian attitude - wanting a big, expensive car, big house. Beautiful wife. Married to a model!’ Contrary to Irfan and Murni, Ahmad desperately desired a Mercedes or BMW.

One last example stands out in this discussion of cars. 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 legitimise the purchase of it. This is his explanation:

‘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 day 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. This preference ultimately seemed to signify balanced consumption. The MPV thus worked very satisfactorily as a piece of expressive equipment that helped shape a performance of perfectly moderate consumption for the sake of family, Islam and education. It has to be mentioned that in the purist group (Irfan and Murni drove a Proton and Yasir and his wife did not own a car), Binsar was thus the owner of the most luxurious car, and this might help explain his somewhat protective attitude towards this particular and public type of consumption.
In conclusion, we can say that cars as convertibles may be the principal signifier or modifier expressive of status in the semi-domains. 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 fractions. Exterior thrift in cars can signify concealment of highly 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 personalises the otherwise indistinguishable house so hard to classify for the outsider or neighbour. Moreover, expensive European cars were seen as quintessentially excessive and inscribed with masculine status. Such imported 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. Perceptively, 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.’ (245).

BACK IN TTDI
In July 1979, the article entitled Penghijrahan Dari Kampung Ke Kota (Migration From the Village to the City) in the widely popular women’s magazine Wanita discussed what at the time was a fairly recent trend towards Malay mass migration. The article is an interesting historical example of the way in which migration and urbanisation were understood in a period of major social upheaval. Simultaneously, it shows how popularised sociology started to be concerned with the question of migration in the new national Malay family.

The article establishes that migration from kampung to the city, especially in the last part of the 1970s, had increased greatly and posed a number of serious economic, social, and political problems for the government. Because of the traditionalist worldview and poverty in the kampung, migrants were pulled towards the dynamic city full of education, industrialisation, employment, and economic opportunities - the city was the place to improve ones livelihood. The problem,
however, was that the values of the Malays were basically still rural and backwards because of laziness, and existential and religious fatalism.

Against these images of the rural Malay, the New Malay is different in every respect. In this last section, I will look at informants’ trajectories of migration. The quintessential cycle of Malay middle-class migration is from a *Kampung* to the city and then after graduation and/or an improved job situation, to a suburb such as TTDI.

The ethnography shows that one specific plot permeates informants’ accounts of migration to TTDI. On the one hand, moving to TTDI signifies social mobility, as this suburb is known around Kuala Lumpur as a model residential area. The darker side of planning, orderliness and affluence, however, is sterility, excess, arrogance and social isolation. Mascud and his wife, for example, moved first to a low-cost settlement in Kuala Lumpur from a *kampung*, and in both places ‘People were more friendly, more caring, take care of children. In TTDI it’s quite different, everybody is busy.’ Most informants supported these ideas. Ahmad mentioned that residents in TTDI kept to themselves in their bungalows and did not want to mix with lower middle-class people such as himself: ‘Compared to my *kampung*, it’s very different. Sometimes you don’t even know the people next door.’ Azmi and Henny both found that the individualism and arrogance of the privileged in their bungalows were unbearable and they were disillusioned with the promise of social life surrounding the mosque. According to Azmi, these Malays were ‘Government super skilled, corporate figures, well-to-do businessmen, among that circle. So, we meet them during the prayer, but then in the mosque you are not allowed to talk, you’re just praying and going back.’ Informants mostly contrasted suburban respectability and social distance with the imagined or real ‘community space’ of their (backward) *kampung* or (noisy/polluted) low-cost urban settlement. In other words, social mobility, status, and respectability acquired in suburbia had displaced the feeling of community in the *kampung* and the city.

Comparing the narratives of the purist group with the more pragmatic, the general tendency was that the purists more explicitly articulated criticism of the suburban world. Yasir, for one, said he was planning to move to an exclusive newly established *kampung* area, which he felt would be more natural and green: ‘There’s a stream. And my dream is always to have a house and home where I can retire with a
stream nearby.’ In much the same way, Irfan and Murni expressed that Islamic revivalism was initiating a process of reversed urbanisation, meaning increased consciousness of the immorality of urban/suburban life. In stark opposition to these ideas, the most pragmatic among the informants (Siti and Udzir/Nur) were pleased and unconcerned with suburban living. In all these ideas, families completely take centre stage in everyday life. Ironically, the family of the other was often seen to subtract energy or surplus from sharing in ‘community space’ - when families turn in on themselves, they turn away from community.

In terms of ethnicity, Indian informants in particular were concerned about the price paid for social mobility through migration. An Indian informant living with his wife and two teenage children in a one-storey terraced house clearly recalled the family’s introduction to TTDI:

‘Most of the people here are like one group, very well-to-do people. In fact, I regard myself as a middle income person. I am only a supervisor in a government department. Mostly they keep to themselves, there’s a lot of privacy in this place. In fact, during festive time, when we just moved here I approached them the way I did in the low-cost settlement, but they did not seem to respond. It felt like they wanted to be left alone so I stopped.’

In Malaysia, Malays and Chinese often imagine Indians to be marginal in terms of material status. Interestingly, Indian informants would continuously evoke the history of Malaysian Indians as rural labourers in plantations and estates. Thus, their social mobility vis-à-vis stereotyped Malays (favoured by the ethnicised state) and Chinese (rich capitalists) could only be understood on the background of their modest trajectories. The suburban context seemed to reinforce such distinctions.

Looking at the modern suburb of today, the tendency is to see that these new spatialities contain specialised functions such as industry, shopping malls, hospitals, universities, cultural centres, and parks. Diversity has come to represent the suburban landscape and this is evident in the case of TTDI. I conclude with an outline of some geographic and historical processes that have shaped TTDI.

The geographical location exposes TTDI to a number of often contradictory spatial and temporal influences: the kampung as a concurrently idealised community, the subject of a romantic voyage back and historical signifier of backwardness; the
expanding city of Kuala Lumpur; religious fanaticism in Arquam; enforcement of state and entrepreneurial planning versus the organicness of the kampung; TTDI as a point of intersection between the world of urban material excesses contrasted with the moderation of the kampung; progressivist visions and dreams of social mobility in TTDI injecting the city and urban lifestyle into Sungai Pencala; sediments of the exploitative colonial rubber economy in the kampung versus suburbia embodying the modern nation; the backwardness of the state protected kampung Malay stuck in his reservation versus the New Malay in TTDI, inherently socially and spatially mobile.

Historically, plantation estates established in the period between 1890 and 1920 surround Sungai Pencala. Sungai Pencala borders on a small orang asli (indigenous people) reserve beyond the Damansara-Kepong road to the west, and village land of Segambut Dalam to the east. Extensive estates lay both north and south - where TTDI is situated today. Large blocks of land under rubber cultivation extended down to the tin mining areas in the Klang Valley to the south. Sungai Pencala holding the status of Malay reserve was an island among rubber estates by 1920 and continued to be so until the 1970s (Brookfield et al., 1991: 50). The Structure Plan of 1982 envisioned Sungai Pencala as one of the three sites for commercial subcentres in the metropolitan area. In this way, Brookfield et al. recount the historical development of Sungai Pencala and TTDI as a perfect example of the quintessential urban encroachment on rural areas.

The fence between TTDI and Sungai Pencala is a symbolic division between the reserve and middle-class suburbia to the south. The division in itself works as a demarcation of TTDI as a fortified enclave. The boundary also highlights the fact that Sungai Pencala contrary to TTDI is excluded from the domain of effective planning by authorities or private enterprise (86). Despite the clear physical separation of the two areas, residents in Sungai Pencala are highly dependent on the shopping and job opportunities in the city. From the terrace in the condominium on the boundary between Sungai Pencala and TTDI, I could frequently see Malays from Sungai Pencala cross over to the shopping area in TTDI, as there were only a few small grocery stores left in Sungai Pencala. Often the Arquam people on mopeds wearing turbans, long white robes, and rifles on their backs would cross over as well. Regarding the continuation of more traditional values and ways of life in Sungai Pencala, Brookfield et al. concludes that ‘When the city comes to the village, as it is
doing at an alarming pace around Kuala Lumpur, no rural way of life can survive.’ (171). Regardless of the production of new identities in Sungai Pencala, the kampung form is still there in the shape of house styles and blurred boundaries to one’s neighbour.

The existence of an intimate relationship between kampung, city, and suburb is central. A suburb such as TTDI functions as a powerful yet ambivalent symbol: on the one hand, it is a parameter of achievement, affluence, status, respectability, and state privileges. On the other hand, there is an obvious element of moral ambivalence, tension between material consumption and Islamic piety, social isolation, and the claim for a practised community. The monumentality of the suburb may lie in its inherent ubiquity, but throughout the globe in diverse locations such as Brazil, Indonesia and Malaysia, it evokes quite divergent responses in the local context.

When outsiders see families turn away from community, a strangely ‘materialistic familism’ arises. At the core of such materialistic familism there is the enjoyment of privatised forms of consumption that prevent any social investments in the common good. Consequently, any kind of public consumption or shopping, e.g. cars, are seen to signify performances that may give public audiences an idea about what is actually imported into the home of the other. In all this, cultural intimacy stands out as a meaningful approach to capturing the overspills between the parallel semi-domains of front and back. And a suburb such as TTDI is the perfect stage for performing class and ethnic distinctions according to certain internalised moral, social, and religious scripts subjected to careful preparation in privacy. In suburbia, residents are physically close, and yet separated only by thin walls. In this design there is an intrinsic vision or potential for community and nationness. These ideas, however, do not seem to be translated meaningfully into inter- or intra-ethnic everyday practices in a suburb such as TTDI.
Chapter III

A Taste and a Touch of Islam

INTRODUCTION
The most significant transformation over the last three decades in Malaysia may have been the mass availability of commodities. All aspects of everyday life for Malaysians are affected by the advent of a vast range of commodities. Unsurprisingly, this mass availability of commodities has produced inequalities and distinctions between those able to buy and those unable to do so. In the domains of housing, transportation and communication, foodstuffs, dress and the way daily time is structured (Lee, 2000: XIII), radical changes are taking place. Hence, a Malaysian ‘ontology of consumption’ has emerged, which is split between individual consumer desires in the market for identities on the one hand, and heartfelt social anxieties about the moral and social integrity of the ‘national’ family on the other.

Another point of tension is between, on the one hand, everyday consumer choices and practices, and, on the other, articulations of halalisation within the wider process of creating a national Islam. In this multitude of everyday decisions and debates, there is a marked tension between notions of excess and balance. Understandings of proper Islamic consumption are determined by constant attempts to resolve this tension. As one could expect, the commodity form itself is central to the above problems. I argue that this construction of commodities as fetishes compels two sets of contradictory actions and feelings.

Common to both these sets is the search for authenticity and identities in the commodity form. The first type of search is associated with the quest for material status and social mobility through consumption practices. The second manifests itself as a desire for commodities and/or practices in accordance with the ever widening process of halalisation - whether certified by the state or not. Each of these two sets of desires tries to inscribe commodities with a wide range of intrinsic dual qualities, e.g. purity-impurity, halal-haram, alien-familiar or excessive-balanced. This fetishization of the commodity form makes possible a mapping of the moral,
religious, and social dimensions of everyday practices of consumption, and thus provides, in turn, a guide to consumers in their everyday choices.

In everyday understandings and practices of consumption in Malay middle-class families, however, it is not so much the intrinsic qualities of the commodity form itself that shape identities. It is rather the ritual and performative context in which commodities are consumed that is constitutive of individual and social identity formation. Such performances seek to forge Malay middle-class identities by displaying proper and advanced taste that is religiously legitimate, respectable, and sophisticated at one and the same time. Halalisation, as will be dealt with in detail, is, in other words, immensely focused on re-signifying commodities as non-commodities qua their cultural and religious marking. This process requires a massive investment in targeting ever more commodities that are open to this type of ritual cleansing. Purification, moreover, involves a constant balancing of notions of intrinsic (and powerful) properties of commodities that can be bracketed, negated or amplified by the context of handling, style, and display.

The overriding concern in this chapter is an exploration of the way in which the proper in Malay Muslim consumption is understood and practised in suburban middle-class homes. In order to provide the most ethnographically ‘thick’ descriptions of how halalisation is played out in everyday life, I examine a number of what Miller (2000: 117) calls object domains such as food, dress, decoration, services and cultural consumption. All these object domains have to varying degree been subjected to the elaboration and expansion of halalisation. At the same time, halalisation is a controversial and contested field of meaning in diverse Malay middle-class groups. Empirically, I draw on both the quantitative survey data and qualitative analyses of Malay middle-class narratives of proper Islamic consumption and halalisation.

Chapter III consists of a number of broad thematical sections. In each of these sections, I discuss material Malayness from a number of perspectives, i.e. how understandings and practices of consumption incite ideas about class, gender, generation, and ethnicity in the everyday lives of middle-class Malays. What is more, these ideas inform and are informed by political and religious discourses. The contention is that Malay middle-class identities are moulded through negotiations between what Shamsul (1997: 208) called two levels of social reality: the official or
‘authority-defined’ social reality of individuals within dominant power structures on
the one hand and the ‘everyday-defined’ social reality on the other.

With the extension of consumer goods markets and their advertising around the
globe, a complex ideology or social ontology of global consumption was required
(Mazzarella, 2003: 12). In Malaysia, the emergence of such a new ontology of
consumption was felt most forcefully in the advertising of images that reflected the
desire of individual consumers and simultaneously presented ‘...a generalized
sounding board for the national community, now reconceptualized as an aesthetic
community.’ (13). This type of aesthetic community with its own social ontology of
consumption is distinguished by its taste preferences, which are most clearly
pronounced in the emerging middle class - being a social person or possessing a
certain identity through sets of proper Malay Muslim consumption. As I shall show,
the aesthetic community among the Malays emerged through halalisation. This
process can be seen to encompass a particular form of Malaysianising foreign brands
in a national setting. In effect, this works as ‘glocalising’ local marketing and
appropriation of the global (Robertson, 1992).

Any kind of commodity improperly handled can be signified as excessive in the
Malay middle-class world. Several informants, for example, classified excess as the
practice of ‘flashing the card’, meaning Malays showing-off in terms of buying
power and credit in public. This idea of excess was precisely tied to the excessive
handling of the credit card rather than the card in itself as the vast majority of Malays
held one or more credit cards. Understandings of commodities hinge on the context
of their everyday handling rather than intrinsic properties. The point is that the
effects of the commodity on people and contexts depend on how the tension between
its imputed properties and its handling (either mitigating or amplifying these) are
played out. In this respect, ideas and practices of halal and haram are essential. In
other words, the nature (intrinsic qualities), processing (production method and
context), and manner of acquisition (the morality/immorality of handling and
origin) of commodities all determine whether they are classified as halal, haram, or
indeterminable. These criteria are, obviously, open to endless speculation and
interpretation. In the end, the ultimate meaning of these rules follows divine order
(Riaz and Chaudry, 2004: 6).
In its most basic definition, halal is ‘That which is permitted by Allah, the Law-Giver’ and, conversely, haram ‘That which is prohibited by Allah, the Law-Giver.’ (Azimabadi, 1994). From this straightforward definition halal and haram in food and drink consumption are filtering into all aspects of human life. In Azimabadi’s book *The Permitted and the Prohibited in Islam*, these binaries inform and control ideas and practices such as the wearing of gold and ornaments; wigs and hairpieces; statues; paintings; photographs; keeping dogs; cleanliness; industries and crafts; sexual appetite; spreading the secrets of conjugal life and innumerable other areas (V-IX). One point specifically highlights the arguments of this dissertation - Disliking Excesses:

‘We have now come to the conclusion that Islam likes the middle path in all the functions of life. Good appearance is no exception. One is asked to keep clean, wear nice garments and beautify oneself within a limit. Whether it is a matter of cleansing or beautifying, one is not allowed to alter one’s physical features and appearance. One should be as Allah, the Almighty has created. Alteration is clear forgery and deception and hence an act of Satan.’ (121).

In this understanding, more and more is taken in, valorised, and then subjected to a normative halal/haram judgement. The central concern is to modify the consumption of commodities as fetishes that may exactly compel personal recognition of new, unnatural, and un-Islamic forms of identities.

So, not only large objects such as houses or cars can be seen as excessive. Several informants held that to them excess was concentrated in buying pricey coffee in *Starbucks* or *Coffee Bean* instead of a plain and inexpensive cup of *kopi* (coffee) in a modest local café. However, it is not the expensive ‘branded’ cup of coffee *per se* that is seen as excessive. Rather, it is the whole range of connotations linked to practice that evokes ideas of excess: enjoyment of ‘foreign’ products displacing Malaysian originals in an increasingly globalised market; unpatriotic consumption; suspicions about the *haramness* of products and their handling; the selling of alcohol together with otherwise halal products in shops and restaurants; immoderate display of status in terms of generation and class (yuppie New Malays showing-off), gender (Malay women frequenting what is seen as improper establishments), ethnicity (the Chinese
are seen by many Malays to be more morally uninhibited and overly aware of performing in public life).

When excessive consumption is denounced as materialism, the implication is that it has subversive effects such as hedonism, pleasure, and expressive lifestyles. Moreover, personal excess can be seen to be a socially unacceptable investment in individualism at the expense of altruism and social welfare (Ger and Belk, 1999: 184). Proper Islamic practices of consumption are ideally socially acceptable, balanced and negotiated in moral terms (201).

The quest for balanced consumption against that which is seen as excessive is exemplified in Mahathir’s statement in his speech held on 29 April 1997 at the National Congress Vision 2020: The Way Forward. Mahathir explained that ‘…at this particular ‘moment in time’ what seems particularly pressing is the need to ensure the correct balance between material and spiritual development.’ [http://www.pmo.gov.my]. Mahathir’s ideas build on the contention that the actions of Muslims must be balanced between the present and the spiritual world, and that these worlds should be given equal importance (Mahathir, 1993: 4). This type of pragmatic juxtaposition has been subjected to massive critiques from PAS, PUM (Malaysian Ulama Association) and dakwah groups. As one would have expected, purist Malays were more articulate about this kind of critique compared to pragmatists. Mahathir’s ideas should be seen as a strategic attempt at appeasing and preempting these critical voices. Helpfully, Mahathir provides us with his famous and infamous list of the where and what of essential excess. Relegating excess to the realm and body of the Western other, Mahathir (2001: 230) writes that

‘Hedonism, the love of pleasure and the gratification of the senses, has gradually displaced religion and made it more and more irrelevant. (…) The relation between members of western society is now largely based on material gains and sexual gratification. Selfishness dominates in the search for these objectives. The community has given way to the individual and his desires. Inevitably, the result is the breakdown of institutions. Marriages, family, respect for elders, for conventions, for customs and traditions have all but disappeared. In their place emerged new values based largely on rejection of all that relates to faith. And so there are single-parent families which breed future incests, homosexuality, cohabitation, unlimited and
unrestrained materialism and avarice, irreverence, disrespect for all and sundry and, of course, rejection of religion and religious values.’

In fact, all this evokes the whole connotative range of meanings of lebihan or excess. In situating enjoyment and materialism in excessive consumption through the senses that produce the ultimate Western hedonist body with a nihilist mind, Mahathir crafts the ultimate object of otherness. These ideas are not, however, limited to Malaysian discourses of Islam, but seem to be fundamental to transnational Islam, which associates Western and especially US culture with excess of any kind. The paradox, nevertheless, is that while Islamic networks intensify through global communication technologies, and today particularly the Internet, the potential of this technology also confronts Islam with massive and baffling cultures of consumption. This, to some Muslims, is felt to be an unbearable pluralisation of lifestyles most visible in the field of consumption (Turner, 1994). More specifically, these critiques react against what is conceptualised as un-Islamic or haram consumption.

One theme permeates the whole of Mahathir’s invocation of the range of Western lebihan: Western displacement of religious energy as surplus energy to the world of matter. Removing religious energy from the world of ideas has produced an overpowering spiritual lack or imbalance in the West. Mahathir points out that this imbalance is a product of the withdrawal of religious faith in guiding social conduct. These ideas reflect a particular reading of excess as being intrinsically material. In effect, Western materialism unavoidably produces improper handling of commodities. The drive behind these notions may lie in deep-rooted fears of mass-produced commodities that are both ‘empty’ and plentiful, and therefore open to excessive pleasure. In fact, these assumptions about the empty core of commodities may provide the impetus for the entire process of halalisation. Central to these ideas is the urge to make Islam control and fill these empty vessels properly. If it escapes Islamic control, the empty vessel may become a vessel of evil in the way this has

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1 Under the heading Consumed Consumers, the following article on the Internet attacks the perils of consumer culture: ‘What is most striking about consumer culture, aside from its unprecedented ubiquity, is its celebration of consumption. The economy is our religious faith, consumption our orthodoxy. This becomes even more frightening when we discover that the targets are innocent children. This article attempts to reclaim our kids from a toxic commercial culture that has spun completely out of control. Children are innately innocent regardless of their belief system. Muslim children have a dual challenge - to knowingly miss the bandwagon of their peers and also to uphold their Islamic values.’ [http://islamicity.com/articles/Articles.asp?ref=IC0108-331].
happened in the West. Thus, commodities in the West will always remain commodities and cannot function as things, artefacts or anti-commodities.

HOUSING THE SEMI-DOMAIN: INSIDE OUT AND OUTSIDE IN
Consumption is most often inscribed in discussions of individuals versus institutions, ideologies or regimes of power. Against this image of duality, I argue that relations between individuals and institutions are almost always filtered through the processes of socialisation in families. In his book A Theory of Shopping (1998), Miller convincingly contends that shopping has more to do with love, devotion, sacrificial rituals and devotional rites than the sheer individualism of the shopper. Instead, shopping may be directed at two forms of ‘otherness’:

‘The first of these expresses a relationship between the shopper and a particular other individual such as a child or partner, either present in the household, desired or imagined. The second of these is a relationship to a more general goal which transcends any immediate utility and is best understood as cosmological in that it takes the form of neither subject nor object but the values to which people wish to dedicate themselves.’ (12).

Miller analyses sacrifice as that which transforms expenditure or consumption ‘...into a primary means by which the transcendent is affirmed. The true act of sacrifice seems to be one directed as a devotional act to a divine agent.’ (78). These two aspects of consumption, the significance of particular others and the cosmological, permeate the analyses in this chapter.

In the course of my fieldwork, I interviewed an official in the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs. Discussing the significance of halal certification, she pointed out that the Malays, and Malay families in particular, are becoming extremely particular about halal requirements, and state certification of these commodities: ‘Beef at the supermarket, if it doesn’t have that logo, halal-haram logo, it will be a very big issue. We Muslims believe that what we eat contributes to what we are.’ (Interview 1 March 2002).

The halal/haram dichotomy is an example of not only maintaining this separateness of these two binaries, but simultaneously also protecting the status of the sacred against the impurity of the profane. An example of this could be the separation of halal and haram food products in supermarkets in Malaysia, such as
Jaya Jusco. The non-halal products are for the most part stored in a small, secluded area away from the main shopping area. Hence, sacred or profane effects are to a large extent generated in objects by inscription, classification and context. Of course, the way in which these effects are presented is of crucial importance.

Clearly, shopping as a daily activity is ritualised to exorcise the non-certified or haram contributing to the performance of Malay identity. Food consumption is very much charged with symbolic representations of purification and it is in the domain of food that halalisation was first developed to expand to more and more types of products. Nevertheless, it is at home, in the family, that restrictions and permissions are settled. Halalisation could be seen as distinct sets of invocations of haram or taboo. Douglas (2004: XI) points out that taboo may protect distinctive categories of the universe, consensus, and certainty about the organisation of cosmos, and reduce intellectual and social disorder. However, certainty and order easily mirror feelings of uncertainty and disorder. These doubts mostly surface in everyday confusion about how to go about practising ever intensifying demands for the Islamically proper in consumption.

In this respect, purists are seen by pragmatists to incite a constant deepening and widening of these moral requirements. Douglas argues that taboo works as coding practices that produce and maintain spatial limits in precarious relations. The fear of contamination can extend dangers of broken taboos to the surrounding community (XIII). The inherent danger threatening transgressors work as ‘danger-beliefs’ that ‘...one man uses to coerce another as dangers which he himself fears to incur by his own lapses from righteousness. They are a strong language of mutual exhortation.’ (3). These anxieties cast and recast distinctions between purists and pragmatists. These processes are strikingly similar to Douglas’ point that pollution powers most of all ‘inhere in the structure of ideas itself’ and that these ideas are all about punishing ‘...a symbolic breaking of that which should be joined or joining of that which should be separate.’ (140). As I shall show, the middle-class home in suburbia with its quest for moral virtues and respectability is a universe that is subjected to a wide range of ideas of pollution. These ideas help shape the home as a moral and social sanctuary.
I will now briefly discuss a few examples of the way in which everyday Malay Muslim consumption is reflected in a number of commodities. The essential commodity in the lives of Malay middle-class families is their house. The house is the pre-eminent stage for the performance of identities. Large portions of a home are intended to be presented to visitors as well as performed for those living in the house itself. The house, thus, functions as a stage for every aspect of family life including as a link between the semi-public and the semi-private. Spending or consumption in public and the visibility of these practices incite intense speculation about the actual level of prosperity in the intimacy of the home and the family.\(^2\) The nationalisation of Islam and halalisation are intimately tied to the way in which Islam has become domesticated in Malaysia today. Moreover, these houses functioned as the dominant stage in my ethnography in terms of interviewing and participant observation. Below, I provide a glimpse into this secluded sphere in the form photographic evidence.

The global trend in recent years is to see that a thriving business in Islamic goods has emerged. Everything from stickers, rugs, holiday cards, plaques, to special types of holidays aimed at a Muslim audience,\(^3\) watches displaying *salat* (prayer) times (Picture 18), logos and ringing tones on mobile phones, clothes etc. touch upon and Islamicize virtually every aspect of life (D’Alisera, 2001: 97). Especially in the case of the interior of homes, one often finds an abundance of Islamic paraphernalia, which work as effects of wider structural transformations of state and market.

In fact, mobile phones and their widely marketed Islamic paraphernalia provide a classic example of the way in which a commodity in modern Islamic consumption may work as what I would call a benevolently charged fetish. The latest development in this field is a mobile phone manufactured by a Dubai

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\(^2\) This notion is very similar to IKEA’s slogan ‘Prosperity Begins at Home. When you’re prosperous it shows. From plush sofas to practical cabinets, colourful rugs to little knick-knacks, there is so much to choose from IKEA’s gorgeous array of home furnishings. To flourish in comfortable style, trot over to IKEA for Chinese New Year with a Swedish touch.’ (NST 18 January 2002).

\(^3\) In an advertisement (The Star 2 May 2002) the reader is ensured ‘Meals prepared by a local Muslim chef’, ‘Flight Muslim meals’ and ‘Sightseeing, shopping, shops, and sights of Muslim interest’. As with halal requirements in connection with ethnicity, it is interesting that halalisation in the context of the nationalisation of Islam has deepened this aspect to cover a craving for food prepared by Muslims as outlined in the ad. The ad shows two younger Malay women in London. We see a distorted, unfocused, and twisted image of Tower Bridge in the background adding to the impression that the Occidental setting is disturbing, to say the least. This eerie feeling calls for the comfort of stabilising Muslim-friendly services and activities on the trip.
company, Ilkone Mobile Telecommunications. Besides sending an SMS (Short Message Service) at prayer times, it can point to the exact location of Mecca from anywhere on the globe. On the one hand, the mobile phone in itself is a quintessential example of a commodity that has been introduced fairly recently into the Malaysian market. At the same time, it is a relatively expensive commodity that is often seen as a trendy and technologically advanced piece of Westernisation or globalisation. On the other hand, it is a social piece of equipment through which large middle-class families can communicate in a rushed everyday life where both parents and children are away from the home. In halalisation, this type of modern fetish is re-signified and thus transmuted from mass produced commodity into something that may be partly commodity and partly ‘authentic’ artefact or non-commodity. In spite of the ‘Islamic’ mobile phone claiming false relation to origin so typical of fetishes in Siegel’s understanding, it may be capable of working as a personal everyday reminder to the wearers of their relationship to God. The Islamic ringing tones, the SMS and the logo can all be seen as attempts to bring out the benevolence and authenticity in the ambiguous fetish.

The informant, Mascud, who was a wealthy Malay businessman, told me that in order to teach his seven children moderation, he rationed the use of mobile phones given to them by him through a monthly donation of prepaid phone cards. This effort to control the use of mobile phones draws attention to the above dilemma. When both parents in many cases are busy working outside the home, the children are often left to themselves after returning from school. Therefore, material goods, as in the form of mobile phones, or the money to buy these commodities, are given to the children as a form of compensation. Hence, these commodities, and the malls in which they are most often purchased, simultaneously take on morally and socially subversive powers in the eyes of parents. As everyday fetish, the mobile phone signifies the modern craving for uninterrupted ‘hooking up’ to two forms of otherness – family and the cosmological or transcendental.

In the Malaysian context, a multitude of commodities such as candy, credit cards or mobile phones discussed by informants are often, and especially by the purist group, seen to embody ideological and hidden (Western) residues (alcohol, gelatin, toxics/additives, excess, exploitative capitalism) of malevolent forces. The influx of more and more foreign produced commodities into Malaysia has deepened
and expanded anxieties about potentially haram substances in everyday consumption.

The most visible manifestation of the domestication of Islam in Malaysia is the import of Islamic paraphernalia into Malay middle-class houses. The effect of this import of Islamic paraphernalia is to singularise the house and thus transform it from being a mere commodity into a home (Dovey, 1985: 53). This ambivalence between the profane nature of the house as structure and the emotionality of the home is evident in a suburban context such as TTDI. In suburbia, the homogeneity of the house types accentuates the fact that these houses are mass-produced commodities planned and constructed by state and entrepreneurial capitalism catering for the emerging Malay middle class especially (Picture 19).

**Islamic Wrist Watch**

SKU: 05208-4492

Our Price: $59.95

Members Price: $50.96 (15% Off)

**Availability:** Usually ships within 24 hours.

**Detail Description:**

**Islamic Prayer Watch** ... with Compass, Voice Call for Prayers and least expensive in the market with an unconditional guarantee for 1 year.

**Unique Features:**

1. Day, Date, Time
2. Voice prayer reminder (Allah-o-Akbar, Allah-o-Akbar ... Salat Al Maghrib or ...)
3. Fixed Compass on the wrist band
4. Accurate prayer times for more than 2500 cities of the world
5. Daylight time saving function (ideal for USA residents)
6. 1 year unconditional warranty

Islamic Prayer Watch is the least expensive watch in the market and with the unique feature of voice reminder, The easy to follow graphically illustrated manual is multilingual in English, Arabic and French.

Picture 18: The Islamic wrist watch.
Chapter III: A Taste and a Touch of Islam

Picture 19: The middle-class house as representation of home and commodity (Masyarakat TTDI No. 1 1993.)
Chapter III: A Taste and a Touch of Islam

The plaque in the photograph (Picture 20) may serve a number of purposes. Firstly, of course, as an Islamic symbol or emblem protecting the house and its inhabitants. It should be noted that the informants living in the house, Azmi and Henny, expressed strong sympathies with the whole notion of political Islamic revivalism and its critique of the government and especially Mahathir’s assumed involvement with the trial of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. I shall return to this in greater detail in Chapter V.

Picture 20: Even a plaque placed above the doorway can be subjected to intense contestation.
The couple felt threatened by government persecution and censorship in respect of their oppositional loyalties and work. Azmi, who was educated as an engineer and at the time unemployed, refused to try to influence government officials and ‘cronies’ within the construction business in order to get a job. These circumstances generated a certain type of oppositional Islamic performance, especially when the family itself experienced severe economical constraints. The couple primarily attended the ‘independent’ mosque in TTDI. Consumption in the family was heavily oriented towards rejection of what was seen as state encouraged excessive consumption giving in to Western consumer culture, materialism, and teenage loitering.

Yasir, a very outspoken representative of the purist group, explicitly critiqued the hanging of a plaque like the one discussed above. When we passed the house in question one day, he expressed doubts that the inhabitants would possess any relevant knowledge of its true Islamic meaning. The plaque reads ‘In the Name of Allah the Most Gracious the Most Merciful’. According to Yasir, it is to remind the occupants to always remember Allah when entering the house, and at the same time let outsiders know that it is a Muslim house. He explained that

‘To be honest, there are a lot of Muslims doing it for the sake of decoration only. You do not become more Muslim by erecting the plate and neither will you be less of a Muslim if you don’t hang it up.’

This is an example of the way in which Malay consumption and taste is constantly subjected to critique and distinctions that are equally political, religious and social in orientation. More importantly maybe, this example points to the significance of context, appearance, and handling rather than the existence of intrinsic properties in commodities. In spite of the plaque’s obvious claim to origin and authenticity, Yasir was unable to translate these seemingly intrinsic properties into a meaningful decoding without deeper knowledge of the people inhabiting the house. In itself, the plaque was mainly open to a materialistic and excessive reading.

During fieldwork in TTDI, some Malays, who had been living in the area since it was constructed in the 1970s, speculated that the Indian and especially Chinese paraphernalia was brought out onto the façades or front gardens as a response to the nationalisation of Islam and a feeling among Chinese and Indians that Islam was encroaching on their lives. This encroachment materialised in terms of what in Chapter V I shall discuss as the ethnicisation of the state to become a
signifier of Malayness and unambiguous Malay identity. This sort of paraphernalia can take on an ethnic labelling or distinction effect on the façade of houses that without paraphernalia are virtually homogeneous (Pictures 21 and 22).

*Picture 21: The spirit of the home: a Chinese spirit house in TTDI.*

*Picture 22: Holy cows at the gate in the middle class.*
Chapter III: A Taste and a Touch of Islam

Picture 23: At home in the Malay middle class.

Picture 24: The cultural intimacy of knick-knacks.
The next photograph (Picture 23) shows the living room of a Malay family in TTDI that I visited on numerous occasions. A special occasion for a visit was around Hari Raya, where the family served traditional Malaysian food on the large dining table in front of the Mecca tapestry. The husband was a government official specialised in statistics; the wife a housewife taking care of the four teenage children. The two boys in the family attended religious school in TTDI. The wife in particular, as in many other Malay homes in the neighbourhood, was very concerned about the moral perils of consumer culture in Kuala Lumpur and TTDI. She therefore also put much emphasis on Islam in the upbringing of the children, the schooling, and values. I take this photograph to be highly symbolically charged in terms of linking decoration and family narratives. It is all there in the family shrine: the dominating Mecca tapestry serving as background for both the chest of drawers with its line up of things and the large dinner table in the foreground. The line up first: the sewing machine symbolises a sort of self-made domesticity and the domain of the housewife and daughters of the family. Furthermore, it signifies self-sufficiency related to both thrift and personalisation in fashion. The oil lamp radiates the romanticism of the ‘old stuff’, things that no longer have a practical everyday function. Next, there are wedding photographs and other photographs from celebrations over the years, staging the trajectory of the family. The wedding is of particular significance as the symbolically material, formal and ritual celebration of family life. Some informants would refer to celebrations or feasting as excessive displays of consumption that should be moderated in accordance with Islamically acceptable practices while others accepted excesses in terms of celebrations. Then on the chest of drawers there is a series of knick-knacks (Picture 24) whose signification escapes most standard theorisations of status and distinction.

The dinner table seemingly holds it all together as the major symbolic object of family life. Gillis (1996: 93) points out that historically in the American and British

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4 *Hari Raya*, celebrated by the Muslims, marks the end of the fasting season of Ramadan.

5 Kitsch should be seen as a radical escape from the taste hierarchies, consumption skills and cultural capital. Kitsch and religious paraphernalia may even be more connected and share more identical qualities than first thought. Binkley (2000) makes the case that kitsch is embedded in routines, follows conventionality, and is rooted in ‘...modest cadence of everyday life, works to re-embed its consumers, to replenish stocks of ontological security, and to shore up a sense of cosmic coherence in an unstable world of challenge, innovation and creativity.’ (136).
middle class, the newly invented dining room table allowed families to turn in on themselves. The heavy dark wood of the dining table suggests solidity and continuity, setting the scene for eating as a carefully arranged sequence, sharing more than just food.

In sum, the things of this house, like any other house, carry a family biography or narrative of the people who inhabit this space. In the picture there is also a mobile phone placed in its charger. This particular phone actually followed the Malay trend and was equipped with both a logo with Islamic scriptures as well as Islamic ringing tones.

I contend that ‘It is the material culture within our home that appears as both our appropriation of the larger world and often as the representation of that world within our private domain.’ (Miller, 2001a: 1). Moreover, the house and the things of the house work ‘…as both the source and the setting of mobility and change.’ (4). At the same time, the longevity of the house and things of the house can generate a feeling that agency resides within (Miller, 2001b: 119).

As more and more Islamic products appear in the market and are certified by the state, the range of legitimate and proper Islamic alternatives expands. These processes produce halalisation as the legitimate in taste that can rub off on, modify or balance other types of excessive consumer practices. Commodities, thus, are embedded in three spheres of signification: firstly, their inner composition in terms of Islamic or un-Islamic surpluses, respectively, which I shall discuss below in connection with fetishization; secondly, the proper/improper context of consumption vis-à-vis other modifying commodities that can work as either polluting or purifying, and finally, the performance context in which commodities are employed as fronts.

In terms of its social context, consumption in Malaysia should be analysed as constitutive of individualisation as well as social group constitution with regard to class, religion, ethnicity, gender and generation. Material goods and their appropriation work as building blocks of life-worlds and constituents of self and other. An example of othering is Mahathir’s articulation of Westoxication above. Zizek (1993: 202-3) writes that
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‘The national Cause is ultimately nothing but the way subjects of a given community organize their enjoyment through national myths. What is therefore at stake in ethnic tensions is always the possession of the national Thing. 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.’

Imbuing westerners with material excess is an endeavour to construct a unique and balanced Malaysianness. Moreover, a similar function in halalisation is the promotion of requirements that only Muslims can produce halal products. This form of Malaysianising or ethnicising consumption is all about coming to terms with compelling commodities in a rapidly expanding national market. At the same time, the other is right next-door. In the suburban world of seclusion, the front region is mirrored by the secretive back region, in which excesses are seen to be hidden.

Halalisation in Malaysia constantly targets and exorcises that which is considered impure in order to ritually cleanse commodities so that they are transmuted into things or artefacts. Unevenly, purists and pragmatists promote the idea of transforming or re-signifying commodities. Translating these ideas and ideals into practice was, of course, much more complex.

Malay middle-class homes work as structures that frame the new national family. There seems to be a striking resemblance to the way in which the English suburban middle class pictured the house as a shrine or altar taking on religious meaning (Gillis, 1996: 112). The feeling of the house as the naturalised emotional core in living was further strengthened as work and education left the house and pushed adults and children in different directions. Accordingly, the symbolism of home took on even stronger forms such as synchronicity in imagination:

‘Just as new family times coordinated the disparate schedules, providing family members with a common sense of anticipation as well as store of collective memories, the symbols of home provided a domestic mecca that, wherever family members might be physically, brought them together in a shared mental terrain.’ (122).

This is of special importance in suburban middle-class families where the spheres of work and domestic life are strictly separate. Gillis stretches this point even further and demonstrates that the national became the sum of a hierarchy of households - a ‘...mythic democracy of homes, sharing common characteristics by virtue of being
rooted in the same territory.’ (113). In this sense, homes within a national territory had more in common with one another than with homes elsewhere:

‘Home and Homeland were now paired in the spatial imagination in such a way that one was inconceivable without the other. Home functioned as a symbol promoting the unity of the family in the same way that homeland promoted the unity of the nation. Every nation began to imagine itself as more home-centered than the next. It was not enough for people to be housed; now they had to have homes of their own for the good of the homeland.’ (op. cit).

This is exactly Mahathir’s point in hyping the Asian values campaign, as we shall see in the subsequent chapter. The home thus became a miniature imagined community comparable to that of the homeland. This idealisation of the moral bonds meeting in the home is clearly reinforced in the commercialisation of the home as an object of consumer culture and advertisement, as well as Islamic discourses. In actual fact, however, the household is far from a stable, uncomplicated unity. It is a social site in which a wide range of conflicts and interests intersect. The household should not be seen as a stable social system, but rather as a locus of difference, social change and class politics in the form of individual narratives with transformative effects (Gibson and Graham, 1997: 68).

With reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss, Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1997: 8) demonstrate that the house as a social institution combines a number of opposing principles or social forms, thus reuniting and transcending incomparable principles adding to an appearance of unity. The house ‘transfixes’ an unstable union, becoming ‘…the objectification of a relation: the unstable relation of alliance which, as an institution, the house functions to solidify, if only in an illusory form.’ (24).

It occurred to me that while informants’ lives had been shaped by countless events and celebrations, the house basically remained the same. The house is the material cornerstone of stability and socialisation, ‘our corner of the world’ in Bachelard’s phrase (1994: 4). Houses work as a body of images that offer an illusion of stability, a vertical and concentrated being that appeals to our consciousness of centrality (17), and takes on the protective qualities of a redoubt (46).

The movement of goods and people between the inside and the outside of the house is a movement sometimes represented as those of the orifices vital to sustaining the body (Bourdieu, 1990: 277). Similarly, the movement of goods from
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both inside to outside and the reverse is itself vital for the way Malay families perceive material status through public performances. Distinctions between public and private are closely tied to the binaries of individual/society and civilised/natural (Davidoff and Hall, 1987: XV). Especially concealment as a dimension of the private relates to the binaries of inside/outside and open/closed, highlighting the dimension of public and private in the use of space. Hence, families mediate between the semi-private and the semi-public, and thus connect domesticity to the market (32).

Bourdieu⁶ (1984: 247) writes that while the working classes are preoccupied with ‘essential’ goods and virtues such as cleanliness and practicality, middle-class preferences are aimed at warm, ‘cosy’, comfortable or neat interiors. The keywords listed below were presented to informants to set off discussions of taste in interior decoration. Out of the large number of informants interviewed, four significant homes represent divergent taste preferences.

For Udzir and Nur ‘comfortable’ and ‘cosy’ took prominence. Secondly, ‘classical’ was a preference whereas ‘studied’ and ‘harmonious’ appeared to be restrictive and normative, as Udzir explained: ‘We like something where we can feel free to do anything.’ Nur added: ‘Don’t have to follow rules too much.’ This tendency was strongly reflected in their ideal preferences in furniture, which were ‘mixed’. Modern decoration IKEA style was rejected. Udzir found that modern or classical styles were confining and more suitable for an office. Their decoration reflected choices stressing personalised style rather than conventions. Dominating in their living room was a large beige leather sofa with a similar one next to it. In terms of art, only one painting of flowers decorated their walls. Their dining room furniture and cupboards was a mix of classical and country style. They accepted that their sons’ room was untidy and had children’s drawings on the walls. Neither in terms of decoration or paraphernalia, was there any indication of Islamic influences.

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⁶ In his questionnaire, Bourdieu (1984: 513) asked the following three questions: Firstly, which of the following keywords best describe the type of decoration/interior you would like to live in? Clean and tidy (bersih dan rapi), easy to maintain (mudah menjaga), practical (praktis), cosy (nyaman), comfortable (selesa), warm (hangat), harmonious (rukun), imaginative (bayangan) and studied (telah dipelajari). Secondly, is your furniture modern (modern), antique (antik), country-style (perabot yang mempunyai gaya pedalaman)? Lastly, if you had the choice which style of furniture would you rather buy: modern, antique or country-style?
This family in their one-storey terraced house, together with the next informant, represented the most individualistic among informants. Cleanliness or order was never articulated to be desirable.

Siti preferred the categories of ‘clean and tidy’, ‘comfortable’ and ‘easy to maintain’. Most of all, though, cosiness was significant. The ‘sober and discreet’ category had no place in her home, as she preferred Chinese antiques:

‘When people look at my home they say it’s very Chinese. In fact, somebody asked me, are you a Chinese convert? They came to my home when I was sitting at the table eating these noodles with chopsticks. No, I’m Malay!’

The Chinese influence was obvious in Siti’s home, especially in terms of furniture. The feeling in her house was a bit like that of an exhibition - classical and presentable, with large and small mirrors covering the walls, marble floors, and glass cupboards with representations of China. The home was very ‘full’ in the sense of the number of pieces of furniture and their ornamented appearance. There was no indication in the condominium flat in the form of Islamic paraphernalia that Siti was Muslim.

In the home of Azmi and Henny, it was Azmi who mostly articulated preferences in terms of taste. He would prefer ‘clean and tidy’, ‘comfortable’, ‘warm’ and ‘easy to maintain’. The family lived with Henny’s mother and had no direct influence on the decoration of the house. This fact generated a whole range of ideas as to how their own future home should look. Azmi: ‘Anything. Not to say antiques all over. Some people, they go to the furniture shop, they start filling their house from A to Z. We don’t have the finances.’ Henny explained that classical was what came closest to her preferences. Concerning the furniture in Henny’s mother’s house where they were now living, Azmi complained that it was unfashionable 1980s rattan furniture that had to be replaced instantly. Their primary preference in furniture would be Bali style furniture. Azmi explained: ‘It’s very cooling. If you go to MPH bookstores, to one section in a book under interior décor and flip through, you can feel the environment there.’ The rattan furniture and a discrete rug constituted the scarce decoration of the one-storey terraced house the family hoped they would be able to leave as soon as they found a place of their own. There was no discernible Islamic paraphernalia in the house. These accounts, together with the
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decoration of this home, gave the impression that necessity most of all determined the present choices of the family.

Sardi found that ‘clean and tidy’, ‘easy to maintain’ and ‘comfortable’ were acceptable. He explained that they had no modern furniture in the house, which was quite true. The furniture was old and he and his wife were satisfied with not having any antiques or luxury. If their financial situation were different, Sardi would invest in antiques for his home. At the core of Sardi’s taste preferences were modesty, unpretentiousness, contentment and even indifference towards ‘taste’. In the house, there were several plaques and other types of paraphernalia.

Sardi’s house could not be more different from that of Izura and Yusof. Even though Izura agreed to most of the keywords, ‘classical’ was her favourite whereas ‘sober and discreet’ were rejected. The furniture in their enormous house was a mixture of many different tastes and styles: antiques, modern, and country style:

‘Basically, my hall is a European kind of setting. You find my Chesterfield there. In this room it’s more Asian, a Balinese surrounding, the concept of water, the natural. On my floor a pool with fish. I call this Asian, not only Balinese. People want to be associated with Bali because it’s a very well-known area.’

Izura then pointed to a house next to hers and explained that it was supposed to be Balinese design: ‘They try to import a lot of things from Bali like pictures, carvings in wood and brick, rock, but I don’t have these kinds of things because in Islam you’re not supposed to have images, idols and souvenirs.’ Consequently, Islamically acceptable plants, flowers, and a fishpond compensated. In Izura and Yusof’s home, their high cultural and economical capital enabled them to realise virtually any taste preference of luxury. In terms of paraphernalia, there was a number of large plaques in the house.

Comparing purists to pragmatists, the former were far more protective about the intimacy of their private domains. This is not in any way to say that this group was not helpful or accommodating during the fieldwork, far from, but rather that they did not seem to place emphasis on the aspect of formal invitation and thus open up the intimacy of the home. Maybe they felt uncertain about the researcher’s intentions, or perhaps unwilling to reveal the back region where preparations for more public performances took place. Finally, there could be an effect from 9/11 with all the
suspicion, confusion, and mistrust these events caused. In spite of purists’ hesitation, I have a clear idea about their preferences in the back region.

On my numerous visits to Binsar’s house, in which he ran his Islamic school, we normally talked outside on a small terrace adjoining the house and its large windows facing the street. Through these windows, it was obvious to see that the interior in no way diverted from that of pragmatists such as Sardi or Azmi/Henny. The decoration did not in any way reflect or signal particular modesty, frugality or piety. In other words, the furnishings and decoration altogether was comparable to what you would see in other homes and more than one item was purchased in IKEA. Consequently, the interior of this home did not reflect any uniquely Islamic taste or style. Likewise, the kitchen was equipped like many other kitchens in the neighbourhood in terms of decoration and kitchen appliances. In the little classroom used for the Islamic school, pupils were seated on ordinary chairs at their desks and Binsar used a whiteboard in his teaching - pupils were not taught sitting on the floor. Qualitatively, all this substantiates that in Binsar’s house there was no inclination towards the piety through abstention that we have seen in groups such as Arquam, but rather an individualised and personalised expression of moderation through consumption. Moreover, purists do not in any way seem to embody the collectiveness or communal spirit of Arquam where followers sat on the floor in a circle eating from one large metal dish. Every single purist lived in nuclear families in either a single storey terraced house like Binsar, a condominium (Yasir), or a terraced house (Irfan/Murni). As we shall see, purists’ attempt to perform private and public piety is rather unconvincing in the eyes of pragmatists.

From detailed survey data and in discussions of this data with purists, it was clear that no single object domain reflected significant divergences that could be ascribed solely to purists’ piety. In this way, purists did not significantly reject certain kinds of media products, furniture, electronics or kitchen appliances. Thus, the image of purists’ homes as the concentration of asceticism can easily be dismissed. Relatively, purists were more interested in the preference ‘studied’ compared to other informants. Most significantly, however, purists comparatively stressed ‘simple’ as the most accurate keyword to describe their taste in interior decoration. Yasir, like Binsar, explained that IKEA was his favourite: ‘I like the design and the price is also quite reasonable. A lot of simplicity in the design. It’s just
something that we like; both me and my wife share that. And **IKEA** is just around the corner in *One Utama*. In respect of purchasing simplicity in style, Yasir chose to disregard the fact that he was fundamentally against the immorality of malls. The same tendencies were present in the case of other purist informants.

In sum, a number of keywords such as ‘clean and tidy’ and ‘easy to maintain’, which in Bourdieu are all time favourites with manual workers, craftsmen, and small shopkeepers, recur throughout the interviews. The question of cleanliness follows a more general trend towards purification and ordering of the home. This tendency is greatly influenced by popular culture in the media, especially magazines and the nature of suburbia itself. There is no apparent evidence from survey data and participant observation in the homes above that there exists a marked difference in taste preferences between what I consider the more individualised versus the purist group. What really matters is that as the level of cultural, educational, and economic capital rises, the articulation of reflexive taste judgements in the form of juxtaposition and aesthetic composition increases. It is, nevertheless, significant to note that preferences for ‘studied’ or ‘harmonious’ do not exclude preferences for ‘clean and tidy’ and ‘easy to maintain’.

Interestingly, according to informants, it is in the privacy of the home that material status is secretly crafted. These divisions strongly evoke Goffman’s (1971) distinction between the front and back regions giving shape to performances. Interior decoration is obviously an object domain that simultaneously is extremely significant in terms of taste and lifestyle and kept out of the public gaze in the suburban context. An example of this logic is Azmi’s idea that it is in the intimacy of the private sphere that status is situated. Publicly, Malays mask their class affiliation:

> *We can’t really differentiate. People go to the same supermarket, mosque, but you cannot differentiate within the low income, middle class and the upper class. But when you go to their houses then you see, they show their true colours. When you go to the bungalows and ring the bell, they don’t respond. So, the only place where you can go to find out is to their houses.*

The status generated in cultural intimacy is entirely dependent on the consumption of these objects in the front region and their import into the house. One last point is that male informants seemed very interested in interior decoration. Maybe this could
be explained by the fact that men, as well as women, presumed that it was within this private domain that status and respectability were crafted. Consequently, knowledge of legitimate taste in the home was essential. The quintessential back region nature of the fortified middle-class home spurs endless speculation about the ‘real secret’ of the interior. This fortified secret works as ‘…an invention that comes out of the public secret, a limit-case, a supposition, a great ‘as if,’ without which the public secret would evaporate.’ (Taussig, 1999: 7). The domestication of Islam is actively shaping forms of cultural intimacy that transforms commodities imported into the house into non-commodities.

GET IT RIGHT: THE MODERATE AND THE EXCESSIVE
Excess and moderation are crucial in this ethnographically detailed description of understandings and practices of consumption in Malay middle-class families. The central focus is the way in which these understandings and practices of proper Malay consumption may support, transform, or contradict halalisation. Concerns with ‘getting consumption right’ have helped shape new forms of ethnic and religious Malay middle-class identities. Hence, halalisation and its contestation in various middle-class groups is actively reshaping modern forms of Malayness. Excess and moderation are constitutive of a discursive field into which informants plot their personal consumption.

In the ethnography, children were commonly seen as embodying excess by inducing parents to import more and more commodities into the family house. In spite of parents’ complaints, this import into intimacy seems to translate that which could be seen as ambiguous or malevolent into something benevolent that can be shared and enjoyed. Children are frequently excused because of their ‘innocence’, which is invoked to justify excessive consumer fantasies of parents. This aspect can only be fully examined in the sphere of domesticity.

In the eyes of informants, quotidian considerations such as thrift were prominent. Through thrift, Miller (1998: 62) writes, ‘…spending is transformed into an act of saving.’ This was the case with Ahmad, for one, whose personal thrift was contrasted to that of his friends, who were ‘big spenders’. Hence, consumption and preferences depended exclusively on one’s type and lifestyle in the spectrum of moderation and excess. In other words, the delicate balance between
thrift/saving/piety and excess/investment in consumption is seen by informants as 
moulding divergent forms of Malayness.

The overriding significance of families in consumption is reflected in ideas of 
branding and branded goods. More specifically, Azmi avoided buying *High 5* 
sandwich bread and preferred *Gardenia* bread instead because of its wheat content 
that arguably made it more wholesome. He explained that the family was very 
particular and would not feel comfortable with any other brand. Branding in food 
products was a question of being accustomed to that brand, not a matter of ‘high 
taste’. In milk, Henny chose *Milkmaid* for the family. Azmi added that products from 
*Nestle*, *Milo* and *Nescafe* were of better quality than similar Malaysian products, but 
conversely the taste of Malaysian-produced *Maggi Ketchup* was superior to the 
international brands. Even though Azmi emphasised that they were not brand 
conscious, certain ideas and practices of quality and representation were clearly felt 
to be inscribed in different brands of products. Buying certain brands and avoiding 
others is an example of how consumption functions as reiterated practices in the 
body, which may be the ultimate purpose of the advertisement industry. Branding, 
furthermore, was in no way exclusively related to e.g. more expensive designer 
products, but commonly to everyday commodities of consumption in the household. 
As a consequence, any product, no matter how quotidian, can be inscribed with 
excess. Brands and branding have a strong imprint on the way commodities are 
understood and handled. Ambiguously, brands can signify material status, quality, 
and distinctions on the one hand. On the other hand, they may contain malevolence 
in the form of being alien (and thus unpatriotic), and materially excessive (used for 
showing-off), or simply haram or indeterminable (impure, doubtful or un-Islamic).

Frequently, as in the case of Azmi and Henny, it is the smaller everyday 
commodities that were seen to be charged with Westernisation and excess -commodities that may not be easily classifiable and identifiable, and thus were 
objects of daily negotiation in everyday life in families. To Henny, *Amway*, probably 
short for the American way as she rightfully noted, is a worldwide company 
specialising in the sale of cleaning agents. The company has several million 
distributors globally and these are recruited by buying a certain number of the 
products from the person who recruits one. Every distributor in turn tries to recruit 
more distributors. Income is generated by sales of products by the distributor plus
‘bonuses’ from the sales of his or her recruits and their ‘recruit-descendants’ [http://skepdic.com/amway.html]. Clearly, Amway and similar companies symbolised US imperialism, capitalism and values of the American way. Henny exclaimed that ‘Actually, we should boycott Amway. That one is totally like the American way, but small things are so difficult to boycott.’ Amway products seem to be inscribed with essential fetish properties. On the one hand, these chemical cleaning agents are effective and indispensable in order to maintain cleanliness and order. On the other hand, they are ultimately malevolent as an example of how US imperialism creeps into and pollutes Malay homes.

This discussion also evokes ideas of patriotic consumption, i.e. actively practising consumption that is seen as beneficial to state and nation. Sardi, a government civil servant for many years, and his wife clearly supported patriotic consumption. They maintained that they would always prefer local fish instead of imported meat harmful to the Malaysian economy. Two tendencies materialised through informants’ ideas and practices of patriotic consumption. For food and clothes so significant for the purity of the body and its appearance, informants would ideally prefer local products first of all. Compared to imported commodities, local ones were seen as inscribed with far more national ‘surplus’, i.e. a form of economic and symbolic devotion to the Malaysian nation.

Moreover, informants in the purist group stressed the significance of local products in the context of government halal certification and the preference for products produced by Muslims or bumiputera. Consequently, the state emerges as an enormously powerful symbolic signifier of correct and non-excessive embodiment in the everyday lives of Malays. These concerns and confusions are deepening as more and more foreign-produced halal as well as non-halal commodities enter the Malaysian market. In praxis, the state cannot possibly halal certify all these commodities. This point may especially refer to the fear of concealed and unclean haram gelatin, glycerine, emulsifiers, enzymes, flavours and flavourings in everyday consumption. A high level of technical expertise and an abundance of resources are required to perform the certification of only a fraction of commodities in which substances may be present. The other plot entails object domains such as cars and electrical appliances, which are seen to be inscribed with more prestige, excess, and quality when produced abroad, even though most informants agreed that the quality
of domestically produced goods was increasing. 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 were seen to embody far more status, and thus excess, compared to local brands.

To Mascud, the covering of the body for Malays was an individualised practice, and one would not be penalised for neglecting this in Malaysia as in Saudi Arabia or Iran: ‘Moderate Muslims allow their children or family to wear both Western or non-Western clothing, different styles according to your style and fashion.’ Mascud’s point is that the interplay between Islamic requirements in terms of fashion is flexible according to the social context in which they appear. This is precisely performance attuned to diverse situations and audiences in which the body in particular is the focus of display and covertness simultaneously. In general, Mascud was sympathetic towards and supportive of Islam in consumption to the extent this was preconditioned on individualised practices instead of mandatory requirements. Consequently, adhering to a rule would seem to violate the authenticity of individuality. Adherence to such principles would be religiously ‘excessive’.

These ideas stand in contrast to those of purists. When discussing the existence of typical consumer behaviour of Malays in contemporary Malaysia, these informants instantly invoke Islam as a discursive blueprint for valuation of requirements and prohibitions. Ritual divisions are constantly called upon to demarcate sacred/profane ideas and practices.

Yasir was the most consistent informant in this respect. While in Australia, he accidentally ate food that was not halal certified and instantly threw it away: ‘Some Muslims don’t bother, but we take care.’ Elsewhere, Yasir drew attention to the different groups of Malays and their dedication to halal requirements, which he saw as quite incomplete and unacceptable. Yasir’s ideas about particularity involved in Malay halal food preferences were exceptionally elaborate, and simultaneously worked as one of the clearest examples of ethnic and religious distinctions and social boundaries emerging from the nationalisation of Islam. Yasir identified three main Malay segments in relation to halal:
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‘My friends go for halal food. They will only eat if they see the halal logo certified by the government and that the cook is Muslim. Top of the pyramid. Very concerned. And down the pyramid you have people who as long as they see halal, certified by government, it doesn’t matter if they don’t see the cook whether he is Chinese or not, they still go and eat. Then the lower part of the pyramid. They don’t care whether it’s halal certified or not. As long as there’s a word in Romanised halal, they go and eat. Even though they see that there are no Malays, it’s not a Malay business.’

So excess takes the form of un-Islamic, even un-patriotic, Malayness in distinction to the extreme efforts and particularity the pious Malay invests in his halal-branded food. At the same time, it is often rumoured among Malays that the Chinese, in spite of Malay requirements and sensitivity, may be using lard in food production and cooking.

It is characteristic of the purist register of consumption that strict Islamic requirements become ritualistic practices that necessitate detailed planning to such an extent that these ideals are impossible to live up to in the everyday life of families. In Yasir’s opinion, shopping was preconditioned on knowledge, especially in cases of rejecting certain products:

‘You know that Nike is making use of child labour in Indonesia or India with high profits and paying no taxes. And violations of human rights. Genetically modified ingredients in foods. If you know, you wouldn’t buy. Knowledge of this separates a bad and good shopper.’

There are striking similarities between the ideas of ‘green shoppers’ in Europe and elsewhere and the moralistic attitude of purist Malays. Informants such as Izura and Jeti, high in economic and cultural capital, were quite aware of the introduction of organic food in Malaysia, and Izura often frequented a small shop for organic food in TTDI. Comparing organic food with halalised products, we can say that in both cases its consumption is conditioned by consumers’ trust in its certification, most often by the state. In both fields, there is an apparent craving for simplicity and wholesomeness in production, promotion and consumption. While halalisation is intimately tied to the nationalisation of Islam, green shoppers seem to a larger extent to be driven by individuality and political inclinations that to varying degree may be translated into practice. In other words, halalisation seems to be far more pervasive and elaborate claiming to be traditional in its own right.
Another and more recent trend that comes to mind is the notion and practice of ‘simple living’, which is obviously impossible to attain fully so that a whole industry has sprung up in order to advise and guide consumers about simplicity in family life, e.g. food and decoration. The attraction in all this seems to be striving for a kind of modernity seemingly stripped of complexity and laid bare for display. Simplification seems to function as sets of ideas and practices focused on weeding out the excess of complexity and disorientation. Against these images of confusion, simplicity in taste, handling and context are organised and elaborated. In fact, halalisation is a sentiment that necessitates the employment of modern technology, design, control and power. Without these technologies, the quest for reinscribing industrialised commodities with purity, simplicity and authenticity would be meaningless.

Consequently, as I learned from purist informants such as Yasir and Binsar, some Malay men have seemingly become more involved in interior decoration of the home as this practice has virtually merged with that of Islamic piety before God. In this way, simplicity can be an expression of halal. Binsar explained that ‘In magazines, I am interested in simple interior decoration, especially of the kitchen.’ Not surprisingly, IKEA was Binsar’s favourite store in terms of taste and selection. Moreover, in my reading of Malaysian magazines, encouraging men to participate more in a number of domestic activities was a recurrent theme. Increased male involvement echoed the forging of modern (New Malay) masculine identities that were less traditional, fixed and concerned with clear-cut gender distinctions. Against these images, new forms of identities are idealised as more flexible and engaged. Moreover, and in a vein rather similar to halalisation, the quest for simplicity is an ongoing project and will eventually involve and question more and more ideas and practices that need moral elaboration and valorisation.

Again, all these ideals are virtually unattainable in everyday life and repeatedly necessitate attention and mental development. Therefore, the consumer behaviour of the purists is far more ritualistic in that it persistently requires the boundaries between sacred and profane qualities and handling to be maintained. To Binsar, this urge to contain consumption took the form of constant strategising about what and what not to buy. Regarding family and children in particular it was crucial

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7 See for example the magazine RealSimple - the Magazine about Simplifying Your Life [http://www.realsimple.com/realsimple/].
to have a detailed master plan before going shopping so that excess could be avoided. In reality, of course, this pious ideal rarely worked, Binsar admitted, as the entire family had different preferences that could not be contained in one master plan. Conversely, the more pragmatically inclined Malay register of consumption preempts purists’ attempts at standardising halalisation as legitimate taste in two ways: they either directly criticise what they see as excessive fetishization of commodities that should not be a measure of one’s inner spiritual dedication, or they simply neglect the matter or refuse to discuss it openly.

In this respect, the accounts of Udzir/Nur, and Siti stand out as the most individualised by informants. Siti did not really feel that she had goods that she clearly preferred or avoided: ‘If I like a thing, I just buy it, no consideration. Except for food of course.’ Therefore, typical consumer behaviour could not be essentialised. Siti: ‘If I like this thing and I want it, that’s why I buy.’ To pragmatists, commodities are not so much understood according to fixed intrinsic qualities that have to be subjected to forms of ritualization or handling in order to appear Islamically acceptable. Commodities are rather seen as relatively unproblematic in religious terms. Most importantly, pragmatists reserve the right to individualised ideas and practices that escape conformity of any kind.

In the eyes of most informants, consuming had intensified after their children were born. Yasir, for example, complained about the wide range of things that now had to be bought. Especially food and eating exercises proved deeply structuring for everyday life. Siti explained that ‘Whenever my son comes back, several bills will go up because he is into the late eating exercise. He goes for salmon, turkey. Different priority now.’ There were preparations to be completed before these visits when her son came back to TTDI on a break from his college in Australia. Similarly, Izura stressed that food priorities had changed in the family in the direction of healthier food and that her daughter now was much more health conscious than she herself had ever been. Typical of the younger generation, growing middle-class awareness of health, ecology and political issues filter into critical ideas of consumption. Finally, in Irfan and Murni’s family, priorities had changed drastically in several ways. Murni:

‘In fact, the children dictate. Sleeping habits and even holidays we have to follow them, other sorts of travel plans. Any free weekends we used to just go. But now…

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... there’s school holidays. So, actually they are the ones that decide. Even food, preparation of food, you have to plan meals that are suitable for them. I can’t have too much curry or chilli.’

These understandings all point to the transformation of food culture and eating exercises as a shared ritual in modern Malay families. What is seen as more traditional by parents has to give way to individualism expressed through a disjunctive multitude of preferences signifying the embodiment of excess.

A recurrent plot in the stories of informants is the vulnerability of Malays to the advertisements and material excess of consumer culture. Azmi, for one, explained that the massive influence from commercial television in the form of ads, series and movies is linked to American cultural power in particular, and this is coupled with a morally unhealthy credulity: ‘Our local consumers, they’re not brand conscious. They will buy anything that they see on television. Before people would buy furniture from a local Chinese shop. Now since you’re in Taman Tun you go to IKEA to shop.’

These concerns with Malay defencelessness are especially pronounced with respect to the future of the integrity of Malay families in the era of uncontrolled excess and enjoyment. Mascud spoke of a radical difference between more traditional family values in Malaysia contrasted to cultural and material influences from abroad: ‘We respected the old people, often the children are very restricted by parents. In fact, they scold.’ These both positive and negative traditional values stand in stark contrast to the way American youth treat their parents: ‘American youth - sometimes they throw their parents out of the house. That won’t happen here in Malaysia.’

The project in Malaysia today is to combine and balance these two sets of values. Binsar stressed that the influence from consumer culture and materialism can only be addressed from within families: ‘We must explain why they shouldn’t have or buy those things. Excessive electrical appliances, video game CDs. They want to buy more even though they already have so many.’ To Irfan and Murni, Islam is most forcefully invoked as weapon against the import of excess into families. Murni’s major concern with consumer culture is that while many families now have money to spend as the country is developing, the ‘Options available are much too much for our needs.’ An example of this, according to Murni, is the production and
marketing of mobile phones and computer models: ‘Because there is so much choice, people now want everything. And so their values are confined to lowly things. Lowly things are good, but you must have some form of balancing.’ Another issue Murni rose was the question of gelatin in food, in this case sweets for her children:

‘The government is allowing too many things to come in. Because I would have problems when my kids buy sweets and treats like that. I will tell them to check the ingredients because there’s a lot of gelatin. They don’t know. So much that we don’t know what to choose.’

The question of gelatin in food and other products is part of the driving logic behind halalisation. Following this logic, a shampoo can be haram if it contains gelatin made from pigs. This is what Murni reacted against; the strenuous effort persistently invested in detection of these haram substances. As halalisation intensifies, the state is seen by purists in particular to uncritically support the import of impure and, ironically enough, un-patriotic commodities. Consequently, purists work hard to construct and safeguard ever more standards and requirements, as we saw in the case of ethnicity in food production and preparation. Thus, in the eyes of Murni, moderation is only attainable if Muslims acknowledge that

‘The only way is going back to the right teaching. Many of us do not know what is the purpose of life. We thought life is for you to enjoy. But God sent us to this world with the purpose of correcting our faith. When we meet our Maker, we have the right faith. That will be the real life forever on the other side. Perfection of your faith in this world for 70 years will make you enjoy millions of years over there.’

This more literal understanding of the afterlife mirrors moderation in this life against excess in the next. Quite symptomatically for the purists, proper conduct is articulated through theologically invoked models and not as individual preferences or decisions open to negotiation. Again, the return to simplicity may be a full time occupation for a housewife such as Murni.

With respect to excess and moderation within Islam, informants would explain that ideally you should only buy what you need and never more. Jeti formulated this point in the following way:

‘Islam guides how excessive my buying could be; it’s a sin to be too excessive. And also a sin not to buy this or that when you have the money for that kind of thing. It’s best to be in the middle. Being rational, wasted is haram. Within your means and not
The balance between excess and shopping for the state on the one hand, and piety and moderation on the other is not easily translated into practice; there are grey areas of blurredness. Excess can be inscribed into any object and the way it was handled - from foreign cars and expensive coffee in Starbucks, to feasting on exotic dishes of barracuda or ostrich in Western restaurants. Before examining the way in which these debates over excess and moderation may fit into larger discursive political and religious edifices, I will provide one final example of how performance and staging are invoked in debates over excess.

I visited Izura and Yusof in their home on several occasions, both for interviewing and for kelas agama arranged by Izura. In terms of economic and cultural capital, the couple are obviously more elite than middle class: they resided in a mansion-like house in a newly constructed ‘fortified enclave’ outside Kuala Lumpur, had three Proton cars, and extremely elaborate ideas and practices of taste. As previously mentioned, Yusof surprisingly described the family as ‘lower middle class’. Performance-wise the proper fronts were all in place. They were both wearing ragged T-shirts and more generally appeared to be laid back and unpretentious. 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. This particular interview took place on their gigantic terrace in front of the house.

In many ways, the couple were the embodiment of the domestication of Islam. On another occasion, I was at their house for kelas agama. The ustaz arrived at the house and the 13 women present, who had arrived in their cars that were parked outside, were all ready for the class, each holding their copy of the Koran. The ustaz used a whiteboard for making notes in Arabic concerning the theme of the day - globalisation and self-realisation. The women and ustaz together recited passages from the Koran, questions were asked and there was a discussion before the session ended. Then the ustaz picked up his car keys and drove off to return two weeks later. The participants then made a few arrangements concerning their charity work and said goodbye.

In the house, Izura and Yusof had several beautiful plaques and other paraphernalia. Like quite a number of urban Malays, the couple had set up a prayer
room in their house. When we discussed consumption and Islam in Malaysia, the conversation inevitably encompassed excess. Yusof: ‘I spend a lot, but you cannot judge that I’m excessive or wasteful.’ As an example Yusof mentioned that a prestigious car is wasteful compared to a smaller one. Some time back, the couple sold their Mercedes and now instead drove three Malaysian produced Proton and a Volkswagen. In essence, this is a performance of patriotic consumption. Concerning their house, Yusof complained that ‘People say this house is big, but I say no, this house is small, it’s relative.’ To Yusof, excess can spur a kind of motivating envy: ‘Otherwise everybody will only have a little, which is not good. You need that kind of thing.’ Excess is obviously problematic in the sense of contradicting traditional piety, but supportive of state nationalist patriotic investments. Excess to Izura was most of all a question of Americanised yuppy culture embodied in establishments and brands such as Coffee Bean, TGI Fridays, Starbucks and Gloria Jeans. The family itself, however, had no problem regarding feasting in exclusive restaurants, which can be seen as a controversial and excessive activity within the purist register of consumption.

Later that same day, I went to the house of Azmi and Henny, a few minutes’ walk from Izura and Yusof’s previous house in TTDI. Azmi and Henny, who occupied an altogether different place in social space, would constantly complain about the arrogance, excess and privileges of the affluent, and I could not help feeling that more different informants could hardly be found, who would, nevertheless, all claim to be middle class.

Above, I have demonstrated how a number of strategies are involved in working out the problematics of moderation and excess in proper Malay consumption.

MALL IMPORTATION: HALAL, HARAM OR WHAT?

The TTDI survey showed that malls in 77% of cases were the primary place for purchasing non-food products. Merely 14% would go to local smaller shops, 7% to markets and 2% elsewhere. Thus, a wide range of commodities is imported from malls into middle-class houses. In other words, malls are particular forms of public space and their statements about décor, taste and class are imported into the privacy of everyday life (Miller, 1997: 300). Malls have become dominant domains in the
everyday lives of middle-class families in terms of consuming non-food, food and entertainment. Stivens writes that ‘...the behaviour of teenagers has become a site for the negotiation of anxieties about possible ills of modernity, the embodiment of parental and societal failures to produce the right kind of Asian family values and Islamic modernity...’ (1998: 70). In a sense, the ability of teenagers to explore the city and malls is a mark of maturity that may evoke concern in the eyes of parents (Chin, 2001: 110). Concern and fascination with malls often evoked mentally elaborate explanations.

Yasir explained that his wife was ‘the minister of the kitchen’ and decided what food to buy, whereas ‘Necessities such as mobile phones, VCR, normally I make the decision.’ The purchase of these necessities is normally done in one of Kuala Lumpur’s numerous malls. But the Prophet had warned against spending unnecessary time in the market 1400 years ago ‘...when the market was just a market.’ Yasir elaborated:

![Picture 25: The Devil in the Mall: MacDonald’s Hell. Interestingly, the Devil, a.k.a. Iblis or diavolos within Islamic theology, retains a certain ambivalent relationship to God, his creator. The Devil is not absolutely anti-divine, but rather acts as an instrument of God (Schimmel, 1992: 84).](image-url)
Our religion advises us that when we go to a market we do what we have to do and go back quickly. Because the market is not a very good place. Things that you cannot see are there. There's a lot of Satan there. You should spend more time in places like the mosque, but not the market.’ (Picture 25).

Today, the market is a much more dense and complex environment that is also a social meeting place. Yasir's main concern with the malls, shared with many other Malays in Kuala Lumpur, is that ‘Everything is under one roof.’ The market itself, education centres, cinemas, and restaurants are all there. He felt that adjustment was in its place as ‘Islam always encourages you to use adjustment.’

The primary objection is that a constructive education centre and things that are prohibited in Islam such as alcohol, and cinemas are located under one roof with no clear boundary between them. If you want to go there, you should go about your business and hurry home afterwards instead of ‘loitering around seeing things that are not permitted by Islam.’ Yasir added that ‘To have malls is not wrong, but mixing it with other things is wrong. These things should not be easily accessible.’ Alternatively, the things prohibited by Islam could be located in a red light district after the European model as has been done to a certain extent in Kuala Lumpur’s entertainment district, Bangsar, in which a large number of bars, discos, and restaurants are located.

We discussed how PAS had addressed the construction of malls, especially in the PAS controlled state of Terengganu. Yasir declared that PAS did not seem to be against malls per se and the consequent social illnesses because they had taken no action against malls or mall construction so far. Binsar would go to both local smaller shops and malls. When going to a mall, ‘First, I will buy what I need and then walk around for half an hour before going back.’ Even though Binsar on several occasions mentioned that he always made a detailed plan for what to buy beforehand, ‘Sometimes I buy other things than what I planned to buy.’ The problem with malls, Binsar explained, in particular in the case of teenagers, would only increase when One Utama was expanded.

‘They will have an even bigger place to waste their time. Families and authorities should cooperate to prevent this, especially in this area where parents normally are busy with work. To spend less time with children will indirectly encourage this kind of activity.’
This critical attitude towards malls did not, however, prevent Binsar from going to malls on his own or with his family. To purists, malls were excessive because of their plurality of choices, mix of Western and Chinese capitalism, and immoral mingling of men and women in restaurants and cinemas. In this section it is argued that family rituals alleviate these concerns.

When I discussed the moral significance and panic associated with malls with the President of ABIM (Interview 24 January 2002), he stressed the significance of materialism in propagating Islam. His argument, somewhat surprisingly, was to embrace materialism: ‘People are coming back after going into extreme materialism. It is not a problem becoming very rich, but do not forget your social and religious obligation.’ This is where the mall as ambiguous symbol enters in:

‘We have all the best cuisine, boutiques and malls in the world, but you can see that the Islamic culture and identity is still around. We want to be the role model, the catalyst that promotes this model. The Muslim world has always been tainted with violence and mediocrity, but people look at us as a role model. I have this belief that there is no contradiction at all; we can harmonise, balance it. I like to bring my family for fast food. Just to expose them to this thing. Once in a while, we would like to go to Petronas Towers to see the best mall in the world. And of course we would like to maintain our traditional values in the kampung.’

These malls were major attractions to informants despite the uneasiness involved in frequenting them. While Islam may have come to terms with affluence in relative terms, discussions over the mall seemed to embody some of the moral panic associated with the whole way of suburban middle-class existence. These moral concerns were most pronounced in lower income families (Azmi/Henny) and the purist group.

Most of all, malls expose teenagers to a realm in which they are left unobserved. Thus, teenagers’ loitering clearly constitutes an excessive and unwanted social practice. No other practice in magazines and as articulated by informants is described as nearly as subversive. An example of a slightly more alternative view on this controversial topic is the following article in the magazine Ibu (April 1997): Lepak Apa Pendapat Remaja? (What is Teenagers’ Opinion about Loitering?). In the article, the teenagers interviewed complain about the boredom of staying in the home, the controlling attitude of their family, and parents who feel that as long as they provide
a material basis and education for teenagers, that is morally sufficient. This critique addresses a central theme in the entire dissertation. Consumer culture is by no means limited to the excesses of teenagers even though they may be especially exposed. Rather, consumption in the form of material excess is a matter of significance for the entire ‘national’ family. Malay children cannot be expected to balance consumption as long as excess is deeply rooted in the practices of their parents.

Mahathir’s account of Malay laziness and inferiority vis-à-vis other ethnic groups starts with loitering, expending any excess energy that should have been invested in the education of the national Malay individual:

‘The number of Malay students who succeeded in getting places in universities is also not encouraging despite the vast opportunities given to them by the government. This is due to their own laziness, preferring to loiter and having a good time, as well as not giving emphasis to the acquisition of knowledge like students from other communities.’ (Mahathir, 2001: 13).

The heart of the problem lies not in the materialism or excess of consumption. Instead, loitering signifies an entirely unwanted practice that is neither nationally educating nor patriotic shopping for the state, as I shall return to in Part V.

A standard account of urban consumer culture infers that malls or shopping complexes are quintessentially commodified spaces. In Sardar’s (2000: 123) vivid portrait of life in the malls of Kuala Lumpur, the commodification process is expressively spelled out as teenagers loitering:

‘These are school children who loiter around looking bored out of their minds. In this jungle of brick and mortar, digital clocks and mobile phones, fast food and even faster ‘rides’, there is nothing real to hold on to. All experience is ephemeral; and there is no connection between what is said and done, what is believed and practised, what is sold and bought. This disenfranchising of the Malay minds from their own sense of space and time, from the folk traditions that enraptured and entertained them, is a form of self-inflicted colonialism. (…) The consumers thus become those who are actually being consumed. Despite resistance, despite the infinite adaptability thesis, the innate acumen for the subtle accommodation of multiculturalism beyond the imagination of postmodernism, the city is being eaten from inside.’

Consumer culture is in Sardar’s understanding materialism in its purest form: it encompasses alienation from tradition and the pollution of hitherto uncontaminated
culture, producing superficiality, extreme individualism and false consciousness. The excess of consumption in the artificial environment of the mall dis-embeds the shopper in terms of space and time and inflicts a novel form of colonialism.

One specific discussion with informants highlighted the moral panic associated with malls. For purists, it was unimaginable to watch movies in a cinema in malls, where men and women mixed freely. This concern by far overshadowed that of genre or content in what was watched. From the quantitative as well as qualitative data I learned that purists held a rather liberal attitude towards e.g. violent content in American thrillers, and maybe even more so than in the pragmatic group that was more focused on content than spatial context. The import and viewing of these movies in the home, mostly on satellite TV or pirated VCDs, legitimised the practice of this kind of enjoyment that in principle was clearly morally unacceptable to purist informants. As a consequence, these informants were embarrassed to admit to the conscious consumption of a multitude of malevolent cultural residues. To sum up, family rituals of sharing in privacy purified and legitimised the understanding of otherwise doubtful practices. Going to malls altogether was excused by purists as either a question of pressure from children that could not be refused or of stressing that malls were also a realm of legitimate and educational culture.

GENERATIONAL AND GENDERING CONSUMPTION

The private sphere is a crucial site not only for producing middle classness, but also the creation of a new mode of material gendering of this middle class. Davidoff and Hall (1987), writing about the English middle class, show that the construction of class always takes a gendered form in that domesticity and households in their varied forms are crucial sites for producing middle classness. Consumption is an obvious aspect of this gendering in the middle class as it reflects specific gender practices in the division of household labour. Yet another side of the performance of middle class is that of kinship/generation. These dimensions of gender and generation in Malay middle-class families diversify and deconstruct the understanding of the family as a homogenous social unit.

In this section, it is argued that the spheres of generation and gender are inseparable when examining Islamic consumption in the domestic sphere. In this
respect, I follow Yanagisako and Collier’s (1987) idea that gender and kinship are mutually constructed and that these aspects ‘...are realized together in particular cultural, economic, and political systems.’ (7). In seeing Malay middle-class homes as social wholes, products of the unification of gender and kinship, I examine how divergent understandings and practices of Islamic consumption shape and are shaped by generation and gender.

Firstly, the focus is on distinctions in consumer behaviour in generational terms with special emphasis on excess and moderation. Evidently, there is divergence between younger and older informants, and this is mostly expressed in conceptualisations about individuality in consumption. Younger informants argued that individuality was the freedom of choice in the market for identities, whereas their parents’ generation was seen to be guided by traditionalism. To Maslina, this is reflected in the following way: ‘The old generations - they tend to follow the traditional way. You follow the customs.’ The cultural logic here is that culture and tradition coupled with material necessity and thrift produced a natural balance between excess and moderation.

To informants, the almost universal logic of middle-class existence was that the previous generation was thriftier than one’s own. Increased levels of income have gradually distorted any balance between necessity and luxury that now more than ever is seen as a moral problem that splits generations. As an example of generational differences, Jeti brought up shoes: ‘In shoes, my father can’t see why my sister and me need so many shoes. And to me it’s like different places you go to require different kinds of shoes. It has affected us quite a lot.’ In this generational conflict, material excess has completely displaced piety. To the older generation, the expressiveness involved in individual choices and preferences signifies excess of and in the body. The body in consumption, then, becomes a non-verbal sign of materialism that cannot be morally justified. In terms of generational divergences, the inner moral body of the past is being transformed into an outer and shallow form of embodiment through the excesses of consumption. Contrary to the social-cultural coherence of the traditional inner body of the past, the outer body can be seen as transformative, contaminating, inconstant and destructive in the eyes of the older generation.
To younger informants, thrift as an effect of necessity is absent. Conversely, in the eyes of the younger generation, previous generations lacked a sense of class, lifestyle and taste. These ideas are mostly linked to urbanisation as we see in the case of Hazan. To him, the affluence of his generation had produced a recent culture of display, especially in terms of clothing, whereas his parents’ generation in their kampung in Terengganu were more preoccupied with furniture and decoration:

‘That’s what makes me different. The older people there tend to wear gold because of its value - you can take it to the pawnshop if it’s necessary. But the young generations have a tendency to put money in the bank. So, my mom always said to my sister you have nothing, no gold bracelets, rings, necklaces. What do you spend your money on?’

The imperishableness, authenticity, materiality and endurance of gold, and its moral and economic values fall precisely between the two generations. In contrast, the consumption of the young is seen as immaterial, transitory and subjected to ever-shifting fashion. For the older generation, gold was a kind of saving worn on the body at all times, whereas putting money in the bank may be uncertain in times of trouble and due to a more general institutional mistrust compared to the kampung pawnshop.

In the parents’ generation, many of the above issues were of concern. Sardi drew attention to generational differences as a question of intimacy versus publicity. His generation will go for ‘The personal, food and things to bring to our house. Food is always cooked at the house, to make sure it is our own taste. The younger generation they always go outside for things and fast food because they have the choice.’ There is a world of difference between sustaining the body in the intimacy of the domestic sphere and the superficiality of public consumer culture. The body is subjected to a fetish-like image: it is composed of a benevolent and intimate core sustained by pure food that is threatened by external impurity.

The younger generation of individuality and luxury symbolically embody the artificiality and mass-production of the food they consume. These notions support the idea that modern bodies are signified through exposure to all that is external and pleasurable rather than authentically domestic. Another side of consumer culture among the older generation is the whole question of cultural continuities and discontinuities. Henny explained that her mother had started to like Bali style
furniture because her brother introduced it to her. The situation is the same with Azmi and Henny’s children: ‘They will follow us in what we do, but then when they grow up I think we leave it up to them, their own taste.’ This view, however, is not entirely consistent when it comes to clothing and rap culture: ‘The youngsters like to dress up like rappers.’, Azmi told me. Henny continued: ‘I’m a bit against that, not too much of it.’ This point of tension was obvious one day in the family’s home when the two sons returned from Islamic school. After entering the house, they soon changed into hip-hop inspired outfits and dozed off in front of MTV.

Concerns about media influences and advertising were even more pronounced in the purist group. Yasir explained that

‘We’re influenced by magazines, TV, movie stars. If they’re wearing Gucci, I want to wear Gucci. If they’re wearing Nike, I want to wear Nike. At the moment, it’s all coming from America because they’re so powerful. They have the money to spend.’

Branding is the core symbol of excessive individuality and consumption in the latest wave of globalisation and American cultural imperialism. In this sense, the young generation is more exposed to consumer culture and branding effects. It is within the single individual the struggle between secular and religious forces are taking place. Yasir asserted that ‘There’s no religious aspect to balance things and your lifestyle in everyday life.’ In Binsar’s eyes, the material and spiritual dialectic between generations was seen as the excess of pleasure: ‘The young like to spend more on entertainment. We don’t reject development, but at the same time we need a balance so I teach them morality and ethics. I have told them that wherever they go, they must have this balance.’ Purists contended that entertainment should always be confined to the home, e.g. in the form of magazines or television. None of the informants within this group stated in the questionnaire that they frequented any public entertainment outlets, testifying to the fact that entertainment in itself was seen as excessive enjoyment. But when entertainment was imported into the house it was legitimated. Watching movies in the home, however, worked as intergenerational sharing and compensation for external ‘lack’ of pleasure.

Irfan used his son as the primary example of how life was changing from generation to generation. When it was his son’s birthday, the son wanted what to Irfan were excessive gifts such as an expensive *Play Station*. As far as I could understand, the son did get the *Play Station* for his birthday. Murni had systematised
the effort to instil moderation in her children: ‘If they deserve it, did well in the exam, then we give them, we reward them, so we’re being cooperative and flexible.’ Murni elaborated, using the Internet as example. When the world changes with the Internet, the family also has to change and not just reject the Internet: ‘But we control them. At the end of the day, the consumption aspect is based on values that you hold.’ If not, individuality and excess will result in daring fashion and exposure of the body.

Murni is here directly addressing the pragmatists: ‘In Malaysia there’s a lot of Malays pretending to be Muslim, but they don’t practise Islam in their attire, smoking, drinking, because they lack the values. When they lack values, they can’t get values by learning the knowledge again.’ For purists, the Islamic element in consumption is a crucial material marker in terms of piety and moderation. Conversely, pragmatists claim that the externality of the material is only secondary to one’s inner, deeper worship, dedication and commitment. In effect, the purists in this instance are more preoccupied with Islam as consumption - the whole idea of excessive individuality and sexuality of the body involved in generational distinctions are explained as a series of imbalances producing a lack of spirituality and piety.

I now turn to the gender aspects. I argue that gender and class at all times work together so that ‘...consciousness of class always takes a gendered form.’ (Davidoff and Hall, 1987:16). In a suburban context where virtually every father, and, more recently, a substantial number of the mothers, are absent in everyday life, this made the display of fatherhood and fathering urgent (Gillis, 1996: 74). The gendered division of labour in the homes of informants was clearly tied to divergent perceptions of the nature of commodities, their nature, use and proper context.

In all but two of the homes, there was a clear gender division in terms of consumption and the personalisation of goods imported into the house. Not surprisingly, the dominant ideas among informants embodied a gendering between ‘soft’ objects such as food and clothes and interior taste preferences for women, on the one hand, and ‘hard’ objects, such as electronics and cars, on the other, for men. Hence, the consumption that was most intimately associated with the body and its sustenance was typically the domain of women. In the case of Azmi and Henny, who
lived in Henny’s mothers house, there was a clear element of generational and
gendering divergence present. The mother took care of everything that had to do
with food. In Henny’s mind, this fuelled elaborate plans of sharing household duties
with her husband when they had a place of their own. Azmi, unlike the majority of
male informants, was very clear in his ideas about the way their future home should
be decorated Bali style.

In only two families, was the otherwise strict division of labour tied to
various types of goods and their appropriation unconventional. For Udzir and Nur,
and Binsar and his wife, the buying of food and non-food was shared equally
between them. Izura and Yusof reflected a tendency towards a re-gendering of
consumption. Taking their own generation as a starting point, Izura noticed that in a
gender perspective these traditional patterns were changing. The trend was that in
‘Islamic societies the money is controlled by the husband.’ The husband is the wage
earner and it is his duty to pay for food and clothes for the children and the wife, and
give them education. Izura: ‘In this house my husband gives me the money to shop. I
will use it in whatever way I like.’ One of her daughters shared the earning and
shopping equally with her husband, and Izura took this as an example of the
breaking up of the traditional ways due to changed gender roles, education and the
general development in Malaysia:

> ‘My daughter and son-in-law, they go shopping together, make the decisions together.
>
> It’s different from me. I will buy whatever fish or fruits I like. Of course, I will see
> what my husband likes to eat. So, if he likes that I will buy more of that.’

What seems to be emerging is re-gendering of the object domains of decoration and
food especially. Yasir stated that ‘I always quarrel with my wife when it comes to
decoration.’ Conversely, food was strictly the domain of the ‘minister of the kitchen.’
Non-food items were exclusively Yasir’s responsibility, including football dress for
their son, which could be seen as a performance of masculinity.

In sum, to the younger generation the world is much more fluid and open compared
to their parents’ generation, and even more so their grandparents’ generation.
Informants’ concern with and desire to control hip-hop culture, fast food, the
Internet, brands, mobile phones and entertainment in their children’s generation
reflect their own heartfelt ambiguity towards all these objects they invest in. Thus,
excess in generational terms is a constant negotiation of culturally ambiguous objects that are deeply embedded in family sharing and simultaneously are seen as the root of social fragmentation and individuality. Not surprisingly, the purist group articulated their concern more in religious terms compared to pragmatists, while in the younger group Islam never really materialises.

None of the women in the purist group were professionally employed outside the home. Yasir, for example, explained that he preferred that his wife did not work outside the home even though she possessed the necessary qualifications. Alternatively, both Binsar’s wife and Murni had each previously had a job. To my mind, this could be explained on the basis of purist anxieties of exposing female bodies in the front region.

In the lives of the younger generation, gendering is clearly becoming a much more complex field. In cases where both parents are working, there often emerges an ideal of sharing of responsibilities in terms of the division of labour inside as well as outside the house. Moreover, a relatively high level of educational capital typical of the Malay middle class affords more complex patterns of domestic consumption (Davidoff and Hall, 1987: 450). A frequent issue in women’s and family magazines is involving men in the work and responsibilities of the home, and it may be this tendency that is being appropriated in the younger part of the Malay middle class. My impression was that in terms of intimising Islam in the home, i.e. decorating prayer rooms, preferences in and placement of paraphernalia such as Islamic effects, arranging \textit{kelas agama} etc., this was mainly organised by women. Nevertheless, there was a tendency among purist Malay males to see an increased interest in translating proper Islamic ideas into the decoration and taste preferences of the home. An example of this is the quest for fashionable simplicity in decoration, which is a primary aspect of some interior decoration magazines.

The above observations were not significantly different in the case of Indian informants. The almost universally held perception of younger generations as more pragmatic and excessive was generally shared in the context of the pluralisation of choices involved in modern consumption. Parents invoked Hinduism to demarcate social boundaries in terms of moderation versus excess. Chinese informants, however, would not to the same extent embody religion as specific plots concerning gender and generation. The proportion of women working professionally outside the
home was comparable in all three groups. The most general feature was the impact of the intensified struggle for social mobility most significantly manifest in new gender and generational middle-class identities performed through different forms of consumption.

THE BODY OF HALALISATION
At a more aggregate level, this section serves the purpose of exploring the way in which Malaysian bodies have been subjected to halalisation on the one hand, and theoreatisation on the other. In other words, a number of broader arguments and assumptions pave the way for more detailed examinations of the two object domains in which halalisation has been felt most forcefully, i.e. food and dress, to be explored in the two subsequent sections.

The growing preoccupation with the body and bodily functions are perhaps linked to at least one ideological transformation at present, namely ‘...the urge to aestheticize modern life. The body as image – in advertisement photographs, on television, and in the flesh...’ (Asad, 1997: 43). Today, the body may well operate as the prime site for conceptualising, practising, and critiquing consumption. Within consumer culture itself, images of the body are dominant, and the consumption of these images constitutes the inner logic of this culture (Featherstone, 1991: 178). In the Malaysian context, this new visibility and phantasmagorical qualities of the body come into being as what I have called a novel ontology of consumption, tightly linked to the advertising, promotion and marketing of an ever growing range of commodities and services. In all of this, bodies in Malaysia have been subjected to a number of moral, political and religious discourses.

In Mauss’ classic text on *Techniques of the Body* (1973: 73), the habitus is understood as habits that vary between individuals, societies, education, property, fashion and prestige. The habitus, then, emerges as ‘...the techniques and work of collective and individual practical reason.’ Practices, Mauss writes, are highly dependent on education and ‘imitative action’ so that there is no ‘natural way’ for adults (74). These techniques of the body make it both a technical object and a technical means (75). Mauss concludes by commenting that ‘I think that there are necessarily biological means of entering into ‘communication with God’.’ (87). Halalisation and the new
ontology of consumption in the Malay middle class encompass a type of habitus that is informed by daily habits of Malay consumers. This type of habitus is inseparable from a multitude of religious and political discourses that all seek to discipline Malaysian bodies. Techniques of the body are part of performances that ideally balance the display of class while covering/dressing the body properly.

Human bodily existence can be seen as both the basis and the ‘model’ of the constitution of the subject or the self. The body is essential in consumption as it is the site for often involuntary and revealing display. Bourdieu (1977: 72-82) developed the concept of habitus further, referring to the existence of social reality in individuals, and the social and material world outside. Habitus encompasses principles of practice in interaction between social structures, systems and actors. For Bourdieu, the most significant process of embodiment is the interaction that takes place between the bodies, on the one hand, and space structured around myth and ritual on the other. Bourdieu writes that

‘...it is in the dialectical relationship between the body and a space structured according to the mythico-ritual oppositions that one finds the form par excellence of the structural apprenticeship which leads to the em-bodying of the structures of the world, that is, the appropriating by the world of a body thus enabled to appropriate the world’. (89)

The rise of institutionalised and standardised Islamic consumption in Malaysia has produced bodies that are less given and more open to multiple choices and interpretations. An obvious example is that of dress in connection with the fusing of Islamic requirements and fashion in contemporary Malaysia.

The *dakwah* movements have, according to Nagata (1994: 104), been subject to a Western feminist stereotypisation of veiled women, portraying these as repressed and anti-modern. What is often left out, Nagata convincingly argues, is that many of these women are prominent in the middle class, highly educated and cosmopolitan. These Malay middle-class women actively pursue an Islamic worldview and lifestyle that makes *dakwah* fashions compatible with popular and foreign-influenced trends (112). Islamic meaning is inscribed into the attire in a way that retains modesty and control while simultaneously signalling experimentation. Hence, *dakwah* dress symbolised depeasantization, the exploration of modern Malay class mobility, and gender identity (Ong, 1995: 181).
Ritualization produces distinctive forms or types of bodily actions in different contexts. Therefore, different situations and events address and activate different perceptions of bodies. The economy of managing these, often conflicting, conceptualisations and practices of the body, its responsibilities and performances may call for routine control of the body. Both Islamic revivalists and state nationalism, on the background of the emergence of novel forms of consumption and consumer practices, have created images of the body as a key element in their competing visions of the Malaysian nation (183).

These conflicts reflect different positions within Islam in Malaysia as a discursive tradition in Asad’s (1986) phrase. State nationalism and Islamic revivalism, each following relatively distinct moral logics, ‘...have incited and intensified concerns and ambivalence about female, sex, space, and actions, and more generally, how competing knowledge-power schemes deployed to patrol the borders between races and classes have affected women in different classes in different ways.’ (Ong, 1995: 159). The crisis of national and moral uncertainty is most visible in the middle class as an intermediate class subject to resurgent Islam and idealisations of pious embodiment.

I propose to see these ideological manifestations and articulations of the body as critically absorbed, handled and negotiated within families as a primary influence in the way in which different ideas and practices of bodies come into being. In fact, the tension of the commodity discussed above has a parallel in the body. Like the commodity, there is a tension between its intrinsic properties or dispositions, due to ‘blood’ or gender. Most of these dispositions would be assumed to be ‘evil’ or ‘base’, especially in the case of women. Consequently, practice emerges through the way in which these things can be disciplined, amplified or mitigated through learned behaviour, adornment or comportment.

Ong and Peletz discuss the ‘...political nature of symbols and practices surrounding the body politic and the human body.’ (1995: 6). The body politic involves what they call entangled ‘cross-referencing inscriptions of power’ or ways in which society and its diverse articulations of values, expectations or demands are symbolically mapped onto the body. Intrinsic to these articulations of embodiment, generally and more specifically in the Malaysian context, is the ability of regimes to perform relatively simple inscriptions of ideology and power onto the subject. In
much the same vein, Khuri (2001) outlines a fairly fixed body ideology of Islam that does not seem to be open to transformation. In the Malaysian context, the conditions of embodiment have changed dramatically over the past 30 years due to the emergence of urban consumer ontologies in the wider nationalisation of Islam.

I argue that regimes may be modes of self-discipline that are not uncontested or stable, but moulded by individual understandings and practices concentrated in performances. Examining the body politic from an ethnographic optic highlights the interlocking of official and state articulations and that of the private sphere to capture ‘…two discourses that are in practice a single rhetoric of community, family, even body, and both of which are therefore intensely entailed in each other.’ (Herzfeld, 1997:171).

In Shamsul’s (1998b: 11-14) discussion of the body and reproductive technology in Malaysia, the central argument is that to Malays as social actors the body is made up of a biological, social-cultural and moral body, each with a number of sub-components. These conceptualisations of the body evolved through interaction between local conditions and historical as well as global influences (11). Shamsul sets out to explain how the concurrent existence of distinctive bodies bears reference to quite different cultural and historical understandings. He argues that the notion of the Western consuming body appeared and developed ‘…in the context of crass materialism…’ characteristic of Western imperialist modernity and concludes that ‘…the expressions of the consumerist-social body are often contemporary, capitalistic and, surprisingly, existentialist in nature, with little ‘moral-theological’ concerns.’ (13). Conversely, the moral body is strictly a ‘moral-theological’ or religious one, which is responsible for certain kinds of private and public behaviour such as dressing patterns etc. (op.cit.). After listing these different notions of the body, Shamsul addresses the question of the body in connection with material status and the Islamically inspired dress worn by the majority of Malay women, the baju kurung (long loose robe in Arab style) and mini telekung (headscarf).

In Shamsul’s understanding, there is no actual conflict between these two domains as they relatively unproblematically pertain to the different notions of the body. The dress and practices of Malay women refer to divergent ‘…meanings and relations to different parts of the body concept…’ in the self-understanding of women (14). Analytically, one may be able to separate these bodily spheres in detail,
but in the everyday lives of social actors, as will be evident in regard of Malays in TTDI, these divisions are not that smooth and functional. This type of analytical distinction may instead blind us to the social ambivalences and contradictions existing between the various notions of bodies. To return to Goffman’s dramaturgical metaphors, the body is always evoked in performances that endeavour to strategically contain the above ambivalences. According to Shamsul, bodies shape and are shaped by consumption and religion as seemingly independent spheres.

Against this compartmentalisation, I contend that the religious and consuming bodies in the Malay middle class are inseparable in terms of analysis and to social actors themselves. In the ethnography, clothing and bodies occupy a central place. This discussion of the body is predominantly focused on women’s bodies, as it is women who most forcefully have been subjected to intensified Islamic requirements in the wake of the nationalisation of Islam and halalisation. It is, nevertheless, mostly men who have articulated these Islamic requirements. Once again, the realm of the family in the home is the site where these ideas and practices are negotiated. In spite of male dominance, female informants possessed strategic knowledge of dressing as a particular form of Islamic consumption situated between public display of class and covering the body. Moreover, this strategising has everything to do with performing in the spaces of the front and back regions, respectively.

HALALISATION I: EATING HALAL

This object domain has traditionally been subject to the inscription of Islamic understandings of halal and haram, and from this initiation these ideas have deepened and widened in Malaysia to be inscribed into a large number of other object domains. Historically, the halal/haram distinctions in Malaysia gained momentum in the wake of *dakwah*, but have been diversified and individualised as understanding and practice in everyday life.

Jeti declared that Islam and consumption could not be differentiated or thought of as separate entities or practices. Islam performs a dual function in consumption. Firstly, it works as a symbolic guide demarcating the boundary between moderation and excess. To Jeti, as to many other informants, Islam provides this limit: ‘We’re thought not to be too excessive and only buy what one needs. It’s best to be in the middle. Islam guides how excessive my buying could be.’ Secondly,
there is the whole complex of Islamic commodities that in the Malaysian context was initiated by groups such as Arquam and their mass-production of halal ‘non-commodities’. These new forms of Islamic capitalist enterprises are often co-ops and informants such as Jeti find that these as yet more alternative sources in halalisation are more authentic expressions of not only halalisation embodied in products and services, but also action and engagement.

Capitalism, however, is adjusting to the recent requirements of a growing number of Muslims in Malaysia and the Islamic market is expanding rapidly. Jeti explained that ‘Previously, it was very difficult to go to a restaurant and ask is it halal or not, because they don’t have signs. But now I see a lot of Chinese shops that start putting up signs or take the trouble to get the Islamic halal recognition.’ In the end, it is the privilege of the state to recognise and standardise these businesses according to halal requirements, which obviously is an immensely complex endeavour inviting a wide range of more or less legitimate interests to influence this type of decision making. Another issue is that for the most dedicated among the purist register, 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 (bumiputra) in order to be Islamically acceptable in the wave of halalisation.

Halalisation may contribute to the fusing of myths of the historic Islamic nation with more modern imaginations. These imaginations could be enacted through rituals that are individualised to invoke different notions of the nation. More specifically, the ongoing nationalisation of Islam is discursively driven in that it encompasses constant competition for the most appropriate Islamic practices, pushing and contesting boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Simultaneously, Malay middle-class groups resisting the pressure for correct conduct and piety are subjected to forms of moral pressure.

In the purist group of informants, halalisation is morally given, while the pragmatists either reluctantly accept the imposition of halalisation or simply reject it as a material and thus shallow display of belief – as Islamic materialism or excess. An expression of this type of resistance is Azmi’s phrase that ‘Islamic belief alone should be fine.’ This observation is supported by Sloane’s (1999) work on how Malay entrepreneurs negotiate between their newly acquired wealth and Islam. She writes that the pursuit of wealth in Islamically approved ways is central to modern Islamic
identity formation. These Malays rejected the very visible and Islamic manifestations of the *dakwah* Malays:

‘...my informants carefully distinguished their demonstration of faith with that of the highly visible, highly conformist fundamentalist Malays. These ideas about the visibility of faith, and moreover, how to demonstrate faith, became the modest terms of their contestation. True faith, people told me, could not be seen by anyone but Allah.’ (71).

The practice of veiling was described by these informants as ‘merely a costume’ that did not necessarily reflect the true faith of a person. Likewise, praying in the mosque was seen as a visible ritual act, which, nevertheless, did not indicate that men who did not pray in the mosque neglected their prayers (op.cit). The faith of the modern Malay individual was personalised in ways that only Allah could comprehend. Sloane’s account, however, may be too fixed on the way in which these public representations are literally producing and produced by Islamic discourses. Conversely, attention should be paid to pragmatists’ perception of the material piety of the purists as merely a public performance in the front region, often to be matched by material and quite un-Islamic excesses in intimacy. Moreover, the element of class as a powerful conditioner in Malay middle-class identities is left unexamined in Sloane’s analysis. Finally, the question of food in halalisation is far more subtle, confused and private compared to that of public demonstrations of faith and fashion.

Now back to the ethnography. In the eyes of Azmi and Henny, Islamic business was tolerable as long as it was not ‘extremist’. Extremism in this context can signify two points of scepticism: firstly, radical groups such as Arquam promoting overly alternative ideas through the marketing of Islamic products; secondly, the apotheosis of the state involved in the certification, legitimisation, and, ultimately, inscription of commodities with sacred or profane qualities. In most cases, pragmatists would argue according to the logic that ‘Buying things is totally personal, but Islam forbids overspending.’ This flexible standard image is entirely open to interpretation and practice. Consequently, purists critiqued it for being elusive and pragmatic. Another point of criticism materialises in the case of Siti, who felt that the whole idea about Islam in consumption, e.g. Islamic banking, was insufficiently argued and altogether unconvincing. Islam as an everyday guide to consumption was to her a question of halal food and clothes that would cover the
body in an acceptable yet fashionable manner. Conversely, to Yasir, for example, halalisation is not a recent trend but a compulsory and authoritative moral invocation of the roots of Islam: ‘It’s something that is required. And something Muslims must support, actually.’ This is a mythical return to the era of the Prophet and the ideal community. Irfan and Murni provide perhaps the most accurate account of the force of consumption in Islam. They stress that it is mandatory for Muslims to be aware of halal and haram and that this knowledge cannot be externally imposed, as was the case with the Taliban in Afghanistan – it must start from within. Therefore, it is the moral obligation of individuals to buy into Islamic consumption and return to the master plan of the Prophet that will provide modern consumers with Islamic enlightenment.

In conjunction with halalisation, which can be seen as modes of purification taking various forms, it is noteworthy that urban Malays are often worried and afraid of being poisoned or sorcerized. Peletz (2002: 237) writes that ‘These fears and anxieties attest to heightened concerns with bodily vigilance, the integrity of the Malay social body, and the stability of the Malaysian body politic.’ These fears can easily target foods and drink that formally are halal certified, but suspected of being haram and thus impure. Food is probably the most essential object domain of all, where a multitude of social, religious, and material transformations intersect.

Taste in food, the context of buying it, and the transformation of the dapur (kitchen) where it is being prepared, is now the centre of attention. Statistically and through participant observation, it was evident that house culture is being transformed since the kitchen in the typical Malay middle-class house has been radically modernised and industrialised with the import of a multitude of kitchen appliances. These transformations of the inner domain mirror wider societal changes, most notably in

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8 Inspired by Bourdieu (1984: 514), I tested the keywords below to set off discussions of food and taste. The questions were: When you have guests for a meal, what kind of meals do you prefer to serve? Simple, but well-presented (makanan yang bersahaja tetapi diberikan dengan baik); delicate and exquisite (enak dan sangat indah sekali); plentiful and good (banyak dan bagus); pot-luck (seadanya); appetizing and economical (merangsang selera dan ekonomis); original and exotic (yang asli dan yang aneh-aneh); traditional Malaysian cuisine (masakan tradisional Malaysia)(In Bourdieu’s text, French cuisine) or other (specify).

9 In the survey I learned that besides a refrigerator and oven, the vast majority of families regardless of class fraction, ethnicity and religion owned a toaster, blender/mixer, microwave oven, baking machine, rice cooker (over 98%), juice maker, electric kettle, and a number of other appliances.
the form of increased affluence, material status, and the fact that a large number of Malay middle-class women worked outside the home while still being in charge of buying groceries and preparing food.

Peletz’ (227) discussion of the feast as culturally contested between dakwah and ordinary Malays highlights a whole range of Islamic distinctions that add another layer of signification to Bourdieu’s categories. For ordinary Malays, Peletz writes, the attacks by resurgent Malays are commonly seen as aimed at the ‘…sanctified elements of their basic values and cultural identities.’ Especially the realm of feasting (kenduri) is subject to these points of criticism of the sinful wastefulness and incorporation of pagan animistic and Hindu-Buddhist beliefs. Feasting may be seen as a concentration of excessive presentation, handling and context. These controversies are all the more apparent when it is taken into account that the hosting of feasts in connection with all kinds of celebrations is one of many routes to status and prestige.

Food consumption and its religious, social and cultural context may be the closest one can come to a core symbol in the everyday lives of Malay families. I was invited to celebrations in the homes of informants on numerous occasions. In addition to Peletz’ insightful comments above, there are other dimensions to food consumption, namely the context in which it is bought.

My survey shows that 28% of Malay respondents as their first priority bought groceries in a supermarket, often the nearby Jaya Jusco (Picture 26) in One Utama, 22% in the wet market, 18% in a Mini Market, most likely Pasar Raya (Picture 27), 16% in a Hypermarket (Pictures 28 and 29), 14% in a local grocery store, and 2% elsewhere. The majority of respondents, 51%, listed that they commonly bought their groceries in two different shops, 27% in one shop, and 18% in three shops, whereas only a minority went to more than three shops. Finally, the vast number of choices with respect to buying groceries indicates that strategies involved in food consumption have exploded in the wake of the pluralisation of the food market.

10 In TTDI Masyarakat No. 2 September 1996, the Message from the Chairman on the front page read: ‘Much has been said about our buoyant economy, affluent life-style, high-rise apartments, new housing estates, expressways and now the multi-media super corridor. There should be no doubt in the mind of any Malaysian that we will achieve Vision 2020 under the able leadership of our Prime Minister and his Cabinet colleagues. However, amidst all the signs of prosperity and good living, it is timely that we consider tackling the problem of proliferation of hawker stalls which we encounter along
most of the city streets today. Many of these decrepit ‘premises’ are operated by aliens and are breeding ground for flies and rodents. The social costs behind their relatively cheap fare are apparent in the attendant litter, clogged drains, stuck traffic and their insidious hazards to health and public safety. (...) As our country prepares for the Commonwealth Games in 1998, we would urge the Kuala Lumpur City Hall to spruce up the streets by relocating these hawkers in properly constructed hawker centres (...) This will no doubt enhance our country’s image as an emerging Newly Industrialised Country. ’ The central argument is that hawker stalls are anachronisms blocking the passage to the order of urban and suburban modernity. Removing the overt impurity of these food stalls will pave the way for the Commonwealth Games as a platform for the global display of national progress and development.
Consequently, the mass availability of imported food can increase anxieties about contamination while this food may also be a sign of refined and exotic taste. This is symptomatic of and corresponds to the commercialisation of the kitchen within each Malay middle-class home as described above. In short, food consumption is a crucial component in the market for identities.

Three different types of approaches to the field of proper Malay food consumption emerged. Firstly, the approach seen in the accounts of Azmi and
Henny. Azmi and Henny would go to either the Pasar Raya, the wet market in TTDI, or one of the hypermarkets, but never to Jaya Jusco in One Utama where Azmi found that ‘The prices are quite stiff so we prefer the hypermarket.’ Having guests for a meal, Azmi would prefer the family served food that was oriented towards simplicity and was appetizing and economic, whereas ‘original and exotic’ was openly rejected. In Azmi’s view, there was an element of familiarity present in going to local shops, but it was not a determining factor in the everyday life of the family. Most important were price consciousness and thrift as determinants for food consumption. In relation to the tension between feast and meal, Azmi and Henny often attacked the excess feasting and celebrations of wealthier groups as excessive displays whose sole function was the performance of luxury.

Necessity is the driving logic in this type of reasoning, signified by price consciousness and thrift. An effect of necessity in the everyday choices of the family produced a radical critique of luxury and excess of the affluent. This criticism was expressed in much more political terms, however, than in the purist group. Consequently, there was no stress on halalisation in itself, but rather plots that would call for a more equal distribution of resources against state nationalism as materialism benefiting the rich.

The second approach is extreme variation as personified by Izura and Yusof. Izura listed that she went to every kind of shop for various reasons. The grocery store ‘To buy certain things, easy parking and long opening hours.’ The mini market for ‘Conveniences, parking, because they also sell wet foods, vegetables and fish. When I have run out of fresh food and I just need a little bit, I go there.’ The supermarket, ‘…for certain products that are not available in the mini market, especially imported products like cheese.’ Hypermarket, ‘…when I want to buy something in bulk that is cheaper. I don’t go there every day.’ Wet market, ‘…when I need fresh foods and normally I go there once a week. It’s quite fair. Not to say the price in the wet market is cheaper than the Mini Market. We never know because we can’t see the weight. We just believe what they say. The Mini Market is cleaner.’

The buying of food appears to be a highly ritualised practice that involves careful planning and organisation. Its ritualistic features emerge as reiterated and temporally structuring practices that require certain skills and knowledge for
optimal performance. Izura was extremely conscious of the particular audience or guests. She declared that she would serve anything depending on the particular audience of performances. If there was ‘special’ guests such as foreigners she would serve something ‘ethnic’ or

“If I know that this particular person loves Western food, then I present Western food. If I have my kampung friends here, I cannot serve spaghetti. They won’t eat it. So, I have to serve them rice, curry and a proper meal. And if I have a minister coming to have a dinner in my house, which I do sometimes, then I’ll have a very good presentation, it could be mixed fruit. Whereas appetizing and economical - that is a daily affair. Original, of course, I do that because I was a home science teacher once.’

This clear example of performance signifies how food as deeply embedded cultural fronts works to constitute class as a performative category through proper knowledge of legitimate taste.

Izura: ‘Traditional Malay food of course we serve friends or foreigners or... not really foreigners, but Chinese or Indian friends.’ These ideas testify to the fact that ethnic interaction normally takes place among more privileged groups. In the accounts of the remaining informants, sharing food and socialising with the other ethnic groups was, at best, limited to yearly open house arrangements. Secondly, she prefers to serve Chinese and Indians authentically rich national food as if to compensate for their lack of nationness and re-embodiment of the national. The category ‘delicate and exquisite’, in Bourdieu typical of ‘upper class’, Izura associated with French cuisine: ‘I don’t really serve French food because it is so little food, they might think I’m stingy.’

In this instance, the performance aspect depends on the proper audience and its ability to recognise legitimate taste. Izura was not quite convinced that these skills were always present in her guests. Altogether, she was extremely conscious and accommodating in terms of food, also in her own family: ‘Today, I am cooking a black pepper steak for my daughter because she doesn’t like to eat rice. She prefers Western food, so I have to accommodate her taste whereas my eldest son loves rice and grilled food, an American barbecue kind of thing.’ Sharing of food in the family, which may be seen as one of the basic rituals of family life, is transforming into a performance of accommodating diverse taste preferences of the younger and far more globally oriented generation. On other occasions Izura complained that
materialism was most clearly embodied in the spoiled yuppie culture imported from the West, where for the most part her own children had received their education. Izura and Yusof were the most consistent buyers of organic food. Organic food in Malaysia could be seen as a novel form of purity in food available to the most affluent groups. The above attests to a very expressive form of food culture in which elaborate ideas and knowledge of superior taste are prominent. They bought their organic products in a supermarket or a small store specialising in organic products that had opened in TTDI. On the occasions I visited the home of Izura and Yusof, a soft drink or tea together with biscuits were served. In the eyes of both Azmi/Henny and Izura/Yusof the question of halal preferences was presupposed but not carefully elaborated to the extent that will become evident below.

Yasir most strongly embodied the power of halalisation involved in consumer preferences in everyday life. I previously described how he minutely divided Malays into segments according to their adherence to extremely elaborate ideas about what was considered Islamically acceptable and what was not. These distinctions produced and maintained purity versus impurity, and, in the end, legitimate Islamic taste. There was an expression of halalisation as the support of Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese through consumption. Consequently, he maintained that his favourite shop is the small Malay-owned Azlinah (Picture 30) right next to the condominium where he lives. Going to this local shop also was in accordance with his principle of buying a minimum of 10 percent of the family’s goods in bumiputera shops. He also shopped at Pasar Raya, owned by Malays, because they had a good range of things at a fair price: ‘We want to support Muslim businesses.’ Nevertheless, the family would regularly go to Jaya Jusco in the One Utama mall to buy fresh food that they could not buy in the small shop even though this store presumably was owned by Chinese. Yasir was equally attracted to serving food that was ‘simple and well presented’, ‘delicate and exquisite’, ‘appetising and economical’, ‘original and exotic’ and ‘traditional Malaysian cuisine’.
Purists work hard to stretch food halalisation to involve proper preferences, taste, handling, presentation and context. Thus, the whole complex of food has been subjected to processes of ritualization in a world of consumer choices. Douglas (2004: 157) writes that

‘...food is not likely to be polluting at all unless the external boundaries of the social system are under pressure. (...) Before being admitted to the body some clear symbolic break is needed to express food’s separation from necessary but impure contacts. The cooking process, entrusted to pure hands, provides this ritual break.’

The uncertainty involved in food consumption seems to incite this new form of stringency within the logics of halalisation. The halalness of a product is not directly verifiable through smell or appearance so, as in the case of organic products, it is mainly a question of trust in its certification. Ideally, this certification will remove or mend malevolence in support of the lighter side of the commodity. Instead of delivering what I would call a stable ontology of Malay consumption, halalisation appears to cause immense confusion and social fragmentation.

In terms of the social context of eating, the preferences of most informants were preconditioned on who the guest was. Other informants reflecting comparable ideas would be Binsar, Jeti and Irfan/Murni. Purists, interestingly, do not
consistently reject establishments that are associated with materialism or Chinese capitalist dominance. Most of all, everyday choices based on convenience and thrift seem to be determining for their decisions. Another point is that comparatively there was no discursive difference between the purist and the pragmatic group concerning the modernisation of the kitchen in the form of the import of kitchen appliances into the house. From survey material and participant observation I learned that the only visible difference was one of quality and design in these appliances and that point could for the most part be explained on the basis of class fraction above anything else. There is, however, a tendency to see that the local, patriotic, moderate, ethnic and Islamic element is discursively more present with purists compared to pragmatists. Most significantly, these concerns for the purist group do not work through the practice of abstention, but rather as careful organisation, weighing and juxtaposition of the clearly acceptable against that which is more problematic.

In sum, informants reflected general adherence to halal principles in terms of food. All informants conveyed that this was the single most significant principle. Comparatively, the aspect of moderation and excess involved in the object domain of food seemed to be far more informed by ideas and practices of class than by Islamic preferences. Hence, performing moderation becomes more and more difficult, and even insignificant, as one moves up the social latter. Yasir, for one, had no problem with idealising food normally associated with the taste of excess and exoticism as long as it was halalised.

Performance appears to be of particular relevance here as it highlights what each single informant wants to signal through food in the light of classing on the one hand and halalisation on the other. In this struggle, food as a crucial class conditioner is unmatchable. In fractions of the middle class, there is a high level of reflexivity involved in presenting and representing taste to a specific target group. That is, informants are not only aware of what type of food they personally would serve, but also what other individuals or groups, audiences, would expect from them.

Most urban Malays consider alcohol and its consumption haram. Nevertheless, the consumption of alcohol was embedded in a number of strategies. Only Hazan admitted to consuming alcohol even though he was aware that a Malay drinking alcohol ‘…was always considered a sinful man or girl. You really have to
know the group, the crowd itself. I know Malay Muslims who are drinking alcohol here, but they are always careful whom they address.’ On one occasion, I was with Hazan and a few of his colleagues in Bangsar, one of Kuala Lumpur’s entertainment districts plastered with bars, discos, and restaurants. There he drank beer in public while his colleagues from University Malaya did not. Hazan’s admittance of drinking was in accordance with his more general critique of Islam as the suppressive moral system he knew so well from his childhood in Terengganu and the moralistic dakwah student groups at University Malaya. The question of where alcohol is consumed, in public or privately, is of central significance to the pragmatists, who would emphasise that alcohol consumption is a personal choice and clearly forbidden in public. There is a stark contrast between the discursive haramness of alcohol consumption following the whole dakwah intensification about proper conduct and piety of the body, and the question of personal freedom in the private and covert domain of the home.

Against this image of drinking, purists considered alcohol consumption completely forbidden. Evoking the powerful literalness of scriptural argumentation, Irfan explained that the prohibition against alcohol in this lifespan of maybe 70 years was bearable as ‘In the next life, God will give you a river of wine. The prohibition is actually just a test because the knowledge of the religious is not there.’ Murni further explained that the Prophet clearly forbids alcohol on the ground that ‘We humans do not know how to control ourselves. But I promise you everything in the next life if you can only control it now. A lot of people don’t know that.’

HALALISATION II: DISPLAYING CLASS AND COVERING THE BODY

Bourdieu writes that the middle classes have ‘...a degree of anxiety about external appearances, both sartorial and cosmetic, at least outside and at work.’ (1984: 201). The project for the Malay middle class, and especially for women, is displaying the classing and fashioning of the body in material terms while performing piety. Thus, the tudung has taken on meaning as an essential commodity in everyday life. In magazines, the proper wearing and handling of the tudung was a frequent issue. Younger girls in particular are subjected to a plethora of advice seemingly intended to instil standards for correct appropriation against experimental personalisation.
Hence, Islamic meaning is inscribed into the attire in a way that retains modesty and control while simultaneously signalling experimentation. The company *Sri Munawwarah* located in TTDI has specialised in clothing aimed at a Muslim audience, initially produced especially for *Hajj* and *Umrah* (visit to Mecca outside the time of pilgrimage). Among my informants, this clothing was considered Islamically fashionable as an expression of legitimate taste to those who could afford it and excessive and unattainable to those who could not. The company is run by a Malay family, where the mother is a designer and head of production and the daughter is in charge of marketing and PR. When I interviewed the PR representative in the shop, she argued that the marked interest in this type of clothing is taking place because ‘It appeals to human nature. I think lots of people are trying to get in touch with their inner self rather than being materialistic.’ Similarly, Giddens (1991: 62) writes that dress is ‘...a means of symbolic display, a way of giving external form to narratives of self-identity.’ The question then is how dress materialised in the narratives of taste and dress among my informants, how dress as a specific form of commodity is personalised and appropriated as a class conditioner in Islam.

In an interview with a representative from the feminist Islamic organisation Sisters in Islam (18 January 2002), the discussion was mainly focused on debates over the wearing of the *tudung*, which she personally had abandoned. She argued that the culture around the mandatory status of wearing the *tudung* in many cases started in conservative universities such as Universiti Malaya: ‘I don’t feel comfortable going to that university because if you’re not wearing *tudung* they will look at you.’ Moderate students at UM told her that they often felt pressurised and controlled by the *dakwah* students there. Her own family was unaware of her decision to abandon the *tudung* that she initially wore because of family and peer pressure, she explained. When she started working, the *tudung* was taken off because ‘I feel that it’s not me. I don’t want to be pretentious. Normally, I will just put on a simple headscarf if I go to see my family, but they are very particular.’ She described how she knew other women who did not wear *tudung* before they got married, but ‘Once they get married, the husband will pressure the woman to wear *tudung*. Sometimes I’m scared also.’

11 My male Malay research assistant felt offended by these statements when transcribing the interview with the Sisters in Islam representative. He told me that she was exaggerating the level of the pressure on women to wear the *tudung* and argued that wearing the *tudung* was mostly a personal choice for the majority of women.
In general, Bourdieu’s data show that in terms of clothes ‘suit my personality’ as well as ‘chic and stylish’ are the preferences in the New Petite Bourgeoisie and the middle-class fractions (534-35). In comparison, moving from working class to upper class, the category ‘classically cut and good value for money’ becomes less prominent.12

Dress probably more than anything else embodies divergences according to gender, generation, class and one’s interpretation of Islam. A crucial characteristic of dress is that it both physically covers the body while revealing personality regarding fashion, class and Islam. The two groups of Malays that emerge from their religious and material divergences throughout the dissertation are actually self-constituted with regard to dress. By that I mean that there is a high level of reflexivity involved in clothing preferences as appropriate communication. To me, the way informants dressed was a first indication of their place in social and religious space.

The public performance of the purist group was correct and respectable. Binsar, for example, preferred clothing that was ‘comfortable’ and also ‘classically cut and good value for money’. This taste preference reflected the thriftiness of lower middle-class taste and moderation so central to understandings of the proper Islamic way. Normally, Binsar would buy most of his clothes in a chain store and often at Sri Munawwarah. He modestly explained that ‘The quality is good, but I just buy one or two things because it’s expensive. I wear it for teaching.’ Teaching as a particular part performed with specific properties seemed to legitimise what could be seen as excessive in shopping at Sri Munawwarah within his class fraction. Typically, Binsar would be dressed in, e.g. in grey trousers with knife-edge creases, a light blue silk shirt and a black kopiiah and he grew a janggut.

However, I once met him in One Utama where he was dressed quite differently for a quite different part it seemed; he was wearing none of the clothes mentioned above, but rather plain casual dress for strolling in the mall. Binsar’s wife was the informant who most of all covered the body in a plain grey robe that contrary to the remaining female informants was not subject to fashion, but rather

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12 Following Bourdieu (1984), I tested the following keywords to map informants’ taste in clothes: classically cut and good value for money (potangan klasik dan nilai yang baik atas wangnya); reflect fashion and suit your personality (menggambarkan mode yang baru dan cocok bagi keperibadiannya); sober and correct (sederhana dan yang sebenarnya); daring and out of the ordinary (keberanian dan luar biasa); comfortable (enak dipakai); chic and stylish (cantik dan bercaya); other (specify).
functioned as a uniform in their Islamic school. To Yasir, preferences were multidirectional. He strongly opposed the extremes of ‘sober and correct’ and ‘daring and out of ordinary’, and instead preferred ‘comfortable’ and ‘chic and stylish’, which are quintessential markers of middle classness in Bourdieu. Normally, he bought his clothes at Sri Munawwarah or from a chain store. Yasir had worked in the fashion industry, advancing from sales executive to supervisor to manager for Cerrutti 1881, which he described as an

‘International brand. High fashion. One suit costs RM3-4000. I do the buying in Paris or London. I was also involved with another brand, Replay, Italian brand, predominantly jeans theme. The regional office in Hong Kong. I travelled to Hong Kong frequently and was in charge of boutique outlets in Singapore.’

The times I met with Yasir he was dressed in a light short-sleeved shirt, black trousers, and a white *kopiah*. I could not help wonder about the nature of the rite of passage in Yasir’s life that could signify these bodily discontinuities. Of course, his past in the fashion industry could somehow explain his deep preoccupation with legitimate taste and the excess of others.

In the purist group, Irfan straight away would select the ‘comfortable’ category whereas Murni was far more flexible and felt that all categories appealed to her. Irfan would be wearing a white *kopiah* and white *baju kurung*, and grow a *janggut*, and Murni, a light green silk *baju kurung* and a colourful *tudung*. Jokingly, she remarked to me when I asked permission to take their picture: ‘So this will be your typical Muslim couple posing!’ On several occasions, Murni referred to proper dress and covering the body as a core point in Islam that pragmatists neglected or misunderstood. In the eyes of Murni, this type of negligence was socially constitutive of the pragmatic group. Dress style precisely signified the hybrid of fashionable experimentation with Malay middle-class Islam. The imprint of Islamically correct attire strongly shapes the following accounts of informants. Both Jomono and Maslina preferred clothes that were comfortable, whereas Maslina strongly rejected the category ‘daring and out of the ordinary’:

‘That one is out of my mind. Because we as Muslims cannot dress in something that is so daring and makes other people stare at us. So, we have to avoid that. Sometimes, anyway. Muslims in Malaysia are different from other Muslims, they tend to follow the Western style. They want something new and turn fashion into Muslim fashion.'
Even though they’re wearing tudung, they also wear what those who are not wearing tudung wear.’

This statement is expressive of how the body in Malaysia is constantly ambiguously signified as an object of discursive conflict between Islam and fashion for the purists, and Islam as fashion for the pragmatists. Maslina’s background in a reputable Islamic school in Penang is significant. Most importantly perhaps, her current status as a student may financially and morally restrict this kind of experimentation. Both Jomono and Maslina primarily bought their clothes in chain stores in one of Kuala Lumpur’s shopping malls. After graduation, Maslina stressed that she would favour high quality branded clothes to go with her then acquired middle-class status. The times I met Jomono and Maslina, they were both dressed in moderate clothing and Maslina was wearing her tudung. Economic necessity coupled with belonging to the age group most strongly subjected to Islamic claims of piety, morality and virtue was a strong influence in Maslina’s life. Interestingly, middle classing acquired after graduation in the case of Maslina signified a passage from moral and economic necessity to affluent respectability and experimentation. In effect, this was a passage from being ‘lower class’ as a student to becoming ‘middle class’ next year after graduation.

Turning to the more pragmatic group of informants, a number of accounts emerge that contrast with those above. To Azmi and Henny, economic necessity had transformed their preferences in clothes. Azmi explained that over the years he had lost interest in brands such as Calvin Klein: ‘As you grow older there’s actually no living to that.’ Regardless of this plot, the family still bought most of their clothes in a factory outlet for affordable designer brands, which would suit Azmi’s ideal of something ‘comfortable’. This strategy is all about maximising the display of status at minimal cost. Conversely, Henny would prefer more traditional and homemade clothes such as a baju kurung. Normally, Henny would be dressed in e.g. a white T-shirt with a Planet Hollywood print on the front, black and white-striped trousers and no tudung, and Azmi in a grey T-shirt with an East India Company print on the front and white trousers. Considering the couple’s blunt opinions regarding American cultural power and the current state of politics in Malaysia, this can be said to be a remarkable choice in everyday clothing. Moreover, these preferences may reflect a relaxed or indifferent attitude towards the body in Islam. In each of their preferences
in dress there is an element of attempted resistance towards commercial and Islamic legitimate taste in the form of buying brands in a factory outlet and toying with tailoring Islamically acceptable dress according to personal preferences. In the accounts of Sardi and Ahmad, there were similar plots present structured around modesty, thrift, comfort and contentment, and their style of dress fitted these relaxed notions. In the eyes of both informants, buying branded clothes (Ahmad) and Islamic clothes in *Sri Munawwarah* (Sardi) were seen as excessive and unnecessary displays.

Jeti’s preference would be ‘comfortable’ and ‘suit my personality’ supposedly exemplary of middle-class taste. She would ‘Just wear what’s my move for the day.’ Conversely ‘daring and out of ordinary’ seemed both luring and frightening: ‘I know when I wear certain things... not what most girls with tudung will wear. But I won’t consider it daring and out of ordinary.’ Most often when I met Jeti she would be wearing jeans, a loose-fitting white blouse and sneakers with her white tudung. On one occasion, however, when I was invited to the house of her family, she was not wearing the tudung. ‘Sober and correct’ were absolutely not keywords that appealed to her. As a child, Jeti’s clothes were made by her mother, who had a small tailor business. Now, Jeti bought most of her clothes in chain stores around Kuala Lumpur. These ideas comprise another example of how Islamic preferences are inseparable from wider ideas about class affiliation. As the only informant, Jeti declared that she was ‘at least middle class’. This obviously legitimated a level of experimentation that was not seen in other female informants. Jeti’s strong preoccupation with Islam was not directed towards a fixed moralistic codex of conduct, but was rather as a religious framework for discussing modern living. At the same time, she was more engaged in critiquing the government than in defining ideal faith and practice of Malays.

Izura and Yusof most clearly of all represent high economic and cultural capital. Izura explained that her preference in clothes was ‘classically cut and good value for money’ and ‘comfortable’ and explained that ‘we don’t really follow the fashion now because we are old. We did in our younger days.’ Yusof commented that ‘We follow fashion in relation to our religion.’ Izura was very detailed about the variety of places in which she went shopping for clothes: ‘I do like a tailor to make my dress like this.’ She was wearing a brown *baju kurung* and a brown tudung. Likewise, Yusof was dressed in brown and dark colours.
On another occasion when I visited Izura and Yusof in their mansion-like house, both were wearing T-shirts, Izura’s with a reprint of Picasso’s *Guernica* on the front. Izura explained that she bought her clothes wherever she found what she liked. The performance of simplicity is hard to miss as Izura explained that

‘When I was young and middle-age I was very westernised, dressed up to what is going on around me. But as I grow older, I’m more subdued so I go more for a simple dress style. Not really to follow fashion, wear something that I’m comfortable with. It doesn’t matter people say it’s an old-fashioned thing. Basically, I prefer to use fabric, either silk or cotton. I don’t go for artificial fibre because it’s too hot.’

Discussing clothes and taste was a favourite topic among informants and not only with women. Male informants were surprisingly explicit about appearance and preferences. Basically, I agree with Nagata’s contention that fashion, experimentation and resistance are involved in shaping taste preferences of the female informants in particular.

In suburbia, the elements of respectability and modesty infuse the practice of dress. Neighbours will often be an audience of strangers to whom you want to show a perfect façade. Thus, in terms of appropriate dress and practice, the ideal woman ‘...acts properly in social life, highly attuned to her relative position in all interactions. There is also a spillover into general comportment, which should conform to the behaviour appropriate to modesty.’ (Abu-Lughod, 1999: 108).

This exploration of dress shows that despite the nationalisation of Islam and influences from *dakwah*, the practice of dress is both split between the public and the private and linking these to spheres. Many of my female informants would wear the *tudung ad hoc* in the home, while it would be respectably worn in public to be taken off when the door was again closed. In this sense, the body is subjected to very different forms of control and opportunities in private and public. Informants were not particularly articulate about Islam in their discussion of taste preferences. They would rather as their starting point take the fusing of Islam and consumption as having created a whole new range of meanings and possibilities in the market for identities. For the purist group, the complexity involved in signifying status, fashion and piety had been made easier in the wake of halalisation, as I have shown in the local context with Sri Munawwarah. Here fashion, comfort, respectability and Islam fuse in perfectly balanced halalisation, which is simultaneously supportive of the
local community. In a way one could argue that Bourdieu’s functionalist and aesthetic extremes in this instance tend to meet. Bourdieu (1984: 247) asserts that the keyword for middle class in terms of fashion and dress is a ‘fashionable and original garment’. Conversely, I have shown that due to the influences outlined above, the favourite keyword of informants was ‘comfortable’, which Bourdieu quite differently links to middle-class ideal perceptions of the interior of the home. This twist may signal that most informants strategically or reflexively confer the comfortableness of the safe home to their dress, which quite differently transfixes the public/private boundaries. A whole range of choices and preferences in dressing the body has taken effect. For purists, excessive revealing of the body is immoral. Conversely, pragmatists often see *dakwah* attire as excessive and material without being a sign or proof of inner dedication. Both groups find the ways of the other regressive, unfamiliar and excessive.

Female informants in particular were aware of how far they could take fashion and status within a framework of acceptable and respectable Islamic dress. In general, there was deep knowledge of performing legitimate taste in different contexts. Bodily techniques are used to fuse personal and class material status on the one hand, and requirements of piety in wider social systems on the other. While halalisation has worked as disciplining middle-class Malay bodies, it has also encouraged the availability of a new range of Islamically legitimate tastes and fashions.

THE OTHER OF CONSUMPTION

Distinctions in consumption refer to more than classing. In this section, the question of the other in consumption is explored. This other constantly figures as a real or imaginary other, incurring feelings of disgust or fascination. The *kampung*, so central to informants’ accounts, strongly mirrors such ambiguous positions. For purists and several of the more pragmatically inclined informants there is a marked difference between the two worlds. The boundary is demarcated by the material excess of the city versus the spiritual excess of the *kampung*. In this image, there is an obvious element of charging the *kampung* with romantic ideas of national authenticity.

One example of this is Yasir’s idea that the excesses of Kuala Lumpur contrast with the moderation of *orang kampung* (village people). Of special significance in this
type of understanding is the fact that the *kampung* is a strangely anachronistic yet piously primordial pocket of self-sufficiency and subsistence economy independent of external capitalism and excess. Yasir explained that *kampung* people inhabit a *bumiputera* haven so that ‘They don’t even have to go far the food is just behind their backyard.’ In a way, the *kampung* materialises as the prophetic visionary model for some purists as in Irfan’s account. In the *kampung*, ‘They realize slowly that town people are going back to nature.’ Conversely, the *kampung* is simultaneously regressive in terms of job opportunities and low income. This view reflects a tension between the romanticised and authentic *kampung* and the *kampung* as peripheral in terms of more pragmatic and everyday concerns. The *kampung* works as the natural core of the Malaysian nation linked to Malay ethnic religious identity, which will once again prevail when authenticity returns as a response to depraved urban modernity. Most importantly, the *kampung* in terms of consumption retains an intact form of indigenous pride and piety that is lost in the city. From a class distinction perspective, the *kampung* of tradition and necessity mirrors the city of shallowness and excess.

Against this vision of the *kampung*, most pragmatists, e.g. Siti, would argue that *kampung* people were conservative, lazy, detached and reserved. Siti: ‘If you don’t mind, most of them are just loitering around.’ Coming from a *kampung* himself, Hazan saw the difference in terms of overly tight social relations in the *kampung* versus the freedom of individualised choice in Kuala Lumpur: ‘In the *kampung* we know each other, the busybody type, I know everything about you and keep asking about it. Here you don’t really care about your neighbours.’ In terms of consumption, the interior of the house in *kampung* is crucial as this is where you meet friends, neighbours and relatives. In Kuala Lumpur, the car is a much more overt status symbol, ideally signifying what the interior of the house might be like as only a limited number of visitors will ever enter for a first hand assessment.

Jeti articulated that ‘The buying of gold is still compulsory for any girl and they’re willing to go all the way to buy it even though they’re poor. To me, that shows you want to be materialistic.’ This tendency, Jeti explained, is a cultural effect in a rural place such as Terengganu. Conversely, Kuala Lumpur was populated with ‘A lot of middle-class people and we don’t really care what we do.’ Central to pragmatists’ notions of city and suburb is that these spatialities do not embody or
produce radically different identities. *Kampung* people are no more simple or pious compared to the city, but rather materially backward without the ability or ingenuity to advance.

Now the aspect of ethnicity and ethnic distinctions in the lives of Malays, Chinese and Indians is examined. Diverse object domains are mobilised as conditioners of ethnic self-identity and distinctions, and that especially in the light of halalisation so central to the nationalisation of Islam – the market for ethnicities. In this respect, Siegel (1997: 56) notes that in plural societies ‘…communities meet only in the market.’ (Picture 31). It follows that consumption is tightly linked to specific practices of self and other that are strategically charged and recharged.

![Picture 31: The market for ethnicities. A furniture store in KL.](image)

Pragmatists articulate that ethnic distinctions and interaction mainly materialise in this market for ethnicities in a quite unproblematic manner. In these ideas the plot is simply to be sufficiently cautious of halal and haram when going to a Chinese shop especially. Siti’s ideas were indicative of this trend. She explained that religion more than race determined the shopping behaviour of Malays: ‘If I go to a Chinese shop and they sell halal food like the one nearby there, even if it’s the Chinese way of
cooking we can eat it.’ Even though the Chinese in the restaurant or shop were not Muslims, Siti felt that it was acceptable according to her individualised standard of halal requirements, which was forcefully rejected by purists. Going to a Chinese shop was mostly motivated by convenience. Hazan reinforced this notion. The urban multitude of choices and preferences is in stark contrast to the small Chinese shop in kampung like the one Hazan is from in the state of Terengganu:

‘Normally, the Chinese shop offers a variety of items, which are not in the Malay shop. In my Malay kampung, all the groceries are Chinese. So, you don’t really support the Malays, you just go where the best bargain is, Muslim or non-Muslim. In my kampung, on Friday mornings, there’s a morning market with religious speeches and at the same time they do business. Many people go there because normally they can get cheap stuff so it’s religious in a way.’

Contrary to the Chinese business dominance in their kampung, the selection in Kuala Lumpur now made it possible to find alternatives on a much larger scale than the Friday market, as articulated by Hazan. Izura started to attend a Chinese health and fitness club practising Qi Gong. Her Chinese neighbours in similar bungalows socialise from time to time on the occasion of celebrations. Typically, the higher the financial capital, the more unproblematic and relaxed was interaction between the ethnic groups.

The next set of ideas materialises as an effect of much more fixed ideas of divergence between ethnic groups. When discussing the implications of going to a shop owned by one’s own ethnic group, Azmi explained that this tendency was most clearly detectable when the Chinese in particular wanted to buy certain non-halal items. Normally, they would only go to one particular place. Chinese loyalty to the owner of one single shop over time was naturalised by Malay informants. This loyalty signified the texture of Chinese networks,¹³ and maybe even suspicions of the existence of traditional Chinese fraternities always working in the back region of intimacy and secrecy. Chinese herbal medicines and mysticism fuelled ideas of Chinese excess, fortifying the secrecy and taboo for Malays. Azmi:

¹³ Yao (2002) rightly points out that networks in everyday imagination are circular in nature: ‘Once it is conceptualised as having tightly patrolled boundaries and bearing benefits only for those inside, then a business network – or a social network generally – becomes real and operates exactly as so defined.’ (143).
Chapter III: A Taste and a Touch of Islam

‘The Chinese go to their own medical shop, sen-se. Islam doesn’t allow us Muslims to go there because they have all these insects. They boil the things and drink it. If you have asthma they will advise you to swallow small rats. The Chinese they eat anything under the sun, so we’re not allowed to go. And the Indians, they also have certain items so that we can’t go, special items for prayers.’

In light of halalisation, the omnivorous character of Chinese consumption, and vulgar Indian ritual remedies are both symbolically excessive and repulsive. However, Azmi and Henny themselves visit local bomoh (traditional healers). The bomoh embodies living folk religion, adat, a form of customary law, invoked when, as Henny put it,

‘The children can’t sleep at night and are disturbed by spirits. So we consult the bomoh for a cure. But in Islam we’re not allowed to believe in bomoh, we can only believe in one God because sometimes people worship the bomoh.’

Chinese herbal medicines and the bomoh tradition share a similar challenging function of alternativeness and supplementary functions for Azmi. Referring to his Chinese neighbour, Azmi explained his moderation:

‘Even though it’s Chinese New Year, I don’t think they change their furniture. In terms of economics, they’re more stingy compared to us. We tend to earn 1,000, we spend 2,000, and we need to address this unnecessary spending. We buy the things we don’t need. Changing this TV or sofa is something like a yearly fair. When it comes to Hari Raya, they have to change the furniture.’

Material excess and greed of the Malays against the entrepreneurial yet moderate Chinese capitalist is by far the most significant plot in Malay ideas of ethnicity. The deeply disturbing Chinese embodiment of seemingly incompatible qualities is extremely powerful in Malay middle-class imaginations. In both national histories replayed in state nationalist versions as well as in informants’ accounts, there is bewilderment about the impact of Chinese immigration and its impact on bumiputera culture. The character of the Chinese other emerges as partly entrepreneurial and partly excessive and hedonistic in a strangely un-Asian manner. In effect, the Chinese other ironically seems to share the character of the westerner in Occidentalism. In Malay national myths, Chinese material enjoyment is often fuelled by doubts about Chinese possession of national devotion because of more powerful
ethnic loyalties. Rather, Chinese are seen to possess an ‘ethnic surplus’. Yasir made clear to me that

‘Chinese are permanently immigrants. They come from mainland China, a very difficult place. Moved to different places. So, they know how difficult life is when they arrive in Malaysia. They started with nothing so they know they have to save, to work hard, to be committed and dedicated, to sacrifice a lot of things. When success is a theme, you don’t simply throw it away like that. Whereas Malays they have not been in these kind of difficulties. There’s no such thing in Malaysia where people don’t eat like in mainland China. Mainland China once upon a time was like the desert. Millions of people died because there was not enough food. In Malaysia, food is in abundance. There are not many difficulties for the Malays here. So, they take things easily.’

Unsurprisingly, in the eyes of some Malays, Chinese may be omnivorous while Malays, in line with halalisation, are particular and sensitive about food. Logically, the halalised food domain must be protected from the ‘pollution of indifference’.

Malays can only actively challenge the entrepreneurial and networking skills of the Chinese through ethnically conscious consumption in Malay shops:

‘I will tell my wife to include at least 10% of the things that we buy daily or monthly to be a product that is made by bumiputera. Because we find that if the Malays don’t support the bumiputera manufacturers or businesses, who else is going to support them? Their networking is not strong and their goods not present in the supermarket because they are controlled by the Chinese. They refuse to take in Malay products.’

Yasir strategised that the most obvious way for bumiputera to market their products vis-à-vis the Chinese is through what he called multi-level marketing or direct selling. This is the strategy employed by major American companies such as Avon and Amway and supposedly a number of bumiputera have managed to successfully promote their products this way. Therefore, ethnic loyalties are effects of daily practices of consumption. Malays have a moral obligation to support Muslim

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14 In spite of Yasir’s strong government antipathies, his statements are a replay of Mahathir’s ideas in *The Malay Dilemma* (1970: 21): ‘The lush tropical plains with their plentiful sources of food were able to support the relatively small number of inhabitants of early Malaya. No great exertion or ingenuity was required to obtain food. There was plenty for everyone throughout the year. Hunger and starvation, a common feature in countries like China, were unknown in Malaya. Under these conditions everyone survived. Even the weakest and least diligent were able to live in comparative comfort, to marry and procreate. The observation that only the fittest would survive did not apply, for the abundance of food supported the existence of even the weakest.’
businesses as the Chinese have always supported their own consumers through complex networks of loyalty, questionable moral business standards, and a concealed system of credit given only to Chinese.

Lastly, Jeti’s ideas are expressive in exemplifying the bewilderment of what I call Chinese thrift as excess. Jeti did not believe that the Chinese were extravagant in the interior design of their houses. In terms of ethnicity, her ideas play on the stereotypisation of the Chinese as socially outward looking and overly conscious about public material status. Another aspect of this perception of the Chinese in Malaysia that informants draw on is that the Chinese remain in a modest house even if they have acquired a substantial amount of wealth because this house brought them good luck. The effect of this in the urban context is that it is even harder to measure the actual social position of the Chinese due to the strategic charging of excess to the inside/outside domains. There is a strong resonance here of Mahathir’s contention that ‘The Chinese give less priority to immediate needs. They think over the long term. And so they are willing to make sacrifices in order to gain later. That is why the Chinese have thrived and prospered wherever they are.’ (Mahathir, 2002: 93).

Nevertheless, Jeti felt that regarding goods such as cars, the Chinese were extravagant: ‘My neighbours prefer the car and the house is empty.’ Another issue Jeti brought up was Chinese investment expertise that enabled them to spend extravagantly on ‘Food, cars and gambling. They will spend a lot because it’s part of their culture.’ In another discussion with Jeti, she articulated a quite different view: ‘Chinese also like to fill up their house with extravagant furniture.’ These ideas fit Yao’s (2002: 3-4) analysis of the everyday conceptualisation of fixed and uncontested Chinese economic success. Thus, the hard-working, economically successful Chinese ‘...comes alive in the twilight zone between reality, ideological construction and social imagination.’ (4).

In this sense public and private domains are constantly charged and recharged with ideas of purity and excess. Everyday life experiences and practices fuel these conceptualisations of the consumption of the Chinese. Jeti concluded that:

*I think Malays are even worse shoppers, don’t really know the reason why. They shop more, the amount of things, look at the sales, the first ones to rush there are Malays. We don’t know why, maybe it’s just the culture.*
Jeti linked the question of Malay excess vis-à-vis the Chinese to the emergence of the New Malay: ‘Malays are trying to catch up for lost time.’ Her feeling was that even this point did not justify Malay excesses in houses, designer goods, antiques or cars whereas the increased concern with children’s education was seen as crucial to the emergence of the New Malay in the first place. The frequently celebrated religious festivals in multicultural Malaysia, to Jeti, kick off the Malay shopping craze:

‘Raya festival, Chinese festival, Deeparvali,\textsuperscript{15} we shop like mad. I think we get it too easily, more buying power and high debt. I always fear that’s happening. And all this because of state support of the Malays.’

Consequently, the festivals are understood as quintessential occasions of excess, which especially the Malays seem to seize. This is a direct critique of state sponsored consumerism, a recurring plot with Chinese and Indians.

Lillian, a Chinese woman in her 20s working for a large British investment company, told me that Chinese were far more materialistic than Malays:

‘The Chinese want status. You must be ahead, a leader, have money, be successful. Have a good job. But the Malays, don’t care so much about this. They care more about family. They have a really good relationship in comparison with Chinese.’

Among the urban Chinese there seemed to be a shared idea that the Malays were family orientated to such an extent that any investment of excess energy in entrepreneurial activities was blocked. To Lillian, Malays were ‘…searching for something. I find these people more simple.’ Due to state overfeeding, ‘Malays have a lot more opportunities than us; I feel it’s a bit unfair. I do sympathize as well. Some of them don’t work.’ Supporting the plot above, a Chinese engineer in his 40s living in TTDI explained that business people would tell you that Malays were the best customers ‘Because they get the money easily. They get promoted very easily. Most Chinese have to work damn hard to get that sort of money. And you’re taking a business risk.’

A Jamaat member from TTDI argued that the increased influence of Islam together with the emergence of an open-minded middle-class identity is improving both community and ethnic interaction:

‘Professional people tend to be close to the mosque, to learn more on religion. That means they’re already affluent and at the same time they learn religious things. This

\textsuperscript{15} Deeparvali is the Hindu Festival of Light.
combination is very good. A multi-ethnic community is not a problem to me. Because I do attend weddings of my neighbours who are not Muslim. They also attend my parties. We’re fortunate because we belong to the middle-class group with education. They understand. And Malaysia, being Muslim, Islam is the national religion, they already understand that.’

Ethnic interaction is premised on the full acceptance of Islam as the national religion - the nationalisation of Islam. Then well-educated middle-class groups representing social mobility and open-mindedness can socialise freely. The statement demonstrates the power of social group constitution, but also the conditionality imposed by wider structural patterns such as Islam as a national hegemonic influence. Interestingly, in the quote ethnic interaction is associated with functions such as parties and weddings, which constitute obvious stages for performing status.

Among the Chinese in TTDI, Islam and Malays’ engagement with prayer and work in the local mosques did not balance with their investment in other types of activities and the wider community, and, in particular, the TTDI Residents’ Association. The members attending the meetings in the Residents’ Association were overwhelmingly Chinese. Among both Chinese and Indian groups, within the last 30 years Islam is often felt to be encroaching on the lives of non-Muslims and limiting ethnic interaction. This feeling, however, was most pronounced in the lower strata of the middle class. In this sense, ethnic relations are closely tied to social group. An Indian informant living with his wife and two sons in a small one-storey terraced house put it like this:

‘The biggest problem in this country is the race issue. The bumiputera are overfed. All top posts are Malay. They have to mentally bridge that issue. Trying to mix with Malays because it’s not easy anymore, it’s really down unless he or she is very open-minded. The feeling in them is that they cannot mix with you, it’s so wrong, very clear-cut. They think we are from India or something, their religion is different. It’s not a problem that just came. They encouraged it without thinking through the consequences and now you try to cool it down. 15 years ago, Malays, Indian and Chinese could share a meal on this table, there’s still pork and beef on this table.’

16 There cannot be a more marked contrast to Mahathir’s comment on the success of multiculturalism in Malaysia reflected in the powerful symbolism of food sharing: ‘The Muslim Malays abhor pork which the Chinese love, while the Indians do not eat the beef which the
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Interestingly, food consumption in the past seemed to be the connecting ethnic tissue. In this way, symbolic sharing has deteriorated due to halalisation as sets of strict distinctions between pure and impure. Moreover, these ideas have deepened to cover ethnic groups that emerge as products their impure consumption.

These ethnic tensions may be latent in the majority of the middle-class segments, excluding the upper strata that stage and perform shared codes of status and consumption instead. Another contributing factor to this division is the nature of suburbia itself; the seclusion of the house style and form and, more generally, the planning and development behind the perimeter city seem to stress the significance of the nuclear family as the primary source of personal and group identification rather than a broader imagined and existing multiethnic community. Moreover, the nationalisation of Islam and halalisation seem to impact more on object domains, which are central to Malay ethnic identities than it is the case with Chinese and Indians.

To sum up, we can say that in the eyes of informants, proper Islamic consumption was a quite naturalised and wholesome part of national development. Purists and pragmatists alike, albeit for diverse reasons, agreed that consumption properly handled, displayed and contextualised was quite unproblematic. This is an expression of the emergence of a new ontology of consumption. In this ontology, a range of others figure prominently. Previously, I discussed how consumption may be contested in terms of class (front region) on the one hand, and generation/gender (back region) on the other. In this section it was demonstrated how ‘national’ others outside of conventional class distinctions help informants map a spectrum of desired/undesired consumer practices and then plot themselves in. Obviously, there are elements of protest and hostility involved in these preferences (Douglas, 1996). As a consequence, the psychology of shopping hostility between cultures was explored because people easily recognise ‘what they do not want’ - ‘standardized hates’ (83). As we have already seen in this chapter, the discursive struggle in Malaysia between state nationalism and challenging Islamic discourses has essentialised an image of the excessive westerner. In spite of the latency of this image, informants were not really articulate about the excesses of the West. Instead, 

*Malays love. But somehow we manage to sit at the same table to eat, each sensitive to the sensitivities of the others. Muslim leadership achieved this.* (Mahathir, 2001: 38).
they were far more concerned with ‘getting consumption right’ in relation to the
prominent others figuring in their everyday lives.

CAPITALIZED HALALISATION

Islamic banking was a crucial drive in the ongoing expansion of Islamic institutions
into the economic sphere in the 1980s. Islamic banking is widely advertised and
marketed as the viable alternative to traditional banking. Under state supervision,
Islamic banking is a cornerstone in proper Islamic consumption. The TTDI survey
indicated that the majority of Malay residents here, 59%, used Islamic banking while
41% preferred the conventional system. Quite a number of respondents in the
survey, though, listed that they used both systems simultaneously.

Maurer (2005: 9) shows that the modern ‘recuperation’ of Islamic banking is
not necessarily a reflection of its scriptural or medieval contractual forms of the past
(9). Islamic banking and finance (IBF) covers a worldwide phenomenon:

‘The broadest definition of IBF would include all those activities understood to be
financial or economic that seek to avoid riba – itself a term of considerable
definitional anxiety – generally through profit-and-loss sharing, leasing, or other
forms of equity- or asset-based financing.’ (28).

As I shall try to show below, Islamic banking is often associated with a high degree
of ambiguity. With reference to Indonesia, Maurer (148) provides evidence that while
most of his informants identified Islamic banking as positive, it was simultaneously
seen as ‘unclear’. In support of the analysis to come, Maurer concludes that the
paradoxical nature of people’s relation to the state and state institutions, discourses,
and vocabularies is reflected in their ambiguous attitude towards Islamic banking
(149).

Islamic banking has been a field where the state has promoted new types of
businesses and institutions seemingly inculcating Islamic values such as banking,
insurance, and pawnbroking (Anwar, 1987: 3). According to Haron (1997: 1), Islamic
banking must be in accordance with the teachings of Islam. More specifically, these
principles should essentially comprise the prohibition of interest (riba) in all types of
transactions.17 Haron finds that the Islamic banks of today were products of the

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17 In addition to this requirement, Haron (1997: 25) lists a number of other principles: ‘(a) to
engage in legitimate and lawful businesses; (b) to fulfil all obligations and responsibilities; (c) business
must be based on their concepts of honesty, justice and equity; (d) overspending and wastage are
Islamic resurgence and its aim at transforming capitalism in the direction of an Islamic foundation (2). In Islamic banks, as in conventional ones, profit is considered a crucial aspect, but Islamic banks should include social and moral aims as well.

The question is how these ideals filter down to shape the practices of consumers in everyday life. Three plots run through informants’ understandings of Islamic banking. First, is the principle of exclusively using Islamic banking. The entire group of purists were present here as well as Mascud, who argued that he used Islamic banking for moral and religious reasons: ‘We avoid feeling guilty. Because interest is haram and God is cursing those who take the interest.’ He felt that the system of Islamic banking was sufficiently certified by the government and a committee of mullah (Muslim clerics).

Another argument for using Islamic banking was put forward by Udzir and Nur, who normally opposed most ideas of halalisation. Not only was this type of banking in accordance with their belief, they were also pleased with the high Tabung Haji dividend that they received. Another plot encompasses those who use conventional as well as Islamic banking because of loyalty to their conventional bank, habit or sheer convenience they would not use Islamic banking exclusively.

The third group of informants consists exclusively of pragmatists who strictly used conventional banking. In their eyes, Islamic banking was a means to legitimise politicisation of the banking system and another twist to deepen halalisation. Moreover, pragmatists often quite simply found that conventional banking was a more profitable product compared to Islamic banking. In spite of this, Islamic banking has by now become the dominant banking system in the Malay middle class. There is an aspect of ambivalence in all this. Purists in general critiqued the material excesses of the state, but with respect to Islamic banking they fully and uncritically relied on the authenticity of state certification. Conversely, pragmatists time and again expressed concern that Islamic banking was merely an avenue for the legitimisation of state authority. Islamic banking to some informants has the potential to mend malevolent capitalism while others contest these ideas and prohibited; (e) wealth must be used in a proper and orderly manner; (f) to help and assist the needy; and (g) transactions must be properly executed.’ Obviously, these requirements present the Malaysian and other state bureaucracies with virtually impossible tasks of classifying, monitoring, certifying, and sanctioning ‘unlawful’ transactions and practices.

Tabung Haji is a savings fund for the Hajj institutionalised and formalised within Islamic banking in cooperation with the state.
practices entirely. To purist informants, Islamic banking is a logical necessity in halalisation. In principle, it would be altogether impossible for them to perform proper Islamic consumption with haram money from conventional banking.

A cross-cultural study of credit use and ethnicity among Malays, Chinese and Indians, respectively, showed that Malays and Indians were more inclined to use credit cards in comparison with the Chinese. The answers were found in the values, attitudes and practices of these ethnic groups (Talib, 2000: 53), and obviously there was also the aspect of access to resources at play in this context. The TTDI survey showed that 69% of the Malays held one credit card and 21% two, whereas only a fraction held more or none. The figures for Chinese were about the same level, while slightly lower for Indians. These figures, however, give no clear indication of the practice of credit in everyday life.

For Malay informants, however, it was naturalised knowledge that Chinese may be spending widely, but never uncontrollably or excessively. This conceptualisation of the Chinese other is embedded in two broader sets of ideas. The first is that Malay excess is intricately tied to, and even encouraged by state support of indulgent Malays who in turn are compelled to the practice of patriotic consumption or shopping for the state. A Chinese male informant from TTDI, who was a retired labourer and thus not a networking capitalist, explained that when Chinese decide to buy something ‘We are planning, we save and buy. We don’t go there and take credit.’ This practice apparently contrasts with the culture of credit and impulsiveness of Malay families. Malays were clearly the ethnic group in Malaysia that was most inclined to buy on credit. At the same time, the informant indirectly pointed to the second set of ideas related to credit and ethnicity. Credit was not even seen as a necessary means among Chinese. When the informant’s family had decided to purchase an item such as a stereo or computer, without exception they frequented the shop of an old Chinese friend: ‘We usually go there so they give us a special price.’ To Malay informants, this type of informal and exclusive Chinese networking stressed that a formalised and proper credit system was essential for Malay material progress.

The question of credit is far more complex in the wake of halalisation. Only recently, the first Islamically accepted credit card appeared. Visa Card, MasterCard,
and Diners Club were the preferred credit cards of all respondents and informants. The Islamic alternative, the Al-Taflif credit card, was only used by two percent of Malay respondents. On the Middle East Banker website [http://www. bankerme.com/ bme/ 2003/mar/islamic_banking.asp] the Al-Taslif credit card was introduced under the heading Can a Credit Card Ever Be Halal? On the website it is argued that while at first it may appear to be a hoax introducing such a credit card, ‘...banks in the region are now making such seemingly impossible concepts a reality.’ In avoiding the riba and thus adhering to Islamic requirements, AmBank in Malaysia launched this type of credit card in December 2001. The logic of this credit card is that it lives up to the constant expansion and elaboration of proper and legitimate Islamic practice. This trend should be seen as merely one aspect of the way in which halalisation can only function as the subjugation of steadily more object domains that again will necessitate elaboration in terms of proper understanding, standardisation and practice.

While pragmatic informants with sufficient economical capital would unproblematically buy on credit, more disadvantaged pragmatists and purists alike were far more sceptical. In general, informants held an almost universal suspicion that credit produces excessive spending. In itself, the practice of buying on credit (flashing the card) was seen as quintessentially excessive. Conventional credit card systems would generally assume the symbolic nature of deeply ambivalent fetishes, compelling all sorts of excess as well as providing the material base for shopping for the state in the market for class and ethnic identities. In the end, Islamic banking may be about controlling or purifying money: ‘The truth of money is that it is (simply) a sign, humanly created, not ordained from on high. If it is humanly created, it can be re-created and remade into a human good.’ (Maurer, 2005: 166).

FINAL REMARKS: THE EXCESS OF POSSIBILITIES, AUTHENTICITY AND THE COMPELLING FETISH

In this conclusion, I will do two things: firstly, address the main findings of the chapter and, secondly, examine some of these insights in a broader perspective. Divergent understandings and practices of proper Islamic consumption among Malay middle-class families in TTDI comprised the ‘case’ subjected to the largely ethnographic exploration of a multitude of object domains. This ethnography
captured a slice of the chaotic reality that is the daily lives of middle-class Malays. At the end of each section that makes up this chapter, the main conclusions and findings were summarised. Consequently, this conclusion will not slavishly reiterate the insights accumulated throughout the chapter.

What I will do is select and discuss three recurrent key concepts - performance, body and excess. While performance and body mainly are discussed in relation to the ethnographic details of the chapter, excess together with the concepts of authenticity and fetishism are situated in a wider theoretical framework as excess turned out to be a concept that realised more and more themes and discussions.

The theories introduced in the discussion of e.g. excess were not forced on the ethnographic material and its diversity, but should rather be seen as sets of challenging perspectives that are both infused by and infuse the empirical data. In fact, the structure and content of this entire chapter aim at escaping the traditionalism of filtering or streamlining the richness of empirical data through a ‘theory chapter’.

In this chapter, I have tried to show how the performance of identity through proper Islamic consumption was embedded in a range of ritualistic practices. These practices strongly informed ideas of what could be considered sacred and profane as meaningful and workable everyday categories. Performance works as reflexive and strategic practices, and the force of this dramaturgical metaphor lies in its applicability along the axes of intentionality versus practice; the complexity of spatiality; and consumption of fronts as ‘expressive equipment’ that functions as the setting for performances.

Ownership of expensive cars, for example, was a particular performance of status. In a wider perspective, this type of performance was expressive of the handling of a specific kind of equipment to convey social messages to a large audience in public. Purists much more than pragmatists upheld a somewhat protective attitude towards this public type of consumption.

An essential finding gained from the fieldwork was that in the everyday understandings and practices of consumption in Malay middle-class families it was mainly the ritual and performative context in which commodities were consumed that formed individual and social identities. Moreover, performances seek to forge Malay middle-class identities by displaying proper and advanced taste that is
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religiously legitimate, respectable, and sophisticated at one and the same time.

I tried to show how performance appears to be of specific relevance, firstly, when informants, e.g. through food, signaled about classing on the one hand and halalisation on the other. Secondly, women informants in particular were acutely aware of how far they could take fashion and status within a framework of acceptable and respectable Islamic dress. In general, informants expressed extensive knowledge of performing legitimate taste with regard to different object domains and in various social contexts.

Simultaneously, performances may work under constraint with the force of prohibition and taboo shaping their production - e.g. the way in which Malay middle class women’s dress in public is subjected to strict Islamic requirements as well as fashion and experimentation. Thus, bodies in performances reflect the conflict between individuality as agency and social constraint. Hence, different performances and staging apparently constitute the lifestyles of both purists and pragmatists. Interestingly, in the eyes of purists and pragmatists alike, Islam should ideally be internalised as a national-cultural consciousness or as deeply embedded beliefs manifesting themselves in a distinct lifestyle. Divergent forms of performances, e.g. in connection with food and dress, were crucial tools in the shaping of these lifestyles of purists and pragmatists.

‘Getting consumption right’ socially in a Malay Muslim context has everything to do with the body of, and within, consumption. Thus, diverse understandings of proper Islamic consumption subject Malaysian middle-class bodies to new forms of order and disciplining. Bodies are always evoked in performances that endeavour to strategically contain ambivalences. Especially in the case of dress and food, bodies are disciplined by a multitude of moral sentiments. At the same time, the body of the Western, generational, gendered or ethnic other may evoke the whole connotative range of meanings of excess.

Buying certain brands (Malaysian versus foreign) and avoiding others is an example of how consumption functions as reiterated and embodied practices. Closely related to this, two tendencies emerged from informants’ ideas and practices of patriotic consumption. For food and clothes so significant for the purity of the body and its appearance, informants would ideally prefer local products first of all.
Compared to imported commodities, local ones were seen as inscribed with far more national ‘surplus’, i.e. a form of economic and symbolic devotion to the Malaysian nation – and ‘national bodies’.

Moreover, informants in the purist group stressed the significance of local products in the context of government halal certification and the preference for products produced by Muslims or bumiputera. Consequently, the state is an enormously powerful symbolic signifier of correct and non-excessive embodiment in the everyday lives of some Malays. These concerns and confusions are deepening as more and more foreign-produced (halal) commodities enter the Malaysian market.

To the older generation, the expressiveness involved in individual choices and preferences signifies excess of and in the body. The body in consumption, then, becomes a non-verbal sign of materialism that cannot be morally justified. In terms of generational divergences, the inner moral body of the past is being transformed into an outer and shallow form of embodiment through the excesses of consumption. Contrary to the social-cultural coherence of the traditional inner body of the past, the outer body can be seen as transformative, contaminating, inconstant and destructive in the eyes of the older generation.

There is a world of difference between sustaining the body in the intimacy of the domestic sphere and the superficiality of public consumer culture. The body is subjected to a fetish-like image: it is composed of a benevolent and intimate core sustained by e.g. pure food that is constantly threatened by external impurity in the outer domain.

While pragmatists claim that the externality of the material is only secondary to one’s inner, deeper worship, dedication and commitment, purists in this instance are more preoccupied with Islam as consumption – especially with regard to protecting the body from what is seen as external impurities. In other words, bodies in Malaysia are ambiguously signified as an object of discursive conflict between Islam and fashion for the purists and Islam as fashion for the pragmatists. For purists, excessive revealing of the body is immoral. Conversely, pragmatists often see dakwah attire as excessive and material without being a sign or proof of inner dedication. Both groups find the ways of the other regressive, unfamiliar and excessive.

The visibility and phantasmagorical qualities of the body come into being as
what I have called a novel ontology of consumption tightly linked to the advertising, promotion and marketing of an ever-growing range of commodities and services. In all of this, bodies in Malaysia have been subjected to a number of moral, political and religious discourses. In halalisation, these discourses seem to both meet and conflict.

In the course of the fieldwork, I realised that it would perhaps be difficult to find a country in which the contemporary study of religious consumption, or, more precisely, the fusing of religious revivalism and consumer culture in an urban perspective would be more rewarding. The recognition that religious consumption takes on increased significance both challenges and actualises some fundamental assumptions and theories within social science. In other words, we can say that after having substantiated the significance of religious consumption as a field of ethnographic study in the everyday lives of middle-class Malays, it is challenging to explore the wider implications of religious consumption in more abstract terms.

I have tried to show how the emergence of a modern Malay consumer ontology is both shaped by and shapes the wider nationalisation of Islam and halalisation. A number of social and religious tensions linked to proper Islamic consumption arise in this market for identities. Of particular importance is the question of strategically attaining balance and moderation against excessive materialism, or allowing pleasure and sexuality to provide the meaning and content of commodities. Removing the material excess of the commodity form has everything to do with properly cleansing and re-signifying commodities. In essence, this whole endeavour to transmute commodities is part of a wider fascination with purity and authentication. In doing so, these processes involve controlling the compelling nature of the fetish. With the danger of preempting a key argument put forward in Chapter V, the second coming of capitalism or millennial capitalism in Malaysia has incited ideas of an entirely new form of Islamic capitalist reasoning. These ideas and the constant attempts to translate them into workable everyday practices, however, are continuously being contested. In all this, the suburban homes of middle-class Malays are primary sites for exploring the ideas, practices and contestations of Islamic consumption.
Contrary to what would be expected in a conventional conclusion, I will try to put the immense diversity and confusion that permeates this lengthy ethnography into a wider theoretical perspective. In all this, the concepts of excess, authenticity and fetishism stand out.

In Georges Bataille’s weird and wonderful monograph *The Accursed Share* (1991) excess occupies a quite unique position. Bataille states that ‘...it is not necessity but its contrary ‘luxury,’ that presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problems.’ (12). Initially, excess energy as a supreme impetus or overdetermination of all life processes radiates from the sun and must then be expended on earth. Especially in the field of consumption, excess is a crucial term for Bataille as ‘...we use the excess to multiply ‘services’ that make life smoother, and we are led to reabsorb part of it by increasing leisure time.’ (24) Furthermore, ‘...there is generally no growth but only a luxurious squandering of energy in every form! The history of life on earth is mainly the effect of a wild exuberance; the dominant event is the development of luxury, the production of increasingly burdensome forms of life.’ (33).

Bataille’s central critique is that of radical materialism and the utilitarian reduction of individuals to individualists in modern capitalism. Counter to the destructive processes of commodification in a profane world, Bataille sees religion and sacrifice as a field of resistance and opportunity. He writes that ‘Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane.’ (55). The deepest purpose of sacrifice is always to ‘...give destruction its due, to save the rest from mortal danger of contagion.’ (59). Here, Bataille develops a central idea for my argumentation, namely that

‘Once the world of things was posited, man himself became one of the things of this world, at least for the time in which he labored. It is this degradation that man has always tried to escape. In his strange myths, in his cruel rites, man is in search of a lost intimacy from the first. Religion is this long effort and this anguished quest: It is always a matter of detaching from the real order, from the poverty of things, and of restoring divine order.’(57).

By restoring divine order in production and handling, commodities are re-signified as non-commodities. This sacralisation of commodities fulfils the need for authenticity evaporated in mass production. Obviously, halalisation is all about
mass-producing authentic things as non-commodities. Purists promoting and imaging an Islamic way of life persistently made reference to authenticity in the form of the traditional and pure lifestyle at the time of the Prophet. In craving this type of relived authenticity, mass production must necessarily be re-thought from an Islamic perspective.

The local 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:

‘One of the means of circulation of wealth by the rich is through generous consumption. This is why Allah has prohibited monasticism and allowed good food, beautiful clothing, spacious houses, etc. for those who could afford it. It is also for this reason that reasonable and proper adornments and beautification are regarded as mubah (allowed). Islam however strongly forbids conspicuous show of wealth by having luxuries and further flaunting them to the public. Any kind of lifestyle involving overconsumption of unnecessary goods which have minimal benefits, or which do more harm than good is considered as wasteful.’ (Nik, 2001: 117-118).

Obviously, the problem is the understanding and definition of luxuries and excess central to balanced consumption. Nik states (132) 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.’

The ethnography demonstrated how a diversity of Malay bids to conceptualise proper Malay Muslim consuming the Islamic way attempted to situate Malaysia and middle-class fractions in a social geography of excess.19

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19Under the heading Luxury Test the Islamicity.com website argues that ‘There are people who think that the affluent people of the world are put through lesser trial since they have wealth and riches to play about. They do not have to worry about their food and shelter. The luxuries of life open their arms for them. This perception is not true. The Almighty has created this world as a trial and test for all of us. Every one of us undergoes this trial in some form or the other. It is not that only the poor and needy are put through this test. Affluence also is a form of trial. Here the trial is to test a person regarding his attitude towards the Almighty. He is tested on whether he shows gratitude to the Almighty on His favors and blessings. As such, since a person generally tends to forget his Lord if he is blessed with an affluent life, this trial is perhaps tougher than that of a person who is put through the
Chapter III: A Taste and a Touch of Islam

Walter Benjamin’s (1999) contention, not unlike that of Bataille, is that the originality of works of art has been polluted and disfigured by modern forms of reproduction. Benjamin writes that ‘Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.’ (214). However, the reproducibility of authenticity in mass produced objects, in effect, produces a differentiation and grading of authenticity. Benjamin’s most vivid idea for my further argument is that ‘To be sure, at the time of its origin a medieval picture of the Madonna could not be said to be ‘authentic.’ It became ‘authentic’ only during the succeeding centuries and perhaps most strikingly so during the last one.’ (236). Instead of functioning as forgeries or imitations, reproductions feed on the surplus authenticity of the distant original.

In fact, halalisation thrives only on the surplus authenticity craved by some Malays while others see this quest as excessive, shallow, demonstrative and materialistic. These types of understandings powerfully echo wider debates in contemporary Malaysia over the nature of excessive consumption in the context of the nationalisation of Islam. Moreover, state monopoly certification, as we shall see in Chapter V, of that which is considered halal is a concentration of symbolic power that flourishes only as institutionalising and standardising the surplus value of authenticity. Without this authentic surplus value, surplus is signified as what I would call ‘a matter’ of excess.

Revisiting Bataille, religion is simply the pleasure a society invests in the use or destruction of excess resources:

‘This is what gives religions their rich material aspect, which only ceases to be conspicuous when an emaciated spiritual life withdraws from labor a time that could have been employed in producing. (…) Religious activities – sacrifices, festivals, luxurious amenities – absorb the excess energy of a society, but secondary efficacy is usually attributed to a thing whose primary meaning was in breaking the chain of efficacious actions.’ (120).

Religion’s fundamental claim to intimacy is, however, quite unsuccessful as religions erroneously ‘…give man a contradictory answer: an external form of intimacy. So the successive solutions only exacerbate the problem: Intimacy is never separated from

trial of poverty and adverse circumstances; in such circumstances, a person tends to remember the Lord more - or at least, has more opportunities for this remembrance.’ [http://www.islamicity.com/articles/Articles.asp?ref=RI0402-2211].
external elements, without which it could not be *signified.* (129-30). The point is that
the domestication of Islam reclaiming this intimacy operates so that intimacy can
exclusively be expressed as a thing if this thing is ‘...essentially the opposite of a
*thing,* the opposite of a product, of a commodity – a consumption and a sacrifice.
Since intimate feeling is a consumption, it is consumption that expresses it, not a
thing, which is its negation.’ (132). Hence, halalisation is all about standardising the
re-signification of commodities as things or anti-commodities.

Bataille acknowledges this dialectic in consumption in that man is constantly
driven to waste the excess, and yet ‘...he remains eager to acquire even when he does
the opposite, and so he makes waste itself an object of acquisition. Once the resources
are dissipated, there remains the prestige acquired by the one who wastes.’ (72-73).
In one of Bataille’s subsequent works, *Theory of Religion* (1992), he is more elaborate
on the ambiguous nature of the material in religion. Bataille here recognises the
struggle in the world or matter between the beneficent/apprehensible on the one
hand and malefic/unstable/dangerous on the other (72).

In *The Accursed Share,* Bataille argues that historically resources in early Islam
were invested in conquests and expansion much similar to the development of
industry through capitalist accumulation (1991: 89). The pious Muslim renounced
any expenditure that was not turned against infidel enemies. But because of Islam’s
foundation and conquests, its meaning was lost in the constituted Muslim empire
which ‘...quickly opened itself to the influence of the conquered lands whose riches
it inherited.’ Bataille sees this as a regression to the pre-Islamic and material tribal
world opposed by the Prophet in the Koran. These ideas are strikingly similar to the
discussion of the demonisation of the pre-Islamic past in Malaysia in Chapter I.
Consequently, piety and moderation in Islam materialise only in the context of
conquest or missionary work, without which it appears to be ‘...a tradition of
chivalrous values in which violence was combined with prodigality, and love with
poetry.’, Bataille states in this sweeping Orientalist manner (90). In essence, this was
a culture of excess and enjoyment. Modernist Islam may be seen as a desire for
returning to the authenticity of the deeds and life of the Prophet. Hence, the
enormous fascination with the Hadith that can function as a guide to the
authentication of everyday practices. Often, this desire for a return to tradition is
evoked through ideas of the simple life – balanced consumption performed by moderate consumers.

As previously discussed, understandings of excess in Malaysia encompass a wide range of moral and social connotations. On the basis of ethnographic research, Peletz (2002: 121) observes that Malays often covertly believe other Malays to be driven by ‘...greed, envy, and malice and are forever trying to get the better of one another through displays of status and prestige and by attempting to gain control over one another’s resources, loyalties and affections.’ These suspicions are intimately tied to the material and emotional excess of the other.

In Chapter I, the idea of the fetish was reflected upon in relation to Siegel’s (1997) conceptualisation of this fetish as a ‘fetish of appearance’. The fetish signified forms of power that cannot be appropriated, but are nevertheless felt to be possessed. In its power as a magical instrument the fetish is claiming false relation to origin. It compels personal recognition of new and unfamiliar forms of identities forged in the perplexing excess of modernity.

Appadurai (1999: 6) argues that commodities are ‘...things with a particular type of social potential.’ In the following it is examined how this social potential is translated into ambiguous conceptualisations of commodities as fetishes in Malaysia. In Marx’s classic account of the nature of commodities it is argued that within commodities wider social contradictions are concentrated: ‘The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.’ (Marx, 1976: 163). In capitalist societies such as Malaysia, the fundamental rupture between production and consumption deprives consumers of knowledge of the true capitalist process behind the production of commodities. This rupture leaves commodities open to fetishization as sacred objects ‘...in the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed by a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race.’ (op.cit). Hence, the malevolent transmutation of commodities into fetishes compels uncontrollable feelings and practices.
Taussig’s (1980) analysis of the changing symbolism of the devil among Bolivian tin miners after Spanish colonisation explains how the figure of the devil came to embody all the strange forces of the new capitalist economy. Contrasting earlier forms of the reciprocal economy, the capitalist system evolved as the object of miners’ hate, fear and economic dependency. Taussig (26) writes that ‘The market established basis of livelihood becomes in effect a constantly lived out daily ritual, which, like all rites, joins otherwise unconnected links of meaning into a coherent and apparently natural network of associations.’ The new type of ritual worked out by miners ‘…reflects the ambiguities and contradictions of an economic practice that straddles two incompatible worlds.’ (Appadurai, 1999: 53).

Clearly, there are parallels between the way in which the contradictions of the market and capitalism in Taussig’s understanding is ritually worked out and internalised in the cosmology of the workers, and how particular forms of consumer behaviour among urban Malay middle-class families are ritualised. While Taussig assumes that capitalism and traditional culture are fundamentally incompatible, purists in Malaysia work hard to argue, firstly, that Islam and capitalism are indeed compatible, and, secondly, that any incompatibilities precisely can be overcome by halalisation. In effect, purists’ claims about this type of compatibility fit the intangible and shadowy nature of Malaysian capitalism.

Fetishes in Malaysia materialise as commodities/things that are ambiguously signified and open to the inscription of both material and religious surpluses. As noted above, fetishes compel modes of feelings and actions. Evoking the thinking of Durkheim (1995) and Eliade (1987) in their seminal monographs on the sociology of religion, the sacred emerges singularly in binary opposition to its opposite, the profane. The constancy of this struggle actively produces the sacred as a dynamic and negotiable category. The sacralisation of certain consumer objects and actions that is taking place in the Islamic field in Malaysia comes into being as an antithesis to the profane, as discussed by Durkheim. For Durkheim (1995: 38) the sacred is generated when lifted out of the context of ordinary, functional human use. Sacred things are protected and isolated by prohibitions and must be separated from the profane. Kopytoff’s (1999: 73) notion of ‘singularisation’ accurately captures this mechanism. With reference to Durkheim, singularisation works to mark certain fields of society as sacred and thus resistant to any commoditised pollution. In this
sense, singularisation takes on the effect of the transmutation of commodities into mere things or artefacts.

More specifically, sacralisation works as ‘labelling’ or ‘tagging’ of various objects and services as being halal or approved. Consuming these items may in the end produce a sacred effect or feeling of purity or morality against that which is haram and impure. Halal is a signifier that one adds in order to control content and impure connotations. Of major importance is the formal certification of these products guaranteed by the state and consumers’ trust in the halalness of products. This arena of conceptualising and authenticating halal and haram is immensely open to all sorts of contestation, exploitation, rumours and speculations. As halalisation intensifies, the standardisation and moral significance of legitimacy of Islamic consumption deepens and widens. The halal logo also fills the commodity with a content and makes it available for performance of identity - not unlike the way the label ‘organic’ or ‘simple living’ also makes commodities available for identity construction and display.

Pietz (1985: 5) traces the origin of the fetish as an idea and a problem to the ‘cross-cultural spaces’ of the West African coast in the 16 and 17th centuries. More specifically, fetishes emerge in processes of triangulation between ‘...Christian feudal, African lineage, and merchant capitalist social systems. It was within this situation that there emerged a new problem concerning the capacity of the material object to embody – simultaneously and sequentially – religious, commercial, aesthetic, and sexual values.’ (6-7). Fetishes materialised in conjunction with ‘...the emergent articulation of the commodity form that defined itself within and against the social values and religious ideologies of two radically different types of non-capitalist society, as they encountered each other in an ongoing cross-cultural situation.’ (7). Hence, the fetish is signified only as a product of ‘...the problematic of social value of material objects as revealed in situations formed by the encounter of radically heterogeneous social systems.’ (op. cit). This deeply ambiguous image of fetishes brings to mind the emergence of how the whole process of halalisation was a way of coming to terms with, or Malaysianising, the influx of increasingly more commodities.

Pietz points out that ‘The fetish has an ordering power derived from its status as the fixation or inscription of a unique originating event that has brought together
previously heterogeneous elements into a novel identity.’ This form of ordering is also evident in the fixation in the form of ‘...desires and beliefs and narrative structures establishing practice are also fixed (or fixated) by the fetish, whose power is precisely the power to repeat its originating act of forging an identity of articulated relations between certain otherwise heterogeneous things.’ (7-8). This invocation of ritually repeated practices is intimately linked to bodily functions and performances in everyday life. Halalisation is deeply rooted in the social, moral and religious context of commodities as fetishes. What is more, there is a tension between fetishization (based on imputed properties) and performance (based on the malleability of meaning according to context).

The compelling nature of the fetish lies in its inherent worship of a false god/demonic spirit and that it simultaneously was ‘...practiced to achieve certain tangible effects (such as healing) upon or in the service of the user.’ (10). Thus, the benevolent part of fetishes can work as objects or formulas endowed with the power to produce sacred effects or averting and dispelling danger. The fetish may be inscribed with impersonal forces that should intentionally be inherent properties of the object, i.e. the power in Arabic scriptures emanating from the holy Koran. Even the powers of a plaque placed above the entrance of a door to a Malay middle-class house, it was shown, can be questioned and contested.

The informant Ahmad provided a brilliant example of such malevolent residues in a commodity. He explained that if he wanted to buy a watch he would have to be absolutely sure there was no cross on the face of this, as Christian symbols are not allowed in Islam. He brought out this example because he once bought a watch of the well-known Swiss brand Victorinox with a version of the Swiss flag in its logo. Ahmad’s mother then told him that he could not have a watch with such a symbol in it so he had to dispose of it.

Another illustration from the ethnography points to the way in which proper Islamic consumption is ritualised. Ritualization can work as sets of practices that should ideally support the benevolence of the fetish against its malevolent sides. These rituals are attempts at transforming what could be seen as excessive consumption into meaningful and acceptable practices. Yasir may be seen as the embodiment of dakwah purism in that he holds a position as Head of Business Development in an IT company that promotes Islamic values and ‘content
development’. At the same time, he is a leading member of a local NGO in TTDI that seeks to ‘...to propagate Islam and to make sure the delivery of Islamic information effectively over different platforms.’ When asked about shopping behaviour in everyday life and his feelings about going to the malls to shop, Yasir pointed out that malls were clearly haram, i.e. in malls all sorts of temptations and sins lurked. Most frightening, however, was the mixing of halal and haram; halal in the form of supermarkets and food courts selling strictly halal certified food ensured by government certification, bookstores, and playgrounds for children; haram being primarily the selling of alcohol, but also cinemas showing mostly American movies both men and women can watch together. Most importantly, immorality is lurking everywhere in undetectable form. Yasir insisted that these excesses should be confined to one specific ‘red light district’ of the city like in West. This type of spatial differentiation would clearly be a demarcation of halal and haram spaces. He explained that when his family visit the malls, the primary purpose was to go to a bookstore with their young son. This type of practice to Yasir was regarded as Islamically acceptable entertainment. The moral contradiction inherent in going to the devilish mall seemed to be mended through the performance of a ritual that seeks to establish a distinction between immorality, excess and chaos (haram) on the one hand, and knowledge and constructive activities directed at the family as a social unit (halal) on the other. Thus, daily rituals, as Taussig points out, create coherence in unconnected links of meaning. To Yasir, the mall is signified as a morally acceptable place through the ability of ritual and ‘...‘ritualization’ to draw attention to the way in which certain social actions strategically distinguish themselves in relation to other actions.’ (Bell, 1992: 74).

To sum up, performing shopping in the mall for knowledge related to social and moral education may legitimise the practice of crossing the threshold to a mall that is seen as fundamentally malevolent and excessive. Ritualization in the form of selectivity and legitimacy produces a distinction between the materialistic or haram space of the mall and halal pockets within. Thus, these ritualizations order what is seen as indeterminable.

The theoretisations and ethnographies exploring ritual, its meanings and functions tend to be oriented towards the religious or sacred ritual (see for example Bowen, 1993 and Denny, 1985 for discussions of ritual in Islam). For Bell, however,
ritualization constitutes a way of acting that distinguishes and privileges practice against the quotidian - most often as sacred and profane. As we saw in the case of Yasir and his family above, ritual and ritualization become significant through their interplay and contrast with other strategic and value-laden distinctions (90). Once again, the sacred can emerge only against the antithetically profane. This dialectic is mainly produced through ritualising and performing the morally accepted in opposition to the demonised and profane. In effect, handling most of all determines the social use of objects.

I have argued that any object could be perceived as excessive or improperly handled or displayed. Naturally, the basics of everyday necessities are relatively more unlikely to be conceptualised as excessive compared to more expensive or publicly visible commodities such as houses, cars or fashion. That which can easily be understood as illegitimate or excessive consumption is more likely to be marked or embedded in various forms of ritualization in order to appear legitimate or balanced.

The performance aspects in all this are obvious, and staging excess as balance is intimately linked to distinctions between the semi-regions. Informants were extremely alert to their physical appearance in public whereas practice in the home followed much more relaxed patterns. For example, all female informants wore the tudung in public as well as loose fitting clothes. Conversely, these items did not seem to acquire any special moral importance in the homes of informants. Performance takes on meaning as an essential ‘practice strategy’ in balancing the public display of status/wealth with moderation/piety. Thus, the preemption of likely critiques of excessive consumption occupies a central position in performances.

Of special importance is the way in which the family takes on meaning as legitimating forms of consumption that may be particularly subjected to these types of critiques. Going to McDonald’s, for example, was seen by purists as highly problematic ideologically, but was legitimised as pressure from children that could not be resisted. The same was the case with American movies or television programmes in the home. These were relatively uncritically watched in spite of parental awareness of the problematic aspects in this.

Comparing purists and pragmatists, purists are more concerned with the search for more and more commodities and practices to be subsumed by halalisation.
In this respect, ritualization is a way of ordering and classifying practices. Ritual practice thus works as that which possesses or has the potential of becoming halal. That which is seen as clearly haram, e.g. alcohol, is then exorcised as impure. Against this, pragmatists are much more relaxed and uninterested in these halal/haram distinctions, which are seen to be the moralistic trademark of purists. For purists, public ritualization as sets of ordered and reiterated actions are crucial. These performances aim at generating a ‘sacred’ effect through the evocation of potential forms of authenticity. To pragmatists, individualised bricolages of choices, style and taste embody individual and deep authenticity against the conformity of purists.

Ritual and ritualization are strategies rooted in the body. Thus, the expressiveness of the body is deeply involved in performances of the self. The bodily distinctions produced by ritual come into being as social roles which represent one or more parts presented by the performer.

Deep knowledge of legitimate taste is crucial for the argument that middle class is a practised set of values rather than an objective category. The understanding and practice of Malay consumption is more and more focused on proper Islamic practice generating and generated by the nationalisation of Islam. The question of ‘getting consumption right’ in Malay middle-class families has everything to do with this understanding and practice of legitimate Islamic taste formative of distinctions.

Distinction can refer to a difference, or the recognition of a difference, between objects or people on the one hand. On the other hand, it may signify excellence in quality, talent, honour or respect – that which singles someone or something out. These dual meanings evoke the previous discussion of excess or surplus. Excess in one form or the other (e.g. material, spiritual, religious or honorary titles) is embedded in structures and processes of distinctions. For Bourdieu (1984: 2) ‘Consumption is (...) a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code.’ This culture of knowledge and practice works as a ‘principle of pertinence’ enabling consumers ‘...to identify, among the elements offered to the gaze, all the distinctive features and only these, by referring them, consciously or unconsciously, to the universe of possible alternatives.’ (4). Most importantly, informants reflected on class and Islamic consumption through the construction of a wide range of material and mental distinctions. To my mind, however, the trouble in Bourdieu’s
argument is his somewhat one-dimensional interest in class and class fractions. This overdetermination seems to prevent any analytical focus on religion or ethnicity, which would not have been insignificant for his wider study in its social, spatial, and historical context. It has been demonstrated that intrinsic properties may evoke elaborate ideas and requirements about proper context and handling. Therefore, Islamic consumption cannot merely be explored as a process of communication. Instead, distinctions materialise as far more intangible sentiments that are not exclusively extrinsic to the nature of the commodity form.
Chapter IV

Consumption, Moral Panic and the National Family

INTRODUCTION

I shall show how the national family works as the primary model of social and moral identification in the lives of middle-class Malays. Extensive reading of a number of women’s and family magazines substantiates the emergence of such a national Malaysian family. Rather than community or other models of identification, there is an inherent ‘moralistic familism’ to modern middle-class living in Southeast Asia (Kessler, 2001: 42-43). The field of tension within many families is that while individualism is a binding force, e.g. in expressive, materialistic or excessive consumption, ‘middle classness’ is viewed as a form of cultural formation based on implied togetherness and domesticity (Davidoff and Hall, 1987: XXXII). Middle-class Victorians turned families into objects of worshipful contemplation. Worship of God was practised through these families as a kind of sacrament through which archetypes were brought down to earth in a turn away from cosmos and community for families to live by. In effect, this was the creation and sustaining of their personal symbolic universe, which, in turn, meant that families could no longer be taken for granted, but were in need of constant attention. This transformation

‘…opened up vast new possibilities for individuals to construct identities, marriages, and family worlds to their own specifications, but it also placed huge burdens on marriage and family to produce those models of behavior – that had previously been found only in a divine original or communal exemplar, never in the family itself.’

(Gillis, 1996: 71)

These points are strikingly similar to the idealisation of the New Malay national family. Domesticity in Malay middle-class families is important in at least three respects. Firstly, the home is the primary domain for the valorisation of proper Islamic consumption, e.g. smaller children and teenagers’ desires to import novel and/or costly commodities sold in malls into the home. It is important, secondly, in connection with the breakdown of traditionally more authoritarian models or
Chapter IV: Consumption, Moral Panic and the National Family

religious identification. Lastly, middle-class families have become subjected to a number of moral calls and requirements from the Malaysian state and a number of Islamic discourses all competing to impose morally correct models of understanding and practice on families. One such call is that of Asian values.

RECOGNISING THE NATIONAL FAMILY

Much has been written about the Asian values debate and this topic does not occupy a central position in this dissertation. In the Malaysian context, I regard this debate as a hype embedded in the staging of state spectacles. Nevertheless, the debate over Asian values is rather similar to the way in which Shiraishi for Indonesia (1997: 166) discusses the cultural construction of the family as the domain where national politics and identity are most forcefully contested. In Malaysia, middle-class homes are significant semi-domains of cultural intimacy. Ironically, it is in the private sphere of the family and in the household that the potential for articulating challenging views come into existence. The inseparability of family and nation is a crucial component in state nationalist discourses. Mahathir (2001: 69) writes that

‘First of all, Asian values are community- and family-oriented. We place greater value on the family and on the needs and interest of the community than on the individual and his or her rights to absolute personal freedom. Fulfilling your responsibility towards your family and your community comes before your right to claim individual privileges. (...) Asian values also include respect for authority. Authority is seen to guarantee stability for the entire society; without authority and stability there can be no civility.’

During fieldwork, examples of newspaper articles on the need to construct and maintain bonds between family and nation were particularly massive. For example, Ministry Seeks Policy to Strengthen Family Unit (The Star 27 October 2001); Help Achieve Target, Youth Urged. Don’t Sell Yourself Short, Says Dollah (The Star Tuesday 30 October 2001). The recently appointed Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

‘...has made a plea to youth to direct their energy towards helping Malaysia achieve Vision 2020. He said it was disheartening to note that many were squandering their time indulging in crime and activities that were detrimental to their health. Youth would only be an asset to nation-building if they become good and healthy citizens, he added. (...) They get involved in drugs, they join activities which could lead them to
Chapter IV: Consumption, Moral Panic and the National Family

contract HIV/AIDS, they get involved in black metal cult. Juvenile crime is becoming a big problem.’

Obviously, the moral concern for the well-being of the national family is evoked through perils and moral panic, e.g. the black metal cult as I shall return to below.

An example of state stagings of such moral panic is the following hype in newspapers in April 2002. It was suggested that incest and rape were symptomatic of depraved Malay mentality in particular, e.g. a heading such as ‘Prevention Better Than Cure’. Dr M: Instil Good Values to Avoid Incest (The Star 15 April). This type of staging of the moral imperfection of Malays by Mahathir is only one example in a series of ongoing media hypes. Apparently, these calls seek to incite a continuous feeling of moral panic or inferiority. Douglas (2004: 4) convincingly makes the case that such moral panic or calls are forms of forcing the other into ‘good citizenship’ through distinction between moral values and ‘dangerous contagion’.

In Chapter II, crime as a city symptom polluting the otherwise pure middle-class suburb was discussed as moral panic staged in the Malaysian media. The effect of staging these media hypes seems to be the invocation of a protective state that legitimately can produce and uphold authoritarian power. While this may be true, another, and unintended, effect is that Malay middle-class families retreat into a defensive and intimate familism in the refuges of fortified enclaves.

Yet another hype in 2001 demonised what was labelled a satanic ‘Black Metal Cult’ in the Malaysian and international media. BBC on 13 August 2001 [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/1489407.stm], under the heading Herbal Cure for Malaysian Metal Fans. Prime Minister Mahathir Wants to Curb Foreign Music’, reported that in the state of Kedah ‘150 teenage rock fans accused of

1 Other examples of the family-nation edifice are: Broken Ties (The Star 5 November 2001). The family unit faces ‘degradation and disintegration’; Good Parenting ‘Key to Reducing Unwed Mums’ (The Star 8 January 2002); Teen Anger Can Kill! Are ‘Adult Crimes’ Slowly Violating the Teen Psyche? Are Teens Losing Their Grip on ‘Staying Cool’? (NST Friday 9 January 2002); First Roadshow in Campaign for Promoting Family Ties. Fathers Urged to Participate (NST 18 January 2002); Praise for Concerned Youth. PM: They Must Temper Idealism and Impatience with Pragmatism (NST 7 March 2002). Mahathir explained that ‘It is, therefore, important that we temper idealism and impatience with pragmatism and a willingness to learn from the mistakes and the successes of the past so as to ensure that the mistakes are avoided and the successes are repeated.’; Dr M: Younger Generation Can Help Realise Vision 2020 (NST 7 March 2002). ‘Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the younger generation must do their bit to help achieve Vision 2020 as it was not easy to achieve this goal.’; The Making of Wholesome Families (The Sun 30 March 2002) and Working Towards Wholesome Families (NST 1 April 2002). A Wholesome Family gathering was held to stress the importance of wholesome families as integral to the sustenance of a dynamic and progressive nation.
belonging to a Satanic cult…’ were to be given herbal medicine. An official told
Reuters that ‘This herb is to stimulate the brain so that students can concentrate on
their studies.’ In the future, foreign groups had to submit videotapes of their concerts
to the government before being allowed to play publicly. Mahathir ‘…criticised both
rap and heavy metal music for corrupting the morals of Malaysia’s population.’ In
effect, the state radio was ordered to play less heavy metal music. The official
explained that Black Metal members recruited new ones through heavy metal and
were ‘…accused of sacrificing animals, drinking blood, smoking cannabis and
desecrating religious texts, such as the Koran.’ Besides rehabilitation, the herbal
medicine was developed by a private company to treat drug addicts and was
‘…found to be effective in stimulating their thinking.’ This staging most of all draws
on more sectarian elements of folk religion and reference to herbal remedies applied
to exorcise evil spirits. This performance, nevertheless, signified a wider concern with
the hedonism and moral excess of Western popular music. Informants seemed to
have internalised these anxieties and on several occasions they demonised heavy
metal and the black metal cult.

More broadly, there was no pronounced disagreement between purists and
pragmatists concerning their taste in music. Not surprisingly, generational differences
were far more determining for informants’ preferences. The tendency was that
informants such as Yasir would select mainstream Western pop music of his
generation. This said, he would instantly point out that he regularly listened to
Islamic radio stations broadcasting ‘Islamic messages and entertainment. Not really
quiz shows, but more nasyid (Islamic song) and melodies allowed by Islam.’ For
favourite music artists, Yasir mentioned the local Islamic singer, Raihan, Sting, Boyz To
Men and Babyface. Consequently, performance here works as a form of juxtaposition
of legitimate Islamic taste and that which is seen as less acceptable. The worst genre
of music would be metal music as ‘…it worships the devil in the way they sing, in
concerts and images. It’s not right.’ Quite a number of informants followed the hyped
moral panic over heavy metal, rap and hip-hop, which could be seen as support of
the harsh government line on foreign music.

In the local context of TTDI, the monthly Masyarakat TTDI (No. 1 March 2001)
reported that a parenting seminar was scheduled. This type of education of parents
should be seen as a localised response to the emergence of a national pedagogy. The seminar stressed the difficulties of modern parenting and how to address these:

‘It will cause you to reflect on your influence over your children and whether you are the role-model for them to learn values and life skills from. Your children will be the leaders of the next decade. Will they be effective, productive citizens of the next generation?’

In a subsequent issue (No. 2 Jun 2001), the topics of the seminar were outlined:

‘…parenting is teamwork; fathering is not just limited to bringing home the pay-packet and abdicating all other duties to the mothers. Children learn by imitating adults, so parents setting a good role model is so important. More time spent working on the job means less time for the family. Eating together at dinner time at the same table is crucial for family bonding, while weekend evenings for the family to do fun things can further strengthen this bond.’

Informants in TTDI generally found that this type of seminar was necessary in order to strengthening the skills of modern parenting. On a multitude of levels, the effect of this grand naturalisation of the cultural linkages between Asia, nation, authority, community, family and individuals presents families with unattainable ideals of values and practice. As a consequence, strategic ‘moralistic familism’ instead becomes the order of the day. Novel styles of domestic life have created modern types of inner-directed and self-reliant personalities that have transformed the middle-class home into a Haven in a Heartless World (Lasch, 1979: 4) or a fortified enclave. In the seclusion of the home families can find ‘…ideological support and justification in the conception of domestic life as an emotional refuge in a cold competitive society.’ (6). The safety of this type of haven ensures that imports are emotionally accommodated. Carsten (1997: 155) points out that money earned outside as it passes through the house is ‘…transformed from divisive, commercial, and competitive associations of the way it is earned. Instead, it becomes imbued with the values of kinship and unity associated with the house, and above all with the dapur.’ The hearth, which was previously the natural centre of many Malay houses and kitchen has now been replaced by an abundance of kitchen appliances.

I now move to a discussion based on my extensive reading of magazines. From the reading of these magazines it was obvious that over the past three decades the Malay
family has been subjected to ever more calls for the production of a new ‘familial-national’ ontology. This type of idealisation involves the family as a forceful and resistant urban/suburban social unit that lives up to national responsibilities as patriotic Malays. The main focus below is on the way in which these magazines have been vehicles of a number of broader debates and imaginings of current interest in Malaysia. The construction of and concern for the integrity of the national family is a theme that is present throughout these discussions.

The TTDI survey shows that magazines are a major source of everyday information in terms of proper Islamic lifestyle, home and consumption. These were major themes that motivated the everyday reading of magazines for both respondents and informants. 28% of all Malay respondents listed that as their primary preference they would regularly read entertainment magazines, 23% religious magazines, 21% family magazines, and 14% Finance/Business magazines. 9% read other types of magazines, and only 5% did not read magazines. Chinese respondents differed significantly. 41% of Chinese respondents listed that they did not read magazines at all. Religious magazines in particular did not interest Chinese respondents, and only 4% listed that they would read these on a regular basis. Comparatively, Malays were clearly most interested in reading magazines with special emphasis on entertainment, religion and family.

Thus, in the object domain of magazines, the whole issue of family domesticity in Islamic consumption seemed to come together. Consequently, I have extensively read a number of the most popular family and women’s magazines going back about 30 years.

Entertainment in magazines was approached from two contradictory perspectives. Firstly, as exemplified in the magazine Female. This magazine focuses on fashion and lifestyling without any moral or religious implications in terms of consumption. Excess in this type of magazine is idealised rather than demonised. A telling example of the way in which excess can be displayed is an article in Female (March 2002) entitled Confessions of A Shopaholic. In the article, a young Malay girl, Yani, with her hair uncovered, shops like mad, and ‘...the most when she’s feeling

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2 National market statistics on total advertising expenditure show that for the year to date (June 2001), magazines accounted for RM82, 827, 000 and a relative market share of 5.7%. These figures are only surpassed by TV and newspapers (RIS Update, August 2001). Magazines comprise a major avenue in terms of local and international advertising.
down. And for some women (or perhaps all), the fastest and easiest way to perk up from feeling down in the dumps is to simply shop. Yani swears that retail therapy works for her.’ These few lines concentrate the entire complex of excess: overt display of material status; individualism; over-enjoyment; gender and generational conflicts.

Secondly, in the magazine Muslimah on July 1997 in the article with the heading Budaya Berhibur. Suatu Kemestian Kini? (The Entertainment Culture. Is it a Must Today?). The article discusses various scholarly approaches to the morality of entertainment. In essence, however, the article brilliantly signifies halalisation as a particular mode of conceptualisation and practice. In spite of these scholars’ diverse points, e.g. that the material world is not everything, in their discussion of entertainment as excessive, one common argument runs through the article. Entertainment per se is not morally problematic as long as it is properly Islamic. The task is to creatively set up Islamic entertainment outlets such as sports centres and picnic areas. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that entertainment is not everything and that it must be balanced with Koran teachings in order to counter typical Western entertainment. In sum, Islam does not oppose entertainment, but solely forms that are un-Islamic and excessive. Islamically proper entertainment could actually compel the creation of good individuals. To purist informants, entertainment represented moral ambivalence particularly with respect to the location of entertainment. None of these informants rejected the thought or practice of reading entertainment magazines or watching entertainment programmes on television. Improper and excessive public entertainment to them was the primary object of critique.

Practical and moral aspects of child rearing were a prominent theme in many magazines. Even younger male informants such as Jomono expressed that he would like to learn more about how to educate children, and that magazines provided constructive guidelines on everyday life in families. Izura appreciated ‘Very light and generalised topics’ in magazines, which could be educational for teaching children to understand the basics of issues pertaining to the practice of Islam, e.g. fasting and the

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3 In the article one is defined as a shopaholic if ‘Shopping is your primary activity of choice; you have hidden or lied about your purchases; you have felt nervous and guilty about telling others about the frequency of your spending sprees; you can’t differentiate between needing and wanting something; you spend quickly and freely without being fully aware of where the money goes. It just seems to disappear!; Your shopping has left you in debt.’
Islamic calendar. Another area where Izura felt that magazines offered valuable advice was in terms of commendable or non-mandatory acts. The everyday performance of these acts, e.g. certain types of prayers, is explicated in articles and problem pages in magazines. Izura commented that ‘If you want to perform these, we get extra points.’

The following articles in Wanita all testify to the emergence of the Malay national family with respect to the morally correct raising of children. The heading of this article (April 1983) was Keburukan Tabiat Anak-Anak Terletak Di Tangan Ibu Bapa (Children’s Bad Habits Are in the Hands of the Parents). Proper socialisation of children is preconditioned on parental responsibilities in raising children. On the one hand, parents must be able to communicate their support, love and a caring attitude so that the children become responsible for both themselves and community. On the other hand, punishment should be firm because if parents are weak the children will disobey. Children should be raised to be independent, if not, they will solely depend on others in their lives. Parents have to work hard, and never let the children control the situation. The father and mother should cooperate when raising children so when one of the parents scolds the children the other should support this, or the child will hate the scolding parent. Only through continuous work on gender and generation conflicts can the family assume its proper role as a truly national family. Thus, the social integrity of this family is not given, but emerges as an ongoing social project.

Under the heading Mengatasi Masalah Anak-Anak Yang Mencuri (Ways to Handle Children Who Steal) (June 1983), the argument is put forward that parents have to balance firmness and respect for children when guiding them on the correct way to spend and save money in order to prevent the children from stealing. These pieces of advice should be seen in the context of an emergent social consumer ontology gaining impetus in the 1980s. At the same time, novel sets of values have to be instilled, e.g. the value of money and balanced spending in order to become a skilled consumer. Otherwise, the child will resort to moral corruption and stealing.

Yet another article (July 1983) addresses the issue of praise in upbringing: Memuji Anak-Anak Pencapaiannya Atau Peribadinya (Praising Children for Their Achievements or Personalities). It is a myth that praising children will give them self-confidence and a feeling of safety; in reality it exerts pressure and provokes negative feelings in the child. Unjustified praise will distort the self-image of the child and
distrust towards the parents. Praising is emotional and should be based on ability, achievement and effort, not on personal values or attitude. These ideas echo the wider need for Malay introspection persistently articulated by Mahathir. Thus, the family metaphor fits state nationalist visions of the New Malay.

The following article (December 1989) *Orang Kaya Anak Tak Ramai Manusi* Tidak Normal? (The Children of Rich People Are not Boisterous - Does That Mean that They Are not Normal?) addresses the relationship between wealth and fertility, arguing that the decline in births in urban areas is due to higher levels of education, the social and physical environment and excessive lifestyles. Against this tendency, it is argued that the number of children in families is an indicator of positive family values reflecting the wider values of nation and society. Psychologically, children bring happiness, pride and satisfaction. Clearly, material excess is seen to displace traditionally rural and healthy patterns of family living in which the large family was a resource invested in survival.

The subsequent article (January 1991) *Anak Diupah Supaya Berkelakuan Baik* (Children Are Paid to Behave) questions the tendency to buy off children with e.g. desserts as this causes more problems than solutions. Parents should be careful and skilled in rewarding their children.

In the article *Anak-Anak Lemah Tidak Dapat Mencapi Tahap Hidup Yang Damai* (Weak Children Cannot Achieve a Peaceful Life) (January 1992), knowledge of religion and piety is essential to a peaceful and happy life. You have to follow the right way according to the concept of *Iman* (faith). This theme is developed further in another article (March 1992) in which modernity itself is questioned: *Membesarkan Anak-Anak Di Zaman Moden Membingungkan Ibu Bapa* (To Raise Children in the Modern Era Can Be Confusing for Parents). On the one hand, some parents’ idealisation of raising polite and obedient children in an increasingly complex modern era compels them to overemphasise discipline without love and care, which are essential to upbringing. On the other hand, parenting skills have deteriorated in contemporary Malaysia because of work and busy lifestyles, so that parents grant their children excessive freedom while forgetting that one universal rule applies: children always emulate their parents.

In the magazine *Ibu*, similar themes are replayed. The article (January 1995) *Bentuk Nilai Keluarga Dalam Rumah Tangga Bawa Kebahagiaan* (The Shaping of Family
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Values in a Household Brings Happiness) argues that respect for gender equality, closeness, encouraging children to achieve according to the best of their ability, and individuality are essential to the happiness of modern families. A similar message is brought forward in another article (February 1996) Ibu Bapa Yang Jadi Impian Anak (Becoming the Ideal Parents for Children). Parents must advise their children as a friend in order to help solve problems.

A number of issues arise from reading the above magazines. Firstly, that the family is subjected to a plethora of specialist advice ranging from psychology over economy to religion. The import of these expert ideas of the happy family construes a number of ideal models to be emulated in everyday life. The therapeutic aspect of family life is prominent in the articles discussed. More broadly, the articles take up central questions of contention in the modern urban lifeworld of which Malays are part: the rightful place of work, family, material excess, urbanisation and religion in the production of patriotic citizens in Malaysian nation-building. All these transformations are intricately tied to the production of the new middle-class Malay in a suburban setting.

Reading these magazines from 30 years ago, attested to the fact that Malay families increasingly are subjected to moral national ideas and imaginings. In these discourses, the modern nuclear family is not given, but rather an ongoing social and moral project in need of constant attention from the state, religious and educational experts, and, most importantly, family members themselves. Moreover, the rise of a Malay ontology of Islamic consumption has re-signified the ideal of the modern urban Malay family. When the nationalisation of Islam intensified in the 1980s, magazines truly came into their own. An abundance of advice attempted to identify and standardise the proper Islamic way. An example of this was advice to women about proper dress. Persistently, the urgency of maintaining family integrity is articulated. This construction parallels state nationalist insistence on the urgency of nation-building. More specifically, the metaphor of the affluent urban Malay family comes to symbolise the whole construction of the Malay middle class produced by, and thus indebted to, the state. In all this, family bodies are constantly subjected to moral calls concerning caring, discipline and reward.

Above, moral panic in newspapers was discussed. In the Islamic women's
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magazine *Muslimah*, which was introduced in 1984, moral panic is a recurring theme, for example, in the article (May 1988) with the heading *Gejala Keruntuhan Moral. Siapa Patut Dipersalahkan?* (The Collapse of Morality. Who Is to Blame?). The majority of Muslims have a questionable moral attitude and it is the responsibility of parents to address this problem and not only through providing proper education, but by acting as role models. Another article (April 1995) in this magazine is *Fenomena Kaburnya Konsep Kemajuan Islam* (The Phenomenon that the Islamic Development Concept Is Fading). For the few past decades of nation building people have put position and materialism before spiritualism, rejecting the existence of God as has happened in the West. This is a critique of state nationalism and its desire for materially excessive development in e.g. *Vision 2020*. The argument is that material excess has polluted the ongoing progress towards authentic Islamic development.

Cleanliness was a virtue with informants and their homes were actually clean and tidy. One exception was the playroom of Udzir and Nur’s two children that more than anything else truly functioned as a playroom especially fitted up so that young children could play and make a mess of things. This liberal attitude towards cleanliness and order matched this couple’s ideas of not being restricted by conventions in self-realization. Douglas (2004: 2) points out that dirt is never absolute, but subjective. Most importantly maybe, ‘Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained. To recognise this is the first step towards insight into pollution. It involves us in no clear-cut distinction between sacred and secular.’ (50). All these ideas and practices are intricately tied to domesticity against its outside: ‘We are separating, placing boundaries, making visible statements about the home that we are intending to create out of the material house.’ (85).

In the suburban world, the street as inherently disorderly and boundless contrasted with domestic virtues of order and cleanliness in the fortified enclaves. The quest for order and cleanliness was matched by the external artificiality of suburbia. Consequently, the back region of the home is where control is ensured and maintained as a resource against front region anxieties. As we have seen with informants, decoration and taste are primary means of personalising harmonious homes. And magazines are major vehicles for advice on interior decoration as well as a pedagogy of the modern national family in Malaysia.
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An abundance of advice guides the housewife and mother as to how to achieve the faultless home producing the ideal site for family living. Secondly, cleanliness in a more public form is prominent in the TTDI Residents’ Association’s newsletter. In several issues, the theme of cleanliness materialises. For example in No. 3 September 1994: A More Caring Attitude to Make Things Work:

‘Together with the whole nation, we have just celebrated our 37th anniversary of independence from colonial rule and our existence as a sovereign nation in our own right. Well, we have lots to be proud of. Our economic growth, our standing in the international community, and the peaceful coexistence of the multiracial communities are worthy of study and emulation by most other developing and maybe some developed countries too. But let us not be too carried away as one finds there are still a lot of things not ‘working’ properly in our everyday life. Look at those complaints about rubbish not collected. In fact one has only to wander a bit off the main roads of the city to find our side streets and backlanes in less than pristine condition. Take a trip to the sub-urban or rural areas and the situation is even worse.’

National purity is idealised, and this should be emulated in TTDI. In No. 1 March 1995 it is argued that cleanliness should be an integral part of children’s socialisation to the benefit of the community in TTDI and uphold the label of ‘model township’:

‘…teach our children that littering is wrong and morally unacceptable by being role models ourselves. (…) …ensure that our frontage and the portion of road adjacent to our gates are spotless. Please devote perhaps fifteen minutes a day to this endeavour.’

In No. 2 October 1998, there is an on-the-spot report announcing Winners of the Cleanliness & Landscaping Contest held in TTDI. In the Message from the Chairman (No. 2 September 1995) the editorial reads as follows:

‘Our country has been blessed with an incomparable economic growth, a stable socio-political environment and freedom from natural disasters that we take for granted our good fortune. On a micro-scopic level, Taman Tun Dr. Ismail is similarly fortunate with our clean wide roads, lush greenery and efficient services.’

The last two examples are from women’s magazines. Firstly, in Wanita (March 1971): Mengurus Kebersihan Rumah Tangga Anda (To Manage and Clean Your Household). If the house is well maintained and clean, this will provide you with a mentally and spiritually harmonious family life. Lastly, the article Rumah Kemas Hati Gembira (House: Tidy, Elegant, Happy) in Ibu September 1992 argues that once your house is
neat it will make you happy and, maybe even more importantly: the tidier the home, the more time the husband wants to spend there. In all this, there are elaborate ideas of the linkages between purity, control and happiness.

In *Wanita* (June 1971), the article *Punjok Untuk Menghias Rumah* (The Way to Decorate a Home) guides the housewife in her decoration of the home. The most important furniture such as cupboards and sofas must be given first place before you decide where to situate the remaining furniture in order to achieve a harmonious interior. Colour is of importance so you should choose wall colour to match the furniture. Moreover, the context of purchasing goods for interior decoration must be taken into consideration. Firstly, goods should always be bought at the same store to avoid being cheated. The inference here is that the unskilled Malay consumer should be cautious about the cunning Chinese dealer. In the early 1970s, it was still unusual to find that other ethnic groups than Chinese would sell commodities such as furniture. Secondly, the article urges that both husband and wife must be satisfied with the furniture. Here, as well as in other similar articles, gendering is about making men more interested in and attached to the home and domestic affairs. Finally, the consumer is advised only to buy if sufficient funds are available to avoid credit. Saving up will enable one to buy good quality, which is always expensive.

In another *Wanita* issue from May 1992, the heading reads *Cara Menyusun Perabot Yang Baik* (Ways of Arranging Your Furniture Nicely). If you organise and balance your furniture in the right way, it will make your house seem larger. Similarly, another article in the *Ibu* (May 1993) *Paduan Rekabentuk Tradisional Dan Moden* (The Combination of Traditional and Modern Design) reports from the house of a famous composer in whose home everything is mixed yet convincingly balanced. There is ratoon furniture vital to Malay taste and identity, and simultaneously modern design.

In yet another issue of the same magazine (October 1994), an article entitled *Lambang Kemanusiaan Dan Kedamaian* (Symbol of Humanity and Peace) stresses that the correct decoration and arrangement of the furniture, plants, and trees symbolise peace and humanity. Moreover, the advice is to mix furniture from different periods. Much the same topic on harmony is present in the articles (December 1994) *Harmoni Warnai Kebahagiaan Rumah Tangga* (Harmonious Colouring Brings Happiness in a
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Household,) and *Pilihan Yang Sesuai Lahirkan Suasana Harmoni* (Choosing the Right Colour Creates a Harmonious Atmosphere) (February 1997).

In an *Ibu* issue from September 1995 happiness and materiality is again brought up: *Kebahagiaan Keluarga Amat Penting* (Family Happiness is Crucial), but in this context, the argument is that a large bungalow does not necessarily mean happiness. Against this, the crucial question is how the home is decorated and personalised. It is in the intimate details and the knowledge of these that distinctions between the pompous and the persuasiveness of the discretely legitimate emerge. Most importantly, the personalisation of taste is achievable only if the house is clean, tidy, and neat. The central idea in the above articles is that family harmony, wellbeing and happiness are intricately linked to material distinctions, organisation, and dispositions.

I was quite impressed by the number and variety of magazines informants would read. The majority of informants mix the reading of different types of magazines. In terms of generational and gender differences there were no clear tendencies. Younger informants would for example read family magazines to learn about and prepare for future family life. Male informants would read family as well as interior design magazines. This should be seen as a tendency towards challenging the private domain as dominantly female in terms of child rearing, interior design, and decoration. Moreover, in my own reading of magazines I saw a tendency for men to be encouraged to participate in and shape domestic life. In spite of this male interest in decoration of the home, it was mostly women in both the purist and pragmatic group who would organise interior decoration.

Interestingly, purist male informants such as Yasir and Binsar were fascinated with appropriating and domesticating simple Islamic living. Consequently, *IKEA* design was a favourite with these informants. This fascination with simplicity mirrors the wider tendencies in the magazines discussed above. Juxtaposition, composition, balance and subtlety much more than single objects of material status inform the knowledge of legitimate modes of decoration. Most significantly, these elaborate ideas and practices fundamentally exorcised feelings and suspicions of being excessive. Consequently, conceptualisations and practices of material excess were mended. The element of performance seems relevant to bring in here. Even though
purist informants insisted on simplifying the decoration of the house, there is no clear evidence that these ideas were translated into actual practices in their homes.

In sum, a number of trends appeared from reading these magazines. First and foremost, the number of magazines in existence from the late 1960s, following a general trend of specialisation and individualisation up to today, has exploded. Today, magazines aim at certain target groups with specified consumer behaviour that supposedly is congruent with their class fraction. The segmentation, specialisation, diversification and transformation of the market are apparent in magazines.

In the early 1970s, it was not uncommon to see Malay girls wearing bikinis in some of these magazines. This tendency changed dramatically later in the 1970s and early 1980s when the *tudung* became standard together with the *baju kurung* as part of *dakwah*. This proved to be a radical recasting and control of embodiment that set new standards for Islamically correct attire for women in particular.

Concurrently, expanding markets provided an increase in the availability of goods and services advertised in these magazines, including Islamic banking, savings, insurance, and increasingly more everyday products said to be halal certified. Magazines proved to be prime sites for investigating how different modes of Islamic consumption interact with new ethics of a modern Malay consumer ontology emerging and intensifying in the later part of the 1970s. In magazines, we see a concretion of the way in which Malay middle-class family living was subjected to the wider process of the nationalisation of Islam. In effect, the modern national Malay family materialised as a New Malay family. Thus, Malay families have been subjected to more and more calls for the production of a new ‘familial-national’ ontology. In this form of idealisation, the Malay middle-class family emerges as a forceful, loyal, progressive and patriotic social unit. Inside these families, however, the intensified struggle for social mobility as well and gender and generational transformations have all produced a type of intermediate family that experiences confusions and contradictions.
Chapter V

Consuming the Hand that Feeds You

THE MATERIAL OF MALAYNESS

In this chapter, I continue the exploration of the state and ‘the political’ in Malaysia introduced in Chapter I. In this particular section, I shall argue that state responsiveness through ethnic policies in Malaysia addresses two modes of desire in the Malay middle class. The first mode is that of ‘state deliveries’ fulfilling demands for a multitude of commodities constitutive of ethnic Malay material identity. As will be discussed below, these deliveries of the state are intimately linked to the expanding state monopolisation of the certification and standardisation of a plethora of halal commodities. Closely related to this, the second pressing endeavour of the state is the symbolic and discursive project of delivering a meaningful version and vision of a Malaysian nation in response to and preemption of revivalist Islamic counter-visions often strongly focused on the demand for an Islamic state.

In Mahathir’s book *The Malay Dilemma* (1970: 4), he wonders how racial tension between the ‘major races’, Chinese and Malays, could explode into violence the way it did in the riots of 13 May 1969 discussed in Chapter I. To Mahathir, the answer lies in Malay frailty and backwardness against Chinese resilience. The social formula for alleviating Malay inferiority is through ‘Urbanization, acquisition of new skills and the acceptance by the Malays of new values which are still compatible with their religion and their basically feudal outlook.’ (114). These visions were translated into a major scheme of state social engineering called the NEP (New Economic Policy).¹

The NEP was instigated to improve the economic and social situation of the bumiputera vis-à-vis particularly the Chinese. More specifically, the NEP encompassed two major goals. The first was the reduction and eventual eradication of poverty by

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¹ In the 1990s, the NEP was replaced by its downscaled version called the NDP (National Development Plan).
increasing income levels and employment opportunities for all Malaysians. The
second aimed at ‘...accelerating the process of restructuring Malaysian society to
correct economic imbalance, so as to reduce and eventually eliminate the
identification of race with economic function.’ (Second Malaysia Plan, 1971-1975
quoted in Crouch, 1996: 25). In actual fact, the NEP generated a number of benefits for
the Malays and other indigenous groups such as increased ownership of production
and quota access 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 manufacture an urban educated,
entrepreneurial and shareholding Malay middle class (op. cit). So the expanding
Malay middle class can to some extent be seen as a product of ideological work on
behalf of the state (Milner, 1998; Embong, 1998). In the eyes of every single Malay
informant, the NEP is felt, even today, to be vital for the social and ethnic progress of
the Malays and to have a crucial impact on their abilities as Malay consumers.
Informants time and again referred to themselves as New Malays. The coining of this
term by Mahathir (1995a: 1) signifies the concretion of a hard-working and
entrepreneurial urban Malay middle-class mentality. Rightfully, this new class of
Malay consumers was entitled to enjoy the fruits of their work.

The ideological blueprints of the NEP and the New Malay, however, would
have been unimaginable without the steady economic growth Malaysia has
experienced since 1970. The launch of NEP and general economic growth has

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2 In his insightful reading of The Malay Dilemma, Yao (2000: 72) writes about the historical and
ideological background of the NEP project that in official discourses a story is being told of
Malays being denied a rightful place in their own country mainly by the Chinese, who are
economically and professionally dominant. In these discourses there is a strong feeling of the
‘...impotence of the bumiputra to define ‘in their own country’ national identity and cultural agendas
according to their social and religious aspirations. Infused with all the features of a rehabilitative
project, the bumiputra’s policy is about ‘restoring’ the right ownership and control, (only) to those who
can trace their primordial connection ‘by blood and the soil’ with the country. The outcome, somewhat
inevitably, is a form of multiculturalism firmly rooted in a zero-sum game of power-sharing and
cultural legitimacy. From the installation of the pro-bumiputra New Economic Policy (NEP) to the
promotion of Malay as the sole national language, the state is able to insist on a real continuum between
the ‘backwardness’ of the Malay community and the effrontery of the ‘immigrants’ enjoying fruits they
do not deserve, in a place to which they do not belong.’

3 Real per-capita income doubled in the period between 1970 and 1990, and this significantly
reduced the number of families living below the poverty line (Crouch, 1996: 189). On two
transformed Malaysia’s class structure, producing an urban Malay Middle class and the decline of agricultural occupations (Crouch, 1996: 181). 1990 statistics show that the Malay middle class’ share in middle-class occupational categories constituted 48.1 percent and that Malay white-collar middle-class professions doubled from 12.9 in 1970 to 27.0 percent in 1990 (184-185). Urbanisation after 1970 represented a serious challenge to UMNO, which could no longer rely on its largely passive rural base (192-193). The party now had to pay attention to other and more demanding sections of the urban Malay community. A similar effect was noticeable in PAS, which in 1980 was taken over by well-educated leaders who downplayed the rural-Malay ethos and stressed its Islamic foundations.

The middle class now had a ‘material stake in the social order’ (195) and was equipped to practice what I call shopping for the state. Shopping for the state encompasses the transformation of more traditional and symbolic types of reverence for authority in the form of Islam, royalty and Malayness promoted through colonial policy (Nagata, 1994: 66). Instead, the state now demands patriotic consumption of subjects in return for various forms of responsiveness, most clearly through delivering economic growth and spending power. In other words, the economic transformation of Islam in Malaysia has displaced Islam as a source of traditional legitimacy of Malay rulers. Their historical mode of articulating Malayness based on universal Islamic authority and adat,\(^4\) local customary law (45), has been seriously destabilized. 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, 1998: 146).

Under the heading *Think Practically, Dr M Advises Ulamas* in *The Star* 4 December 2001, Mahathir attacks the Malaysian Ulama Association (PUM) for their call to boycott American goods in the wake of the US attack on Afghanistan: ‘We

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\(^4\) A discursive element within Islam in Malaysia is the tension between modernist Islam and *adat*, which, according to Geertz (1983: 185), is defined as ‘…something half-way between ‘social consensus and moral style’. The tension between this tradition and modernist Islam materialises for example in connection with *bomoh*, whom the comparatively more authoritative tradition of Islam sees as representing superstitions of ‘folk religion’. 
should not be emotional, we should think practically, things that we can do, we do, things that we cannot, we don’t talk about it, the Prime Minister told reporters after breaking fast and performing *terawih* prayers.\(^5\) An anonymous representative from PUM in the same article replied that ‘It’s unfair to ask the government to boycott (American goods), we do it on our own, things that we don’t need, we don’t use.’ The representative added that the call was ‘…difficult to implement and cited American-made Boeing aircrafts being used to fly Malaysian pilgrims to the *Haj* as example’. The state soon elaborated its criticism of boycotting further by saying that such a boycott would have either no effect or a damaging effect on US-Malaysian relations. This view was outlined under the heading *Goods Boycott Will Only Hurt Us* (NST 8 December 2001).

The global economic downturn and insecurity following 9/11 moderated consumer sentiments in Malaysia. Consequently, the government launched a campaign in the media aimed at boosting the consumption of domestically produced goods especially. Under the heading ‘*Tis Season for Spending, Consumers Told*, the 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’, the Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry parliamentary secretary explained. He continued: ‘As we prepare to celebrate Deepavali, Hari Raya, Christmas and Chinese New Year, let’s not be too rigid in our expenditure, which could lead to over saving.’ With the US and global markets slowing down after 9/11, spending was the only reliable way to spur growth (*The Star* 13 November 2001). The state and nation depend on this type of patriotic consumption. In fact, the encouragement to consume is a state nationalist endeavour that aims at embodying the nation as ritual patriotic practice in consumers. These ideas are directed against what the state sees as the decline of Islam due to the arrogant rejection of secular knowledge by *ulama* (Milne and Mauzy, 1999: 84). Finally, the state’s call to consume is in line with the neoliberal dogma that consumption is the primary source of value. The trouble, of course, is to examine how consumers in reality negotiate and practise this kind of discourse.

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5 The *terawih* prayer is a special prayer only performed at Ramadan.
The above debate shows that in Malaysia mass consumption is subjected to intense political and religious contestation. Most importantly, the issue of proper Islamic consumption is now inseparable from the way in which the state in Malaysia seeks to incite feelings of reverence, loyalty and patriotism in its citizens. Against these attempts at instilling new sets of material values and practices, Malay consumers, as demonstrated, are highly ambiguous about this ideological state presence in their everyday consumption.

In all this, halalisation stands out as the most striking example of these new forms of loyalties that find their everyday concretion in the commodity form. Halalisation as ideas and practices has explos[ed in the form of certification, commercialisation, standardisation and promotion by the state and private enterprise. For Malay consumers, this trend encompasses a concern with not only food products, but also an increasing number of non-food halal products.

On the website [http://www.miti.gov.my/miti-halalhub.html] of The Ministry of International Trade and Industry, the mission to promote halal products and the institution of halal is outlined as follows:

‘The goal is to introduce the institution of halal to manufacturers, educators and regulatory bodies, to develop an awareness of halal among all consumers, to make halal foods conveniently available and to provide halal solutions to consumers’ needs. In support of our mission and goals, we engage in the following activities:

Supervising the production of halal products; Certifying the production of halal; Leading discussion about topics affecting the halal consumer; Finding solutions for ever-evolving challenges; Publishing relevant information; Maintaining ‘best in class’ producers for halal production.’

This information is backed up by a guide to the practicalities pertaining to halal certification in a folder (n.d.) issued by JAKIM (Department of Malaysian Islamic Development). In the folder’s introduction it is stated that in order to certify halal food ‘...the Halal Endorsement Certificate will be issued to manufacturers of food and products who have complied with all the conditions as stipulated according to JAKIM’s Guidelines on Food, Drinks and Products for Muslims.’ In this procedure, ‘Inspection and analysis of products and manufacturing premises will be conducted
on every application of the Halal Endorsement Certificate.’ Following these procedures, final approval, renewal of certificates and follow-up inspections all take place according to specific guidelines.

Halal simply means permitted or lawful. But there are a number of other aspects to halal emerging that will now be explored in detail. The understanding and practice of halal requirements, however, vary among import countries and companies producing halal food. This is the point made in the book *Halal Food Production* (Riaz and Chaudry, 2004: VII). The book by two US scholars is a popularised guide to promoting, marketing, and producing halal foods for professionals in an expanding global food market.

For Muslims it is obligatory only to consume halal food established in the Koran and Sunna (2). Three sets of ideas may guide the permissibility of foods. Firstly, impurity and harmfulness as reasons for prohibitions that follow divine definition: ‘A Muslim is not required to know exactly why or how something is unclean or harmful in what God has prohibited. There might be obvious reasons.’ Secondly, the permitted is that which is sufficient and conversely the superfluous or excessive is prohibited (6). Lastly, ‘Doubtful things should be avoided. There is a grey area between clearly lawful and clearly unlawful. This is the area of ‘what is doubtful.’ Islam considers it an act of piety for Muslims to avoid doubtful things.’ (6-7). The doubtful or questionable is expressed in the word *mashbooh* (7), which can be evoked by divergences in scholars’ opinions or the suspicion of undetermined or prohibited ingredients in a commodity (op.cit).

Modern ideas and practices of halal apply to more than just foods, e.g. cosmetics and care products (op.cit). In essence, however, the concept of haram refers to food, its production and handling, or products derived from or contaminated by these. In addition to these prohibitions, animals should be slaughtered by a Muslim of ‘proper age’ pronouncing the name of God. The cutting of the animal’s throat must be performed in a manner so that it ‘...induces rapid, complete bleeding and results

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6 The following categories are haram and thus unfit for human consumption: ‘Carrion or dead animals; flowing or congealed blood; swine, including all by-products; animals slaughtered without pronouncing the name of God on them; animals killed in a manner that prevents their blood from being fully drained from their bodies; animals slaughtered while pronouncing a name other than God; intoxicants of all types, including alcohol and drugs; carnivorous animals with fangs, such as lions, dogs, wolves, or tigers; birds with sharp claws (birds of prey), such as falcons, eagles, owls, or vultures; land animals such as frogs or snakes.’ (Riaz and Chaudry, 2004: 9).
in the quickest death.’ (12). Moreover, ‘The animals must be raised, transported, handled, and held under humane conditions. However, these are only desirable actions and mishandling of animals does not make their meat haram.’ (17). In the modern food industry, a number of requirements have taken effect, e.g. to avoid any substances that may be contaminated by porcine residues or alcohol such as gelatin, glycerin, emulsifiers, enzymes, flavours, and flavourings (22-25). The problem in certifying food and other products with regard to these substances is that they are extremely difficult to discover. In sum, to determine whether foodstuff is halal or haram ‘…depends on its nature, how it is processed, and how it is obtained.’ (14).

Besides these relatively clear requirements regarding food, there are far more abstract, individual and fuzzy aspects of context and handling involved in certification. The interpretation of these mashbooh areas is left open to Islamic specialists and state institutions. In the end, it is concluded that ‘Although these explanations may or may not be sound, the underlying principle behind the prohibitions remains the divine order.’ (12).

Knowledge of the above requirements is, of course, essential to innovative food companies that try to establish themselves in an expanding global halal market. The increased demand for halal products by conscious and educated Muslim consumers has urged developed countries to export halal products. In this way, developed countries have entered a market that was previously dominated by Muslim countries (op.cit). Moreover, the proliferation of Western franchised food has changed the international food market and subjected it to new standards of halal certification (29-30).

The expansion of the halal market on a global scale has pluralized, legitimised and confused consumer choices involved in everyday consumption in a relatively affluent country such as Malaysia. After coming to power in 1981, Mahathir in 1982 set off the wave of institutionalising and regulating halalisation. In all this, he was clearly a tactical visionary blending calculated and coordinated state responsiveness and authoritarianism. Thus, Mahathir actively Malaysianised the international proliferation of halal and concentrated its certification in the realm of the state where it has remained.
Malaysia is described as a model country in terms of complying with halal standards. Thus, Malaysia, along with a number of other countries, has strong halal activity in food processing and export/import trade as reflected in its systematisation and standardisation of halal certification. Moreover, halal certificates for imports of meat, food and kindred products are mandatory (35).

In response to the expansion of food service establishments and the opening of international restaurants in Malaysia from the 1970s onwards, a thorough enactment of laws, diverse procedures, and guidelines were worked out:

‘The passage of the Trade Description (use of expression ‘halal’) Order of 1975 made it an offense to falsely label food as halal, and the Trade Description Act (halal sign marking) of 1975 made it an offense to falsely claim the food to be halal on signs and other markings.’ (54)

The Malaysian state in 1982 set up a committee to evaluate the certification of halal commodities under the Islamic Affairs Division (later JAKIM) in the Prime Minister’s Department (op.cit). Mahathir was a driving force behind these moves. Exclusively, this committee was responsible for ‘…instilling halal awareness amongst food producers, distributors, and importers.’ Another responsibility was mandatory halal certification of all imported meat. More specifically, the Islamic Affairs Division of the Prime Minister’s Department and the Department of Veterinary Services should approve all meat plants exporting to Malaysia (52): ‘…if a company wishes to use the official Malaysian halal logo, the processing facility in the country of origin has to be inspected and evaluated for halal certification by a team of two auditors from JAKIM.’ (52-53).

The Malaysianisation of halal requirements strongly reflects the heightened sensibilities involved in new forms of consumption. At the same time, the centralisation of certification procedures parallels Malay ethnicisation of the state. In a way, halalisation purified and legitimised the expansion of imported commodities. In fact, this Malaysianisation is not unlike what we have seen with respect to family rituals, cleansing commodities for import into the middle-class home. Formally, certification assured anxious consumers of the purity and validity of commodities.
Indeed, these measures established shopping for the state as pure practices of mass consumption.

In this discussion of the roots of halalisation, there is no requirement that halal food should be produced or prepared by Muslims. But in JAKIM specifications of halal requirements, there seems to be a dubious preemption of this specific point. Regarding Devices and Utensils in halal production it is stated that

‘Premises and facilities such as devices and utensils (machines) should only be used for processing halal food. The same premises and facilities are not allowed to be used for processing both halal and non-halal food, although they can be washed and cleaned properly as required by the Syriah law.’ (213-214).

In terms of Storage, Display, and Serving ‘All halal products that are stored, displayed, sold, or served should be categorized and labelled halal at every stage so as to prevent it from being mixed or contaminated with things that are not halal.’ (214). In praxis, the correct Islamic handling of commodities is crucial to bring out their halal qualities against that which is considered haram or mashbooh. Only Muslims seem to be able to practise these standards that are extremely volatile to pollution. Most of all, these formal procedures seem to signify a celebration of JAKIM’s authority to market halal as a brand or logo of the state and nationalised Islam.

Consequently, halal products to some Malay informants can even take on ethnic significance, as this group will only buy food that is produced by Muslims. Consequently, these commodities are considered pure in competition with non-halal products, most often produced by non-Malays, as we have seen.

The immense confusion in processes of halal production, marketing and consumption is addressed in the handbook Halal Food. A Guide to Good Eating – Kuala Lumpur (Azmi, 2003). In the book, over 100 restaurants, take-away counters and cafés are listed and reviewed. Much more than strictly traditional halal requirements are involved in guiding Muslim consumers - the spatial context (atmosphere/feel/ambience) of food consumption as practice may be just as significant as the intrinsic qualities of the food and its ingredients. The various establishments are classified according to their halalness, e.g. whether alcohol is sold or food is produced/served by Muslims/non-Muslims. Explicitly, it is stated that the authors refer to and rely on the official channels of Malaysian halal certification and not their personal
preferences. All this is expressive of new formations of meta-industries that are beyond the strictly religious focus on halal/haram dichotomies and its certification, but instead target the marketing, pluralisation and promotion of halalisation as brand or logo of state capitalism: Halal™

Branding takes place at two concurrent levels, i.e. in the sphere of institutional relations and in material objects. In both these spheres, branding concentrates on ‘...techniques of packaging, positioning and promotion which together serve to reshuffle constantly the separate and linked relations among and between institutions and commodities.’ (Moeran, 1996: 279). In terms of definition, ‘brand’ qualifies as that, which ‘... is well known for being well known!’ (280). In the end, as shown in the case of halalisation, advertising puts forward a structure of belief that is akin to that of religion (287).

MALAYSIANISED MILLENNIALISM

Comaroff and Comaroff (2000: 294) in their discussion of millennial capitalism argue that consumption presently works as ‘...the factor, the principle, held to determine definitions of value, the construction of identities, and even the shape of the global ecumene’. Thus, consumption in all its forms ‘...animates the political impulses, the material imperatives, and the social forms of the Second Coming of capitalism.’ These points were obvious in the above example of the state nationalist rejection of challenging Islamic sentiments of boycotting. At the same time, this second coming of capitalism or millennial capitalism both feeds into and is fed by new religious ideas. Malaysia is an obvious example of the emergence of such a complex, and often highly ambiguous, millennial capitalism.

In the age of neoliberal millennial capitalism, ‘...the chiliastic urge emphasizes a privatised millennium, a personalized rather than communal sense of rebirth; in this the messianic meets the magical.’ (315). In the Malaysian context, Arquam, for

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7 In this publisher’s pendant to the Kuala Lumpur guide Halal Food: A Guide to Good Eating – London (Azmi, 2003a) it is stated in the introduction that ‘The city of London does not have a specific all-encompassing authority that acts as the central or sole halal certifier for all restaurants. However, the city has several empowering bodies and councils who give certifications to food suppliers and outlets.’ (11). Consequently, for Malays or Muslims in general living in London and elsewhere, halal certification is even more complex, confusing and blurred. In the end, this competition over asserting oneself as a producer, authority or trader in the halal market most likely deepens and widens halalisation.
example, was a sign of this form of messianic, secretive, and sectarian type of capitalism. Their production and marketing of halal in the seclusion of their commune embodied this second coming of capitalism, which both fascinated and repulsed Malay informants in TTDI. Symptomatically, the Malaysian state’s preemption of Arquam’s ideas and practices reflects both the authoritarianism and responsiveness already discussed; firstly, an authoritarian form in the banning of the organisation; secondly, a responsive form, i.e. the state’s move to institutionalise and monopolise the certification of everything halal. In all this, religious consumption is becoming a core idea and practice in Malaysian millennial capitalism. In fact, halalisation has entered the Malaysian market as a brand or logo of the state, which is nevertheless virtually unverifiable in the context of production or consumption. This points to the inherent intangibility in millennial capitalism. The acceptance of halal products by consumers has everything to do with trust and belief in the validity and efficacy of state certification.

In a historical perspective, Said (1993: 24) shows that the imprint of European economic and political power in Malaysia unfolded in three successive phases. Firstly, Portuguese and Dutch mercantilism from early 1600 to late 1800 and, secondly, the establishment of free trading marked by the ‘opening’ of the island of Penang in 1786 by the British. The Straits Settlements (the Island of Penang, Singapore, and Malacca) thus safeguarded British trade in the Peninsula. This period terminated in 1874 in connection with the Pangkor Treaty that portended the coming of colonialism. Kamaruddin shows that the expansive colonial-capitalist economy and the modern market and forms of exchange effectively subsumed Peninsular Malaysia. In conclusion, the visions of an Islamic economy have basically co-existed with the rationality of capitalism for over a century (29).

In contemporary Malaysia, capitalism is more than ever before inseparable from and subjected to elaborate Islamic ethics and standards as shown in the case of halalisation in production, certification, and consumption. The present effects of consumer capitalism may even, Lee (1993: 36) rightly argues, be promising material paths to redemption and divinity. As a consequence, the religious market transcends international boundaries and expands within a framework of advertisement and accessibility to the public. In other words, millennial capitalism in Malaysia is infused
with much more than Westernised market rationality critiqued by diverse groups of Muslims.

The Comaroffs convincingly argue that to a large extent production has been superseded by less tangible ways of generating values by controlling ‘...the provisions of services, the means of communication, and above all, the flow of finance capital.’ (295). Again, the marketing, production and consumption of halalised commodities are prime examples of controlling and categorising that which is fundamentally elusive and unverifiable.

In line with the Comaroffs’ ideas, Malaysian millennial capitalism is flavoured with ‘casino capitalism’. Historically, this type of capitalism was seen as a pariah in the mindset of the Protestant ethic and populist morality. Today, however, state institutionalised gambling has become an essential metaphor that has transformed the morality of everyday life (295-296). At the core of this metaphor there are cravings for ‘...abundance without effort, of beating capitalism at its own game by drawing a winning number at the behest of unseen forces.’ In all this, there is an ‘invisible hand’ at play (297). This invisible hand is ubiquitous in the expanding type of halal certification and capitalism discussed above.

The local variant of capitalism in Malaysia emerges as highly ambiguous in several respects. Mahathir promoted the New Malay Protestantised work ethic as a cornerstone of modern state nationalism. These official ideas of a New Malay work ethic were to set new standards for the realisation of national modernity. This work ethic was aimed at curbing the desire for ‘instant riches’ that can be transmuted unproblematically into material status. Mahathir (2001: 21) writes that

‘One weakness of the Malays is they are impatient to become rich. Therefore they will sell every opportunity and allocation given to them. Shares, licenses, permits, contracts and others specially allocated to them were immediately sold to others to gain instant profit.’

In support of these ideas, a heading in The Star (30 March 2002) read Wealth Disparity Because of Greed. Mahathir Slams People Who Yearn for Instant Riches. This is an example of a strategic critique of excess, extravagance and greed of ordinary Malays. Mahathir’s critique indirectly targets greedy Malays who put bumiputera reserved privileges on the market for the Chinese capitalist to buy.
In reality, quite contradictory interests and activities flavour the Malaysian version of capitalism. In his book *Political Business* (1994), Gomez demonstrates how the channelling of privileges and funds through ethnic party corporatism has been systematically institutionalised in Malaysia. UMNO dominance of the state has enabled Malays to effectively curv what is seen as the excessive economic influence of foreign and Chinese capital (21). What came into existence in Malaysia was a form of party political capitalism controlled by the Malay elite that produced major class inequalities (22). This centralisation of power and resources with an elite of cronies and the resulting inequality was a favourite topic with informants. Time and again they speculated, moralized and rumoured about the shady dealings of state cronies. Unsurprisingly, respect for the state’s staging of a New Malay work ethic was minimal. Consequently, politics were mostly associated with elite immorality, greed, and dishonesty.

The NEP was a means to establish new forms of reverence for the UMNO-led state through what I have called patriotic shopping for the state. However, as mentioned above, every single informant agreed that the NEP was indispensable as a provision for material Malayness. Obviously, there are a number of moral dilemmas involved in this kind of ethnicisation of state privileges. The NEP has brought about a ‘...marked propensity of the Bumiputera electorate to lean heavily towards the state for solutions to their problems.’ (290). Another reason for the emergence of a Malay elite group is Mahathir’s personalisation of political patronage in encouraging *bumiputera* capitalism (291).

This type of capitalism is effectively promoted as a capitalism that adheres to Islamic standards. At the same time, it is fundamentally organised as business that is subservient to politics (293), and speculative and ‘creative’ rather than innovative in terms of entrepreneurial practices (296). Of crucial importance to the formation and consolidation of a particular Malaysian capitalism was the way in which Islam became a cornerstone of the Malay ethnicisation of the state and its policies. In other words, the state and Islam together effected the invisible hand of millennial capitalism in Malaysia - shopping for the state as a new neoliberal dogma.
Chapter V: Consuming the Hand that Feeds You

As mentioned above, the responsiveness of the state was accompanied by the deepening of authoritarian powers in the post-1969 emergency context. Concretely, this new state ethos entailed the centralisation of powers in order to counter in particular the causes that were seen to have led to the riots: limitation of legal challenge of detention under the Internal Security Act (ISA), which was an emergency legislative measure of preventive detention from 1960. For example, the leader of Arquam mentioned above was detained under the ISA. Other types of legislation controlled the content of political debates, challenging political activity and the freedom of the press. In reality, all major newspapers were owned by BN interest groups (Crouch, 1996: 94-95) i.e. it was not only the written press that was owned by Malay interests groups.

As part of the larger NEP project, the state established a great number of bumiputera corporations such as the Urban Development Authority (UDA)\(^8\) in 1971, which was to provide assistance and land for Malay businesses in Chinese-dominated areas (201). The bumiputera policies coincided with the emergence of political business. In the 1980s, as the solution to economical problems Mahathir promoted privatisation in Malaysia. Bumiputera companies would, however, still be given preference in the privatisation of projects and companies (15). In reality, the limited role played by the state in the economy as a consequence of privatisation led to an increased dependence of non-bumiputera groups on Malay politicians. The outcome was that political power was further concentrated in an UMNO dominated political elite (21).

From the 1970s onwards, the state was ethnicised to become a signifier of Malayness and unambiguous Malay identity. Moreover, dakwah movements challenged Malay state nationalist authority for its overemphasis on material development. More specifically, dakwah activists criticised the NEP for its emphasis

\(^8\) As outlined on the TTDI Residents’ Associations’ website [www.ttdira.com.my], UDA was strongly involved in the development of TTDI, which ‘…came into being in 1974 when two experienced developers teamed up to form a joint venture company called UDA-Seapark Sdn Bhd. One is UDA, the Government’s arm for urban planning and redevelopment while the other is SEA Housing Corp. Sdn Bhd., a prominent private development company headed by the well known philanthropist, the late Tan Sri Lee Yan Lian.’ This is an example of the way state bumiputera bodies attempted to both control and liaise with Chinese entrepreneurial capitalism. Other areas of state enterprise involvement were ‘…trading, engineering, real estate, mining, and securities.’ (Crouch, 1996: 201).
on materialism and Western capitalist models of development (Zainah, 1987: 94). Against this type of critique, state institutionalised halalisation proved to be the most elaborate and effective measure for preempting *dakwah* sentiments.

The state’s employment of combined authoritarianism and responsiveness was intended to curb the challenge from a multitude of Islamic discourses. In respect of authoritarianism and especially ISA together with other legislative measures, this ensured some degree of state control over *dakwah* and what was identified as deviationism. Most importantly, however, the state embarked on a wide range of measures symbolising its dedication to Islamic values. The economy thus fused with a politics of ethnicity that in itself was defined in terms of religion (Shamsul, 1999a: 43).

The growing centrality of Islam in Malaysian society is also reflected in the materialisation of an Islamic bureaucracy, what Ackerman and Lee (1997: 33) label the bureaucratisation of Malay ethnicity. The Islamic clergy and bureaucrats hold a central position within this political and bureaucratic establishment (22). An example of an Islamic bureaucratic body set up by the state is IKIM (Institute for Islamic Understanding) established in 1992 by the Prime Minister’s Office. One of its main objectives is the message not to fear the afterlife (*akhirat*) alone, but the needs of the here and now are stressed (Nagata, 1994: 75). IKIM, together with other Islamic foundations, has taken on the role of a national ‘public moral councillor’ (76) that constantly addresses questions of proper Islamic thought and practice. Of special significance to state organisations such as IKIM is guiding Malays on correct and rightful Islamic practice in everyday life against challenging views, as illustrated in the media debate over boycotting below.

The forging of Malay identities through consumption has become the central focus of the ethnicised state in Malaysia. New forms of mass consumption have displaced older forms of loyalty and provided the state with new technologies of constructing loyalty, reverence, contingency and dependence. These types of state deliveries of a wide range of privileges and rights of *bumiputera* are, however, meticulously balanced by forms of authoritarianism and constant calls for moral corrections. Moreover, these state deliveries are now taken for granted by many
Ironically, the success of state nationalism is entirely dependent on the steady delivery of these privileges, without which their *bumiputera* support would be seriously endangered. In all this, halalisation in all its forms stands out as an extremely elaborate avenue for manufacturing and sustaining modern forms of state power. Thus, patriotic shopping for the state appears to be a particular Malaysianised form of millennial capitalism. It is in the interfaces between state, nation and Malay consumers that the central question of ‘getting consumption right’ was explored.

CONSUMPTION AS THE PREDICAMENT OF STATE POLITICS

Throughout the dissertation, I have hinted at effects of state, politics, and Islam filtering down to shape or contest certain forms of consumption in the private sphere. The ongoing discursive tension between UMNO and PAS in particular overshadows any other single issue in the censured media in Malaysia. Symbolic consumption in all its forms is indispensable in state nationalist discourses of elite and middle-class privileges and rights. Against this image, PAS, PUM and *dakwah* fractions officially position themselves as true guardians of the faith, often propagating some form of Islamic state. This is an attempt at performing pious and spiritual Malay identities against materialistic infidels. The central question, however, is how Malays more generally understand these claims as models of practice. These issues are very sensitive in the Malaysian context, and I addressed them not so much in terms of voter behaviour among informants, but rather in terms of how meaning was created in this discursive struggle.

Human existence is preconditioned on the interaction of living in both a private and public sphere. In *The Fall of Public Man* (1977: XVII), Sennett shows how the private realm has become the site for self-disclosure, intimacy and the sharing of feelings. In this way, the public realm has been destroyed by the way we overcharge the private realm with feelings of authenticity and sincerity. As a consequence, the city has become an impersonal stage for human interaction. The fall of politics is due to our own desire to transfer intimate metaphors such as warmth and trust to questions of power and allocation of resources. This is an accurate description of the severe feeling of political mistrust found in my ethnographic data contrasted to the authenticity of domesticated and intimised Islam. These ideas seem to be of particular
relevance in a suburban middle-class context and in ambiguous dealings with state politics.

In the home we reflect over our psyches and the authenticity of our feelings (4). Naturally, these points have an immense bearing on the family; as it turned into a ‘...refuge from the terrors of society, it gradually became also a moral yardstick with which to measure the public realm of the capital city.’ Thus, public life deteriorated and became morally inferior so that privacy and stability were only in existence within the united family (20). The anxieties and uneasiness with public life emerge in two forms in the ethnography. They appear, firstly, in the form of anxieties about the immoral city and the suburban world of seclusion against a threatening and divisive outside, and secondly, shopping malls as essentialised realms of consumption and material excess. Sennett, however, seems to overemphasise the way in which capitalism has spurred the moral withdrawal from public exposure. In the Malaysian context, for example, it should be added that state authoritarianism is immensely powerfully represented in public architecture, planning and the control and censorship of ideas and practices.

To informants, debates between UMNO and PAS in contemporary Malaysia were seen as merely the discursive staging of pragmatic power games rather than deeper theological or ideological differences. Several informants pointed out that PAS’ performance of piety was seen as not only false, but also unconvincing, dated and naïve. Jeti formulated this critique as follows:

‘The image of PAS is not very sensible - their houses do not have any kind of furniture. The image is given they sit on the floor and don’t have chairs. But most of the PAS people that I know actually live quite normal lives. It’s a political game that people play. In Terengganu, they may be less materialistic because they are poor, but in KL I don’t see this sort of difference.’

These points are significant in several respects. Jeti’s ideas point to a crucial tendency, namely that striving for wealth and material possessions is indicative of normalcy. It follows from this that piety and moderation are not preferences or choices, but instead effects of underdevelopment and necessity. Ultimately, Malayness and Malay identity emerge not as the rejection of consumption per se, but in and through Islam as certain registers of Islamically and socially acceptable consumption.
It is no coincidence that the Northern PAS-controlled state of Terengganu is mentioned in the example above. Terengganu is the home state of both Jeti and Hazan, as I shall return to in a minute. Terengganu at the same time works as a closely inspected laboratory for the practice of PAS discourse. Within state discourses in the media, the problematic implementation of *sharia* there is emblematic of the inherent contradictions in fundamentalist Islam. One specific plot concerning quintessential materialism in the form of malls in Terengganu shapes Yasir’s view of PAS. His point is that PAS cannot really be against malls and materialism as long as more and more malls are being constructed there – precisely as in Kuala Lumpur, where the government is constructing more and more monuments to attract tourists, he argued. Once again, political discourse is seen as shallow performance that is not in any consistent way put into practice. Hazan was content with the government’s ability to balance spiritual and material values. This feeling materialised in distinction to his painful childhood memories in Terengganu:

‘I still remember how the PAS people treated my family there as government supporters. That’s why I never agree with the way they behave in this country. When we invited kampung people, they said we were non-Muslim and we should be more Muslim. They isolated you from the kampung like you didn’t exist.’

This pressure on what is seen as lesser Muslims is congruent with ideas concerning *dakwah* as the imposition of discursive conformity as previously discussed. Siti argued that PAS’ crusade against materialism and their refocus on the next world appears to be fundamentally illogical: ‘But if you’re so poor, you don’t have time to pray.’ Material frugality is, in effect, anti-ritualistic from a middle-class position at the centre of which worship is exactly materially conceptualised and practised. These ideas parallel Mahathir’s contention that Islamic prayer must be accompanied by other and more worldly values and practices, as I shall return to in the subsequent section.

Conversely, to some informants, UMNO and state nationalism is criticised for its overemphasis on mega projects such as the Petronas Towers and Menara KL - rumoured to be favourite venues for state elite cronies. Azmi, supporting the Parti Keadilan Nasional (The National Justice Party), an opposition party headed by Anwar Ibrahim’s wife, for one, felt that the state wrongly prioritised these symbolic
spectacles: ‘We don’t oppose development, but we don’t need mega projects, the abuse of funds.’

In the wake of the political crisis incited by the Anwar case of 1998-99, a novel form of Malay vernacular political literature emerged (Noor, 2001a: 407). This type of Reformasi discourse attacked what it saw as the moral decline of politics, secular elites, religion and nation (408). This body of literature constantly feeds into and is fed by gossip and rumouring mapping movements of political elite factions (412). In this popularised genre of literature

‘...we see how a political, economic and structural crisis has been radically recontextualised and reconstructed from an Islamist viewpoint as a deeper crisis that strikes right at the heart of the social and cultural fabric of contemporary Malay society. Here we can also see the politics of memory at work where images, motifs, characters and a vocabulary from an Islamic past are brought into play to serve as a backdrop to the conflict at present.’ (413)

In sum, the deep-rooted lack of confidence in public politics of Islam has brought the family as a metaphor of sincerity and authenticity to the forefront in modern Malay imaginings. The recurrent phrase ‘It is just politics’ signified shallowness so markedly different from the world of the private sphere. The informants Irfan and Murni accurately captured the distrust of political life. They argued that PAS as well as UMNO misunderstood the teachings of the Prophet and the Holy Book and thus the oneness and umma of Malay Muslims. The main concern expressed by Murni was this:

‘What saddens me is it breaks the family. We have families, PAS and UMNO and they conflict. Brothers should have a close talk, but because of politics, they just break.

They are not fighting about religion, actually. They’re fighting about politics.’

The logic in this is that the impurity of politics pollutes the purity of Islam, and the national itself. These ideas are in themselves a driving force behind the processes I have described as the domestication of Islam or cultural intimacy. At the same time, the national family has now become a powerful metaphor that signifies the natural core of the Malaysian nation. This cultural and historical type of nation is far more resilient and naturalised in its folk imagined version than any political nationalism.
Chapter V: Consuming the Hand that Feeds You

Consequently, this nationalism is similar to what Billig dubbed banal nationalism. A clear tendency in the above discussion is that informants indirectly articulated loyalties through critique of the political far more than expressing direct support of one party or ideology. To informants, politics in Malaysia remains impure power struggles that strategically make reference to certain inauthentic interpretations of Islam.

Distinguishing between purists and pragmatists, there was surprisingly little divergence between the two groups, as they both seemed disappointed with the pragmatics of power politics. Lastly, when discussing these issues with Chinese and Indian informants, there was an understanding of support for state nationalism against what was seen as regressive Islamic revivalism.

Merely one month after the 9/11 bombings in US and my arrival in Kuala Lumpur, I was in the PAS influenced Al-Mujahideen mosque situated between TTDI and One Utama mall looking at an announcement that encouraged boycotting American goods because of the war in Afghanistan and American support of Israeli/US oppression of the Palestinians. The fieldwork allowed me to examine this question in-depth among informants. The purist group of informants was, not surprisingly, more inclined to support the call to boycott, and simultaneously discursively rejected the state’s encouragement to increase spending. For example, Binsar made clear that boycotting was morally imperative because of

‘...what the Americans have done to the Afghans. Personally, I boycott American goods, but it’s hard for me to ask my family to follow what I do. Because, you know, the children they love to go to McDonald’s or Kentucky Fried Chicken. I try to tell them about Coca-Cola. It’s not good, but it’s very hard to boycott because our government is dependent on more and more investments from America.’

In this purist group, however, the performance of individual identities of boycotting and consumption stands in contrast to actual family practices. Their fixation on the obligation of Islamic ritual and idealisation of a non-materialistic lifestyle is not directly reflected in clear-cut practices of boycotting and modest consumption. Thus, while these Malays articulate or stage a fascination with and modelling of the pious lifestyle of the Prophet as described in Hadith, the embodiment of the Islamic way of life is unattainable and almost impossible to put into practice.
Turning to the pragmatic group of informants, we can say that regarding boycotting, the discursive aspects are downplayed in comparison to the former group and that this is reflected in a much more relaxed and individualised attitude towards boycotting and consumption. As in the case of the encouragement to spend, informants evoke their individual consumer choices, pragmatism and issues of national identity in debates over consumption and boycotting. Consequently, in the lives of pragmatists, ritual does not play the role of constructing distinctions between purity/impurity and the sacred/profane. In sum, divergences between purists and pragmatists are products of performed distinctions rather than actual practice.

These tendencies are reflected in media consumption of informants. It will be substantiated how state nationalist ideology is at work in newspapers and television, and how the Internet has emerged as a major source of alternative information. Newspapers in Malaysia have been primary vehicles of UMNO political discourse and control. Newspapers are cultural texts in which the state and ‘the public’ are represented (Gupta, 1995: 377). With respect to major newspapers in Malaysia, these were all owned or dominated by BN interest groups.

Moreover, newspapers comprise a major market for advertisement. Statistically, I found that the English language papers *The Star* (27%) and *NST* (20%) were favourites with Malay respondents, followed by *Utusan Malaysia* (18%) and *Berita Harian* (14%) in Bahasa Malaysia. 7% listed that they read the printed version of the PAS-supported *Harakah* newspaper on a regular basis.

The controversial question of whether Malaysia should become an Islamic state was a favourite state nationalist topic in these newspapers. This issue was particularly suitable for portraying PAS as a party of waning traditionalists. For pragmatic and purist informants alike, this topic caused confusion rather than clear-cut ideology. Unsurprisingly, purists were friendlier to the idea of setting up an Islamic state in Malaysia, but regrettably knew of no workable formula that could be adapted to Malaysia. To the pragmatist Siti, the ongoing struggle between the government and the opposition has produced radical doubt. Reflecting the view of the entire group of informants, she explained that
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‘If the government says A, the other side will surely say B. Why buy the paper then? To me it doesn’t matter. And Harakah to me is nonsense because it is very critical and sometimes what they say is not true. I don’t want to give them money.’

Most informants, however, purists and pragmatists alike, would turn to Harakah as a source of alternative and ‘unbiased’ information. Azmi pointed to the fact that the NST, Berita Harian and The Sun all were government-dominated newspapers, which ‘...the government had shares in whereas Harakah is more neutral and independent.’

Likewise, Yasir bought Harakah because it was ‘...a more political newspaper voicing their thoughts openly and this is the main paper that does this.’ Compared to all other papers, Harakah and its Internet version stand out as more credible alternatives. In the eyes of Hazan, there was no actual choice ideology-wise because of government control. In this way, the reading of newspapers, informants explained, is a practice that requires selectivity, critical sense, and empathy. Hazan: ‘As a person you should know how to interpret the content. When they say ‘no’ it’s probably ‘yes’. And ‘yes’ is probably ‘no’.’ You have to interpret by yourself and discuss with friends.’ Hazan was strongly opposed to PAS and Harakah:

‘I don’t really read or know about Harakah. Don’t really follow Harakah. It was good, actually. It gives you another perception of news. Different in the sense of content and how you tell a story, an untold story, it is often exaggerated.’

Even though Hazan supported the government, he found some of the rumours and gossip in Harakah interesting, and maybe even more credible compared to what can be read in the other papers. During the Anwar Ibrahim trial, Hazan, like many other Malaysians, turned to Harakah. Jeti explained that the journalistic approach determined her choice in newspaper. Her favourite paper was NST, and she especially liked the world section. In Jeti’s opinion NST had started ‘Only quoting certain people and replace it with the other side of the story.’ So she stopped buying it during the Anwar Ibrahim trial: ‘NST was constantly justifying what the government is doing even though any person who doesn’t have to study law would know that the case is not going on correctly.’ Conversely, Harakah appeared to be ‘More clear even though they don’t deal with all subjects and they can be quite conservative as in the
debate over an Islamic state. What I really like is that everybody can write in and they print it even if we disagree.’

In general, there is a high level of mistrust involved in newspaper reading. The credibility crisis animates most informants to read several newspapers in order to minutely compare how different issues are presented or misrepresented. Little ideology is involved in newspaper preferences. In the massive critique of the state and censorship, Harakah stands out as a pragmatic alternative appealing to the majority of informants.

Many of the above tendencies are similarly involved in television viewing. My point is that the massive state presence in national television has a quite unintended effect: a deep-rooted mistrust in the way in which the state stages and performs politics in the local media. Actually, the state’s massive presence in the local media has backfired so that the state itself, instead of the targeted Western other, has become the object of intense critique in the Malaysian middle class. Ong (1999: 204-205) shows that on national television in Malaysia, praying for prosperity has actively linked Islam, wealth and national progress, all hopefully concentrated in the New Malay. In television programming, the effects of the nationalisation of Islam are strongly felt. Riddell (2001: 310) observes that Malaysian television programmes have been flavoured by Middle Eastern influences through statements in a number of programmes attempting to identify local viewers with the wider Muslim world.

Only in 1996 was Malaysia’s first communication satellite, Astro, set in orbit, meaning that the population nationally could access international television and radio stations, Internet and multimedia technology. In 2001, Astro had more than one million Malaysian subscribers, presumably because of its wide selection of national and international channels.

The TTDI survey showed that on average, Malay families in TTDI had 1.6 television sets per household. There was no general evidence that purists compared to pragmatists would be less inclined to subscribe to Astro in spite of their substantively more elaborate critique of the dangers involved in television viewing.

Malay traditionalism and national censorship were the major causes of critique of local television programming in the lives of informants. When discussing
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her preferences in television channels, Jeti was particularly serene about what to avoid: ‘I don’t watch Malay drama because it’s Malay, the quality is bad, and it doesn’t fulfil Malay life. Love stories, marriages where the woman always suffers. I think it’s also chauvinistic.’ Instead, her preference was Chinese movies. Jeti chose CNN and BBC, and ‘underground circulation’ on the Internet, as I shall return to shortly, to avoid media censorship. Likewise, Azmi felt that restrictions in the media were severe to an extent that even the selection on Astro was too narrow: ‘They show the same series all over again, it’s very sickening. I’m not condemning my own country, but that’s the way the country is run. And then they make us pay every month.’ When Astro was first introduced, Azmi recollected, everybody was excited, but ‘After a few years we feel cheated. It spoils the kids. They will be stuck there from morning till midnight during the school holidays.’ Nevertheless, the family had two television sets and two decoders. In comparison with BBC and CNN, the local channels were seen as appalling: ‘We tend to shift the channel every time Mahathir appears.’ This disgust with Mahathir, however, had to be contained in the home as Azmi was ‘Lobbying for government jobs so I have to pretend that I’m neutral.’

Television as a medium for communicating about Islam was an issue touched upon by several informants. ‘Question and answer’ formats on television were popular and in these programmes questions addressing everyday life problems of conduct, appearance and morality were brought forward. Informants, however, were divided on the question of the educational value of these programmes. As expected, the younger generation preferred more trendy channels. Gender-wise, male informants were fixed on sports, which strongly guided their selection of Astro. Through the concentration of ‘informational capital’, the state tries to impose mental structures and ‘common principles of vision and division’. (Bourdieu, 1999: 61). This attempt is obvious in the censorship of newspapers and national television, but not necessarily successful or pervasive.

Against this concentration of informational capital with the state, heavily critiqued by all informants alike, my quantitative and qualitative data show that today the Internet has become an immensely popular alternative. The survey data showed that the
average Malay family in TTDI owned at least one computer. Informants would all use the Internet on a daily basis for different purposes.

While one group of informants merely use the Internet to acquire general information in relation to work, entertainment, religion or studies, the second group is also oriented towards using the Internet to acquire what they call unbiased and alternative information in the Malaysian censorship context on Islam, politics and oppositional views. Yasir’s position as a Director of his own Islamic Internet portal naturally situated him as both producer and user of numerous Internet services.

The Internet may enable Muslims to plug into cosmopolitan networks of Islam, which reproduce the properly Islamic as invocations or as sets of signifiers of religion as culture. As a consequence, Islam in cyberspace materialises as a global Muslim property open to a diverse global audience. Sites such as Harakah and a multitude of transnational ones are accessed on a daily basis, and often because they can provide straightforward answers to a multitude of everyday questions and confusions. Informants expressed that it was a quite different feeling to access sites on which they were not compelled to continuously interpret and read between the lines as in the national media context.

Interestingly, there were no significant divergences in terms of accessibility of various middle class, ethnic, gender and generation groups to the Internet. Moreover, purists and pragmatists understood and practised the Internet in similar ways. By now, the computer and Internet access have become standard equipment in the Malaysian middle-class home. Obviously, the intimacy of these homes provides a safe context for accessing information that in official discourses is considered unpatriotic and subversive. This fact opens up a whole range of new modes of cultural intimacy as that which can be kept out of the public gaze with regard to entertainment, politics and religion. In sum, the ethnography demonstrates that to informants no workable political ideology is in existence. To purists and pragmatists alike, there was heartfelt mistrust in what was seen as the shallowness, pragmatism and immorality of Malaysian politics.

In effect, neither state nationalism nor globalism in Malaysia has in any way erased other and competing forms of nationness or national identities. Rather, multiple mass-mediated nationalisms coexist with other types of nationalist
identities. Consequently, ‘...mass media are a potent force in educating people about different nationalities and nationalisms.’ (Wilk, 1993: 295).

THE POWER OF RITUAL

Now, the question of how forms of Islamic ritualisation in domesticity or ‘community spaces’ can challenge public spectacles of the state is dealt with. The influx of new Islamic ideas and practices seems to be particularly appealing to the Malay middle class. As these new forms of religious practice are fundamentally private, they are out of the gaze of the state, and thus seen as deviationist in nature. I argue that nation-building processes in Malaysia are strongly informed by distinct types of modern ritualisation. In the eyes of state nationalism, the excess of certain forms of traditional Islamic rituals is depriving ‘the national’ of its energy or surplus. Halalisation has proved to be a novel field of dominance in which the state tries to concentrate its power. In effect, Islamic consumption emerges as a kind of invocation of a ‘national Islam’ or as a sign or logo of the nation.

When interviewing Hamza, a member of the *Jamaat* who helped publish the *At-taqwa* mosque’s newsletter, I learned that he outlined two distinct groups of Malays partaking in mosque life; firstly, the more pragmatically inclined group to which he himself felt he belonged; secondly, the purist group characterised by their fixation on promoting commendable acts as morally obligatory. The most awe-inspiring quality of this group, Hamza explained, was their ritualization of all aspects of everyday life: ‘They will enter the mosque and make sure to enter with the right leg first. Everything is considered to be a prayer.’ The expression of power as ritualistic control of existence and body is intimately tied to this group’s performance of the disavowal of material goods and worldly pleasures and desires.

Purist informants can be said to belong to the register above. Contrary to the *Jamaat* member, pragmatists were not entirely convinced about the authenticity of the performance of purists’ ritual behaviour, which they saw as moralistic demonstration. Against this image, purists tend to feel that pragmatists were excessively materialistic, un-Islamic, uncritical or indifferent in their consumption.

Following a recent trend within the nationalisation of Islam in Malaysia, to some Malays fundamentalism has been re-signified as an expression of proper
dedication rather than extremism. Hamza explained to me that this type of fundamentalism essentially was about simplicity:

‘They would like to live a simple life. They would like to do a simple life although most of them are professionals. They are brain surgeons, CEOs of a bank or a company. But they would like to live a life outside of this world.’

In Chapter III, this aspect of purists’ lives was discussed in connection with a wider trend promoting ‘the simple life’ in all its complexity. One major field of tension between purists and pragmatists is purists’ drive to deepen and widen halalisation to cover more and more ideas and practices. Time and again, the fundamentalists approached Hamza, e.g. to participate in a Tabligh Itjama⁹ in Australia where about 2 million Muslims were said to attend: ‘Everybody was wearing turban, Pakistani pants, all the black things. They’re very religious. Very dogmatic also. Out of curiosity, I followed them.’ This event to the informant in all respects signified the forcefulness of revivalist Islam as a global network or brotherhood: ‘They’re a very strong force in the sense of their organisation. Financially, they’re very strong, almost like a worldwide brotherhood. So, you find many of them within this community.’ In the economy of excess, this type of brotherhood is seen to thrive on material frugality invested in global conquest against shopping for the state. In fact, in the eyes of the state, mass consumption is constitutive of a modern type of re-ritualisation.

Mahathir strongly critiques ritual excess of Malays as utterly displaced national surplus invested in personal Sufi tareqat (mystically inclined orders) and global projects of conquest and salvation of Tabligh brotherhoods. He argues that ‘Clearly rituals of worship cannot be properly carried out without ‘wealth’ which comes from other forms of knowledge.’ (Mahathir, 1986: 33). The effects of Islamic ritual practice will remain unseen without ‘secular knowledge’, which ‘…is not only related to religion but helps Muslims to do their Islamic duties more effectively and satisfactorily.’ The historical glory of Islam was conditioned ‘…not only in devotion to Allah but also in mastering various forms of useful (sic) knowledge.’ (34). Elsewhere, Mahathir rages against

⁹ Literally, the Tabligh is the work done by Muslims to call others to Allah.
‘ulamas with their rigidity, their belief that this world is not for Muslims, that the most important expression of iman is continuous rituals of obeisance to Allah s.w.t., that what is sunnat and therefore is optional must be considered as wajib and compulsory; it is these people who have reduced Islam and the Muslims to the inferior status that they are now.’ (Mahathir, 2001: 261).

The consequence of excessive energy unprofitably invested in ritualisation is underdevelopment of the Muslim world. Against this undesired type of ritualisation, shopping for the state is a sign of the grand-scale incursion of state and nation in Malaysian bodies. I now turn to the two forms of ritual, wajib and sunnat, in the lives of Malays.

Firstly, the compulsory daily five salat (prayers). This type of prayer is subjected to both religious and political contestation. In narratives of informants, I learned that their mosque of preference was determined both by convenience in terms of location and the impact of political and Islamic discourse. As mentioned in Chapter I, there are three mosques in TTDI. The largest and most directly government controlled is At-Taqwa, whereas Balai Islam presumably is independent and thus requires private funding for its operation and activities. Then, the Al-Mujahideen is influenced by PAS. The majority of informants normally preferred At-Taqwa. Azmi and Henny as well Yasir frequently went to At-Taqwa, but mostly to Balai Islam because there was less government ‘politicising’ there. Mascud as the sole informant normally went to Al-Mujahideen. In spite of informants’ claims that Muslims could unproblematically go to any mosque of personal choice, Islamic discourse apparently imprints on daily practices.

In respect of commendable acts such as solat tahajud and solat tasbih, the performance of these was divided along the lines of purists and pragmatists. As always, Yasir would argue that most Malays were quite unaware of the deeper Islamic meaning of these acts. All purists claimed to perform commendable acts regularly. Among the pragmatists, some performed these acts on a regular basis while others expressed sheer indifference in this respect. Jeti felt guilty about not performing them as consistently as her father required and only performed them when the father was present. Siti argued that sunnat should only be performed according to your individual ability and choice and not be imposed on you by
moralistic others. Lastly, Ahmad had his personal motivation for performing *solat tasbih*, namely that

‘Let’s say I want to get rich, you have to pray to God. Then you pray a lot. If, say, you want to get something that you know is very difficult, you do what you can to get it, but you can’t. So, you have to pray.’

The informant Ahmad in many ways embodied the New Malay spirit, but he felt that he was still ‘not quite there’ in terms of affluence and social status. Thus, he hoped that performing commendable acts such as *solat tasbih* together with hard work would be the ticket to proper middle classness. There is a distinct feel of Malaysian millennial capitalism in this example - the presence of an invisible hand. It is this invisibility and intangibility that is repulsive in the eyes of the state, i.e. beliefs in the magical or superstitious as avenues for personal wealth accumulation.

Within the last decade, the state in Malaysia has become more and more concerned with the influx of mystically inclined Islamic ideas from especially Sumatra and Java in Indonesia. Groups such as Muhammadiyah\(^\text{10}\) are often labelled deviationist and excessively secretive, as was the case with Arquam. *Sufi tareqat* in Malaysia are underground formations and enclave representations of isolated potential to rethink mystical Islam rather than mass movements (Sirriyeh, 1999: 175). The appeal of *Sufi* mysticism in the Malay middle class may arise from the extreme asceticism of these ideas and groups. In a way, *Sufism* can be seen to work as an extreme inspiration that can actively counter or balance material excess. I cannot think of two more contradictory figures or images of the body than that of the *Sufi* saint versus the middle-class Malay shopping for the state. This conflict is all about the quest for authenticity. *Sufism* is deep-rooted in Islamic thinking, but first and foremost it is a mystical tradition grounded in practices aiming at reaching ecstasy and an elevated state of mind in a specific ritualised context. In essence, *Sufism* is esoteric and for the most part practised by religious specialists.

In state imaginings in Malaysia, these secretive and esoteric practices are considered deviationist and unwanted, but they are nevertheless enjoying popularity in the new Malay middle class. The state is fearful of what it sees as uncontrollable,

\(^{10}\) Barth (1993: 188) describes Muhammadiyah as a movement that on the basis of ‘accretions of tradition’ attempts to reform and purify Islam.
subversive and regressive ritual practices that may displace modern and patriotic national energy. Moreover, piety and moderation are seen as unproductive and unpatriotic.

Most informants were aware of real, imagined or rumoured Sufi activities in or around TTDI, but these séances were as a rule confined to the privacy of the middle-class homes. In a way, these activities can be seen as quintessential practices of cultural intimacy to be kept out of the public gaze. Unsurprisingly, in the narratives of purists, support and participation in such activities were most pronounced. Binsar explained that he would attend meetings of a tareqat of which he knew the leader. Yasir was more reluctant in his acceptance of Sufi tareqat because he felt that a charismatic leader generally influenced these, which was quite un-Sufi. Nonetheless, his primary objection to Malay Sufi practice was that it was infused with material excess:

'I don’t believe that if you want to become Sufi you have to dress in a certain way. You have to wear a big turban, you have to wear Uzbekistan kind of pants, which I know some people are doing. And they have to have a beard, they have to be present down there at certain hours. I think that the real essence of Sufi is in a pure state.'

Interestingly, Yasir’s idea here is an exact replay of standard pragmatist critiques of purists’ preoccupation with halalisation as shallow material display. For Jeti and Mascud among the pragmatists, Sufism was seen as an expressive Islamic tradition in the field of art and poetry, or as the ultimate stage of enlightenment. Mascud explained that Sufis were fearless of anything or anyone except God. In this fascination, there was obviously an element of admiration for the purity of the Sufi tradition. The majority of informants, however, expressed that extremism was a trademark of tareqat and that they were excessively ritualistic and individualistic. Siti, for one, felt that ‘Sometimes Sufis, tareqat, they think they’re a higher class of Muslims. In Islam, it shouldn’t be like this. Everybody should have a personal relationship with God.’

Intimately linked to informants’ ideas about Sufism and tareqat was the distinction between openness and secretiveness in Islam. In the accounts of informants, it was a generally held idea that Muslims should always be open about their faith as there was ‘nothing to hide’. This may, however, not be the case.
concerning *Sufism* and *tareqat*. Jeti argued that one of the problems in Islam was its seclusion and sectarianism that prevented open discussion and rather furthered dogmatism and extremism – a central idea in modernist Islam. Against this, Yasir expressed that there are mystically aspects of Islam that ‘Some people are just not prepared for. Islam teaches you to cultivate faith within your home before you start going elsewhere.’ Conversely, Yasir in his position as head of his own *dakwah* organisation rejected the type of domestication of Islam taking the form of arranging *kelas agama* in the home: ‘The problem is that the affluent think that when they have the money they don’t want to visit the *ustaz*, the *ustaz* has to visit them. I got no time for the *ustaz*. The *ustaz* must make time for me.’ In effect, this is an expression of the crisis of Islamic authority that materialises in the wake of the domestication of Islam. There was a clear tendency to see that *kelas agama* was a phenomenon most popular among informants high in economic and cultural capital, such as Izura. Having a prayer room in your house was another point of tension where purists felt that Islamic authority might be undermined by the domestication of Islam. Ideally, as the purist Irfan put it ‘Of course Muslims are best off praying in the mosque because you get 27 times more rewarded.’

The above discussion testifies to the tendency that Islamic practice in Malaysia is undergoing processes of ritualised domestication. This domestication can be seen as a response to or effect of the wider nationalisation of Islam as a hegemonic state project. Growing authoritarianism from the 1970s onwards has produced a crisis of not only authority but also authenticity for the Malaysian state and UMNO in particular. This crisis has taken on new forms in the era of an emergent ontology of consumption in the Malay middle class.

**SPECTACLES OF STATE, NATION AND ISLAM**

In Malaysia, the domesticity of Islamic ritual practice is matched by a systematic staging of national Islam in public space. Mahathir as the personalisation of the state dominated this staging. It is, however, in the consumption of certified and standardised halal commodities that the modern nation, state and Islam fuse. In other words, it is in the halalised commodity form that religious, ethnic and national energy are concentrated.
Taussig (1992: 117) writes that it is the concentration of reason-and-violence in the State that produces ‘the bigness of the big S’. This is exactly the kind of repression-responsiveness that reflects the ambiguity of Malaysian nation-building. In Malaysia, where both the spelling of State and Government are consistently capitalised, the state effects of this ambiguity are crucial to understanding the state. In his Foucault-inspired analysis, Mitchell (1999: 89) conceptualises the modern state as materialising out of ‘...the powerful, apparently, metaphysical effect of practices.’ Obviously, halalisation qualifies as such an effect of practice. Additionally, two articles in the NST on the same day and page (24 February 2002) function as an illustration of this ambiguity of power. The first article was entitled PM: Muslim World Must Master New Knowledge. In it, Mahathir argued that the Muslim world today needed to master knowledge of science and technology to be ‘at the cutting edge’. The heading of the second article read: Government Likely to Approve Public Whippings. A Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department explained that there was a ‘good chance’ that the government would agree to public whipping for those who commit incest. In the end, the Minister, however, concluded that ‘...the government could not decide in haste because the principle of criminal law was endorsed by global conventions.’ These seemingly incompatible issues are exemplary of the concentration of reason/violence and responsiveness/repression in the state. At the same time, the state recognises the symbolic value of whipping as potentially appealing traditionalism. Consequently, such an issue is treated with diplomatic delicacy. All this is about finding a middle ground that may appease purists and challenge Islamic discourses. Before discussing the crisis of authority/authenticity that has intensified in the 1990s, I discuss Clifford Geertz’ ideas of the staging of state spectacles.

Throughout the dissertation, I have employed dramaturgical metaphors and in Clifford Geertz’ monograph Negara. The Theatre State in 19th Century Bali\footnote{According to Geertz ‘Negara (nagara, nagari, negeri), a Sanskrit loanword originally meaning ‘town’, is used in Indonesian languages to mean, more or less simultaneously and interchangeably, ‘palace’, ‘capital’, ‘state’, or ‘realm’, and again ‘town’. It is, in its broadest sense, the word for (classical) civilization, for the world of the traditional city, the high culture that city supported, and the city of superordinate political authority centered here.’ The opposite of Negara is desa, which can be flexibly signified as “countryside,” ‘region’, ‘village’, ‘place,’ and sometimes even ‘dependency’ or ‘governed area.” Desa is the rural world of peasants, tenants, political} (1980) he
makes use of a similar conceptual grammar in analysing what he calls the theatre state in 19th century Bali. Geertz writes that the expressive nature of the Balinese state was enacted through spectacle and ceremony that dramatised cultures of inequality and status pride (13). In Malaysia, these ubiquitous state rituals are performed in a number of fields: monumental architectural modernity as in the case of the Masjid Negara and numerous other constructions, and as state effects in the certification of halal products as a symbolic language of authority in the nationalisation of Islam. All these state effects are immensely functional rituals. Nationalism may even most forcefully be concentrated in this excess of the state (Aretxaga, 2000). Geertz shows that the type of polity negara ‘...designates is one in which the interplay of status, pomp, and governance not only remains visible, but is, in fact, blazoned.’ (1980: 121).

The negara in Malaysia incites and is incited by two forms of powerful images. The modern state as effect emerges through its language and practice of wealth, science and technology, and then only second in how this type of modernity can most fruitfully be invested in Islam. Political symbolisations (myth/insignia/etiquette/palaces/titles/ceremonies) are all merely instruments of social domination (122). A more everyday example of how the state as effect materialises in Malaysia was the almost phantasmic omnipresence of Mahathir unendingly hosting, attending, inaugurating, chairing, lecturing and moralising in the written and electronic media. This form of personalisation of the state has everything to do with staging the concentration of power in negara and its ruler between and against desa (the world of political subjects). This inequality, in effect, works as the legitimization of concentrating power with the leader at the centre. Most importantly, however, for the overall argument, is the deeply material nature of the state ceremony as motor. The excess of state rituals was, in fact, ‘...the measure of the realm’s well-being. More important, it was a demonstration that they were the same thing.’ (129). State nationalist preemption of middle-class critique is all about providing these increasingly politically and religiously alert groups with privileges to be invested in steadily more halalisation and shopping for the state.

Obviously, the analogy between the realms of Balinese kings and the state personified by Mahathir is a speculative and symbolic one. However, one trend
permeates both examples, namely the desire for perfection concentrated at the negara versus desa. While staging himself as the quintessential New Malay, Mahathir was constantly occupied with everyday Malay imperfection and lacks. The main difference between these two examples is that while the negara was all about stable and smooth functionality, Mahathir’s personalisation of the state was increasingly being challenged.

The point is that modern national spectacles in Malaysia are always staged as partly magnificent and perfect, and partly as blaming Malays for their moral and entrepreneurial imperfection. Similarly, in both state nationalist and challenging Islamic discourse, the national Malaysian family is subjected to unworkable and often confusing demands for self-perfection.

Ironically, the whole process of nation-building in Malaysia and elsewhere in the post-colonial world encompasses a de-emphasis on ritual practice as argued, whereas nation-building itself is unimaginable without the invention of novel national practices and symbolisations. Keyes et. al (1994: 6-7) point out that ‘...politics of ritual displacement have faltered because no civic order promoted by any state has proven capable of meeting all fundamental existential problems as a consequence of the social dislocations and restructuring that modernizing and nation-building policies have generated.’ Authoritarian and repressive measures to counter underground religious ritual practices (deviationism) in Malaysia have been complemented with state-led ethnic Malay responsiveness.

The nation-building process, in fact, can be seen as the invention of new forms of mental and material Malay nationness. Invented traditions function as tacitly accepted ritual or symbolic practices that ‘...seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.’ (Hobsbawm, 1992: 1). The spectacle of the state in Malaysia is an obvious example of this type of staging. Another is the way in which the pre-Islamic past has been demonised as a revisionist nationalist project: ‘Inventing traditions (...) is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition.’ (4). Spectacles are by nature material and functional and in Malaysia monuments and ‘national’ urban architecture refer to the reservoir of meaning and continuity in the Islamic past. Ceremonies and what
Michael Billig called ‘flagging of the nation’, perform a similar function. Most importantly, new traditions that are invented tend ‘…to be quite unspecific and vague as to the nature of the values, rights and obligations of the group membership they inculcate: ‘patriotism’, ‘loyalty’, ‘duty’, ‘playing the game’, ‘the school spirit’ and the like.’ (10). In all this, what I have called shopping for the state and patriotic consumption naturally comes to mind as a form of re-ritualization that works as the performance of Malay identities through proper Islamic consumption. These processes have allowed the rising Malay middle class to enter into the emotionally and symbolically ‘…charged signs of club membership rather than the statutes and objects of the club.’ (11).

In his work Language and Power (1990), Anderson discusses the nature of power in traditional Javanese political thought and its modern representations. Not surprisingly, he finds that Javanese conceptualisations of power, quite unlike those of Foucault, are much more concrete and exist independently of users (22). Power can be obtained through yogaistic and extreme ascetic practices all construed to ‘…focus or concentrate the primordial essence.’ The personal significance of these practices is the acquisition and concentration of power (23-24). However, ‘The most obvious sign of the man of Power is, quite consistently, his ability to concentrate: to focus his own inner Power, to absorb Power from the outside, and to concentrate within himself apparently antagonistic opposites.’ (28). The quest for concentrating opposites such as materiality/spirituality or excess/austerity in the body has been a recurring theme throughout the dissertation. To my mind, Anderson’s notion of the concentration of power complements Geertz’ ideas of the somewhat static functionality of the spectacles of the realm. While Anderson establishes how this concentration of power is performed, Geertz outlines the context or stage on which a similar type of power is played out. The discussion of these ideas of classical political thought demonstrates that they still suffuse modern vocabularies and practices of politics and governance in contemporary Malaysia. Most importantly, perhaps, stagings and performances of the ruler justify, legitimate, infer and naturalise that which in anyone else would be considered excessive.
In a way, Mahathir has followed a path that is in line with the ideals of Javanese political thought. Hwang (2003) demonstrates how the Malaysian political system has undergone significant transformations in spite of the continuity of its institutions. In the 1970s and 1980s, the system transformed from semi-democracy to authoritarianism. By the mid-1990s, through personalised rule and the concentration of power Mahathir completely dominated the political landscape (XII). Hence, the ruling elite surrounding Mahathir’s personality was further strengthened (11). However, revisiting Geertz and Anderson, we can say that Mahathir’s absorbance and concentration of power was not naturally given but rather an effect of his strategic ability to perform as a modern leader while drawing on a sense of Malay political tradition and consistency. Parallel to this repressive side of Mahathir’s concentration of power, he was, however, able to channel (halalised) goods, privileges and protection to especially the growing Malay middle class through an ethnicised state apparatus.

Wedeen (1999: 157) in the case of Syrian political cults convincingly argues that in postcolonial nations ‘...regimes are often forced to build an effective state and enforce their dominance while cultivating a sense of national identification...’, and hence political cults ‘...may serve to redefine the terms of national membership by both occasioning the enforcement of compliance and also generating the shared experience of that compliance.’ The notion of the political cult seems to capture the way in which Mahathir concentrated power in his own person and simultaneously came to symbolise progressivist imaginaries of the Malaysian nation. Enforcing compliance, however, proved to be far more straightforward a project than inciting an experience of shared compliance.

In September 1998, Malaysia’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Anwar Ibrahim, was removed from his post by Mahathir and detained under the Internal Security Act. This sacking spurred one of the most severe political crises in Malaysia since the riots in 1969. A large number of Malaysians saw Anwar as Mahathir’s natural heir enjoying widespread popularity. Anwar was accused of sodomy, other sexual impropriety (adultery), bribery, and corruption. Peletz (2002: 258-61) argues that this whole incident was politically motivated and staged.
Particularly incriminating was the implications of immoderate and excessive misuse of power by an elected official such as Anwar. During the trial, extreme cultural transgressions in the form of connotations of sex slavery, group sex, and incest surfaced in the media in a hitherto unseen manner.

The point here is that this whole spectacle, arguably staged by Mahathir, ironically enough produced a feeling in many Malaysians, and especially Malays, that Mahathir had performed excessively by any moral or political standard. Mahathir’s extreme immoderation exposed the fact that he was in no way capable of concentrating apparently antagonistic opposites within himself. The Anwar incident may have spurred multi-ethnic consciousness as well as deep anti-Mahathir sentiment that was articulated as massive critique of UMNO and state elite politics. Consequently, there was an inclination towards ‘re-politicization’ among all ethnic groups, and among the Malays there was clear anti-Mahathir sentiment following Mahathir’s public humiliation of Anwar (Hwang, 2003: 311).

The Anwar case seemed to reinforce informants’ critique of the lack of authenticity in Malaysian politics, UMNO, and Mahathir in particular. Thus, state fetishism in Malaysia can be polyvalently signified as sacred, erotic, disgusting, massive and spellbinding (Taussig, 1992). This fetishization strongly evokes not only the whole edifice of the nationalisation of Islam and halalisation, but the benevolence of the state contained in the NEP. Since independence, many Malays have seen UMNO as their protector, but this relationship is far more complex today in the wake of the Anwar case.

Shopping for the state in the Malay middle class is ambiguously understood and practised. One the one hand, it ensures some degree of certainty in terms of halal certification and material status in the market for Islamic identities. On the other hand, it evokes an unbearable allegiance to a state that increasingly is seen as authoritarian, un-Islamic and non-authentic. As previously noted, every single Malay informant expressed that the NEP was still an inevitable social, ethnic and economic imperative. The ability to consume was inseparable from the privileges of NEP. In other words, the NEP was an account opened by the state for shopping for that same state. In terms of spending, Jeti told me that ‘I think we get it so easy, we have more buying power.’ Not surprisingly, both Indian and Chinese narratives of NEP focused
on ethnic disadvantages vis-à-vis Malay privileges. To these informants, there was a logical consequence between the excess of the state invested in the excess of the Malays so that consumption was nothing but shopping for the state.

The physical and symbolic violence of the state may possess a capability to ‘...produce and impose (especially through the school system) categories of thought that we spontaneously apply to all things of the social world including the state itself.’ (Bourdieu, 1999: 53). The argument here is that the performance of physical authority is unthinkable without symbolic capital. In Bourdieu (62),

‘Symbolic capital is any property (any form of capital whether physical, economic, cultural or social) when it is perceived by social agents endowed with categories of perception which cause them to know it and to recognize it, to give it value.’

The state ‘...is the site par excellence of the concentration and exercise of symbolic power.’ (63). And ultimately so when symbolic capital is transferred as ‘...objectified symbolic capital, codified, delegated and guaranteed by the state, in a word bureaucratised.’ (66). To my mind, the power concentrated with the state in the form of symbolic capital to bureaucratis, standardise and certify ideas and practices of halalisation may be the ultimate state effect. This allegiance to the state is preconditioned on trust in its capability to certify and authenticate proper Islamic consumption. The informant Maslina explained that even though one may suspect that Kentucky Fried Chicken is not entirely halal, ‘You have to trust the logo and the certification because you like it.’

New forms of ritualistic domesticity in Malaysia have seriously challenged the historically and symbolically powerful tradition of negara. Modern leadership in Malaysia relies mainly on the competitive and rationally elective rather than on divine leadership alone (Shome, 2002: 202). Ritualization is intimately linked to what I have called the domestication of Islam. In the Malay middle class, traditional forms of allegiance to the state have apparently been translated into distrust of excessive political practices. Against this, shopping for the state can be seen as new symbolic ideas and practices - state effects that bring the state back in. In terms of food in particular, the state in Malaysia is now effectively certifying and standardising this field of consumption most susceptible to ideas of purity/impurity and the body. In all this, Malay consumer trust in state practices is essential. Thus, shopping for the
Chapter V: Consuming the Hand that Feeds You

state can work to preempt the divergent critiques of both purists and pragmatists and retransfer new modes of loyalty to the state. At the same time, patriotic consumption may be seen to counter underground Islamic deviationism. Nation-building itself more than ever seems to rely on inventions of novel national practices and symbolisations.
Chapter VI

Consumptions, Conclusions and the Wider Picture

Before finishing the fieldwork in TTDI, I crossed over from TTDI to Sungai Pencala and Arquam once more. The workshops and the entire commune that were once a bustling centre for halal production were now quiet. The state had effectively curbed Arquam as the vanguard of halalisation. Moreover, that same state had consumed Arquam’s halal entrepreneurship to form what I have explored as halalisation, the nationalisation of Islam, and the emergence of a unique Malay Muslim ontology of consumption. In other words, what was to become state institutionalised halalisation had been removed from its micro-social base in Arquam into mass consumption. Arquam’s mystical and heterodox form of millennialism had been erased and replaced by a particular version and vision of modern Malaysianised millennialism through halalisation. In this conclusion, I shall on the one hand summarise the main findings of the dissertation and, on the other, discuss the wider perspectives that arise from these findings.

No single theory was able to capture the immense complexity involved in modern religious consumption. Bourdieu’s seminal book Distinction was invaluable and is probably the most qualified and complex study so far of classing and consumption. At the same time, this work misrecognises all that is transcendental or intangible. Paradoxically enough, this intrinsic misrecognition gives rise to a clear-cut distinction between the tangible (rational) and intangible (irrational). I have demonstrated that such a distinction is problematic and that it is unable to address a whole range of questions.

Before discussing the main findings of the dissertation, it would have been desirable to outline a neat, smooth or functional scheme for ordering informants according to class fraction and practice of proper Islamic consumption. Alas, such an endeavour is unworkable as informants constantly wove in and out of, firstly, economic, cultural and social capital such as residence, gender, age and marital
status, and, secondly ‘the religious’ in terms of performing piety and placing oneself in or being placed in the religious field. The ethnography showed that Malay Muslim class fractions most of all emerge from ideas and practices of proper Islamic consumption in cultural intimacy. In other words, consumption links micro-social actions and wider structural processes and transformations such as halalisation, the nationalisation of Islam, and the expansion of global markets.

The mosque and the market comprise immensely powerful fields of force in Malay middle-class identity formation. What I found was that these two fields of force together with a ubiquitous Malaysian state is releasing a tremendous amount of social energy in contemporary Malaysia. Indeed, modern Malay Muslim identity in Malaysia is unimaginable, even incomprehensible, without taking divergent understandings and practices of Islamic consumption into consideration. Central to this new form of ontology of proper Islamic consumption is the idea of excess (surplus/energy) versus balance. Hard work was put into overcoming this and other everyday difficulties. This problem has permeated and informed a wide range of discussions throughout the dissertation.

The Malay middle class is by now consolidated as a class *für sich*. The ethnography shows that the Malay middle class has developed into an emic and performative category. Above all, informants articulated excessive consumption of the other as that which modelled class distinctions in suburbia. Against these images, more traditional class parameters such as income and education were secondary. Of particular concern to informants were the strategies the other employed to invest social and financial resources as forms of surplus in consumption. Interestingly, there were no discernible differences between purists and pragmatists in this respect - they were both acutely aware of classing as strategic ideas and practices.

In other words, this class is both shaped by and actively shaping state and market in Malaysia. The Malay middle-class’s material stake in the social order enabled what I have called shopping for the state. The state now demands patriotic consumption of subjects in return for the steady delivery of Malay privileges. This modern form of governmentality was part and parcel of a neoliberal paradigm within the framework of a Malaysianised mode of millennial capitalism. These privileges were, however, accompanied by the deepening of authoritarian powers
from the 1970s onwards. In all this there was a delicate balance between shopping for the state and intensifying authoritarianism. The ethnicisation of the state that accompanied its authoritarian measures should be seen as a response to the *dakwah* challenge of state nationalist authority. Ironically, the *dakwah* challenge provided the state with its most subtle mode of domination - the certification and standardisation of ever more halalised products, starting with fields such as Islamic banking.

The Malaysian state’s involvement in a large number of *bumiputera* businesses and commodities that were open to halalisation coincided with an expansion and openness of global markets and the emergence of a new consumerist ontology. For individuals and groups, the Malaysian nation was reconceptualized as an aesthetic community in which shopping for the state was intrinsic to novel forms of proper Islamic consumption. Moreover, this ontology of Islamic consumption was inseparable from the transformation of Islam into an ethnic and political signifier of Malayness. Halalisation set the standard for legitimate taste preferences and at the same time worked as Malaysianising, legitimising or purifying the intensified flow of foreign commodities and brands into nation and home.

There is an apparent complexity and confusion in Malay middle-class identity formation in these interfaces between Islam, nation, state and market. James Siegel captured these ambiguities, possibilities and confusions in the idea that the fetish is a magical instrument claiming false relation to origin. At the same time, this fetish is a fetish of appearance and modernity. Malaysianising all the contradictory imports and impulses above is inseparable from what I have called the nationalisation of Islam. In essence, the nationalisation of Islam is concerned with the streamlining of Islamic ideas and practices into manageable national imaginings.

From the detailed exploration of consumer choices in the everyday lives of middle-class Malays, the moral expansion of halal requirements stands out as the most significant, and the most contested. From halal requirements concerning food, these ideas have deepened and widened to cover a whole range of commodities and practices. Halalisation and its constant elaboration actively fuses myths of state, Islam and nation. In other words, halalisation gives rise to new ways of inventing and imagining the post-colonial state in Malaysia. In the wake of halalisation, the purists, who claim to be perfect at practising proper Islamic consumption, are subjecting the pragmatic group to moral and religious pressure.
I have shown how the two Malay registers of modern lifestyles, purists and pragmatists, perform quite divergent and distinctive understandings and practices of Islamic consumption. At the same time, there were continuous overlaps, overspills and confusion involved in the consumption of these groups. Hence, proper Islamic consumption is understood and to a lesser extent practised differently by purists and pragmatists. Distinctions between these two registers in Malay Muslim consumption arise primarily as products of performance as an everyday strategy for ‘getting consumption right’.

Moreover, performance is an essential tool in staging modern identities in an urban/suburban setting, and especially with respect to the semi-domains. These two Malay groups appear to be split between individual consumer desires and the social and moral anxieties of new forms of consumption. At the same time, working out this tension and another linked to excess and balance in halalisation necessitates constant attention and the performance of legitimating rituals.

Through performance of proper handling, ritualisation, and contextualisation, fetish-like commodities are subjected to cleansing of any malevolent intrinsic qualities or residues. This cleansing aims at bringing out the authenticity that can transmute commodities into non-commodities. These ideas and practices are mainly focused on essentialising purity of, in or on the body, especially in the case of food and dress. These understandings of proper Malay consumption of commodities can be seen to fit into wider historical and structural transformations such as the second coming of capitalism. Thus, there seem to be subtle and intimate connections between micro-social ideas and practices in the everyday life of middle-class Malays and these more generalised tendencies in the globalised market for identities. In other words, the idealisation of Islamic consumption in Malaysia can be seen as an attempt at forging an alternative halalised capitalism, as I have shown in the case of Islamic banking and credit systems. In this sense, halalisation thrives on styles of surplus authenticity yearned for by purists. Deprived of this authenticity, the commodity form is merely ‘a matter’ of excess or malevolent surplus energy.

Halalisation and the mass availability of commodities have had immense effects in Malay middle-class families. Families work hard to explain why and how some commodities are demonising. Another job is working out how family rituals
Chapter VI: Consumptions, Conclusions and the Wider Picture

Purists’ constant attempts at deepening and widening proper Islamic consumption have produced a number of distinctions, suspicions and anxieties in the everyday lives of urban Malays. Paradoxically, halalisation has worked as the disciplining of bodies as well as having expanded the availability of a new range of Islamically legitimate tastes and fashions. In respect of bodies, demarcations between the front and back regions are vital but fuzzy. Hence, the realm of intimacy in Malay middle-class families can best be understood as that which is semi-private or semi-public. Into this sphere, commodities are imported, appropriated and consumed on a daily basis. Against this intimate and shared form of Malay Muslim consumption, a number of real or imaginary ‘excessive’ others emerge. It is these outside others that figure prominently in the ethnographic material, but are surprisingly insignificant in the sample data.

Purity in the form of halalisation is not a fixed symbol or a complete process, but rather something lived and dynamic in the everyday lives of Malays. Consequently, the realm of halalisation must constantly be expanded and elaborated by consumers, capitalists and the state in order to retain its impetus. In this battle for purity as legitimate taste, pragmatists play the part of a ‘supporting cast’ in the performance of individualised consumption. Against what is seen as purist taste hegemony, pragmatists evoke authenticity as that which is inseparable from individual and sovereign choices and preferences. In the end, these choices are seen to produce Malay middle-class identities that are effects of these individualised choices.

Suburban expansion is probably the most substantial effect of the expanding middle-class in a country such as Malaysia. TTDI is the quintessential middle-class suburb that is distinctly different from the kampung and Kuala Lumpur. Suburbia is thus a concentration of mythical middle classness, which may be monumental, and intimately private. The suburb is a parameter of achievement, order, privileges and state/market entrepreneurial capitalism. At the same time, suburbia seems to embody excessive materialism, social seclusion and the craving for community. Moreover, class consciousness was intimately tied to the domesticity of Malay middle-class homes in which class also took a generational and gendering form. The
rising Malay middle class embodied economic, national and social cohesion and progress. All these qualities were concentrated in the New Malay.

The widespread mistrust in politics and state among informants had the effect that religious and political ideologies were not directly translated into everyday practices. In this respect, divergences between purists and pragmatists were products of performed distinctions rather than actual practices.

The emergence of the national family was evident through my reading of newspapers, and especially magazines. The Malay middle-class family has taken on meaning as a national project crucial to the ethnicised state and nation. Within the last three decades, these families have been subjected to a multitude of moral, political and religious calls. At the same time, family life has become the primary target of the advertising industry and expansion of the market.

Increased authoritarianism in Malaysia may have spurred a revitalisation of a number of Islamic rituals that work as underground phenomena. In spite of state insistence on seeing these ritual practices as deviationist, this type of domesticated ritual escapes direct state control. In Islamic consumption and halalisation, however, the state has discovered an enormously powerful field in which it reserves the right to certify, standardize, control and expand the demarcations of halal versus haram. Therefore, the state becomes a site of the concentration and exercise of symbolic power.

In TTDI, there was a Chinese restaurant selling pricey, but delicious food with inspiration from the Island of Penang. On one of my visits there, I noticed that quite unusually no Malays were among the guests even though the establishment had been certified as halal by JAKIM. The next day I was in the ‘independent’ Balai Islam mosque. On the notice board outside the mosque, I noticed a decree issued by the Balai Islam stating that in this restaurant makanan ini tidak halal (the food is not halal in this place). Rumours among informants had it that JAKIM and Balai Islam were now ‘looking into the matter’. Until the dispute was settled, Malays were best off frequenting the Malay-owned restaurant across the street. This restaurant boldly displayed the logo of state certification and the promise of makanan Islam (Islamic food) on its façade. In this incident, the whole problem of Islamic consumption seems to be concentrated: the excess of material Chineseness in the eyes of Malays, the
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challenges to state authority, and the everyday power of halalisation intrinsic to the halal logo. Ultimately, the distinction between logo (state) and brand (trademark) has been erased, and thus halalisation emerges as that which is legitimate in preferences and taste of Malays.

THE LOCAL AND THE GLOBAL ISLAMIC THING

In this section, Malaysian Islamic experiences are discussed in a wider perspective. Obviously, as we have seen throughout the dissertation, there is no intrinsic contradiction between globalised capitalism in the new millennium and Malaysianised Islamic modernity. In fact, the two do not in any way seem to be seriously incompatible. In spite of any resistance or uneasiness expressed by purist informants in particular, each informant recognised that Malaysia is part and parcel of a highly integrated and globalised world system in which flows of commodities, people, finance and ideas are intensifying.

Islam in Malaysia and other parts of Southeast Asia such as Indonesia would seem to have a syncretic tinge to it compared to, for instance, the Middle East. Today, more than ever, the incorporation of a distinct materiality or ‘thingness’ into this syncretic stream of Islam seems to be pervasive. In fact, discursive Islam is driven by a constant charging and recharging of the ‘religious’ as materially or spiritually excessive.

The nationalisation of Islam and halalisation may be all about creating, fixing and maintaining the religious as a material base, the thingness in enjoyment: ‘The element which holds together a given community cannot be reduced to the point of symbolic identification: the bond linking together its members always implies a shared relationship toward a Thing, toward Enjoyment incarnated.’ (Zizek, 1993: 201). The emergence of an ontology of Islamic consumption has infused discursive Islam in Malaysia with an immensely powerful ability to syncretize politics, state, authority and morality. In spite of state nationalist insistence on exorcising the excessively magical, deviationist, ritualistic and adat, these repressions seemingly reappear in the commodity form as fetishes and adornments indispensable to modern forms of state power on the one hand, and individual claims of piety on the other. For purists, halalisation has incited a deep concern with halalised piety.
Contrary to the commonly held notion that ‘Islamists’ in general endeavour to transform the state itself, my ethnography demonstrates that this idea is a simplification. Similarly to what Mahmood (2004) shows for Egypt with regard to the cultural politics of a women’s grassroots piety movement, Islamic revivalism is much more focused on personal forms of piety, freedom and agency - and escaping nationalist politics altogether. This contention is supported by Hirschkind’s (2001: 26) argument that in Egypt ‘...the concerns, loyalties, sentiments, and practices that da’wa has given rise to presuppose a form of community for which the nation is a contingent, but not essential component.’

On 16 August 2004, Malaysia’s Prime Minister Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi officially launched the Malaysia International Halal Showcase (MIHAS) 2004 in Kuala Lumpur. The title of the Prime Minister’s speech was Window to the Global Halal Network [www.pmo.gov.my/WebNotesApp/PMMain.nsf/0/61a36f8349dea348256ef30019525e?OpenDocument&Click=]. He argued that establishing Malaysia as a ‘global halal hub’ was a major priority of the government, and that MIHAS was not only Malaysia’s, but ‘...the largest integrated halal trade expo to be held anywhere in the world’. In the wider context, Badawi asserted that halal produce is increasingly being recognised by Muslims as well as non-Muslims globally as ‘a new benchmark’ for safety, quality and purity not only for Muslims, but for all. Consequently, Halal™ is emerging as a new global state certified brand and/or logo envisioned to standardise the market. While the concept of halal embracing what is good, fair and ethical in business practices is nothing new, Badawi maintained that the concept seems to have taken on protective forms of religious signification. Badawi argued that

‘At a time when consumers have been shaken by news of diseases affecting basic food that we eat, it is incumbent on all of us to make every effort to ensure that such health disasters, often borne of unhealthy practices by growers and producers, no longer occur.’

In essence, halal modernity reflects a universally held desire for a return to purity. Consequently, the proliferation of halal standards should be globally accessible. In the ubiquity and grandeur of these visions there seems to be a desire for proliferating the ‘thingness’ or material core of model Southeast Asian capitalist Islam.
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Historically, real and symbolic ‘Middle Eastern Islam’ for instance has impacted on its Southeast Asian counterpart, i.e. ‘Southeast Asian Muslims borrow abstract ideas as well as concrete examples from the Middle East to strengthen their faith and Islamise their often pragmatic and Westernised cultural bearings.’ (Abaza, 1996: 139). Ambivalently, many Southeast Asian Muslims view the Middle East as the home of high culture and knowledge while critiquing its feudal traditions, violence and undemocratic rulers. At the same time, the Middle East may embody traditional and rather unsophisticated cities with regard to taste and modern architectural symbols of modernity - quite unlike Southeast Asian metropolises such as Kuala Lumpur or Jakarta. Abaza argues that Muslims of Southeast Asia are using ‘Arabic and Islam against Western and other hegemonies, but at the same time resort to Western ideologies as a bulwark against Middle Eastern cultural hegemony.’ (139). With specific regard to Malays in peninsular Malaysia, these have traditionally been seen by Middle Eastern Muslims as ‘lax’, and

‘...with the advent of modernity and mass culture as a global phenomenon, and the constant need of self-definition vis-à-vis Western culture as well as towards the other ethnic and religious groups in the region, the Muslim communities and, in particular, the literate middle classes, might find themselves being challenged to prove that, as Muslims of the periphery, they are better than any Middle Eastern Muslim.’ (148).

These Middle Eastern influences played a major role in the way Malaysian Islam was shaped. Modernist movements in Malaysia were highly informed by these streams of knowledge in the struggle against British colonialism, criticism of religious bureaucracies, and the authority of the sultans over religious affairs (Zaina, 1987: 3). Notions of pan-Islamism and reformism from the Middle East filtered down to village level in the Malay world to establish an opposition between Melayu and the British colonial power (Andaya and Andaya, 1982: 202). Most importantly maybe, it was Arab traders that spread Islam in peninsular Malaysia in the 13th century.

In Badawi’s visions, there seems to be an inherent quest for reversing the historically material and spiritual dominance of Islamic centres in the Middle East, Pakistan or South Asia. Moreover, halalisation on a global scale could be an avenue for curving what is seen as unlimited and immoral (haram) Chinese/Western capitalist expansion. In this perspective, the proliferation of halalisation on a global
scale may compensate for the mysticism, syncretism, impurity or imperfection that historically have been imputed to Southeast Asian Islam. Promoting halalisation as a conceptually more wholesome or modern system may at the same time curve claims of Southeast Asian Islamic materialism vis-à-vis challenging discourses and thus situate Malaysia comfortably in a social geography of excess.

Naturally, ‘the material’ is not insignificant in e.g. Middle Eastern Islam or for instance Turkey, as evidenced by Navaro-Yashin’s study of Islamists and secularists. In much the same vein, for modern Iran Adelkhah (1999) shows how public Islamic space, ‘bourgeois civil society’, has been produced by religious practice. This space has merged with processes of ‘…commercialisation, privatisation and building of a middle class whose way of life is tending to acquire hegemony on the national scale.’ (127). Moreover, there is a growing ‘money orientation’ in all walks of life in Islamic Iran and disputes and disagreements among clerics, for instance, are primarily ‘…conflicts over material interests, or more basically about different ideas of government, society, the nation, the faith of believers, daily religious practice, the family, business or the state.’ (136).

In his comparative study of Islam in Indonesia and Morocco, Geertz (1968) shows that for both countries there seems to be a steadily growing gap between Sunni perceptions of Koranic revelations and actual belief. This disjunction is, above all, produced by the rise of individually diversified experiences, ‘multiformity’, and, most of all, Islam’s growing inability ‘…to inform the faith of particular men and to be informed by it…’ (15). Apparently, a ‘progressive increase in doubt’ is deepening. Geertz distinguishes between ‘religiousness’ (being held by religious convictions) and ‘religious-mindedness’ (celebrating belief rather than what belief asserts) (61). The contention in this dissertation has been that the material or proper Islamic consumption in the context of halalisation in essence endeavours to drive back the inescapable slide from religiousness to religious-mindedness.

The effects of these processes are by no means universal in the Muslim world and I will now return to the diversity Geertz maintains between Morocco and Indonesia, which obviously shares much of its history, language and religious traditions with Malaysia. The power of Islam in Indonesia, and other parts of Southeast Asia more generally, Geertz writes, is based on an inclination towards absorbing all styles of thought into one broad stream. This tradition is generally
receptive to the argument that ‘Islamic doctrine and scientific discovery are really not conflicting but complementary forms of belief.’ (106). At the same time, in the Indonesian version of Islam, and strikingly consonant with what we have seen in Malaysia,

‘…almost everything is tinged, if lightly, with metaphysical meaning, the whole of ordinary life has a faintly transcendental quality about it, and it is rather difficult to isolate one part of it in which religious beliefs and the attitudes derived from them play a more prominent role than any other.’ (112).

Conversely, in Morocco there is an inclination towards ‘religious perfectionism’ and ‘moral rigor’ that has attempted to ‘…isolate a purified Islamic faith from contamination with everyday life.’ (106).

My ethnography substantiated that the everyday grappling with understandings and practices of the proper in Malay Muslim consumption, ‘getting consumption right’, is all about the cultural logics of inclusion, subsumption, and syncretism, not exclusion in a rigid sense. Purists and pragmatists alike work hard to demonstrate how the particularities of their visions are compatible with religious capitalism and modernity. In a way, this particular mode of Malay Muslim consumption endeavours to reveal how the ‘secular’ and the ‘scientific’ are merely practical and useful expressions of Islamic knowledge (op.cit). Informants would continuously explain, justify, or legitimate their understanding and practice of consumption with reference to ‘Islam’, the Koran, Hadith or Sunna. Consequently, the quest to come to terms with new modes of consumption in halalisation can be seen to incite rereadings of the scriptures and that may again deepen the compatibility of Islam, capitalism and wealth.

THE CLASH OF FAMILISMS?
Throughout the dissertation, ‘the family’ has permeated discussions in a number of contexts and perspectives. Naturally, the title of this final section is a paraphrase of Huntington’s famous and infamous book The Clash of Civilizations (1993) that some observers in the post-9/11 context consider to posses almost prophetic qualities. I contend that in the wake of the recently held US election in which religious, civilisational and family values became ultimately decisive factors, what seems to be emerging is a kind of ‘globalised moralistic familism’. These ideas were further
developed in Huntington’s most recent book *Who Are We. The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (2004). In the book, the argument is presented that ‘ordinary’ Americans are more nationalistic than cosmopolitan liberal elites. Consequently, these ordinary citizens possess a natural and instinctive mistrust of the unpatriotic activities of political elites similar to what we have seen in Malaysia. In all this, there is a desire for defining and locating the national core of the nation in everyday life. Modern politics is more and more aimed at capturing and exploiting this type of intimacy in populist rhetoric. Inevitably, this core is situated in what I have called the national family. It is from xenophobic, defensive and moralistic panic over the social and moral integrity of families that the clash of familisms emerges.

In other words, what we are witnessing in the US, Southeast Asia and elsewhere is the universalisation of the particular with specific reference to familism. The particularistic values of families clash with and against an outside that is increasingly perceived as threatening, immoral, disjunctive and divisive.

This outside is precisely seen from within families to be tainted with state driven politicisations of religion, values and idealised families as the core of modern nations. Huntington’s argument and vision of neatly organised and bounded civilisations that clash against an isolated West is e.g. driven by what he calls the re-Islamisation of the Middle East. After incurring images of a threatening and disjunctive world to families, global terrorism as civilisational struggle provides the best example, the state in return demands patriotism of these families. Together, civilisational and familial metaphors are crucial elements in modern populist politics.

The more familial metaphors of intimacy and authenticity are exploited in political discourse the more families withdraw into cultural intimacy. In the ethnography it was shown how the public realm has been damaged by the overcharging of such displaced metaphors of intimacy. Paradoxically, desires to transfer intimate metaphors such as warmth and trust to questions of power and allocation of resources have been captivated by the state. In the eyes of many families, this exploitation further stresses the immorality and insincerity of modern forms of power politics. Apparently, this loyalty can best be regained in and through modern forms of consumption.
Appendix

QUESTIONNAIRE REGARDING CONSUMPTION PATTERNS
Please tick or circle your answer. To some of the questions you might have more than one answer.

1. Age:
   19-24
   25-30
   31-40
   41-50
   51-

2. Gender:
   Female:
   Male:

3. Marital status:
   Single
   Married
   Divorced
   Widowed

4. Household size:
   Number of adults (above 17):
   Number of children (17 and below):

5. Highest level of education:
   Primary
   Secondary
   A-levels/STPM
   Tertiary
   No Formal Education

6. Occupation:
   Business owner
   Professional
   Skilled/semi-skilled
   Housewife
   Student
   Other (specify)

7. Ethnic group
   Indian
   Chinese
   Malay
   Other
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8. Migration:
When did you move into this house?  
Where did you move from?  

| State | Town |

8.1. Why did you move here?  

| Education  | Employment  | Family  | Other (specify) |

9. What is your daily choice of newspaper?  
New Straits Times  
Utusan Malaysia  
Sin Chew Jit Poh  
The Star  
Berita Harian  
Nanyang Siang Pau  
Sun  
Harian Metro  
The Malay Mail  
Harakah  
Other (specify)  
Do not read newspapers

10. What type(s) of magazine(s) do you read regularly?  
Finance/business  
Entertainment  
Family  
Religious  
Other (specify)  
Do not read magazines

11. Which TV stations do you normally watch?  
RTM 1  
RTM 2  
TV3  
NTV7  
Astro  
Others (specify)  
Do not watch TV

12. What types of programmes do you normally watch?  
Business  
Entertainment  
News  
Documentaries  
Family Drama
13. Which radio stations do you listen to most often?
- Radio 1
- Radio 2
- Radio 3
- Radio 4
- Hitz FM
- Mix FM
- Time Highway (THR)
- RFM 98.8
- Other (specify)
- Do not listen to the radio

14. What type(s) of club(s) do you belong to?
- Sport (specify)
- Health/fitness
- Recreational
- Other (specify)
- Do not belong to a club

15. Number of electronic devices in the home:
- Video (VCR) Number:
- Video (VCD) Number:
- DVD Number:
- CD Number:
- TV Number:
- Radio Number:
- Computer Number:
- Telephone Number:
- Mobile phone Number:

16. Do you travel frequently, i.e. three or more times each year?
- Yes
- No

16.1. If your answer in question 16 was YES, please specify below. If your answer in question 16 was NO, please proceed to question 17.

Do you mostly travel

A. Locally (within Malaysia)  B. Internationally
- For business
- For pleasure

17. Where do you normally shop for groceries and fresh food items?
- Grocery store? Name:
- Mini Market Name:
- Supermarket Name:
Chapter VI: Appendix

18. Where do you normally shop for non-food items?
   Hypermarket Name:
   Wet market Name:
   Others Name:
   Local smaller shops Name:
   Malls Name:
   The Internet Name:
   Markets Name:
   Other Name:

19. Which credit or charge cards do you hold?
   Amex
   Diners Club
   AMBank MasterCard/VISA or/and Al-Tasrif MasterCard/VISA
   Mastercard
   Visa
   Other (specify)
   None

20. Which sort of banking do you prefer/use:
    Conventional
    Islamic

21. Which entertainment outlets do you frequent?
    Specify according to frequency of visits (Nr. 1 is the most frequently visited outlet):
    1.
    2.
    3.

22. Number of cars in the household:
    1. Brand:
    2. Brand:
    3. Brand:

23. Which of the following kitchen appliances are present in the household:
    Toaster
    Blender/mixer
    Microwave oven
    Baking machine
    Rice cooker
    Juice maker
    Electric kettle
    Other (specify)

24. Monthly income of the entire household:
    Below RM1,000
    RM1,001-1,500
    RM1,501-2,000
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bracket</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RM2,001-3,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RM3,001-4,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>RM4,001-5,000</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>RM5,000-10,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Above RM10,000</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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