6. Islamicity: Experiencing the Divine Light

I ask Faris why some of the reactionary groups have been so successful in capturing the Malay imagination. Their rhetoric on Islam as identity battleground seems to strike a chord with many people. Faris agrees: 'They are clever, they know how to get people riled up. The secular middle class, of which Faris counts himself a member, has few Islamic credentials: 'It's difficult for organisations that want to maintain the secular constitution to also represent themselves as Islamic.' He says it is much easier for groups with an exclusionary agenda, because they can pander to the emotions around ideas of Malay supremacy and Islamic superiority. This is aggravated by a general capitulation of most Muslims to people they see as authoritative in Islam. Faris explains that many Muslims do not believe in Islam wholeheartedly, which means they do not care either way about issues of faith. So they just go along with whatever the majority or persons of authority say. I ask him who these people are, the ones consuming Islam and the ones disseminating it. He claims that the middle class and especially many young people are more into materialism than the spiritual side of life. 'They are enjoying buying things, consuming and having a good life. They don't worry about God, or religion; religion is there of course and they have to do some things, but they are not really into it.' However, he is quick to qualify his answer. Faris's voice quietens down, he leans forward over the table and he looks around surreptitiously, before he adds that, 'Of course, there are many others who want to learn and know about Islam, but they too often just read websites, go to Sufi lecture series or read polemic books on the subject.' He sits back in his chair and calls the waiter to order satay, beef and chicken pieces skewered and grilled on coals with a peanut sauce.

Islamicity: the divine light

This chapter continues my interrogation of civil society, and of the tactics and strategies that people use to deal with the dominant discourses that have power over their everyday lives (see De Certeau, 1984). First I establish who some of the non-state authorities of Islam are and how they employ Islamicity. The digital revolution of the 1990s has meant that information is much more easily and readily available, democratising the information exchange, including the exchange of Islamic knowledge. Many Muslims in Malaysia now receive their information on how to be a Muslim from the internet and other non-state sources. I present a range of authorities from spirit mediums to missionaries who claim to represent the divine light and God's authority. After discussing those who represent Islamicity I turn to a discussion of how religious adherents perform and consume Islam and what implications this has for their religiosity and Muslim identity in Malaysia. Performance and duty-bound religiosity objectify Islam, but performance for performance's sake also has its own internal dynamics. I end with a look at those people who avoid Islamicity and find strategies to evade Islamic policing, Islamic spaces and in some cases an Islamic identity.

Institutionalised knowledge – from ulama control to the internet

The opening of flows of information has caused institutionalised knowledge to retreat into its domains and consolidate the power of bureaucracy. Whilst the Islamic institutions are doing just that, an explosion of Malaysian internet sites in English and Malay as well as access to international online media, blogs etc. in Arabic, English and Malay have increased people's access to and consumption of religious and pseudo-religious knowledge. As part of the modernisation of Malaysia under former Prime Minister Mahathir, the use of the internet has become widespread and has been used by all sides in the growing identity discourse. Blogging has had a profound impact on, especially, the broadband-connected middle class (see chapter 1, also Eickelman & Anderson, 1999: 9). Individuals can spread their views, interesting news items and multimedia files across the internet in an instant. Liberals and reactionaries alike have been using these forms of communication and dissemination of information and misinformation. Information technology is obviously not only used in the pursuit of knowledge production or even

knowledge seeking. An International Islamic University study showed that Klang valley youths and students are using it mainly to chat, email and play games (Shamsul, 2004b: 335). Furthermore, blogs and websites present alternative discourses and voices, which are used and consumed by many people on a daily basis, even if they are fictions. And the new media 'occupy an interstitial space between the super-literacy of traditional religious specialists and mass sub-literacy or illiteracy' (Eickelman & Anderson, 1999: 9). Islam and Muslim identity have been widely discussed, debated and propagated via these networks. By objectifying Islam in this way, it is made into a thing outside of itself, an entity that can be described and enveloped by a systemisation and codification of Islamic traditions (Eickelman & Piscatori, 2004: 37–45). Gilsenan amongst others draws attention to the dangers of Western preoccupations with Islam as a 'single, unitary, and all-determining object, a "thing" out there with a will of its own' (1982: 18–19). However, what happens is that Islam becomes objectified, not by Western observers, but believers themselves. The results can be seen on the internet and the Islamic bookstalls in malls, where everyone is decoding and recording Hadith, Sunnah and the Qur'an.[1]

The following extract is an example of many new media resources that Malays, especially the young, are offering and consuming on the internet, their mobile phones or in coffee shops throughout the country. Here, a young Muslim Malay is describing how to pray. He describes himself as: 'not a knowledgeable scholar. I am only an ordinary Muslim guy wanting to help build readers' personality and character as well as [mine] through blogging. I prefer criticism over praise' (Strang3r (Web pseudonym), 2007). This is his detailed guide to praying:

> I rose up from the ground and stood in prayer before Allah. So far so good, I was focusing quite well.
>
> I then thought, maybe I should teach others how to perform prayers by using my dad's camera to record every step, then upload the recorded video to YouTube.com. I'm sure that there are many others out there who don't have a teacher to teach them. Woops, I had lost focus in my prayer again. I recited Surah Al Fatihah all over again and tried to keep my focus until I had finished my whole prayer.
>
> I took out my camera from my big bag of clothes that was under my study table and placed the camera in various angles while it recorded me doing each step for performing prayers. On every few minutes, I took a short glance at Shafiq sleeping at the lower bed of the double-decker just to make sure he didn't see what I was trying to do. After playing

back a few recorded videos, I noticed some mistakes I made in my steps, and recorded the step again until I had done it correctly. Doing so really is worthwhile. O Allah, may you bless me for the effort and may this effort bring goodness to me and goodness to those who watch. Amee (Strang3r [Web pseudonym], 2007).

This is an example of the way 'good' Muslims want to attract goodness, or Islamicity, and then disseminate it to others. This Muslim blogger has taken the initiative and wants to educate others who may be looking for information on how to pray 'properly'. Thus, when Muslims log on and look at his guide, the blogger hopes God will take notice and reward him with blessings.

Some of the people I interviewed showed me their mobile phones that had the azan, or the call to prayer, as a ringtone, a daily prayer sent via SMS or an Islamically themed screen saver. There is also a burgeoning industry providing mobile content for Muslims ranging from daily prayer times to mobile dating services. Whilst these services mainly focus on consumption, the internet has more of an educating mission. Most of the civil society groups I discussed in chapter 4 are represented on the internet. The *tablighi* are an exception, as their missionary work relies heavily on face to face contact. Others use the internet to distribute information, elicit support and host comments and discussions.

The Islam on offer on the internet is global Islam (Roy, 2004). Global Islam has been purified of ethnic and national cultures, i.e. those cultural attachments to and syncretic elements of a localised religion, and then 're-objectified as a culture in itself' (Roy, 2004: 129). This process is also apparent in Malaysia, where Malayness and its customary and localised inflections of Islam have been purified and standardised to adhere to a national overarching Islamic ideal, rather than a localised interpretation. Most Qur'ans people possess in their homes are copies they had been given at school. The government of Saudi Arabia sponsors the printing and dissemination of Qur'ans which are widely available and used in Malaysia. For all the efforts of the Selangor Islamic Arts Park and their Malay version of a hand-copied Qur'an, their staff also looked towards Mecca and Al-Azhar for guidance on what they were diligently copying.

The forces of homogenisation are not total, but they are strong. Malayness is still at least residual to Islamicity, especially in public discourse and institutions of the state. It can pop up unannounced as a reminder of the past as the following short vignette shows. Upon conversion at a PERKIM[2] facility a new convert to Islam was given a *kain pelikat* (a light sarong worn by Malay

men).[3] The PERKIM staff were still subscribing to the old adage that to *masuk Islam* (enter Islam, become a Muslim) one *masuk Melayu* (becomes Malay). This was a well-known notion in the archipelago where to become a Muslim meant to be integrated and assimilated into Malay society (Ellen, 1983: 56). It is interesting to note that the two people who recounted this story to me did so in different contexts. One said that this was unacceptable, because PERKIM did not understand anything about Islam. 'Islam is a universal religion and has nothing to do with Malay culture or what Malays wear.' The other used the story to highlight Malay Muslim traditions and how they remain important today. The two interpretations return us to the recurrent theme of the tension between Malayness and Islam as identity markers and how people subscribe to them. For some there exists a form of cultural Islam, for others there is only Islam. Islamicity is appropriated by both, but in very different ways. The following section looks at these two forces of Malayanised Islam and globalised Islam amongst those who are authorities on Islam, or at least see themselves as such.

Figure 15 Cave graffiti depicting 'Allah' in Arabic in foreground and cave entrance to the right

The divine light – emanating Islamicity

People who emanate Islamicity are usually religious office bearers such as imams and muftis, in short people who have dedicated themselves to the study and perfection of their understanding and performance of Islam. Of course, many of the people employed by the state religious authorities are less than adequately educated. However, they occupy institutional Islamicity and a privileged Islamic space. Some religious officers I spoke to at JAIS and JAWI seemed confused about basic Islamic theological tenets and legal interpretations when I talked to them. In addition, when they go out on raids, they are often accompanied by unpaid and often untrained, volunteer enforcement officers. These people are accorded Islamicity by virtue of the institution they represent.

Apart from these office bearers, there are also practitioners of the Sufi tradition in the Malaysian peninsula, who incorporate the often syncretic and hybrid form of Islam the Malay archipelago was once famous for (see Geertz, 1976). These modern-day Sufis occupy an interesting space within Islamic identity discourse in Malaysia.[4] Many are *bomoh*s (traditional healers) and offer healing, counselling and other spiritual services within an Islamic framework far removed from the political Islamic framework used by most other voices of Islam, i.e. scholars, muftis, imams or other functionaries of the official Islamic bureaucracy. In the following section I discuss one such *bomoh* and this is followed by a discussion of *tablighi* missionaries.

Channelling spirits

Several times I visited a spirit medium in Perlis who channels Muslim voices from the time of the prophet Muhammad. This *bomoh* is exemplary in that he bridges the Malay *adat* functions of the *bomoh*s and a modern religious framework. He advises on financial matters, matters of the heart, fights evil spells, and heals all sorts of ailments and does so using traditional medicine, counselling and soothsaying whilst continually invoking God. Thus, he channels God's power and will to some extent at least open a gateway to a better understanding of both. In one session I attended the medium channelled a Dutch-speaking Indonesian Sufi from the nineteenth century. He invited me to ask him questions and I asked him about the difference
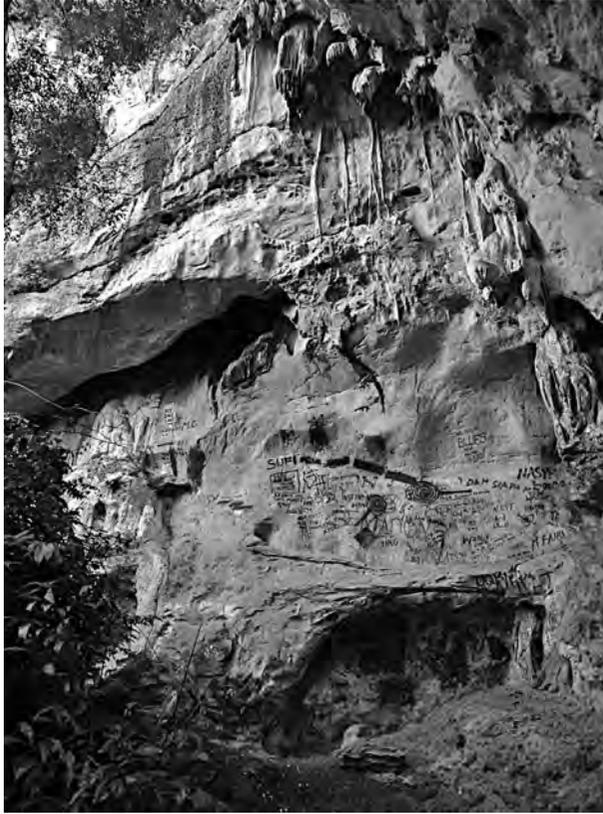
Figure 16 Limestone cave graffiti

between Islam then and now. His worldview and his view on Islam was one of universalism, openness and inter-faith dialogue.

The spirit medium had undertaken an arduous and long path towards attaining Islamicity and being able to employ it as his means of income and reverence in the community. It was based on a significant spiritual journey he had made more than ten years before when he had been working on a sugar plantation. The journey had culminated in a reported three-month hiatus in a cave not far from where he had then been living (see Figures 15 and 16). He noted that he had sustained himself only on belief and deep spiritual immersion, not eating, drinking or sleeping for the entire three months. He said that he had spent his time reciting the Qur'an and calling upon God.

Caves are well known as spiritual places and predisposed for religiosity. They are if not the antithesis to the world above ground then a radically

different environment (Whitehouse, 2000: 163). Not only did Muhammad receive his call to prophethood in a cave near Mecca, the Qur'an itself has a surah entitled Al-Kahf (the cave), which tells the story of a group of young men who find refuge from the encircling unbelievers in a cave.[5] They rested in the cave for 300 (or 309) years under God's protection. During one of his spirit-channelling sessions, the medium referred to the story, ending it with the hermits dying in the cave. It is not clear whether he wanted to emphasise his own achievement of having lived through the experience or whether he had momentarily forgotten the 'real' ending. However, it is clear that he was making a conscious link between himself and the holy book, for hours earlier we had visited the very cave where he had found God and the inspiration to leave the sugar plantation.

The cave was not subterranean, but a cavity in a limestone rock face, not uncommon for the Kedah/Perlis landscape (see Figure 15). This cave, over-looking a dirty stream, was easily reached by climbing up the rock face; a tattered wooden ladder led the way. Once inside I found an array of cooking utensils strewn over the floor, rubbish bags and other modern-day relics that proved that this spot was still frequented. The inside walls of the cave were adorned with a particular kind of painting, mostly calligraphy of verses of the Qur'an and other graffiti. Some walls had prayers written out in Arabic and Malay. The objects left behind in the cave were indicative of people having been there recently. However, they did not necessarily point to purely religious motivations. Rather, some objects indicated that the cave was being used for the temporal joys of couples away from prying eyes. These couples would hide in these caves not for religious enlightenment, but rather to avoid persecution by their own religious authorities. Nevertheless, the cave for this spirit medium was a source of legitimacy and authority. When he showed it to me he was visibly proud of his achievements, and the cave played a great role in his transformation and therefore can be seen as a founding myth for his own powers.

Tablighi Jamaat

Another group largely outside of the state purview are the wide-ranging *Tablighi Jamaat* (literally 'one who conveys the message') groups who engage in *dakwah*, literally 'to call' what they see as lapsed and lapsing Muslims back to the true teachings and practices of Islam. I was first introduced to the *tablighi* when meeting them in the United Kingdom, where they would travel from

mosque to mosque in multicultural groups of men of varying ages. When I arrived in Malaysia I decided to call on them. However, it was a chance encounter on a train travelling from Malaysia to Southern Thailand for a conference that reminded me of them. I had to cross the river from Kelantan in Malaysia to the Thai side by foot in order to reach the train station in Sungai Golok, a typical Thai border town, with night entertainment, massage parlours and drinking dens many Malaysians frequented to escape the dreary and dry (in terms of alcohol) Kelantanese evenings and weekends. Since the renewed violence and security threats in Southern Thailand, visitor numbers have drastically sunk and Malaysians stay away from Southern Thailand, fearing getting caught up in the unrest. The day I travelled, the military were patrolling the streets and many stations were flanked by machine-gun-toting soldiers behind sand-bags. At the Sungai Golok station there were no soldiers. However, a group of men in white flowing robes, red-coloured beards and white caps were eagerly awaiting the train. There I, too, waited patiently for the train to arrive, which travels all the way to Bangkok from this southernmost point of Thailand. I approached one of the younger men and asked him where his party was travelling to. He duly informed me that he was going to attend the *Tablighi Jamaat istimak* (gathering) in Bangkok the next day, which he said would bring together hundreds of thousands of Muslims. We began talking about religion, life and motorcars (he was an engineer). He recounted to me the main tenets of *dakwah* (Muslim missionary work). As the train filled with more and more missionaries from station to station, he gave me the contacts for the Malaysian *Tablighi Jamaat markaz* (centre) in Kuala Lumpur.

Months later I arrived at the address at Sri Petaling mosque and interviewed the sheikh of the mosque amongst others. In terms of Islamic preaching and theology, the sheikh positioned his markaz between Badawi's Islam hadhari and Anwar's *Islam madani*. The sheikh further explained that Islam was easy, and the Islam they practised and preached was 'the true Islam', as opposed to the various forms the government, NGOs and PAS were peddling. But, above all, tablighis stand outside of politics and this apolitical stance will ensure the government's watchful eyes on them, but leave them otherwise undisturbed in their missionary work. They exert tremendous efforts in this quest, engaging people at home, travelling for three or forty days or four months. Some spend up to half the year away from their homes and families, travelling, preaching, discussing and sojourning in Malaysia and the world. One *tablighi* said to me that he was fortunate that his six months of work as an engineer enabled him to live off his earnings for the next six months that he spent away from

his wife and children. Not only that, but often he would only work half days in order to devote his afternoon to visiting houses of Muslims around the neighbourhood and engaging their occupants in religious discussions and prayer. Another *tablighi*, Ismail, told me about his recent second marriage to a young bride unbeknownst to his first wife. This is a real problem as women's rights organisations like Sisters in Islam and the Women's Aid Organisation attest to numerous cases where first wives do not know about the other wives their husbands have taken subsequently, leading not just to a breakdown of relationships, but affecting maintenance and child custody, amongst other things. Ismail was very pleased with his most recent exploit. However, he was worried what other *tablighi* might think of him – so he asked me to keep this fact quiet. The patriarchal character of such clandestine marriages to second, third or even fourth wives was evident in the make-up of the whole *tablighi* organisation. There was not one woman in sight. They usually have to remain at home and look after the family and house, while their spouses are on their mandatory missionary trips.

After only a short while at the markaz some of the *tablighi* offered me the initial three-day package. They said that anyone could come and stay at the mosque for three days and three nights, including three meals a day, at no cost. All they ask is for the participants to listen and learn. Qur'an study sessions and intensive lectures are supposed to bring lost souls back into the fold of Islam or new ones to commit to Islam with the *shahadah* (testimony of faith). One of the *tablighi* was adamant that after three days at the centre I, too, would want to convert. The *Tablighi Jamaat* is bringing with it a certain brand of orthodoxy that is often at odds with local customs and modern life. However, their own often professional backgrounds and largely secular education mean that *tablighi* fall into Roy's 'individualisation of religion' category, whereby the individual is paramount, both in terms of seeking and attaining salvation (Roy, 2004: 268–269). *Tablighi* I spoke to continually invoked the next life and the rewards Muslims would get there vis-à-vis non-believers. Furthermore, they stressed that many Muslims were leading lives akin to those of non-believers, which made them forfeit their chance of paradise. Indeed, being non-Muslim was often equated with being a non-believer, which closes the door immediately to inter-religious dialogue, if one faithful sees all others who are either faithful to their own religions or to disapproved interpretations of the same religion as outside of his religion. That was the tenor. If Muslims act 'un-Islamically', or rather in a way that *tablighi* deem to be un-Islamic, then these Muslims are outside of Islam.

For these *tablighi*, the 'way of the Prophet' and pleasing the Prophet are paramount. They express this in their choice of dress as well as their *habitus*, their everyday actions. Many men wear turbans as a reference to the Prophet Muhammad who is believed to have worn one. The drinking of water is done in a crouching fashion as the Prophet is believed to have taken water this way. Their focus thus is on an imagined utopia, a golden past of Islam, when there was less temptation to stray from Islam and its teachings and when the Prophet was able to provide clear leadership. These two issues were stressed time and again by the *tablighi*, many of whom were themselves transformed characters. Akmal told me that he had been an avid devotee of rock music when he was at college and had had his share of transgressing, even abandoning Islam. He told me of drunken nights out on the town, drug-fuelled parties and doing the most inappropriate things with women to whom he was not married. I sensed a tinge of nostalgia and I believe I detected a slight smile of reminiscence as he thought of these times gone by. However, this is not to belittle Akmal's present strong beliefs and religiosity. It showed me that he had seen the other side and knew what he was talking about when he ranted about and lamented the social ills, the lax morals and easy-going attitudes of fellow Muslims. He had clearly gone through a life-changing transformation from rocker to *tablighi* and wanted to share that journey. Yet, not all have seen as much of the world and life as Akmal. Some of the most fervent preachers were young enough not to have seen any of what they often called the 'dark side of modern ways'. The resident sheiks seemed more flexible, some even willing to engage in discussions about their orthodoxy and strict ways with me. I found the oldest to be the most affable and willing. One of the senior sheiks in charge did not like my way of questioning, however, and was quite abrupt in his answers and world view, which quickly became a version of 'you're either with us or against us'. He saw me as a lost soul, unless I stayed for the three-day, three-night course and converted. His older colleagues meanwhile focused on the soft marketing approach to the benefits of Islam, vis-à-vis the strict moral codes I would have to adhere to if I chose to convert. This illustrates the push and pull between those advocating a scare tactic and those who were more tactful, admonishing wrong, whilst encouraging the good.

Claiming Islamicity

How do these *tablighi* and other Muslim groups and people attain the charisma that allows them to radiate Islamicity and the authority to speak of and

for Islam? For Weber the authority of a charismatic leader is based on his or her charisma, which he defines as:

> ... eine als außeralltäglich (ursprünglich, sowohl bei Propheten wie bei therapeutischen wie bei Rechts-Weisen wie bei Jagdführern wie bei Kriegshelden: als magisch bedingt) geltende Qualität einer Persönlichkeit heißen, um derentwillen sie als mit übernatürlichen oder übermenschlichen oder mindestens spezifisch außeralltäglichen, nicht jedem andern zugänglichen Kräften oder Eigenschaften [begabt] oder als gottgesandt oder als vorbildlich und deshalb als *'Führer'* gewertet wird (Weber, 1976: 140).[6]

I quote the German original here, for it applies charisma specifically to qualities of personality that are 'außeralltäglich', beyond the everyday, outside of the everyday – which is precisely what makes them special. Thus, the everyday is pitted against an authority beyond it, but one which cannot attain authority without it. For Weber the believers who have faith in a charismatic leader accord to the leader as much authority as he or she seemingly derives from them. Thus, the interplay between believer and leader is crucial to the mobilising power of ideas and people. Lee and Ackerman point out that 'In Malaysia, Islamic charisma lies dormant within the vast structure of religious institutions, legalities, and doctrines practiced by more than half of its population' (Lee & Ackerman, 1997: 139). Thus there is particularly fertile ground for Islamicity in Malaysia. Authority usually takes shape during times of uncertainty or strife, when a cause has to be identified and shared to enable the charismatic leader to rise to the occasion and become the people's saviour. Such authority thus depends on a constant or at least continuing threat to a given community. In Malaysia, this is easy, as Malayness and Islam are continually seen to be under threat. There exists a vicious circle in which people who have achieved authority maintain the perception of Malayness and Islam as threatened because they can use this perception as a base for their power.

For the *tablighi*, for instance, the threat comes both from the inside, i.e. from other Muslims, and from the outside, specifically from the incursions of what are seen as hedonistic Western lifestyles. Malaysia may seem like a relative open society, where homosexuality or even just sexuality is relatively visible. This visibility alone is seen as an affront to Islam by some and even today in Malaysia, whose capital Kuala Lumpur boasts of being one of the region's gay centres, some people told me that there are no homosexuals in

Malaysia. This is certainly the line of the government. Deviance is seen as a direct challenge to many people's world-views, to their very conceptualisation and internalisation of the world around them. Thus, deviance is seen as a threat to their own manifestation of their lifeworld. Here is the relatively easy mobilisation of people through this culture of fear that has progressively been nurtured and today is probably the biggest stumbling block for inter-religious and inter-racial relations. The stereotypes people have and the weight they attach to them are problematic as they often act as self-reinforcing closed systems. The more they are used and the less real contact people have with those they talk about in often derogatory ways, the more real the stereotype becomes. Whilst the threat of the Western lifestyle is a common trope among orthodox Muslims, who focus on a lack of observance of Islamic laws, lax morals and sometimes conspicuous consumption, it is the threat of ignorance that drives the *tablighi* on their missionary activities. Many *tablighi* I spoke to feel that their fellow Muslims are not knowledgeable about Islam and thus act and live an un-Islamic lifestyle.

Knowledge is the key to the re-education and re-orientation that the *tablighi* strive for in the Muslims they encounter and also acts as a charismatic magnet for those willing to learn from them. Knowledge is transmitted through lecturing, and the many groups of *tablighis* departing every day from the Sri Petaling markaz go forth to preach and discuss in mosques around the country and abroad with the aim of converting Muslims to their version of Islam. Amongst them are many foreigners who have come to Malaysia as part of their own missionary activities. Thus, sometimes a sermon will be held in Arabic, Urdu or English and translated into Malay by another group member. Foreigners can add to the allure of the *tablighi* when they present themselves at mosques and community centres, and certainly their presence adds a sense of 'out of the ordinary' in terms of charisma, if those lecturing present themselves as both learned and foreign (preferably Arab, for it carries the most prestige). These missions have had varied success, with some of the urban centres such as Penang, Kuala Lumpur and the far north in Kelantan being strongest (Farish A. Noor, 2007).

The most success has been with those most in need of guidance: unemployed youths, drug and alcohol addicts and other marginalised people with few or no other support networks. The *Tablighi Jamaat* offers them a strict model of and for their lives, with perspective and meaning. Travel to far away places must also add to the allure, as there are always foreigners around with stories to tell. Indeed, I was introduced to an Australian *tablighi*

from the Cocos Islands in Sri Petaling markaz. He had been converted on the Cocos Islands by Malay *tablighi* and was a frequent visitor to Malaysia on his missionary journeys. His story of conversion mirrored Akmal's in that he had been a heavy drinker and smoker, and directionless for much of his life. With his conversion came structure and meaning and this is what he was aiming to give to others. The rhetoric is often based on a shared experience of misery, loss, hardship or aimlessness. The simple and structured rhetoric and lifestyle provides followers with a grounded sense of belonging and connectedness to the wider Muslim community they meet in their travels. The everyday *habitus* consists of many symbolic gestures which mirror the Prophet Muhammad and provide further credence, importance and above all authority. Tying their own actions to those of the leader and founder of the original Muslim brotherhood in Mecca and Medina invokes Geertz's ideas about the transformative power of ritual when empowered by charisma coupled with belief.

Rather than discussing Geertz's definition of religion here, I want to focus on his Weberian undertones of charisma for religious observance and leadership. For Geertz, acceptance of a creed hinges on the convincing authority which must couch the message in a system of symbols. Belief is 'a prior acceptance of authority which transforms . . . [everyday] experience' (1973: 109). And the tool for the creation of faith is religious ritual. It is in ritual, most often in large ceremonies or cultural performances, that the symbolic fusion of ethos and world view shapes the spiritual consciousness of a people.

> The acceptance of authority that underlies the religious perspective that the ritual embodies thus flows from the enactment of the ritual itself. By inducing a set of moods and motivations – an ethos – and defining an image of cosmic order – a world view – by means of a single set of symbols, the performance makes the model *for* and model *of* aspects of religious belief mere transpositions of one another (Geertz, 1973: 118).

Thus, in rituals we ought to be able to witness authority enacted and believed in, consecrated and perpetuated. Yet ritual is not an authority-defined space *per se*, for it requires people to believe in the spectacle before the spectacle. I contend that the authority is not vested in the rituals, the symbols or the charisma of the religiously imbued speaker, leader or politician. Authority rests instead within Islamicity itself and it is therefore part of the experiential realm of religion. Islamicity cannot be materialised, yet it is perceived to

reside in people, objects and places. This allows it to be both an active agent as part of a believer's practice of religion as well as part of the structure of institutions, norms and laws. It pervades both active and passive modes of being and because it is neither here nor there it remains elusive. Yet when asked believers will attest to its most substantial embodiment. Herein lies the paradox of the *thingness* of Islamicity.[7]

Of good and bad Muslims

I want to further refine the concept of Islamicity, by which I mean the metaphysical qualities an Islamic person or object holds. This can radiate from within or be acquired as an external manifestation of being a 'good Muslim'. I do not mean this in the sense that Mamdani has unpacked the terms 'good' and 'bad' from a Western perspective, i.e. how the West sees Muslims and objectifies them as either good and on our side or bad and on the jihadist, radical side (Mamdani, 2002). Rather, I am interested in how my informants aspired to being 'good Muslims', often without labelling themselves 'bad Muslims', just not entirely religious. Roy describes religiosity as the way 'believers experience and formulate their relationship to religion' (Roy, 2004: 149). He sees the main issue as the 'reconciling of self with religion in terms either of norms (Salafism) or values (liberal or ethical Islam)' (Roy, 2004: 149). Thus, he sees the reclaiming of ownership over religion as religiosity, be it in normative or ethical terms. In the Malaysian case this is too active a formula, as religiosity as everyday lived experience has a profound affect and is a widespread aspiration.

However, there exists an incongruity between desire and practice. The desire to be good, a follower of the 'true' and 'real' Islam, leads some to strive for and engage in the inner or greater jihad (struggle) for self-improvement. Most, however, recognise that they cannot fulfil their desires and thus adopt a strategy whereby they seemingly comply with most or some Islamic rules, whilst doing the best they can. Some others actively apply this as a strategy, in that they outwardly perform the religious tasks sporadically, but contradict these very actions elsewhere. A common example is the adherence to fasting times during Ramadan. Many Muslims eat and snack during the day and then dutifully sit at the communal table and break fast with everyone else to perform their duty. The internalisation of discourse and its reproduction, i.e. the construction of norms and the normalising of practices in everyday life, operates in a world of 'fiction', which itself produces knowledge, leading to a self-reinforcing cycle of normalising pressures (Foucault, 1980: 193).

Being a good Muslim in terms of adhering to certain Islamic dress codes can be empowering as well as problematic, as Navaro-Yashin (2002a) shows in the case of Turkey. The same can be said of Malaysia. She describes a fashion show for Muslim apparel in Istanbul that exhibited a range of dress styles to entice especially younger and upper-class women to cover up and still be fashionable or be able to reveal their social class position (Navaro-Yashin, 2002a: 241). The clothing companies were 'creating images that would satisfy the quest for "authenticity" among covered women who wanted to be "modern"' (Navaro-Yashin, 2002a: 238). The search for an Islamic authenticity that can be reconciled with modernity is a continuing and very paradoxical project on many levels. As Kahn has shown, Malay(sian) modernity was first couched in terms of an espousal of mainly cultural *kampung* virtues, especially through the films of P. Ramlee (Kahn, 2001: 111). Later it was transformed into an Islamised version thereof, yet remained within a cultural project of redefining Malayness (Kahn, 2003a). What is striking, then, is the intimate relation between an Islamic religious identity and Malayness, coupled with the need to show Islamic credentials and Islamicity. Those Muslims who self-identify primarily as Muslims, place great stress on their Islamicity.

For instance, going on the hajj or *umrah* (lesser pilgrimage) often becomes a transforming event in their lives.[8] They come back changed and feel more Islamic. Some women take up wearing the headscarf, if they did not do so before. They feel more in touch with Islamicity and thus feel a need to show it. They will abstain from alcohol, partying and other forms of entertainment that they know to be un-Islamic on one level, but can usually justify to themselves on another. Upon coming in touch with an increased and intense dose of religiosity in Mecca and Medina, many come back looking for more in their lives and seemingly find it in Islamic doctrine and practice. However, for others this is short lived and expires after a while. One of my informants returned from Mecca a 'changed man', he said. During his pilgrimage he had worn very simple white robes, which he felt liberated him from the predominantly Western business suits he wore to work and trendy shirts and slacks he wore out partying. He felt that the pilgrimage had mellowed him and he did not want to work for a while. He took some time off to reflect upon the trip. He read books about Islam and carried on praying, something he had not done prior to the trip. After about one week of praying, reading and reflection, he decided to meet his friends in the city for a drink. With that his engagement with Islam was back to where it had been before his pilgrimage. He stopped praying, returned to partying, drinking alcohol and other 'forbidden'

activities. Later on, reflecting on his first week after his return from Mecca, he told me that he had felt good, but had also missed going out and enjoying himself. Peer pressure is certainly a driving force in the reintegration into a more secular lifestyle, but there is more to it. Many young people I spoke to said that they were quite aware of the seeming contradiction of their lifestyle and their religion, but for them it was a conscious negotiation between what they wanted from life and what they felt they had to do. Thus, going on a hajj or *umrah* was a chance to wipe one's slate clean and begin afresh. As one person said: 'Some Muslims treat the hajj like a Catholic confession to cleanse themselves of sin, but when they come back they will commit them [sins in Islam] again.'

The danger then is the importance that is accorded to Islam as an identity marker whilst it is coupled with a profound lack of knowledge about Islam. People defend what they do not know. Reflexivity of their thoughts and actions and an engagement with the serious subject matter is sparse.[9] The dos and don'ts, i.e. the social structure, are accepted a priori, without questioning, partly because it is not permissible to question the politics and policies that underscore and surround Islam in Malaysia at present, as it will be seen as attacking the religion. The individualisation of religion, which Roy describes for the West (Roy, 2004), is far removed from the Malaysian case, where people are often afraid to voice their own opinions on religious matters.

The desire to be a good Muslim is a powerful emotional force. I have discussed a range of very different authorities who radiate Islamicity and use this to work (spirit medium), proselytise (*tablighi*) or police Islam (religious authorities). Individuals are often attracted to strong sources of Islamicity. However, they are also easily distracted.

Performance of religious identity

In chapter 2 I touched upon the dualism between doing (performing) and being in terms of Islam. Most Muslims in Malaysia are Muslims by birth. They have no choice in the matter. That is why performing Islam is very important. It is a visible signifier of an ongoing commitment that goes beyond an inherited Islamicity. This section further explores what a 'good' Muslim ought to be doing and how even performance and working towards salvation can end up as nothing more than meaningless consumption. Esposito spelled out the importance of performing and working for Islam:

> Faith places the Muslim on the straight path; acts demonstrate commitment and faithfulness. In Islam, the purpose of life is not simply to affirm but to actualize; not simply to profess belief in God but to realize God's will – to spread the message and law of Islam. Faith without work is empty, without merit (Esposito, 1988: 69).

The importance of performance of religion is further outlined by W. C. Smith, who said that, 'Faith is something that people do more than it is something people have . . . it pertains to something that people are, or become' (Smith, 1981: 122). Thus, being Muslim is only a small part of experientially being Muslim, which includes the performative part. For Taib, who runs the NGO 'Muslim Brothers' (chapter 4), the practice of his religion is the most important part: 'My own take on religion is that the most important thing is that you *act* in the *way* of the religion.' Religiosity here becomes an ontological and performative identity experience. This being-in-the-world-as-Muslim, to expand on Heidegger, is a form of relational discourse. It is about the way one relates to one's material and immaterial environment. The importance of performing religion here lies in the accumulation of Islamicity by acts of worship and by virtue of being a *good* Muslim. This process further objectifies religion and slowly diminishes spirituality and even belief. I will demonstrate this with the example of the objectification of Islam by believers and the consumption of Islamicity during Ramadan and on pilgrimages in the following sections.

In his portrayal of the waiter Sartre (1957[1936]) describes the waiter as playing the role of a waiter. His performative identity of 'waiter' is only a part of him, but can act as an overriding identity. The waiter acts in 'bad faith' according to Sartre, meaning that the waiter accepts his role, limiting his freedom willingly. Trying to be a 'good Muslim' is akin to this process of accepting factuality over transcendence, i.e. context over freedom. Being Muslim becomes the defining *non plus ultra*, thus downplaying alternative identities.

Islamic identity is increasingly performed in a tokenistic manner. The *doa selamat*, a short prayer of thanksgiving and praise of Allah before a function, wedding or engagement, for instance, stands as a reminder of religiosity and its role in society. Yet many people only follow the notion as a societal performative act of outward religious identity. At one function a hajji was invited to say a prayer to commence the proceedings. The hajji began by reciting the *shahadah* repeatedly and rocking his body forwards and backwards rhythmically. Many Muslims sitting around him did not know how to respond to this form of

prayer nor to what he was saying. Some closed their eyes, some looked around to see how other people were responding. Afterwards I asked a friend of mine what had happened. He shrugged his shoulders and said that when 'someone prays full-on, you just kind of follow them, do what they do.'

This cloak, then, is a means of protection from being seen as too modern or not religious enough. The less one knows about one's religion in a country where religion is on the rise, especially as a signifier of community and an identifier of a dominant majority, the more one needs to be seen to adhere to and perform at least the necessary attributes for this Islamic identity.

Objectified religion

As religion becomes more and more objectified and performative, the outwardly recognisable elements of religiosity remain, but spirituality is lost. In the house of Datuk Amran, a former *Syariah* court appeals judge and land administrator for the state of Kelantan, I was surprised to hear his rationale for going to prayers. He holds a position of authority and reverence in his community and as such he must be seen to be a good Muslim. During lunch, he excused himself to pray at a nearby *surau*. He said he needed to keep up appearances. People, he said, would talk if he missed the prayers and no one wants people to talk, especially not about one's religiosity.

The objectification of religion is as much a result of its practice as of its materiality. This can become a self-reinforcing cycle. Believers often lack a firm grasp of religious knowledge and belief, which furthers their insecurity. They, then, may perform the actions and rituals and repeat religious practices as a demonstration for others and ultimately themselves. Thus praying can become an objectification and externalisation of inner belief as well as an internalisation of the form, of the mechanised ritual. As Žižek puts it:

> The first thing to specify is that Pascal's "Kneel down and you will believe!" has to be understood as involving a kind of self-referential causality: "Kneel down and you will believe *that you knelt down because you believed*!" The second thing is that, in the 'normal' cynical functioning of ideology, belief is displaced onto another, onto a "subject supposed to believe," so that the true logic is: "Kneel down and you will thereby *make someone else believe*!" We have to take this literally, and even risk a kind of inversion of Pascal's formula: "Do you believe too much, too directly? Do you find your belief too oppressing in its raw immediacy? Then kneel down, act as if you believe, and *you will get rid*

of your belief – you will no longer have to believe yourself, your belief will already exist objectified in your act of praying!" That is to say: what if one kneels down and prays not so much to regain one's own belief but, quite the contrary, to *get rid* of one's belief, of its overproximity; to acquire the breathing space of a minimal distance from it? To believe – to believe 'directly,' without the externalizing mediation of a ritual – is a heavy, oppressing, traumatic burden, which, by practising a ritual, one has a chance of transferring onto an Other (Žižek, 2006: 353f).

Thus, you don't have to believe if others believe that you believe. The dis-enchantment of religion has progressed also through the everyday usage of terms like 'insh'Allah' (God willing), which turns the religious iconography into routine thus slowly desacralising it.

In 2006, a report that the *tudung* or headscarf was to be made mandatory for all female police officers for marches, graduations and national day celebrations started a debate about the role and especially the visibility of religion in the public service (Puah, 2006a). The headscarf in general has taken on a life of its own, signifying religiosity and much more beyond that, depending on the local culture and politics (Navaro-Yashin, 2002a: 246–247). In Malaysia, 'wearing [the] tudung will highlight the Islamic vale [sic] permeated in the force which is in line with the requirement of the religion' stated Inspector-General of Police Mohd Bakri Omar (cited in Puah, 2006a). Thus, the performative element of wearing a religious signifier, even if one is not of that religion, is supposed to give Islamicity to the police force as a whole.

At an Islamic lecture in a neighbourhood *surau* I attended the *ustaz* told his congregation that Muslims 'must be proud of [their] identity' and Islamic identity is exuded in one's name and dress. He went on to state that the 'appearance must indicate we are Muslim and we must be proud of [our] Islamic dress.' He thus made it clear that Muslim identity performance begins with the external signifier to announce to the world who Muslims are and create a coherent and presumably unified self-image.

The performance has grown in importance for Muslims as their faith becomes more and more despiritualised. With the fully-fledged Islamisation of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, Islam suffered like many major re-ligions do when the religion becomes stagnant, rigid and politicised. Thus, Islam in Malaysia today is in danger of being appropriated by fringe groups like Muslim Brothers because the only alternative is the state. The individual can and does resist this personal institutionalisation by a hidden resistance,

and I would argue these acts of resistance are often small and have been internalised by ignoring the government and its ever-changing directives. They occur at all levels and can range from small to large transgressions such as not attending prayer, keeping a dog, drinking alcohol or not believing at all. However, what remains is the word 'Islam' on one's identity card.

Iconic Islam

Objectified Islam in Malaysia, as described in the previous section, is largely of an iconic consciousness, by which I mean that religiosity becomes material and real because it is thought of as an idea, an object, a thing. For Alexander the iconic consciousness is the sensual experience of 'being touched':

> To be iconically conscious is to understand without knowing, or at least without knowing that one knows. It is to understand by feeling, by contact, by the 'evidence of the senses' rather than mind (Alexander, 2008: 782).

In Islam icons are rare and have been outlawed by the major law schools, which accounts for the privileging of the textual and narrative forms such as calligraphy. There exists amongst Muslims the accepted view that icons are not allowed, largely based on the linkage of icon to idol and the prohibition of *shirk* (idolatry) in Islam. However, there is a debate as to how far this ban extends. Throughout history, there have been depictions of Muhammad amongst Shia Muslims, some with Muhammad in full view, others with his face veiled. This is unacceptable to Sunni Muslims, who have a strict prohibition on any images of the Prophet. For Wahhabis this goes as far as banning any images, photographs or drawings of anyone. However, over time Islamic narratives themselves have become thinly veiled icons. Beyond the visual imprint, other textual signifiers have become controversially fought over, as a last resort of Islamic representation and its claim of authority over and of the authenticity of such signifiers. In 2008, a Catholic weekly, the *Herald*, was reprimanded and shut down for using the word 'Allah' for God in its Malay-language newspaper. The fight over the word 'Allah' as a signifier for a religion is telling in so far as space is demarcated by and for Muslims in contemporary Malaysia. Similarly, I was sometimes stopped by Malays from greeting them with the Arabic greeting '*As-salamu Alaikum*' (peace be upon you) because they advised me that this Arabic greeting is Islamic and thus reserved for Muslims.[10] This demarcation of sacred space for Muslims only

**Consumers of
Islamicity**
(aspire to and refer
back to markers of
Islamicity)

Islamicity

**People
emanating
Islamicity**
(employ icons and
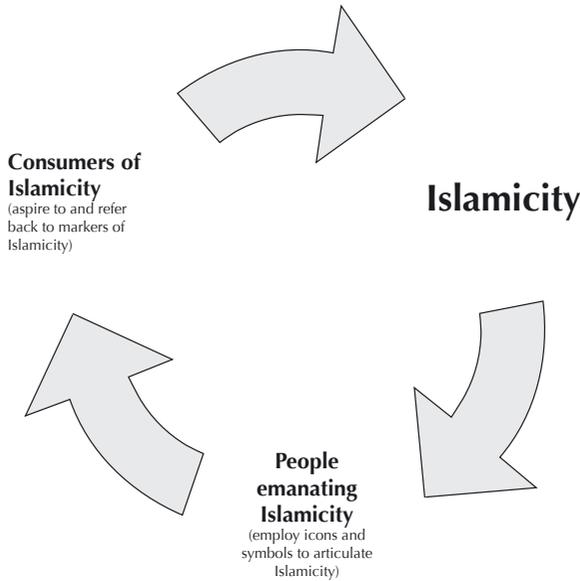symbols to articulate
Islamicity)

Figure 17 Cycle of Islamicity

and the invocation of their right to keep others outside of it is a worrying development in a country with Malaysia's ethnic and religious make-up. When I pushed some of the people who did not want me to greet them in this way as to why Muslims have a monopoly on some phrases and words, I was usually greeted with a knowing smile and little in terms of an answer. The reinforcement of fictitious boundaries relies upon the sealing of gaps in the line of argument and creating a circular justification for their exclusions. Many of my informants would close off discussions upon my further questioning them. Responses included:

> 'Non-Muslims do not understand,'
> 'You wouldn't understand,'
> 'It's a different mentality,'
> 'It's a different rationality,'
> 'You cannot understand, because you do not believe in Islam,'
> 'You wouldn't understand because you are a *kaffir* (infidel).'

To illustrate this point further I want to describe an encounter at Masjid Jamek Kampung Rawa in Georgetown on Penang Island, where the academic

turned Perlis state mufti, Dr. Mohd. Asri, gave an Islamic New Year speech. The main theme of the talk was that Islam is accommodating, because the current debate in Malaysia centred around the Chinese Muslim community and their position vis-à-vis Malay Muslims (see chapter 2). The interesting part for this discussion came when he asked the audience why God had picked Muhammad to be his prophet. Why had God not chosen anyone else, someone better, someone from a richer background perhaps, why hadn't he chosen some young man from somewhere else? He described Muhammad as 'just an orphan', albeit stemming from a good ancestry. But why had God chosen an illiterate? The answer the mufti gave was that God would say: 'I choose whom I want.' The message was clear: believe and do not question God, God's will or his plans. I may be reading too much into an utterance, but this is a general theme of the statements of many imams, *tablighi*, members of the *ulama* and ordinary Muslims. Later on the mufti asked whether Islam had failed to function in this era and whether Islam had failed to be the solution to the problems faced by the people today. His answer was clear: 'Of course

Figure 18 A busy Ramadan market in Shah Alam before buka puasa
(breaking fast)

you won't say Islam has failed. Impossible. This religion comes from God.' By invoking the highest authority possible in Islam he was in effect saying that there was no room for debate.

At another Islamic talk, this time an afternoon lecture on Islam, a local *ustaz* reiterated the same notion: 'Islam is perfect, no new thing should be added, no one has a right to interfere with Islam.' At this point someone in the audience interjected: 'Unless you are the Prime Minister of Malaysia.' This was met with hearty laughter from the audience and the *ustaz* too smiled. However, he went on to say that the 'modifications made today are a great destructive sin.' No Prime Minister, not even the Malaysian one, can intercede with God. The issue is that whilst the *ustaz* and mufti are closing spaces for debate, they retained the power of the interpretation of God's word and will.

This attitude is reminiscent of the turtle story, which has varying versions, ranging from Geertz to Hawking. I shall quote Geertz's:

> There is an Indian story – at least I heard it as an Indian story – about an Englishman who, having been told that the world rested on a platform which rested on the back of an elephant which rested in turn on the back of a turtle, asked (perhaps he was an ethnographer; it is the way they behave), what did the turtle rest on? Another turtle. And that turtle? 'Ah, Sahib, after that it is turtles all the way down' (Geertz, 1973: 28–29).

What is presented here is a circular argument that seemingly makes sense, offering comfort to the believer, offering him an integrated whole. With its relatively simple mechanism of ending debate at the turtle, the explanation functions as an easy defence mechanism. For the shallower the belief of the individual, the more defensive he tends to be. This defensive mechanism acts as a reinforcement of faith and of fictitious boundaries between faiths.

The use of iconography in religions is sometimes part of the expression of such shallow religiosity. Icons are readily employable and consumable as signifiers. Of course, icons require some sort of backdrop to be understood. They need a narrative that provides the icon with substance and meaning. Icons tap into stories or narratives that give the icon its status and provide a framework of meaning. These stories, cultural forms or dreams contained in icons can shift as they get retold and refashioned. Meanings can change and what the icon represents is not easily decipherable. Icons can mean different things to different people in differing circumstances. According to Carroll, every culture has a number of archetypal stories, like the Aborigines'

dreaming (Carroll, 2001). Such stories linger in the background. Even when forgotten or misplaced, they live on.

Consuming Islam

The people emanating Islamicity shape images and icons for consumption. Those consuming these texts and symbols interpret them in diverse ways. Therefore each step of this process has a transmission gap, which opens up space for ambiguity. This ambiguity can in turn become a vehicle to diverge from a set of given meanings and lead to the construction of new ones. Thus, consumption is not a one way street, but an interaction between two parties and part of the cycle of Islamicity (see Figure 17).

The Ramadan market (*pasar Ramadhan)* is a case in point. During Ramadan Muslims are supposed to fast during the daylight hours for one month.[11] The first meal to break the fast is often a communal meal or at least one where the family comes together to pray and then eat. In the last minutes before the break of fast the main activity of Muslims in Malaysia is shopping for food at the neighbourhood markets (see Figures 18 and 19).

Freshly cooked chickens, satay and sweet delicacies vie for the attention of individuals and families with watering mouths, ready to break fast. At the markets in Petaling Jaya and Shah Alam that I visited, several small stall holders told me they come down to the Klang Valley from as far as Kelantan and Perlis just for this one month of market activity and can earn a substantial part of their yearly income there. Judging by the number of shoppers at the height of activity just before sunset it is not difficult to see why these stall owners make the journey once a year to sell their home-made food and drinks.

A similar trend of increase in consumption patterns at mosques and religious festivities has been documented in Egypt for example (see Schielke, 2006). In Malaysian malls, shops selling Islamic paraphernalia have become a common sight. Books on almost any topic, tapes, VCDs, DVDs, the Qur'an in electronic form, prayer beads, the 'bismillah' ('in the name of God') in various shapes and sizes and other items for the discerning Muslim shopper are available. The consumption of religious items comes with the expectation on the part of onlookers that the consumer is religious and in their eyes transports the consumer of religious paraphernalia into a religious moral realm.

Unsurprisingly, the most holy of shopping trips has become the ultimate act of Islamic consumerism. I refer to the hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) and *umrah* (lesser pilgrimage). Muslims return with holy water (from the Zamzam

Figure 19 Fried fish stall at the Ramadan market in Shah Alam

well), dates and clothing, which by virtue of having been bought (often not manufactured or produced) in Mecca or Medina carry intrinsic Islamicity with them, as well as the religious capital and prestige upon one's return for having 'done it.'[12] At one religious lecture I attended in Petaling Jaya the *ustaz* (religious teacher) urged his listeners to 'bring back Islam from Mecca, not Zamzam water and dates . . . all you can buy in Mecca is made in China anyway.' His mission was to Islamise the pilgrimage. His rationale was the spread of Islam, for he argued: 'Four million Malaysians have gone to Mecca, imagine if each person brought Islam back and converted one friend or neighbour, we would have four million extra Muslims!' However, his arguments fell on deaf ears. For it is a custom to bring back presents from Islam's holy cities to give to family and friends. Boxes of dates are very common and I remember friends receiving them from their family and friends who had returned from a pilgrimage. Hammoudi, a Moroccan anthropologist working in the United

States, recounts his experience of the hajj as one of relentless shopping in the various markets in Medina, while pilgrims themselves have become commodities for the Saudi Arabian agencies (Hammoudi, 2006: 83–84). Goods purchased in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina become fetishes in a cycle of gift giving and debt (Hammoudi, 2006: 100–101). In order to transport all the purchases pilgrims make in the markets, suitcases have to be bought at the suitcase market (Hammoudi, 2006: 86). This is very important, because:

> everyone knew a 'reasonable' number of suitcases could make or break a successful return home. At the airport, these suitcases would be unloaded from the plane, and the crowd of people who came to meet the new *haj* would see them, as everyone else when he went back to his village or neighbourhood, of course (Hammoudi, 2006: 90).

This conspicuous consumption helps overcome the daily antagonism Muslims experience living in an often secular modernity whilst consuming Islamic imagery and collectables. This contradiction has to be dealt with somehow by Muslims on an everyday basis. Their religiosity may be the object of introspection as well as contradiction in the light of a secular and sometimes non-Muslim environment (see Schielke, 2006: 18).

Consumption, malls and finding Islamicity

Islam in Malaysia has become for many a lifestyle accessory, consumed by the new middle classes and new rich. Thus, it comes as no surprise that many companies are cashing in on the Islamic market. Proton, the Malaysian national car maker, is considering introducing a 'Muslim car', complete with a compass directing the faithful towards Mecca as well as a special headscarf and Qur'an compartment.[13] The state and market have come together in what Fischer calls the 'halalisation' of society, i.e. the state taking an active part in shaping and accrediting the Islamic (moral) economy and expanding its reach into the everyday lives (and shopping practices) of people (Fischer, 2008).

Shopping malls have become potent new public spaces, although legally they are private domains, owned and run by private enterprise. Moreover, as they spring up in more and more neighbourhoods, especially in the Klang Valley, they become focal points in the cityscapes and lifeworlds of people. They become meeting places for businessmen and -women, sites for flaneurs and youths who window shop and watch movies at the attached cinema complexes. Thus, shopping malls have become places less for shopping than

for hanging out (*lepak*) and meeting friends,. They are meeting places, halfway houses of desire, both carnal and materialistic. However, it is important to remember that these spaces are based on consumerism, the exclusion of the poor, and are sometimes built on the terror of forced eviction from the *kampung*s or poor neighbourhoods on which the bright new malls now stand (see Baxstrom, 2008: 108–128).

In Kelantan, after the cinema was shut down because it was deemed inappropriate for men and women to mingle in a dark room, the state allowed a shopping mall to open. Now KB (Kota Bharu) Mall stands proudly at the edge of the city centre and has fast become the entertainment hub, especially for younger adults. It boasts a range of shops, a supermarket, some fast food outlets and a bowling alley. In the supermarket many employees were busily chatting on their mobile phones. Indeed, new technology has caught on quickly, as it provides a legal and easy way to chat and virtually hang out with friends of both sexes. The *pasar malam* (night market) was still popular with the younger crowd, where they could hang out and observe the opposite sex at coffee shops and market stalls.

These sites of consumption are largely devoid of Islamicity, yet Islam is never far away. As I have outlined, consumer markets for Islamic goods and services are booming and have become part of Malay Muslim lifeworlds. Although spaces are not always signified as Islamic, the religious authorities are a constant threat lurking in the background. More potent, however, is the internalised Islamicity that may be expressed in someone's ringtone chiming to the call to prayer, or a woman's choice to wear a tudung. These choices are mostly not conscious decisions any more, for most girls who wear the tudung do so everyday. They do not decide every day anew whether to wear it or not. Indeed, I found that many young women did not think of themselves as tudung-wearing young women at all. This part of their Islamic identity had become 'natural' for want of a better word. Thus, not wearing a tudung may become a way of evading Islamicity.

Evading the divine light

In this section I look at the efforts exerted by Muslims to evade Islamicity. As I am now using it, the term Islamicity refers to a discourse around people, personified by religious signifiers and religiously imbued people which thus pervades the everyday lives of all. Its thingness is made up of the properties

attributed to it on the one hand, and on the other hand of the essence of, in this case, Islam itself, which attracts these properties in the first place (see Heidegger, 2003: 7–8).

Islamicity is entangled in the hitherto under-represented spectre of class in the moral policing of Islam, which masks an indifference of the elite towards many Islamisation policies of which they themselves are often the (co-) authors. The institutional contract between the upwardly mobile middle class and upper class Malays on the one hand and the Islamic institutions on the other seems to be that neither should interfere with the other. Thus, religious authorities stay away from top hotels, instead focusing *khalwat* (the *Syariah* offence of close proximity between two people of the opposite sex) raids on medium range and cheap hotels. Most nightclubs and other playgrounds of the rich are off limits too. Thus, patrolling backyard drinking-dens, school grounds and parks for Muslims consuming alcohol has become a preoccupation of the authorities.

Islamicity at stake in the city

My own research at JAIS, the Selangor Religious Department, affirmed this fact. A part of the department is the Selangor religious police, charged with the enforcement of the *Syariah* laws of Selangor. The enforcement officers mainly drove around Shah Alam recreational parks and car parks in the evening and at night to patrol for *khalwat* offences and alcohol consumption. The people they are likely to catch at those times are students from the local high schools and from the nearby Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). This university grew out of a development push to train *bumiputeras*. It is run by the Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA), or the Council of Trust for the Indigenous People, and is open only to *bumiputeras*. Thus the vast majority of students are Malay and Muslim. These students have nowhere to go to meet members of the opposite sex apart from hanging out in each other's houses or rooms, which is a direct *khalwat* offence. Hanging out at the mall or park can get them into trouble quickly if they engage in any 'close proximity',[14] or head off to the federal territories and Kuala Lumpur. The latter requires money, but is the only option to catch a movie, as there are no movie theatres in Shah Alam.

With little or no entertainment available it is no surprise to see parks filled with young courting couples, especially after the malls have closed. It is then that the officers strike. JAIS has a separate statistic for the number of students they catch each year. In 2005 in the state of Selangor 183 students were caught

out of a total number of 2468 cases (Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor [Selangor Islamic Religious Department], 2006). The success of the enforcers is visible not just in statistics such as these. In their offices they have a display case that documents some of their operations and their confiscated goods. It houses an almost empty Chivas Regal whisky bottle, a used condom with its packaging and some toilet paper attached, a bra, a pair of man's briefs, and a pregnancy test kit. All these items had tags attached with the date of seizure and case number. These items were bona fide evidence of crimes committed and a testament to the work of the department. On another wall a set of pictures set out further successes, with newspaper clippings, some statistics on the number of people caught and the items seized in raids. Amongst the pictures was one of a couple sitting next to each other, clearly in a romantic mood on a warm afternoon, with the sun setting behind them, its reflection shimmering in the lake in front of them. These were the people they were targeting; a possible *khalwat* offence in the making.

The elite on their part let the religious authorities roam pretty freely and unchallenged in terms of what they do and how they do it. The elite retain access to relatively unpoliced spaces. Ironically, they are the ones who could change present legislation and norms, but because they remain largely untouched in their everyday lives most do not wish to 'rock the boat'. Raids only surface in the media when foreigners are affected, as was the case on Langkawi Island – where an elderly American couple was raided in the middle of the night on suspicion of *khalwat*[15] – or the actions are too outrageous to be ignored by the mainstream political powers, such as the setting up of a snoop squad of volunteers in Putrajaya who were supposed to patrol the streets looking for people in breach of the *Syariah* codes (Hamidah Atan, 2006a).

There has been no real concerted opposition to the elite's and the state's increasingly repressive interpretation of Islam to police the poor. Until such a class-based opposition arises, the state can go on enforcing one set of rules for the many, whilst creating spaces of exclusion and spaces of exception for the few. In these spaces, the elite can live a Western lifestyle, which they may on other occasions denounce.

During a raid on a high-class nightclub called Zouk in Kuala Lumpur in 2005 the religious police divided the crowd into Muslims and non-Muslims and hauled the Muslims to the JAWI headquarters opposite the national mosque.[16] Many were charged with indecent behaviour which carries a maximum fine of one thousand ringgit or a maximum jail term of six months. Amongst those caught by the JAWI officers were the sons and daughters of

Kuala Lumpur's and therefore Malaysia's elite as well as some minor celebrities. The religious police had not done anything out of the ordinary up to this point. Raids on establishments that serve alcohol are standard for the religious police. However, the fallout from this particular raid was quite extraordinary. Many parents complained about the behaviour of the religious authorities. There were reports of indecent behaviour on the part of JAWI raiding officers who had allegedly made some of the girls twirl around in order to assess whether they were dressed inappropriately. The complaints went all the way to the highest echelon of the government through official and unofficial channels. Some took their grievances to the attorney-general Abdul Gani Patail and the Minister for Women and Development Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, whilst others turned to the media or other high placed friends and acquaintances. The final fallout from this affair was that the government decreed that the religious police stay away from five star establishments, which includes bars, clubs and hotels. The reason offered was that it would disrupt tourism, a major economic sector in Malaysia, and give Malaysia a bad image.[17]

Most Muslims are aware of the existence of the religious enforcement agencies and see them as a constant lingering threat from the state. The *raison d'être* for such 'religious vice squads' is not raised, for their manifestation is more one of a distant or imaginary threat. Even if one gets caught for an offence and is hauled into the prison-like facilities at the JAWI headquarters, for instance, this is seen more as a battle wound than a major embarrassment. In any case, parents and friends will rally around one at the silliness and overbearingness of the authorities, and this dies down as soon as safe passage out of jail and no conviction in court are secured. The truce between the authorities and the elite must be retained and both sides know of the fragility of this truce. The authorities, with their current powers, could, if they wanted to, raid and arrest a vast number of Muslims, including royal guardians of Islam, for consumption of alcohol, *khalwat* or a range of other offences against Islam. But they are aware that if they deal with powerful people, their own power will be tested and therefore any such action would be foolish in the current state of affairs in which the Western-oriented elite is in charge of the political landscape. However, if the Islamisation process of the last twenty years bears fruit, the power will gradually shift towards the conservative Islamic elite and thus create an opening for a more widespread implementation of *Syariah* law in Malaysia. The external discourse on which a thinly veiled system of oppression is based has been internalised to the

extent that many people will vehemently defend the policing and restrictive nature of the law. They defend it by referring to the tenets of Islam as divine and therefore unchangeable expressions of God's will. Nobody may interfere with, change or even question their precedent, origin or purpose, for that would be tantamount to blasphemy.

Indeed, some informants wanted to be reminded by the laws of their Muslim identity, thus admitting to their weak nature as human beings. In fact, one informant came back from a Western country because he felt he would otherwise lose touch with his religion and be 'too free'. He wanted to feel the shackles of *Syariah* laws and religious policing around him to better control his behaviour, or rather have it controlled by the threat of the religious authorities.

One of my respondents, Sharifa, remarked on the policing of religion in Malaysia: 'It's ok, it's to show us [Muslims] the limits. We are Muslims after all.' She would not change anything if she could, as she sees the religious police as a legitimate tool to show Muslims what they can and cannot do. However, when given the option, she would rather stay abroad (where she is studying), where there is no religious policing, although she would feel like a bad Muslim there, as she would not adhere to Islamic laws. She will therefore only adhere to Islamic laws under direct instruction and under the threat of penalties. Although she is not pious and knows where she and her friends can live out a non-practising Muslim lifestyle, there remains an underlying urge to be a 'good Muslim'.

Islamicity shunned: Views from the periphery

One of my recently divorced informants in Kota Bahru was telling me about the trials of life in searching for a new partner. He goes on dates every now and then and is still looking for another wife, but deems marriage difficult to maintain: 'Getting married is easy, but staying married is hard.' He says that people can still meet and avoid the religious authorities, even in Kelantan, but they have to go across the border to Thailand or to friends' houses for a 'kenduri', traditional feasts for special occasions such as marriage or *Hari Raya* (day of celebration), which are major social events. He sees no problem with these activities for men, as they cannot get pregnant or tarnish their image by being married many times or being considered 'loose'. Men, according to him, can actually accumulate prestige doing that.

Some younger middle and upper class informants in the Klang valley, ranging in age from sixteen to the late twenties, asserted that the Islamic laws

did not matter to them, as they actually made things interesting. If everything was allowed, they mused, there would be no transgression involved in having pre-marital sex or drinking alcohol. So the laws in fact represent an interesting raising of stakes and spice up an otherwise mundane consumerist leisure time. This is especially true in the light of their knowledge of how to get around the religious enforcers, even though some of them have been arrested by the religious police. The threat of penalty is precisely what entices them to get involved and try the forbidden, they argue. Whilst some do wish that laws were more relaxed, others think that it is the old guard in power.

The laws are seen to be a novelty, but nothing like a 'real law' such as the one against murder. My informants argue that Islamic laws are personal and they know when they transgress them, but the accompanying might of the Malaysian government does not impede their individual freedom to do as they please. They are not frightened by the JAWI religious police or religious authorities. Muslims, especially those of a younger generation, who have placed a bet on progress and especially economic prosperity, have accepted materialism as their creed. Their knowledge of Islam on the whole, even its main tenets, is slim. Their command of English and Western popular culture is more important for their self-identity, especially amongst their peers. They do, however, retain the overarching racial and ethnic, and thus automatic religious, identity markers, without which functioning in Malaysian society seems impossible. Be it the granting of a loan, obtaining a scholarship or seeking housing, one's racial identity is omnipresent as a boundary marker, a rigid label wedged between people and their lives.

Those Muslims often travelled or were educated abroad or have otherwise been in contact with foreigners and ought thus to be exponents of pluralism and acceptance of diversity. However, it is their lack of knowledge of religious and historical matters that makes them insecure and malleable to public opinion and self-styled religious leaders. They often willingly submit to muftis' opinions and fatwas and see this as akin to law, as they deem the mufti or other religious authorities superior to them in these matters. Thus, they choose the path of least resistance and follow authority in all its guises when it comes to Islam, leaving aside, of course, the transgressions which they cannot do without. These tend to be small in what they regard as the bigger picture of religion and life. Their focus on material progression has cut them loose from religious rigidity in the sense that they take their hard earned, in cash terms, freedom and flaunt it in trendy bars and sidewalk cafes. They know they are transgressing religious laws, but they have little sense as to what that entails.

They are not interested in challenging the authorities that create these laws and police them. Living in the here and now has not replaced a more rigid belief in the afterlife and its rewards for which one has to submit to and comply with God's laws. Rather they circumvent the stringent laws for now, with the aim of changing later, returning to the religiosity they know they ought to be practising. The path of least resistance leads them to five star hotels, which do not get raided any more and on trips abroad to party destinations such as Koh Samui and Phuket in Thailand and Bali in Indonesia. It is perhaps ironic that the people fleeing possible persecution for offences such as premarital sex and drinking alcohol in plural Malaysia would have to resort to travel to the majority Muslim South of Thailand or the Hindu enclave of Bali in a sea of Muslims in Indonesia.

One domestic holiday hot spot is *Pulau Perhentian*, the Perhentian Islands, comprised of several small islands of which two are inhabited off the Northeast coast of peninsular Malaysia. They are part of the state of Terengganu and can only be reached by boat from the mainland fishing ports of Kuala Besut or Tok Bali. Thus, they are remote and present a strange interstitial space, aptly named *perhentian* meaning 'stopping place' in Malay, as fishermen have used the islands as places to rest during storms or on fishing expeditions. The smaller of the two islands has become a major tourist destination for mainly Western backpackers with very liberal dress and moral codes who invade the island in the summer months and go to full moon parties once a month. Locals and Malays who come here to work are confronted with Western moral codes and drinking habits. Alcohol is freely available and many locals sit at the bar in the evening sipping Tiger beer. There is no *surau* on the beaches, but there is a mosque in the *kampung* on the south side. It is here that most locals live and where tourists hardly ever venture. Most of the younger workers at the hotels and bars are seasonal workers from the mainland, particularly Kuala Besut, and their time on the island is a respite from the conventions, norms and everyday life they know.

'I am young, so I want to be free; later, when I am older, I will go to the mosque.' This was how one of the waiters at a café explained his relationship with his religion. The faith seems on hold or suspended for the time they work on the island. It is a religion-free sphere at one level. No muezzin calls for prayer and hardly any Islamic imagery reminds them of the world left behind on the mainland. For many the age of liminality is between twenty and thirty years old, when Muslim identity takes a back seat to the temptations of foreign backpackers and drunken nights. Thus, for them it is

a move in and out of Islamic spaces and times. This, of course, harks back to Turner's (1967) use of liminality. Ironically, then, they have chosen the Perhentians, the 'stopping place', a place of historical liminality, as their liminal playground. I offer here a reversed order to Turner's initial concept of the liminal, which was based on van Gennep (1960), who wrote of a liminal phase of being betwixt and between the sacred and profane on the dangerous and potentially polluting margin. For Turner rituals are transformative and life changing, yet the liminal space that these Muslim sojourners enter and leave remains open. Thus this is not a process, but rather a pathology. There is a separation but never a reintegration, which means there is no structure for them to return to any more. These Muslims are experiencing the liminoid on holiday, for in their urban modern homes the sacred and profane no longer have clearly demarcated lines, and they enjoy being away from societal pressures for a while, yet they are ignoring a logical closure and resolution to the underlying schism. For the acceptance of the social structures as they are and the policing of religiosity seem to suggest that these have become internalised and as such integral to the individual's identity. They are not challenged and reordered, thus cannot be seen to be a signal for a liminal phase, where anti-structure inverts societal norms. Rather, the liminoid is always present in different forms, only accentuated and seen as a freeing sojourn abroad. At home it is more readily seen as an all out conscious transgression.

The spatial dislocation emphasises the liminal. This points to a reinforcement in the rural urban divide, not of Redfield's (1956) great and little traditions, but an inversion thereof, whereby many, especially younger, respondents see the city as the capital of vice and the *kampung* as the locus of purity and moral strength. This was couched in Islamic terms by Farouk, another informant, who sees the city as a place between places and Kelantan (his home state) as the place where he can be a true Muslim. In the city looms temptation, which he finds hard to resist at times.

Pak Da, a village elder in a *kampung* in Kedah, similarly exclaimed to me:

> Village life is better! God is punishing Muslims all over the world for their sins and by punishing them he is bringing them together. Village area is better, no sins, here we have closer relationships between people. There is no compulsion in religion, all races live together in the *kampung*.

Thus, the *kampung* is reimagined as Islamic through and through and opposed to the city, where culture, religion and nation are under threat from

within and without. In the village life remains slow, and settled, and certain (see chapter 2).

Indeed, such is the force of the tranquil village that during Ramadan most urban nightclubs and bars that are not geared to the international tourist market scale down operations, as the numbers of visitors drop, because many will join the mass exodus from the major cities to their rural homes all over Malaysia, where they still have relatives. Meanwhile at the bars and nightclubs, customer numbers drop and those who stay in the city try to abstain from alcohol and sex, see their girlfriends less and take a break from transgressing. As one of my informants put it:

> You show respect to elders, even if you don't like it; you show respect. Also, most Malays stay away, so clubs are very slow and there is no atmosphere. I also try not to drink alcohol during the fasting month – respect. So many sins! I know I am a sinful person, so I take a break during fasting month.

However, come Eid and the end of Ramadan, the clubs will have big parties to welcome back their clientele from the holiday season of abstinence and 'lying low' to a reintegration into the pleasure society.

Again an ambiguous picture emerges. Islamicity and Islamic space are appropriated and occupied by some who claim they have some inherent Islamicity. At the same time, others evade these people and Islamic spaces to lead a Western lifestyle, sometimes in a liminal existence. There appears to be a consensus on wanting to be a 'good Muslim' but different approaches to achieve this goal. Indeed, this remains an elusive goal for many who perform aspects of Islam for the performance's sake. This objectifies Islam and makes it into another icon, lifestyle accessory or blank banner to be consumed and performed. The objectification of religion and the evasion of Islamicity can be interpreted as resistance, which further problematises the issue of how to conceptualise resistance. For urban elites drinking alcohol and having parties in five star hotels is a form of hidden transcripts, or offstage rumblings and tactics of resistance that become encoded in public discourse (Scott, 1990). However, the people resisting are the elite and what is policing them is often their own internalised religious system of norms embedded in Islamicity. These often conflicting ideas about where power is located and how it is operating will be further explored in the following chapter, which unravels the fluid and open history of Malayness vis-à-vis the systematic modes of exclusion of otherness that operate in modern Malaysia.

Notes

1 Although at first this may sound like a resurgence of *ijtihad*, in many cases the internet websites and books at bookstalls are supported by, authored by or copied from sources in the Middle East, which is seen as the centre of learning. In any case, many of the ideas that are distributed are of Middle Eastern origin.

2 PERKIM (*Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia*, Muslim Welfare Organisation of Malaysia) is a government organisation charged with missionary work, helping Muslim converts and furthering Muslims in general.

3 This story was told to me by two of my informants and I later found a reference to a similar story on the blog of a Canadian convert to Islam now residing in Malaysia.

4 Although some of the major *tariqas* operate in Malaysia, I focus on one example of a more syncretic form of Sufism cum *adat*, in the form of a *bomoh*. Many *bomoh*s operate in varying degrees with religion, some entirely, whilst others not at all. For a discussion on the trials and tribulations of Sufi groups in Malaysia, see Bousfield (1993). I have done some research with Al Sheikh Afeefuddin Al Gaylani who is the leader of the Qadriyah tariqa and currently resides in Malaysia. However, I am unable to expand on the subject here.

5 This is the recitation of the legend of the seven sleepers of Ephesus.

6 Henderson and Parsons render this passage as charisma being 'a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader' (Weber, 1947: 358–359).

7 Taussig draws attention to the reification and thingification of the world that mask all the relations within it (Taussig, 1992: 113–114, 123–128). Islamicity is part of the thingification of Islam. It is often invoked as a symbol and signifier for much larger and more complex relations that remain hidden.

8 In terms of the role of the hajj for the congruity of Muslim Malay identity, McDonnell suggests that greater access to the hajj for Malaysians has created 'a more uniform Islamic dimension to Malay identity' (McDonnell, 1990: 126).

9 Akbarzadeh provides evidence of similar 'limited knowledge' of Muslims in Central Asia, where he reports that many could not translate the shahadah from Arabic to their native language (Akbarzadeh, 1997: 319).

10 Peletz (1993: 82–87; 1997: 239) has drawn attention to similar cases where Arabic greetings were deemed suspicious to the extent of the police investigating Peletz and his reasons for being in Malaysia. However, in his case, this happened during the *operasi lalang*, in which the government cracked down on dissent in

the country, ostensibly to cool down racial tensions between Malay and Chinese communities. Peletz's encounter with the local *kadi* (judge) is interesting, as the *kadi* was also against Peletz using the Arabic greeting, because the *kadi* deemed the greeting to be Islamic and therefore for Muslims only. However, during my fieldwork I was never approached by the police about any Islamic *faux pas*.

11 For a discussion on the transformative religious features that mask the power politics at play in Ramadan television programming in Syria, see Christmann (1996).

12 Hammoudi (2006) notes that 'In transit, like the pilgrims, these goods took on the beneficial potency of fetishes. Yet here 'commodity fetishism' did not mask labor (as Karl Marx said it did); on the contrary, it disavowed it in the name of prior gestures of gift giving and debt.'

13 This was widely reported in the international news media as a joint Iranian-Malaysian project. However, Proton has in the past been prone to many statements about product ranges, strategic partnerships etc., which in the end fell through, so one must be cautious not to read too much into these headlines apart from the intention to plan such an endeavour. For a sample news report, see Brant (2007).

14 Some of my informants told me that they had been caught by religious authorities for various infringements, such as close proximity or drinking alcohol. Usually they could persuade the enforcement officer not to pursue the offence by bribing them with often paltry amounts. One 22-year-old student told me that it is much easier to go to Kuala Lumpur 'to have fun', because Shah Alam, where the local religious authority headquarters are located, is policed more heavily.

15 The religious authorities were tipped off by someone who said they saw a woman dressed in a sarong with a foreigner. It later transpired that the American woman was wearing a sarong and had been mistaken for a Malay (Sira Habibu, 2006).

16 The accounts of the raid and subsequent detainment of patrons is based on newspaper reports (Sunday Mail Team, 2005) as well as recollections from three of my informants who were involved in the raids.

17 In an interview with a JAIS enforcement officer, I asked him whether he had authority to arrest Muslim foreigners if they were caught contravening Syariah laws. He thought about it for a while, before he said that he probably had the right to do it, but would not do it, because it would be bad for tourism. When I asked him how he would know who a foreigner was in a group of people, he answered that he was very good at those kinds of things (ethnic profiling). He added that if he were in doubt he would not even approach such a person.