

Johan Fischer, *Proper Islamic Consumption: Shopping among the Malays in Modern Malaysia*. NIAS Monographs 113, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008. xix+258 pp. Hardbound: ISBN 978-87-7694-059-1; paperbound: ISBN 978-87-7694-060-7

Of the thousands of scholarly articles and books and academic seminars that have been devoted to the study of Islam in Southeast Asia in recent years, attention has focused mostly on issues concerning religious revivalism, politics, education, history, law, gender, morality, finance and economics, and of course, extremism and terrorism. It is surprising, therefore, that much less attention has been given to the activity that most Southeast Asian Muslims, like their counterparts in other religions, spend an ever-increasing amount of their time doing today: shopping and consuming. This activity is the subject of Johan Fischer's original study of Islam and consumerism in Malaysia.

Fischer began conducting his fieldwork in 2001 shortly after the September 11 attacks in the US. The event, he acknowledges, changed the political, religious, economic, and even consumption context in which his fieldwork was carried out, as Muslim groups called for a boycott of American products. A large part of his fieldwork data is drawn from interviews with Malay informants, of varying incomes and degrees of religious piety, in which Fischer probes their consumption practices.

The focus of Fischer's study is a number of Malay middle-class families living in the suburbs of Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur. The anthropology of suburbia in Southeast Asia lags far behind the anthropology of village society, so Fischer's attention to suburban life in Malaysia is another novel and welcome feature of the book. The suburban middle-class family is the focus of anxieties about the effects of consumption and official measures designed to overcome these anxieties. For Fischer, the suburbs are designed so that "families can turn in on themselves as the primary model of social and moral identification". Moreover it is in the suburbs where space is ordered into "manageable and exploitable form", and where government planners have the greatest opportunity to create what Fischer calls the "new national Malaysian family" (p. 11).

Underlying the book's central argument is the tension between consumption and religious piety. The much-discussed Islamic revival that has taken place in Malaysia since the 1970s is contemporaneous with the country's rapid economic growth as one of Southeast Asia's "tiger economies" and the development of a consumer society. In most developing countries (not just Muslim ones) the materialism that is the unavoidable product of capitalist economic development tends to be regarded as an obstacle to spiritual fulfillment. Moreover, a significant proportion of the products and services that become available for consumption, thanks to the opening up of the economy,

are “foreign”, raising issues not only of economic nationalism, but also, at a deeper level, of purity and pollution. Consumption thus becomes an activity that various parties seek to regulate, among them political and religious authorities. The central question that Fischer seeks to address in the book is, “why and how has the question of Malays’ proper Islamic consumption become a key concern for state nationalism in Malaysia over the last three decades?” (p. 32).

Consumption tends to be regarded as a sphere outside of state control. It is often conceived, particularly in Western economies, as the sphere where individuals may seek and find self-realization. Yet Fischer clearly shows that in the case of Malaysia the state has a ubiquitous presence in its citizens’ consumption practices, and indeed, these practices constitute a form of submission to a state agenda.

Fischer argues that the principal means by which the state regulates consumption among the Malays is through the mobilization of the Islamic concept of *halal*—that which is permitted in Islam. The central argument of Fischer’s book is that, as a result of the “nationalization of Islam” in Malaysia under the auspices of the state, the notion of *halal* has been transformed into something much greater, encompassing not just food but a wide array of commodities and lifestyles including dress, housing and interior decoration, even the type of car one drives. “State national Islam” provides the government with a powerful discursive tool to regulate the way

Malaysians consume. The result is the “halalization” of consumption, where the new and the foreign are domesticated and approved for consumption by Malay consumers in such a way that they can be assured (by the state) that they are conforming to “proper Islamic practice”. While *halal* food requires certification by state institutions like JAKIM (the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia), halalization in the broader context is promoted by a host of state and private enterprises. Indeed, commodities almost become “non-commodities” (p. 75) via this process of halalization, since they are thereby rendered part of the religious realm, rather than the secular, material world of Western capitalism which is at least potentially *haram* (“forbidden” to Muslims). Fischer argues that the “invisible hand” of “millennial capitalism” in Malaysia is, in effect, provided by the state and Islam. The process of halalization allows Malays to safely engage in “patriotic shopping for the state” (p. 39).

The effects of halalization are not confined “merely” to Malays’ consumption of commodities but also help constitute their very ethnic identity as Malays. If “you are what you eat” (or more broadly, “you are what you consume”), then the regulation of consumption represents a powerful means of controlling identity. Fischer argues that the new practices of consumption have “largely displaced more traditional forms of reverence tied to Islam and Malay rulers” (p. 39) that formerly provided much of the substance of Malay identity. Halalization

is a way in which the state can police the boundaries of Malay ethnicity by using religious sanction to prevent Malays from consuming what is deemed “un-Malay” or “un-Islamic” according to Malaysia’s “ethnicized” version of Islam. Malay ethnicity is thus performed through state-mediated patterns of consumption. Or as Fischer puts it, “The state aggressively engages in a re-conceptualization of consumption that envisions the amalgamation of Malay ethnicity, consumption practices and Islam”.

This book intends to make a theoretical contribution to the scholarly literature on consumption in Asia. Some readers will be distracted by the liberal use of theoretical jargon that derives from the outer reaches of cultural studies. A more readable book could indeed have been written, shorn of such theoretical excesses. Yet if the reader is willing to plough through occasional paragraphs of admittedly challenging jargon, it will be well worth the effort required to gain the many original and important insights that Fischer makes into consumption and religion in Malaysia.

Patrick Jory

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