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The Excess of Possibilities

GET IT RIGHT: THE MODERATE AND THE EXCESSIVE

Moderation and excess are crucial to 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. Moderation and excess are constitutive of a discursive field into which informants plot their personal consumption.

In the eyes of informants, quotidian considerations such as thrift were prominent. Through thrift, 'spending is transformed into an act of saving' (Miller 1998: 62). 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. JAKIM halal certification with its state logo can also be regarded as a modern and religious form of branding in contemporary Malaysia. 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'. Interestingly, even the branding of bread follows the logics of halalisation. On Gardenia's website (www.gardenia.com.my/halal.html) it is stated that

At Gardenia, a special Halal Committee is formed to scrutinise every aspect of Halal regulations and to ensure that all requirements are stringently adhered to. [...] All Gardenia products are certified Halal by JAKIM. Regular factory inspections are conducted by officers from JAKIM to monitor and ensure that the overall operations are following the guidelines set by them.

In milk, Henny chose Milkmaid for the family. Azmi added that products from Nestlé and Milo 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-descendents' (<http://skepdic.com/amway.html>).

Clearly, Amway and similar companies symbolised US imperialism, capitalism and the 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 practice, the state cannot possibly halal certify all these commodities properly. This point may especially refer to the fear of concealed and unclean haram gelatine, 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 haram substances may be present. The other narrative 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, for example, 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 coyness 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 Malays performing purism. When discussing the existence of typical consumer behaviour of Malays in contemporary Malaysia, these informants invoke Islam as a discursive blueprint for valuation of requirements and prohibitions. Ritual divisions are 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. He explained that while his family was very cautious, many Muslims were quite indifferent to these requirements. 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 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:

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 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 degrees may be translated into practice. In other words, halalisation seems to be far more pervasive and elaborate claiming to be traditional in its own sense.

A recurrent narrative 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.' Many informants would go to *IKEA* situated in One Utama mall to shop for furniture and other non-food items.

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: '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 a 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. The expanding market more and more reflected an excess of possibilities that was hard to control. This tendency was particularly pronounced as more and more Malays craved 'lowly' things. Another issue Murni raised was the question of gelatine 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 gelatine. They don't know. So much that we don't know what to choose.

The question of gelatine in food and other products is part of the driving logic behind halalisation. Following this logic, a shampoo can be haram if it contains gelatine 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 the purists in particular to uncritically support the import of impure and, ironically

enough, un-patriotic commodities. At the same time, this group relies heavily on the state's capability to halal certify a plethora of commodities for their everyday consumption. Consequently, these Malays 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 seventy years will make you enjoy millions of years over there.

This 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 evoked 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 moderation and excess 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, waste is haram. Within your means and not recklessly, too extravagant, excessive. But at the same time you can still enjoy your life.

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 is handled – from foreign cars and expensive coffee in Starbucks, to feasting on exotic dishes of barracuda or ostrich in Western restaurants.

I visited Izura and Yusof in their home on several occasions, both for interviewing, participant observation in general 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 elaborate ideas and practices of taste. 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 conversation 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 religious teacher (*ustaz*) arrived at the house and the thirteen 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 displaying Islamic calligraphy. 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 Protons 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 yuppie culture embodied in establishments and brands such as Coffee Bean, TGI Friday's, 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 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.

In sum, I have shown how a number of strategies are involved in working out the problematics of moderation and excess in proper Malay consumption. As a consequence, understandings and practices of consumption proved to be integral to various forms of halalisation. Diverse themes such as the excess of children; balance between thrift/saving/piety and excess/investment; brands/branding and shopping for the state versus imported goods with high status were all unevenly legitimated and practised by the two Malay registers of consumption. The more pragmatically inclined Malay register of consumption attempts to pre-empt the more puristically orientated groups' bid to standardise halalisation as legitimate taste. In spite of these distinctions, the commonly held idea that you should only buy what you need was an explanation that was not easily translated into everyday practice, but it played a significant role in the way informants try to perform a particular form of proper Islamic consumption.

I shall return to a more theoretical discussion of the concept of excess later in this chapter.

CAPITALISED 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 per cent, used Islamic banking while 41 per cent preferred the conventional system. Quite a number of respondents in the survey, though, listed that they used both systems simultaneously.

The modern 'recuperation' of Islamic banking is not necessarily a reflection of its scriptural or medieval contractual forms of the past (Maurer 2005: 9). In all this, interest (*riba*) is essential. 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. (Ibid.: 28)

As I shall try to show below, Islamic banking is often associated with a high degree of ambiguity. With reference to Indonesia, Maurer (ibid.: 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 (ibid.: 149).

Islamic banking has been a field where the state has promoted new types of businesses and institutions seemingly inculcating Islamic values into banking, insurance and pawnbroking (Anwar 1987: 3). Islamic banking must be in accordance with the teachings of Islam (Haron 1997: 1). More specifically, these principles should essentially comprise the prohibition of *riba* in all types of transactions. In addition to this requirement, a number of other principles should be adhered to the following:

(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 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 (ibid.: 25).

Obviously, these requirements present the Malaysian and other state bureaucracies with the virtually impossible tasks of classifying, monitoring, certifying, and sanctioning ‘unlawful’ transactions and practices. The Islamic banks of today are the products of the Islamic resurgence and its aim is to transform capitalism in the direction of an Islamic foundation (ibid.: 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 narratives run through informants’ understandings of Islamic banking. First is the principle of exclusively using Islamic banking adhered to by purist Malays 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 Muslim clerics (*mullah*). 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, but they were also pleased with the high *Tabung Haji*¹ dividend that they received. A second narrative encompasses those who use conventional as well as Islamic banking because of loyalty to their conventional bank, habit or sheer convenience.

The third group of informants consists exclusively of pragmatic Malays who strictly used conventional banking. In their eyes, Islamic banking was a means to legitimise the politicisation of the banking system and another twist to deepen halalisation. Moreover, these Malays 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. The 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, the other group of Malays 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 practices entirely. To these 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 per cent of the Malays held one credit card and 21 per cent two, whereas only a fraction held more or none. The figures for Chinese were about the same level. 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 hardly ever 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 practise patriotic consumption or shopping for the state.

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 per cent of Malay respondents. On the Middle East Banker website (http://www.bankerme.com/bme/2003/mar/islamic_banking.asp) the Al-Taflif 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 *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 economic capital would unproblematically buy on credit, more disadvantaged informants 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 or 'flashing the card', meaning Malays showing-off in terms of buying power and credit in public was seen as quintessentially excessive. Conventional credit card systems would generally assume the symbolic nature of 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).

THE EXCESS OF POSSIBILITIES, AUTHENTICITY AND THE COMPELLING FETISH

What I will do is select and discuss three recurrent key concepts – performance, body and excess – that have informed a wide range of discussions in this monograph. While performance and body mainly are discussed in relation to ethnographic details, 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 produced more and more themes and discussions.

I have explored how the suburban Malay middle class was constituted and consolidated as an aesthetic community through a halalisation that was inseparable, on the one hand, from the nationalisation of Islam, and, on the other hand, expanding markets. As could be expected, among informants no homogeneous response to all these developments materialised. While halalisation can be said to embody new aesthetic communities, this does not entail a shared Islamic aesthetic with its own particular and normative rules to be understood by insiders as well as outsiders (Leaman 2004: 187). Indeed, the empirical evidence shows that multiple distinctions rather than a uniform type of practised Islamic aesthetic are the order of the day. This said, the legitimisation of consumption in a vast number of object domains testifies to a rhetorical idealisation of moderation, simplicity and balance that was not, however, consistently translated into practice. We have seen that Malay Muslim purism and pragmatism are largely performed through proper Islamic consumption. While some middle-class Malays perform a more purist orientation towards Islam, morality, and the Islamic way of life, the more pragmatic Malays are more focused on individual consumer choices and national identity.

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 what Goffman called fronts as 'expressive equipment' that functions as the setting for performances. 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 religiously legitimate, respectable and sophisticated at one and the same time.

Performance appears to be of specific relevance, firstly, when informants, e.g. through food, signalled 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 registers of modern Malay consumption. Interestingly, in the eyes of all informants, 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 middle-class Malays.

‘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 group orientated towards purism 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 a 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.

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 the pragmatic group claims that the externality of the material is only secondary to one's inner, deeper worship, dedication and commitment, their purist other in this instance is 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 purist group and Islam as fashion for those performing pragmatism. Purism is incompatible with excessive and immoral display of the body. Conversely, pragmatic Malays 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 new 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 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 shown 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. The second coming of capitalism or millennial capitalism in Malaysia has given rise to ideas of a 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.

Any kind of commodity improperly handled can be signified as excessive in the Malay middle-class world. Several informants, for example, classify excess as the practice of 'flashing the card'. This idea of excess is precisely tied to the excessive handling of the credit card rather than the card in itself, as the vast majority of Malays hold one or more credit cards. Understandings of commodities hinge on the context of their everyday handling rather than their 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.

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 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 are 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 (ibid.: 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. Some Malays are more articulate about this kind of critique than others. Mahathir's ideas should be seen as a strategic attempt at appeasing and pre-empting 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 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 every 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). For example, the following article on the Internet 'Consumed consumers' 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>)

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 excess and displacement of religious energy as energy surplus 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 happened in the West. Thus, commodities in the West will always remain commodities and cannot function as things, artefacts or anti-commodities.

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' (ibid.: 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' (ibid.: 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. (Ibid.: 33)

Bataille's central critique is 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' (ibid.: 55). The deepest purpose of sacrifice is always to 'give destruction its due, to save the rest from mortal danger of contagion' (ibid.: 59). Here, Bataille develops a central idea for my argumentation, namely that

[o]nce 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. (Ibid.: 57)

By restoring divine order in production and handling, commodities are re-signified as non-commodities. This sacralisation of commodities fulfils the need for the authenticity that has evaporated in mass production. Obviously, halalisation is all about mass-producing authentic things as non-commodities. The purist group 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: 117–8)

Obviously, the problem is the understanding and definition of luxuries and excess central to balanced consumption. Nik states that

[e]xtravagance 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. (Ibid.: 132)

Under the heading 'Luxury test', the *Islamicity.com* website argues:

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 the 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 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](http://www.islamicity.com/articles/Articles.asp?ref=RI0402-2211))

Walter Benjamin's 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' (1999: 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' (ibid.: 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 of that which is considered halal is a concentration of symbolic power that flourishes only by 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. (Bataille 1991: 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 external elements, without which it could not be *signified*' (ibid.: 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' (ibid.: 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' (ibid.: 72–3). In one of his subsequent works, *Theory of Religion*, Bataille is more elaborate on the ambiguous nature of the material in religion: he recognises the struggle in the world of matter between the beneficent/apprehensible on the one hand and malefic/unstable/dangerous on the other (Bataille 1992: 72).

In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille argues that historically resources in early Islam were invested in conquests and expansion very similar to the development of industry through capitalist accumulation (Bataille 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. 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 a sweeping Orientalist manner (ibid.: 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.

Understandings of excess in Malaysia encompass a wide range of moral and social connotations. 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’ (Peletz 2002: 121). These suspicions are intimately tied to the material and emotional excess of the other.

I have reflected upon the idea of the fetish 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 a false relation to origin. It compels personal recognition of new and unfamiliar forms of identities forged in the perplexing excess of modernity. Commodities can be seen as ‘things with a particular type of social potential’ (Appadurai 1999: 6). In the following I examine 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 fetishisation 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’ (ibid.). Hence, the malevolent transmutation of commodities into fetishes compels uncontrollable feelings and practices.

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 (Taussig 1980). Contrasting earlier forms of the reciprocal economy, the capitalist system evolved as the object of miners’ hate, fear and economic dependency. Taussig (ibid.: 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, Malays performing purism 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, the purist group's claims about this type of compatibility fit the intangible and shadowy nature of Malaysian capitalism. Islamic banking in modern Malaysia is a prime example of the fusing of religious revivalism, state involvement and consumer culture.

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 the sacred is generated when lifted out of the context of ordinary, functional human use (1995: 38). Sacred things are protected and isolated by prohibitions and must be separated from the profane. Kopytoff's notion of 'singularisation' accurately captures this mechanism (1999: 73). 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 a '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 wide 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' also makes commodities available for identity construction and display.

The origin of the fetish as an idea and a problem has been traced to the 'cross-cultural spaces' of the West African coast in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Pietz 1985: 5). 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' (ibid.: 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' (ibid.: 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' (ibid.). 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' (ibid.: 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 fetishisation (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 in that it simultaneously was 'practised to achieve certain tangible effects (such as healing) upon or in the service of the user' (ibid.: 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 the Arabic scripture emanating from the holy Koran. Even the powers of a plaque with Islamic calligraphy placed above the entrance of a door to a Malay middle-class house can be questioned and contested.

My 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 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.

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 ritualisation 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 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 pre-emption 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 the purist group 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 the purist and pragmatic Malays, the former are more concerned with the search for more and more commodities and practices to be subsumed by halalisation. In this respect, ritualisation 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, Malays exhibiting pragmatism are much more relaxed and uninterested in these halal/haram distinctions, which are seen to be the moralistic trademark of the purist group. For this group, public ritualisation 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. The pragmatists practise bricolages of choices, styles and tastes embodying individual and deep authenticity against the conformity of purism.

Ritual and ritualisation 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' (ibid.: 4). Most importantly, my 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 with 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 far more as intangible sentiments that are not exclusively extrinsic to the nature of the commodity form.

NOTE

- 1 *Tabung Haji* is a savings fund for the *haj* institutionalised and formalised within Islamic banking in cooperation with the state.