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## Muslim consumption and anti-consumption in Malaysia

Johan Fischer

### *Abstract*

*The purpose of this article is to further our understanding of the transformation of Muslim consumption and anti-consumption by an empirical case study of Malaysia. Much current anti-consumerist and anti-globalization discourse identifies boycotting as an immensely powerful force. I argue that insufficient attention has been paid to the micro-social logics of modern forms of religious consumption and anti-consumption in particular historical/national settings and that these issues should be explored in the interfaces between Islam, state and market. This article examines the political and cultural effects of the Islamic opposition's call to boycott US goods in Malaysia in the wake of 9/11 that coincided with a forceful stress on promoting modern halal (in Arabic halal literally means 'permissible or 'lawful') products and services. This article argues that from around that time, Muslim consumption in Malaysia became the subject of increasing consumer activism and I explore how Malaysian federal state institutions, Islamic organizations and consumers respond to and are affected by calls to boycott (anti-consumption) and boycott (consumption) a range of products. More specifically, this article examines the above issues building on ethnography from fieldwork with Muslim Consumers Association of Malaysia (PPIM), which is an organization that protects the interests of Muslim consumers and entrepreneurs, as well as Malay Muslim middle-class informants.*

I am in the Al-Mujahideen mosque situated between the modern and relatively affluent middle-class suburb of Taman Tun Dr Ismail (TTDI) half an hour's drive from the capital of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, and the gigantic One Utama mall that also houses an IKEA outlet. This mosque is largely influenced by the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), the Islamic opposition party enjoying widespread popularity. It is October 2001, merely one month after the 9/11 bombings in the US. In the mosque, I am looking at an announcement that encourages boycotting American goods because of the war in Afghanistan and American support for the Israeli oppression of the Palestinians. The text under the picture reads: 'Every Malaysian Ringgit (the currency in Malaysia) spent on American products means another dead Palestinian.'

In TTDI itself, the site of my fieldwork, there is another mosque, the At-Taqwa, which is the main mosque chosen by the majority of my Malay Muslim middle-class informants, and more generally Malays in TTDI. The At-Taqwa, in contrast to the Al-Mujahideen, is ideologically as well as

financially dependent on state sponsorship and the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant political party in Malaysia since independence from Britain in 1957. Immediately after PAS's encouragement to boycott, Persatuan Ulama (literally, 'those who know the law') Malaysia (PUM) or in English the Malaysian Ulama Association supported this call in the media. The Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, condemned the PAS/PUM encouragement as being overly emotional. In fact, the state not only rejected the boycott, but also staged a media campaign to boost national consumption.

TTDI also borders on the lush greenery of Sungai Pencala that was the home of the commune of Darul Arqam. Darul Arqam or the House of Arqam is an Islamic group whose believers seek to follow the ascetic behaviour of the Prophet Muhammad in everyday life. Darul Arqam'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') products was of the greatest interest to Malays in TTDI. Darul Arqam successfully promoted this vision of communal self-sufficiency, and their halal goods were traded throughout Malaysia. The Malaysian National Fatwa (opinion concerning Islamic law issued by an Islamic scholar) Council banned the organization in 1994 reasoning that the movement and its leader, Ustaz (religious teacher) Ashaari, believed in the imminent appearance of the *Mahdi* (or hidden Imam, a Muslim man who leads the prayers in a mosque), a key idea in Shia belief that in Malaysian Sunni orthodoxy implies unseen power and sectarian secrecy. Simultaneously, the banning of Darul Arqam signified the nationalization of the proliferation of halal and concentrated its certification in the realm of the state where it has remained (Darul Arqam has now dispersed and a highway runs through the area). This article shows how organizations such as Muslim Consumers Association of Malaysia (PPIM), which is an organization that protects the interests of Muslim consumers and entrepreneurs, to a large extent has taken over, continued and institutionalized the work of *dakwah* (literally salvation) groups such as Darul Arqam that emerged in the wider resurgence of Islam in Malaysia starting in the 1970s. The central research question here concerns the Malaysian federal state and Islamic organizations' understanding of calls to boycott/buycott in the context of a global and increasingly regulated market for halal products and services and how PPIM and Malay Muslim consumers respond to and are affected by these discourses. A buycott is a type of positive boycott with a twist where the focus is on what to buy. Typically, a buycott will encourage consumers to buy locally manufactured products or may work as efforts by consumer activists to induce shoppers to buy products or services of selected companies (Friedman 1996: 440). Indeed, modern Malay Muslim middle-class identity in Malaysia is unimaginable without taking the divergent interpretations and practices of Islamic consumption into consideration. The empirical evidence presented in this article sheds new light on the way in which actual practices, puritan ideals as well as political and religious discourses all infuse the debate over boycotting/buycotting.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the more cultures of consumption assert themselves in Malaysia, the more controversies over what Islam is, or ought to be, are intensified. As new consumer practices emerge, they give rise to new discursive fields within which the meaning of Islam and Islamic practice are debated. One key effect of these transformations is the deepening and widening concern for halal commodities among Malay Muslims that I have labelled *halalization*. Halalization signifies a major preoccupation with the proliferation of the concept of halal in a multitude of commodified forms. Halalization has led to the emergence of new forms of aesthetic Malay communities based on different taste preferences in various middle-class fractions. This proliferation of halalization has incited a range of elaborate ideas of the boundaries and authenticity of halal purity versus haram (prohibited) impurity (Fischer 2008). This paper also forms part of a larger research project with the title *Islam, Standards, and Technoscience: In Global Halal Zones* (Fischer 2015). The central topic of this book is on ‘the bigger institutional picture’ that frames everyday halal consumption, the contact zones or interface zones between Islam and markets through techniques like production, trade, and standards. Methodologically, this paper is based on ethnographic material from fieldwork among federal state institutions, Muslim organizations and Malay middle-class groups, namely participant observation and interviewing undertaken since 2001.

This paper is divided into eight sections. Following this introduction, I will highlight why the Malaysian national context is of special significance. Then I discuss modern and globalized halal before moving on to the issue of how this paper contributes to the consumption/buycott and anti-consumption/buycott literatures. Then Malay Muslim middle-class consumption is discussed before entering into the ethnographic portion of the paper on PPIM and Malay Muslim middle-class consumers. The conclusion ties the findings of the article together and reflects on how Muslim consumption/anti-consumption is given new expression in the interfaces between Islam, state and market.

### **Consumption and anti-consumption in context**

As it happened, global events were to dramatically change the context of Malaysia. A few weeks later, the US invaded Afghanistan during Ramadan in search of Osama bin Laden, this move was widely condemned in Malaysia and the Muslim world as an attack on Islam itself. The Islamic opposition in Malaysia encouraged direct military support for the Taliban against the Americans, whereas Mahathir claimed direct support was a counterproductive over-reaction.

In much the same way, Mahathir rejected the call to boycott American goods, arguing that it was irrational, harmful and even unpatriotic. Directly attacking the PAS/PUM boycott, Mahathir then launched his festival season call to spend. This call can signify what Friedman (1999: 11) conceptualized as a buycott. One has to distinguish between calls for buycotts and actual

boycotts, and the real challenge is to map why consumers follow or reject calls to boycott.

Mahathir's encouragement of the plan to boost national consumption in 2001 was given further impetus in the context of multicultural Malaysia with its celebration of numerous religious festivals of the three main ethnic groups. Of the Malaysian population of around 28 million in 2010, about 67 percent are indigenous Malays (virtually all Muslims) and tribal groups that together are labelled *bumiputera* (literally, sons of the soil); 25 percent are Chinese; and 7 percent are Indians (<http://www.statistics.gov.my>). Under the caption *Think Practically, Dr M. Advises Ulama*s in *The Star* 4 December 2001, Mahathir attacked PUM for their call to boycott American goods in the wake of the US attack on Afghanistan: 'We 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, a special prayer performed only at Ramadan.

In the same article, an anonymous representative from PUM 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 (the pilgrimage to Mecca, which is a principal obligation of adult Muslims) as an example.

This contestation of Islam in the context of boycott and buycott is symptomatic of broader controversies over being the true defender of Islam in Malaysia. UMNO is accusing PAS of wrong teachings while PAS blames UMNO for giving in to Western values and materialism. The state soon elaborated its criticism of boycotting further by saying that such a boycott would have either no effect or damaging effects on US-Malaysian relations. This view was outlined under the caption *Goods Boycott Will Only Hurt Us* (*New Straits Times* 8 December 2001).<sup>1</sup>

The global economic downturn and insecurity following 9/11 moderated consumer sentiments in Malaysia. Consequently, the state launched a campaign in the media (*The Star* 13 November 2001) aimed at boosting the consumption of, especially, domestically produced goods. Under the caption *'Tis Season for Spending, Consumers Told*, the following 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. As the country prepared to celebrate Deepavali (the Hindu Festival of Light), Hari Raya (celebrated by the Muslims (signifies the end of the fasting season of Ramadan), Christmas and Chinese New Year, 'let's not be too rigid in our expenditure, which could lead to over saving', he argued.

9/11 had become a global concern reconfiguring domestic politics in

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<sup>1</sup> *New Straits Times* and *The Star* (as we shall see below) are widely popular English-language newspapers.

Malaysia and consolidated the country's position as a moderate Islamic state (Shamsul 2001: 7). One of the main structuring constraints in the shaping of reactions to 9/11 was the political contestation between PAS/PUM and UMNO, who clearly understood 9/11 in quite contradictory ways. At the same time, 9/11 transformed Islam into both an agent and a product of globalization, making Islam a global phenomenon that demands an opinion about itself (Devji 2005).

### **Halal Resignified**

The global halal trade annually amounts to \$632 billion and it is rapidly growing (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada 2011). The Koran and the Sunna (the life, actions and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad) exhort Muslims to eat the good and lawful that God has provided for them, but there are a number of conditions and prohibitions. Muslims are expressly forbidden to consume carrion, spurting blood, pork, or foods that have been consecrated to any being other than God himself. These substances are haram and thus forbidden. Ritual slaughtering entails that the animal be killed in God's name by making a fatal incision across the throat. Another significant Islamic prohibition relates to wine and any other intoxicating drink or substance (Denny 2006: 279).

In the modern food industry a number of requirements have been made in relation to halal food, for example to avoid any substances that may be contaminated with porcine residues or alcohol such as gelatine, glycerine, emulsifiers, enzymes, flavours and flavourings (Riaz and Chaudry 2004: 22–25). Moreover, aspects of context and handling are involved in determining the halalness of a product. The interpretation of these questionable areas is left open to Islamic specialists and state institutions such as JAKIM. In the end, however, the underlying principle behind the prohibitions remains 'divine order' (Riaz and Chaudry 2004: 12).

For some Muslims, halal sensibilities necessitate that halal commodities are only produced by Muslims, and that this type of production is kept strictly separate from non-halal production. Halal commodities and markets are no longer expressions of esoteric forms of production, trade, regulation and consumption but part of a huge and expanding globalized market. Muslim dietary rules assumed new significance in the twentieth century, as some Muslims began striving to demonstrate how such rules conform to modern reason and the findings of scientific research. Another common theme in the revival and renewal of these dietary rules seems to be the search for alternatives to what are seen to be Western values, ideologies, and lifestyles. These tendencies took on special importance from 2001 onwards.

Over the past three decades, the Malaysian state has effectively certified, standardized, and bureaucratized halal production, trade and consumption. Malaysia is described as a model country in terms of complying with halal standards, and the country has strong halal activity in food processing and the export/import trade as reflected in its systematization and standardization of

halal certification. In response to the expansion of food service establishments and the opening of international restaurants in Malaysia from the 1970s onward, a thorough enactment of laws, diverse procedures and guidelines was worked out.

The article *The Halal Way to Free Trade* (*New Straits Times* May 11, 2006) asserted that in the years since Sept 11 terror attacks, the halal market has grown from a tributary concern of the devout to the mainstream of the multitudes. Politics has combined with demographics to manufacture an economic demand of global proportions while supply, still highly localised and inward looking, struggles to catch up.

However, it was far from only 9/11 that shaped to Malaysian halal sentiments. A major food scandal in Indonesia in 2001 triggered a new phase of halal proliferation on a global scale. The Majelis Ulama Indonesia or Indonesian Ulemas Council (in English), set up by the Indonesian state in 1975, accused a Japanese company of using pork products in the production of the flavour enhancer monosodium glutamate and demanded that the Indonesian government take appropriate action. It was a serious accusation: if true, the company would have violated halal rules, which forbid Muslims from eating any pork or pork-derived products.

As a consequence of the scandal, several of the company's employees were arrested, and a public apology was issued. It is most likely that the flavour enhancer did not contain any pork products; instead, the company admitted to having replaced a beef derivative with the pork derivative bactosoytone in the production process, for economic reasons. Bactosoytone was used as a medium to cultivate bacteria that produce the enzymes necessary to make monosodium glutamate. As the products of the company had previously been certified as halal by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia, the scandal seemed to undermine or question the legitimacy of these religious scholars in the eyes of millions of Muslim consumers. The scandal also made it clear that even multinational companies can come into conflict with the rising number of Muslim consumers and organizations if they overlook or disregard religiously inspired customs. To sum up, 9/11 and the food scandal in Indonesia had a marked impact on the way in which halal was produced, consumed and regulated in Malaysia.

### **Boycott/anti-consumption or boycott/consumption?**

I place my analysis of Malay Muslim consumer activism in the interfaces between why people choose or reject a product or brand. Even if anti-consumption research focuses on reasons against consumption rather than pro-social movements, I show that the distinction between the two is not always easy to maintain in the analysis of everyday decisions of consumers (Michael et al. 2009: 145). Exiting scholarship on politically motivated brand rejection among Muslim consumers (Sandikci and Ekici 2009) explores this as an emergent form of anti-consumption behaviour. Three sets of political ideologies can lead to consumer rejection of certain brands, that is, predatory

globalization, chauvinistic nationalism and religious fundamentalism and I shall discuss how these issues are understood and practiced in the Malaysian context. In a broader perspective political consumption relies on market actions and consumer choice as political tools (Micheletti 2003; Micheletti et al. 2003) that potentially can change existing institutional or market relations.

Boycotts urge consumers to withdraw selectively from participating in the marketplace (Friedman 1999: 5). In Friedman's taxonomy of boycotts, the case of boycotting in Malaysia qualifies as a media-oriented and action-requested boycott, that is, announcing that the boycott is being called, and that appropriate action is necessary (Friedman 1999: 10). The relatively limited literature on boycotting in theory and practice falls into two broad categories. The first explores boycotting from a macro-historical, geo-political and political economy perspective with emphasis on economic behaviour as a particular form of resistance. An example of such conceptualizations of boycotting is Feiler's (1998) study of the evolution of the Arab economic boycott of Israel, the longest-lasting example of economic sanctions in the 20th century.

The second interpretation, mostly emerging within market research and cultural studies, examines boycotting from a micro-cultural perspective stressing the need to understand boycotting as an expression of distinction, taste, individuality, ideology or resistance to globalization seen as cultural imperialism. Such studies are Littler's (2005) work on the possibilities and limitations of reflexivity in contemporary anti-consumerism activist discourse, and Klein, Smith and Andrew's (2002) discussion of the mixed motivations people have about participating in boycotts. In another article (2004) these authors employ a cost-benefit approach to boycotting and list four issues (desire to make a difference; the scope for self-enhancement; counter-arguments that inhibit boycotting and the cost of the boycotter due to restrained consumption) that may determine boycott participation. Lastly, Sen, Gürhan-Canli and Morwitz (2001) conclude that the success of a boycott is determined, firstly, by consumers' preference for the boycotted product and access to substitutes, and, secondly, to what extent consumers are susceptible to normative influence.

I suggest that our understanding of boycotting theory and practice could benefit from further elaboration in a number of respects. Firstly, to my knowledge, there exists no anthropological exploration linking the two categories of boycotting discussed above. Secondly, in an era where globalization and anti-globalization have become everyday catchphrases, a study that considers local, national and global effects of boycotting seems to be long overdue. Finally, the complex relationship, or tension, between consumer culture, boycotting, politics and halal has not been systematically explored.

### **Malaysian Middle-class Consumption**

Calls to boycott are far from new in Malaysia. In 1981, three months before



assuming high office, Mahathir had launched his own call to boycott British products in the so-called *Buy British Last Policy*. This boycott was called due to what Mahathir saw as neo-colonial British policies. This policy was sustained until 1983 (Leifer 1995: 75). Since this call to boycott in the early 1980s, Malaysian society has undergone dramatic economic and social changes that have recast the national context for the understanding and practice of boycotting.

The Malays constitute the largest and fastest growing section of the middle class in Malaysia and are the object of both commercial interests and current debates over the shape and meaning of Islam. In the 1970s, the state launched the NEP (New Economic Policy) to improve the economic and social situation of the Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese in particular. The NEP entailed a number of benefits for the Malays and other indigenous groups such as increased ownership of production and preferential quotas in the educational system. The number and proportion of Malays engaged in the modern sector of the economy rose significantly as a product of these policies. Ideologically, the overall objective was to produce an educated, entrepreneurial and shareholding Malay middle class, which the state elite views as a necessary prerequisite for economic, national and social cohesion.

Starting in the 1970s, a powerful UMNO-driven ethnic state nationalism has emerged. This type of state nationalist political culture, constantly challenged by competing Islamic discourses, tries to balance modern forms of consumption as national virtue and national vice. These tensions between religion, state nationalism and consumption are of particular significance in the growing Malay middle class.

Debates over boycotting/boycotting and proper Islamic practice are of particular significance in the Malay middle class as it is within this intermediate group that the question of what constitutes proper Islamic practice or legitimate taste (Bourdieu 1984: 60) is most imperative. In other words, Malay middle-class identities are given shape in the interfaces between revivalist Islam, consumer culture and the blurred area of everyday respectability. On the one hand, consumption has become a national virtue or project supported by the state as a practice in line with the coveted identity as a New Malay. On the other hand, consumption is being questioned from a religious and moral perspective and is associated with the 'excesses of the Malay royalty' represented by the Malaysian king and the sultans of nine peninsular states (Shamsul 1999: 105). Malay middle class groups are also driving forces behind Muslim consumer activism in Malaysia, as we shall see below.

According to Mahathir (1995: 1), the New Malay embodies an aggressive, entrepreneurial and global 'we can' mentality that abandons feudalistic values of traditionalism, excess, luxury and privilege. These official ideas of a New Malay work ethic were to set new standards for the realization of national modernity. In other words, in a developing economy such as Malaysia, the emergent middle class has become an almost mythical national signifier of mental and material development.

Economically, Malaysia has sustained rapid development within the

past three decades and the meaning of Islam has become evermore contested in that period. Even though virtually all Malays are Muslim and speak the Malay language, the contestation of Islam produces a range of diverse lifestyles. Islam, or more accurately, the social and moral meaning of what is properly Islamic, is contested and there are competing attempts to incorporate it into both state institutions and a multitude of everyday practices.

A range of competing visions of what Islam is or ought to be — for example a number of divergent *dakwah* (literally salvation) groups emerged in the wider resurgence of Islam in Malaysia starting in the 1970s. As previously discussed, Darul Arqam was an influential example of *dakwah*, but several other organizations have played significant roles in the resurgence (Ackerman and Lee, 1997; Jomo and Cheek, 1992; Nagata, 1984; Zainah, 1987). It is by no means clear how this Islamic way of life is put into practice, and *dakwah* devotion has undergone relatively unnoticed processes of individualization and domestication. *Dakwah* is both an ethnic and a political phenomenon, which has transformed Malaysia for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Islam in Malaysia has both produced and is in itself infused by a fascination with the morally proper Islamic way of life. This tendency embraces the consumption of specific (halal) goods, which may be seen to have a beneficial impact on domains such as family, community and nation. An example of this could be to prefer certain locally produced and certified halal goods, as we saw in the case of Darul Arqam. Conversely, seeking to boycott other types of goods on ideological grounds may be perceived as protective of the above domains.

### **Muslim Consumers Association of Malaysia: Between Islam, State and Market**

I am in the SembangSembang Café<sup>2</sup> in the The Mall in central Kuala Lumpur. The Mall is comparable to the multitude of other shopping malls in Kuala Lumpur, but it also stands out by housing the SembangSembang Café. This café is run by Muslim Consumers Association of Malaysia (PPIM), which is an organization that protects the interests of Muslim consumers and entrepreneurs. Groups such as PPIM are to a large extent comprised of middle-class Malays. The Café provides shelf space for PPIM members' (halal) products and PPIM and its café is an essential space for Malay Muslim entrepreneurial networking. Activists in PPIM try to articulate calls to boycotts and expand halal requirements to cover more and more products and processes and lobby for the state to incorporate these requirements into halal production, trade, consumption and regulation. An important question

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<sup>2</sup> In Bahasa Malaysia *sembang-sembang* means 'casual conversation' or 'chatting'.

here is how these activists work in the interface zones between new forms of Islamic revivalism, the ethnicized state and Muslim consumer culture and protection. Halal activism has a long history in Malaysia as we have already seen and it is a driving force behind the way in which halal has developed into a global assemblage, but empirically this is not well understood.

I am discussing halal with PPIMs Executive Secretary and a friend of mine, a Malay woman entrepreneur, Altaf, I have known since 2006. It is through this entrepreneur that I have come into contact with PPIM and why I am in the SembangSembang Café today. Both Altaf and the PPIM Executive Secretary are part of the halal network and the Café plays an important role in the way in which this activist and entrepreneurial networking is practiced. The networking and activities of PPIM and its members that take place in the Café do not directly involve the state, but PPIMs role is essential in order to understand the proliferation of halal in Malaysia and beyond: ways in which Malay Muslim interest groups network and protect Malay Muslim privileges through promoting Muslim products, businesses and halal in particular. In other words, groups such as PPIM and its network constantly push for increased Muslim consumer protection and privileges. In the eyes of these groups, the state is unable or reluctant to deliver enough support for these demands.

The New Economic Policy (NEP) has brought about a marked propensity of the bumiputera electorate to lean heavily towards the state for solutions to their problems (Gomez 2004: 290). In line with this, Malay Muslim consumer groups and activists constantly push for support and privileges and the proliferation of halal reinforces this tendency. Islamic consumption in Malaysia has been subjected to state and business intervention in the form of extensive market research and the political institutionalization of consumption, for example the setting up of the Ministry of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs in 1990. Clearly, this is a sign of the state's bid to protect the entitlements of Malay(sian) consumers against what the state and consumers increasingly see as confusing, globalized and excessive consumer culture. Consumers' trust in and dependence on the state as an honest broker in consumption legitimates state intervention regarding the right ways to shop as well as guidance in terms of public debates about value. However, in multiethnic Malaysia the state cannot solely promote and protect Malay Muslim consumer interests and this is why Muslim consumer organizations such as PPIM and others play a major role in safeguarding the rights and privileges of Malays.

PPIM focuses on business development and social responsibility, but also works to assist small and medium sized Muslim enterprises that do not have the working capital required to have their products placed on shelves of supermarkets and hypermarkets. Moreover, the SembangSembang Café provides shelf space for PPIM members' products free of charge. PPIM also consults with members on their goals and ways to actively promote products and business. The SembangSembang Café is used as a focal point 'to encourage Muslim Consumers to support Muslim businesses as well as to actively promote products which are certified halal.' Secondly, the café

offers ‘a range of business and personal enhancement classes and lectures’ on themes such as Strategic Partnerships for women in particular that provide the resources for PPIM’s members to secure the finances they require to start businesses. An Event Coordinator is responsible for this training and several classes consisting of women are to graduate from this program. Thirdly, networking and business facilitation are essential for PPIM. The organization argues that many people come to the Café to meet friends, potential business partners, or ‘those who can nexus business with opportunities!’ (<http://sembangcafeppim.blogspot.dk/p/aktiviti.html>).

PPIM’s Executive Secretary has been active in calling for boycotts of Coca-Cola in 2002 among other similar calls to boycott. The call to boycott Coca-Cola post 9/11 under the heading *Our program will hurt Coca-Cola* was a protest against American interference in Muslim affairs. PPIMs Executive Secretary said that ‘The boycott is in response to Western interference in the internal affairs of Muslim countries in the guise of fighting terrorism’ (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2542517.stm>). In spite of these calls to boycott Coca-Cola and similar products, Coca-Cola is, of course, widely available in Malaysia. In Malaysia, Coca-Cola is fully halal certified by JAKIM. Coca-Cola’s deals with a plethora of rumours about its products on its Malaysian website ([www.coke.com.my](http://www.coke.com.my)) for example denying constant rumours that its beverages contain alcohol and ‘ingredients extracted from the stomachs of pigs. ... All our soft drinks are non-alcoholic and they don’t contain any ingredients from mammals and poultry.’ As early as 1998, PPIM pushed for a halal standard because the organization was concerned with religious principles in management practices. It was timely for such a standard to be developed, the Executive Secretary explains, as Muslims worldwide had been dependent on standards set by the West, which might not necessarily comply with Islamic teachings. When I met with PPIMs Executive Secretary in the SembangSembang Café in the The Mall in central Kuala Lumpur we discussed many of the above issues. As we have seen, the Café provides shelf space for PPIM members’ (halal) products and PPIM and its café is an essential space for Malay Muslim entrepreneurial networking.

PPIM’s Executive Secretary called on authorities to conduct scientific tests on the food seasoning products from the Japanese company Ajinomoto discussed above to confirm products were actually halal. The Executive Secretary said claims made by the company and JAKIM that the products did not contain pig enzymes were not enough and called on The Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry to conduct tests and make the findings public to instil confidence among consumers (*New Straits Times* 9 January 2001). A couple of days later Ajinomoto Malaysia reassured Muslim consumers that its products were halal responding to the call from PPIM (*New Straits Times* 11 January 2001). After having carried out tests on Ajinomoto flavouring powder JAKIM confirmed that it was halal (*New Straits Times* 12 April 2001). Thus, the food scandal in Indonesia in 2001 triggered a new phase of halal proliferation and regulation.

In May 2010 I discussed halal with Altaf and PPIMs Executive

Secretary in the SembangSembang Café. Altaf explained to me that even if she was not very strict about halal in her personal life, halal was extremely important in contemporary Malaysia with respect to the state and companies and also in the eyes of consumer groups such as PPIM and this was the reason we were here today. Two issues were central in our discussions: the need for and expectations to tightened halal laws and the way in which halal is inseparable from Malay rights and privileges in Malaysia.

The Executive Secretary explains to me that he has been involved in the Muslim consumer movement for over 30 years. Similar to what we saw above in the case of boycotting, PPIM encouraged JAKIM to ‘withdraw’ halal logos of Coca-Cola, Starbucks, and Colgate ‘because of support of the Zionist government, illegal money, oppression, but JAKIM will not do it.’ This is an example of the way in which PPIM in the interface zones between Islam and regulation evokes halal to pressure the government to acknowledge that halal is also premised on global questions such as the oppression of Muslims. These points are symptomatic of the ‘bigger picture’ these activist groups promote against a more reluctant and pragmatic state that considers diplomatic relations and ‘moderate Islam’ essential.

The Executive Secretary argues that the reason to form PPIM in the first place was to establish a platform for addressing ‘unfair treatment’ of Muslims and their culture. PPIM has supported a ‘clear direction’ in Malaysian halal for many years both with the government and with ‘Muslim consumers uncritically feeding the system’. An important PPIM critique of the state in Malaysia is that this is not sufficiently involved in acknowledging and supporting Muslim consumption and halal. Hence, because of lack of state support, Muslims are still ‘backward’ in terms of entrepreneurial possibilities – in the eyes of PPIM it is unsatisfactory that so little of halal production, trade and regulation on a global scale and in Malaysia is in ‘Muslim hands’ and PPIMs work aims at addressing exactly this aspect. However, the last 500 years of Western and colonial oppression has instilled a kind of inferiority in many Muslims and this is not easily changed.

The main objective is no longer to provide proper halal food to Muslims, this objective has to a large extent been met in Malaysia, but to make Muslims see that halal is an ‘asset’ similar to kosher that should be on Muslim hands. PPIM works ‘actively and proactively’ towards these aims, for instance by setting up the SembangSembang Café in which all products and activities contribute towards this aim. Ideally, 90 per cent of employees in the halal industry should be Muslim. Right now, big companies operating in Malaysia often would not even let their Muslim employees go to Friday prayer.

The SembangSembang Café is not directly financially supported by the Malaysian state, but through Muslim companies and individual members’ support. Conversely, the products displayed support Muslims and Muslim interests in Malaysia, the Executive Secretary explained. I have shown halal activists or organizations promote boycotting of certain products while encouraging boycotting halal on a big scale in the interface zones between new forms of Islamic revivalism, the ethnicized state, and Muslim consumer

culture and protection. Halal activism in Malaysia can be seen as a continuation of *dakwah* engagement, but with a particular focus on proper Islamic consumption and halal and not so much Islamic theology.

### **Consumption and anti-consumption as purism**

I suggest that the constitution of 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, one group performs boycotting/buycotting and halal consumption as a localized form of purism. Secondly, another group of middle-class Malays are more orientated towards a pragmatic approach to these contested questions. A couple of informants in each of these groups is now selected to represent diverse understandings and practices of the boycott/buycott and halal consumption. In other words, these informants are exemplars of a scale of strategies involved in proper Muslim consumption.

Yasir is a 37-year-old man working with IT development and a leading member of a local Islamic organization. He lives with his wife and young son in a condominium bordering on Sungai Pencala and the Darul Arqam commune. The family moved into their flat in 1995. When laying out his arguments for supporting the boycott, he elaborates on the Jewish-US conspiracy theory mentioned above. Regarding the war in Afghanistan, he argues that PUM's and PAS's motivation to boycott was incited due to American companies' support of their government, which 'uses money to buy ammunition to fight the Afghans. Most of the top profitable companies in America are Jewish owned. US companies are using profits to fight Muslims.' The logic here is that through buying American products, Muslim consumers are unwittingly funding the war in Afghanistan.

Another reason for boycotting, Yasir explains, is the use of child labour in India and Indonesia by US companies such as Nike. A boycott would ideally bend this dark side of US-dominated capitalism and globalization signified by commodities. This type of critique is by no means limited to Islamic activism. Naomi Klein (1999: 365) believes that boycotts are the most effective force for corporate reform ever seen. In Islamic as well as anti-globalization discourse, boycotting a specific product or brand promises to confront much larger geo-political conflicts and ethical dilemmas.

Yasir is surprisingly positive about the question of state encouragement to spend: 'Islam says if you can afford it, by all means spend, but moderation is best.' Again, as in the case of other informants in this register, the question of balance and moderation is the primary ideological logic behind this statement. In spite of Yasir's idealization of moderation and balance, he seems to endorse Mahathir's boycott policy in principle. This is a mental strategy that tries to create a moral distinction between personal and pious religious standards and what he sees as the pragmatics of the powerful state nationalist insistence on patriotic consumption in a globalized world.

Among these Malays, performing public morality is inseparable from

the desire to control and purify the body in terms of appropriate attire such as the *kopiah* (skullcap) and a *janggut* (beard) for men and *tudung* (headscarf) for women. The particular understanding and practice of Islam within this group provide these Malays with a rather detailed and shared material blueprint for performing a particular lifestyle. Interestingly, the interior of these homes did not reflect any uniquely Islamic taste or style. In this respect, the homes of this group of middle-class Malays are comparable to the homes of the more pragmatic group discussed below.

Yasir most strongly embodied the power and purism of halalization involved in consumer preferences in everyday life. 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 a polarity between purity and impurity and, in the end, legitimate Islamic taste. Once, while in Australia, he accidentally ate food that was not halal certified and instantly stopped eating it. He explained that while his family was very cautious, many Muslims were quite indifferent to these requirements. 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 the kind of particularity involved in Malay halal food preferences were elaborate, and simultaneously worked as one of the clearest examples of ethnic and religious distinctions and social boundaries. He identified three main Malay segments in relation to halal:

“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 Romanized halal, they go and eat even though they see that there are no Malays, it's not a Malay business”.

He maintained that his favourite shop was the small Malay-owned Azlinah right next to the condominium where he lives. Going to this local shop was also in accordance with his principle of buying a minimum of ten per cent of the family's goods in bumiputera shops. He also shopped at Pasar Raya, a local mini market in TTDI owned by Malays, because they had a good range of things at a fair price, and 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 a Chinese company presumably owned this store.

More puristic Malays attribute their concern about halal (and the lack of it in others) to the relatively strict Shafi'i school of jurisprudence within the Sunni division of Islam dominant in Malaysia. A young woman in her twenties, Maslina, who studies international marketing explained to me that

‘I would always say that Malaysian Muslims are stricter. It is just the way that we were taught, I think. We are Shafi’i school of thought, we are the strictest.’

In sum, puristic middle-class Malays are acutely aware of their ethical responsibility to boycott. But in practice, the ideals of boycotting are blurred by a number of social and pragmatic concerns. Purist Malays work hard to stretch food halalization to involve proper preferences, taste, handling, presentation and context. The halalness of a product is not directly verifiable through smell or appearance so it is mainly a question of trust in its certification. For the most dedicated among the purists, halal requirements are by no means fixed or stable, but instead elastic and expansive. For these Malays, halal products must also be produced by (Malay) Muslims in order to be Islamically acceptable in the wave of halalization. The above discussion shows that boycotting/buycotting and halal are expressions of everyday negotiations between consumption and anti-consumption.

### **Consumption and anti-consumption as pragmatism**

The more pragmatically inclined Malays often feel intimidated by what they see as an unbearable moralism among more puristically orientated Malays. This section explores ‘ordinary Malays’, that is, Malays who are not in the forefront of contemporary religious or political developments and who are somewhat ambivalent about these (Peletz 1997: 231).

Siti is in her 40s, married with one adult son, who is studying in Australia, and she has lived in this condominium flat since 1992. Her husband holds a senior position in a bank. She is educated as a teacher. The fact that Malaysia is dependent on US industries and investment makes boycotting hazardous. In much the same way, this type of pragmatics is reflected in the way she articulates why she cannot follow the encouragement to shop: ‘I simply don’t have the money to follow that. Some people may.’ This type of statement would not have cropped up among the first group of informants as it supports unconditional shopping for the state without any articulation of Islamic moderation or qualification.

Siti felt that the whole idea about Islam in consumption, for example Islamic banking, was insufficiently argued and altogether unconvincing. Islam as an everyday guide to consumption was to her a question of partaking of halal food and donning clothes that would cover the body in an acceptable yet fashionable manner. In the eyes of more pragmatically inclined informants the question of halal preferences was presupposed but not carefully elaborated to the extent that will become evident shortly.

Other pragmatic middle-class Malays explained that the call to boycott increased their awareness of, and motivation to, boycott: boycotting was the only existing ‘weapon’ to fight America. Turning to the question of encouragement to spend, many of these informants were positive towards the idea, whereas the family unit presents itself as the limitation to excessive spending, that is, a wish to have a ‘limit’ for families to avoid US



materialism that undermines social and moral values of families. This is the dark side of development Islam can help avoid. At the same time, informants would explain that the boycott invites and legitimises excessive consumption. Most of the pragmatic informants would agree that boycotting is one way of expressing dislike towards the 'regime'. They felt that the primary drive behind boycotting was the impact of American consumer culture in Malaysia: yuppies in Malaysia that had received their education in the US or the West and brought back this culture, which is then exploited by entrepreneurial business people. While this type of critique of global capitalism can be said to be pervasive in the majority of economically developed urban settings, it seems to take on specific significance as groups of Muslims post-9/11 try to purify and balance what they see as material enjoyment that constructs superficial and hedonic identities.

Pragmatic Malays either reluctantly accept the imposition of halalization or simply reject it as a material and thus shallow display of belief – as Islamic materialism or excess. An expression of this type of resistance is Siti's phrase that 'Islamic belief alone should be fine.' Malays who are less concerned with the religious morality of public excess, often feel personally victimized by (state) materialism, consumer culture and brands when accused of un-Islamic consumption by puristic Malays. In this battle for purity as legitimate taste, pragmatic Malays play the part of a 'supporting cast' in the performance of individualised consumption. Against what is seen as a purist taste hegemony, pragmatic Malays 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 individualized choices.

## **Conclusion**

My discussion illustrates how actual practices, puritan ideals as well as political and religious discourses all infuse the debate over the calls to boycott/buycott as a wide range of pragmatics, predicaments, contradictions and dilemmas work themselves out in the individual cases. State nationalism has effectively resignified boycotting from being a political weapon of the weak to becoming a subversive and extremist Islamist bid, while festivals of consumption are staged as 'religious' in order to legitimate consumption that could otherwise be deemed 'excessive' by the Islamic opposition.

In political struggles over the values of public consumption, the rising Malay middle class is split between working out what is proper Islamic practice in everyday life and at the same time performing patriotic consumption. The two Malay groups each manifest one side of the religious and pragmatic dilemmas that arise from everyday performances of consumption. At the same time, both groups of middle-class Malays are well aware that the debates between UMNO and PAS/PUM/PPIM in contemporary Malaysia is merely the discursive staging of pragmatic power games rather than deeper theological or ideological differences. Although

political parties and religious groups claim authority to support what they see as their ideal models of proper moral action, middle-class Malays often regard these claims and stagings as merely pragmatic, strategic and unconvincing rhetoric. The unintended consequence of this battle for the moral and religious high ground of public consumption may thus very well be to accelerate the process of contestation, domestication and individualization that Islam is currently undergoing in Malaysia.

I have shown that Malay activists or organizations promote halal on a big scale in the interface zones between new forms of Islamic revivalism, the ethnicized state and Muslim consumer culture and protection. Even if the state in Malaysia has preempted earlier and competing forms of *dakwah* organizations such as PPIM play important roles in pushing and protecting halal in Malaysia, that is, halal activists constantly call on the ethnicized state to tighten halal regulation and call for boycotting products that are associated with unwanted foreign influences.

Even though the more puristically orientated Malays are concerned about excessive and un-Islamic consumption, they tend to articulate a cautious recognition of the necessity of the state nationalist boycott in the post-9/11 context. In order to overcome this ambiguity, puristic Malays try to distinguish between national pragmatic concerns and patriotic shopping for the state on the one hand and their personal puritan ideals on the other hand. Thus, in the interface between the calls to boycott/boycott both patriotic and religious identities are constantly cast and recast.

This type of performed purism, however, sits uneasily with another range of everyday concerns over how to translate the Islamic opposition's call to boycott into actual family practices. Hence, puritan ideals are challenged, confused and tempered by the quest for material status, by the moral obligation to share within families, by media exhortation to consume, by nationalist reverence for the Malaysian state as well as by geo-political considerations. Consequently, these purist middle-class Malays straddle the moral territory between pious and puritan ideals and a national patriotism linked to shopping for the state. Paradoxically, my analysis shows that the more consumers are exposed to extensive calls to boycott, the more they are confronted with the problem of how to translate intentionality into actual practice.

Informants reflected a general adherence to halal principles in terms of food. All informants conveyed that this was the single most significant principle. Purity in the form of halalization is not a fixed symbol or a complete process, but rather something lived and dynamic in the everyday lives of puristic Malays in particular. Consequently, the realm of halalization must constantly be expanded and elaborated by consumers, capitalists and the state in order to retain its impetus and it is these tendencies more pragmatic Malays quietly challenge.

### Author biography

Johan Fischer is an Associate Professor in the Department of Society and Globalization, Roskilde University, Denmark. His work focuses on modern religion and consumer culture in Southeast Asia and Europe. More specifically, Johan explores the interfaces between class, consumption, market relations, Islam and the state in a globalized world. He is the author of *Proper Islamic Consumption: Shopping among the Malays in Modern Malaysia* (NIAS Press 2008), *The Halal Frontier: Muslim Consumers in a Globalized Market* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011), *Islam, Standards, and Technoscience: In Global Halal Zones* (Routledge 2015), the co-edited volume *Halal Matters: Islam, Politics and Markets in Global Perspective* (Routledge 2015) and the co-authored *Between Religion, Regulation and Consumption: Globalising Kosher and Halal Markets* (Manchester University Press 2016) as well as numerous articles in journals and edited volumes.

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