



THEME: The many faces of Islam

Towards a better understanding

A cosmopolitan periphery

Putrajaya as Islamic assertion

Between and beyond mosques and malls in Malaysia

Women and Islam in urban Malaysia

Muslims in Singapore: A secular state recruiting Islam
to its nation-building project

Islam in local contexts: Localised Islam
in Northern Pakistan

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Changes at NIAS

NIAS turned 40 years on 16 September this year. We decided to celebrate the event through three initiatives:

- A special issue of *NIAS Nytt* (no. 2/2008): 'Asia in the Nordic Mirror'
- A joint international conference with Copenhagen University on 16 September: 'Asia in the 21st Century – New Perspectives'
- A conference and PhD course titled: 'Asian Creativity in Culture and Technology', which was held 12-16 November, 2008, and organized jointly by NIAS, Nordic NIAS Council, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, and the Norwegian Asia Network.

These initiatives have now been successfully completed. They rewarded our expectations and the feedback so far has been very positive. Through the initiatives, we managed to cover the past, the present, and the future of Asian studies through a mix of both scholarly exchange and broad dissemination activities. To wrap up, we would like to thank all of those who contributed as partners, as well as through presentations, discussions, participation, sponsoring, and organization of the conference events. We also trust that our readers enjoyed the special issue of *NIAS Nytt – Asia Insights* that presented a broad overview of the trajectories of Asian studies in the Nordic countries.

At the end of the celebrations, it is time to revert to our daily chores. For the readers of this magazine, next year will see some change. *NIASnytt Asia Insights* will go electronic and it will be published under the new name 'Asia Insights'. It will combine two dissemination formats. First, the articles will appear in sequence on our www.AsiaPortal.info inside the Asia Portal's *inFocus* section. Afterwards, they will be collected into an e-magazine for distribution to individual subscribers. The e-magazine will continue to focus on quality content while maintaining much of the appearance of the current *NIASnytt*. It will still be published three times a year and each issue will have a guest editor like now. We would strongly encourage scholars interested in editing an issue to contact the editors.

There will also be a change at the top of NIAS. I have tendered my resignation after seven years as Director of NIAS to take up the position as Professor of China Studies at the Department of Cross Cultural and Regional Studies at Copenhagen University early next year. During those seven years, NIAS has developed its research and services substantially in response to debates on our future directions with our partners. We have modernized our presence in cyber space and our publishing programme. The institute has been incorporated into Copenhagen University, while being safeguarded as a distinctive Nordic resource centre through the creation of a new Nordic consortium that works with us to further develop the study of Asia in the Nordic countries.

A new Director will be recruited early next year. I would like to thank my colleagues and all of the partners with whom I have worked so closely over the last seven years for all of your support. It has been both fruitful and rewarding for me and I would like to express the hope that NIAS will continue to develop its position as a vibrant and dynamic Nordic hub in the rapidly changing global Asian studies communities.

Jørgen Delman, Director

Towards a better understanding

In the West, Islam is often presented in a very simplified manner (much as the West is interpreted in simplified terms in many parts of the Islamic world). This is no surprise but in fact is typical in situations where there is tension between two parties.

However, in this case, for the sake of truth and the need for a de-escalation of these tensions, it is crucial that both sides perceive each other with greater subtlety and insight. Not least, it demands that we see each other's world for what it is, as diverse and humane.

From our Western (Copenhagen) perspective, therefore, it is important that the Islamic world is presented to Western audiences as something other than an alien landscape of beards, burkas and bombs – an image that is far too common. First and foremost, we recognize that it is a human world populated by people with needs and desires much like our own. In cultural terms, the Islamic world is also incredibly rich and diverse.

Arguably, one of the essential aims of scholarship is to uncover and present our common humanity to the widest possible audience. Certainly, this is a thread in the endeavours of academic publishers generally, also of our own NIAS Press. For this reason, we welcome this special issue of *NIASnytt*, which showcases the work (published by NIAS Press) of six scholars writing on quite different aspects of Islam and/or Muslim peoples. Together these offer an alternative vision of the Islamic world to what is all too frequently presented in the West. They give a glimpse into the humanity and diversity of this world.

Timo Kivimäki and Gerald Jackson, NIAS

A cosmopolitan periphery

Philip Taylor, Australian National University

In this extract from the preface to his study of the Cham Muslims of the Mekong delta, Philip Taylor describes how the Cham protect their cultural distinctiveness at home by being markedly cosmopolitan outside.

I first visited the Cham Muslim settlements in Vietnam's Mekong delta during a series of field trips to this region in the 1990s. These visits were motivated by my curiosity about the remarkably pluralist religious and ethnic landscape of the western area of the delta.

Religion is a fundamental part of life in this part of Vietnam. The western delta is home to the goddess Bà Chúa Xứ, whose annual festival, at the advent of the rainy season, is one of the largest cultural events in the region. The Hòa

Hao Buddhist religion was founded here in the late 1930s. This syncretic faith, which blends nationalism, ancestor worship and Buddhism, has a large and committed following in the western delta. Spirit houses, Cao Đài temples, Buddhist pagodas and Protestant and Catholic churches jostle side by side. They organise spiritual and social life for distinct networks of followers.

The Mekong delta is also ethnically diverse. The ethnic Chinese minority, who are con-

centrated in urban areas, venerate the mythical patrons who oversaw their migration and settlement. The region is home to many Khmer people. Their Buddhist monasteries stand at the heart of their rural settlements and are centres for reproducing Khmer people's identity, language and way of life.

Representative of this diversity, the Cham Muslim settlements lie across the Mekong River from the important cross-border trade town of Châu Đốc. Their settlements are immediately recognisable by the presence of mosques, the sarongs, prayer caps and headscarves worn by men and women, and the unique style of their stilt houses. The geographically concentrated character of the Cham settlements is striking. Some are only several hundreds metres in length, yet the cultural life within them is both vibrant and sharply distinct from the neighbouring areas.

One arrives in the Cham area by boat, negotiating the prolific variety of water craft in this area: towering wooden cargo vessels, cross-river ferries, villages built atop submerged fish cages and floating markets that offer goods and services of all kinds. The Cham make a living on the water too, yet their heavy involvement in long-distance trade is unique among the many communities in their vicinity who rely on the water for their livelihood.

The religious and ethnic differentiation of the Mekong delta has generated some consternation and much discussion among intellectuals and state officials in Vietnam's larger urban centres. Some consider this diversity to be a product of the region's ecological or economic precariousness. Involved in small-scale, low-tech and unstable agricultural livelihoods, subject to annual floods and dominated by capricious natural conditions, the residents of the delta are thought to turn to religion or time-tested ethnic institutions for solace and survival.

The localised character of cultural identifications in the lower delta is often seen as a function of the region's isolation and lack of integration with national cultural and political

structures. Lacking roads and factories, with low rates of school participation, and thus purportedly cut off from the outside world, the cultural outlook of the people who live here is frequently described as traditional and autarchic. Once controlled by communist insurgents and armed religious sectarians, the delta is still seen as a reservoir of "feudal" social relationships that are considered backward or repressive by many urban business people and intellectuals.

Among urban dwellers and members of the Vietnamese diaspora, the Mekong delta is sometimes depicted as a home to franktalking farmers, a crime-free zone where traditional morals have been preserved. It is thought to embody a simpler, more natural way of life, long-lost to the industrialised urban centres that exemplify the ideals and the costs of cosmopolitan modernity.

These explanations for the delta's culturally pluralist landscape are based in stereotypes that overlook important dimensions of local social structure and history. The Cham Muslims live at the point where the Mekong River crosses into Vietnam from Cambodia. People and goods move both ways across the border in a thriving informal economy.

Linked to the wider world by a network of waterways, the region has long been a hub for waterborne trade and commodity production. Although few industrial facilities are found here, the delta's extensive canal system, the thrice yearly rice harvest and its burgeoning aquaculture sector testify to a long history of technological intervention and innovation. Despite the western delta's reputation as a free-wheeling frontier area, the Vietnamese state has no serious rivals for control of this territory, a significant accomplishment in light of centuries of competition from a succession of rival states.

To recognise these qualities of connectedness and integration as defining features of the Mekong delta is to broach a set of paradoxes. What sustains the culturally distinct and markedly localised communities of the delta

in the midst of this communicatively open and highly mobile frontier zone? How can we explain the proliferation of ethnic and religiously defined ways of life in a region that is so deeply integrated with the global economy? What accounts for the vitality of so many unorthodox cultural forms in an area subject to control by Vietnam's assimilationist state?

Seeking answers to these questions, I began to conduct research among the Cham Muslim community. I soon came to appreciate that their settlements, although found in an area that is often described as "remote" and "rural", are markedly cosmopolitan. This is evident in the diverse accounts of origin espoused by the Cham and the great variety of places which they regard as authoritative cultural centres.

Their cosmopolitanism is also manifest in the many languages they speak, their embrace of Islam as an expansive identification and their contacts as long-distance traders with a vast number of places in the Southeast Asian peninsula. It is evident too in the ease and confidence with which people spoke with me. Exhibiting remarkably rich intercultural capacities, the Cham are among Vietnam's most cosmopolitan groups of people.

Few might suspect that such qualities would be found in a region known for its agricultural orientation, low level of technological development and supposed isolation. The multilingualism and transcendental vision

embraced by this small community, combined with the Cham people's expansive mobility and their competence in business dealings far from their home, challenge images of the delta as a cultural backwater and dramatically expand our idea of what it means to be rural.

The coexistence within the one community of these two opposing tendencies – local particularism and expansive cultural and material engagements – is the most intriguing feature of the Cham way of life. Despite their cultural versatility and wide-ranging economic interactions, the Cham do not dissolve into the sites and communities with which they interact. They return from their far-flung travels to consolidate their settlements and sharpen the distinctions between them and their nearest neighbours. Indeed, the very coherence of their settlements owes much to the resources they repatriate from their trading engagements.

The Cham case study provides insights into the remarkably diverse exchanges that underwrite local communities in this region. In turn, their localities' diverse cultural resources and strong institutions facilitate Cham people's geographically extensive exchanges. The relationship between place and mobility that is characteristic of this small but markedly cosmopolitan group appears key to the maintenance of their distinct identity, and suggests new insights into the cultural differentiation of their region.

Philip Taylor is a Senior Fellow in the Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University. He is the author or editor of five books and many refereed articles and chapters on contemporary Vietnamese society. He supervises postgraduate students and is currently researching the ethnic and religious subcultures of the Mekong delta. His *Cham Muslims of the Mekong Delta* was published by NIAS Press in 2007.



Putrajaya as Islamic assertion

Ross King, University of Melbourne

Arguably Southeast Asia's most spectacular and architecturally distinguished city, Kuala Lumpur (KL to its denizens) in 2007 celebrated the 150th anniversary of its foundation and its 50th as capital of an independent Malay(sia). The celebrations were fragmented, however, as KL now has a very different twin in the new administrative capital of Putrajaya some 30 kilometres to its south, a putative high-tech focus or 'technopole' for a wider Southeast Asian region – even more, for an emerging pan-Islamic world to stand against a reviled, railed-against West. Where KL is a diverse, cosmopolitan, multiracial metropolis, Putrajaya fulfils an elitist vision of a Malay-Muslim utopia. KL's multi-cultural richness is reflected in the diversity of its architecture and the complexity of its urban spaces. Putrajaya, by contrast, is an architectural homage to an imagined Middle East.

The 'purity' of Putrajaya throws the cosmopolitan diversity of Kuala Lumpur into sharpest relief, while the tension between the two places reflects the rift that runs through Malaysian society. A first dimension of the rift is always between the politically hegemonic Malays and the economically dominant Chinese. A second, more ferociously contested, is within the Malay communities themselves.

The Malaysian constitution declares the Malays to be inalienably and irrevocably Muslim. Islam has therefore been irresistible to Malay politicians as a rallying call, as different perspectives on what constitutes the religion have played out through the history of divisions in the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) and its rivals. In 1951 a faction within UMNO broke away eventually to become the Parti Islam Sa-Tanah Melayu (PAS) and bitter rival to UMNO. Where UMNO has increasingly advocated a 'modern', secular Islam, seeing Malaysia as a focal point in a technologically advanced, pan-Islamic world, PAS has moved to a more fundamentalist, socially conservative, anti-capitalist, *shariah*-based position. In northern Kelantan state, PAS dominated the government from 1959 to 1978 and again since 1990, attempting to impose a strict Islamic rule and an alternative form of economy reflecting that of the Malay *kampung* (traditional village).

It is in this context of a fragmenting Malay identity and community and a polarising Islam that one needs to view the extraordinary form and imagery of Putrajaya. The argument below follows that of my *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya: Negotiating Urban Space in Malaysia* (NUS Press and NIAS Press, 2008).

The Muslim divide

Both UMNO and PAS are caught in contested waves of Islamic revivalism that they cannot hope to control. From the Middle East the Islamic wave is backed by colossal investment funds and a claim to Islamic authenticity, from Indonesia by sheer numbers. Accordingly, Malaysia is increasingly caught up in a discursive redefinition beyond its control.

Other factors have also cut through the divide. The Sufist *Darul Arqam* was formed in 1968, initially as a Muslim study group but transforming into a network of alternative communities seeking a strict, communal lifestyle, a radical economics and opposition to state Islamic enactments. It was officially suppressed from 1988 and finally proscribed in 1994, only to re-emerge in a different guise in 1997 as Rufaqa' Corporation. The 1990s were also marked by increasing repression of Muslims by their fellow Muslims: various official and self-appointed moral guardian groups began to rail against perceived laxity



The Putra Mosque (Masjid Putra), Putrajaya.
Photo by R. King

and ‘immorality’ among Malay-Muslims; by the early 2000s this attention had escalated to raids on KL nightspots, mass arrests and systematic harassment. Not surprisingly, the rising zealotry has attracted reactions from moderate Malay-Muslims and the consequence has been increasing contestation and increasing community fragmentation.

Two further factors have exacerbated the divisions. The first was the September 11 attacks in 2001 with their aftermath in uncertainties, divisions and self-doubt afflicting Muslim communities globally. The second was the October 2003 resignation of long-time Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Mahathir had been the great stabilizer, attacking all the ethnic communities with equal vitriol and tolerating no disruption to the semblance of social harmony. His successor, Abdullah Badawi, lacked Mahathir’s authority, charisma and networks, while his own version of “Islam Hadari” (modern Islam) satisfied no one and left the divisions seething.

Putrajaya is enmeshed in the rhetoric of this uncertainty and redefinition: it is to be seen as images in a discourse taking on a life of its own. The images are accordingly unstable, because the rhetoric will inevitably shift, indeed has shifted since the retirement of Mahathir. Both the PAS-Kelantan-*kampung* and the Mahathir-Putrajaya dreams of a perfect Islamic world harbour contradictions and thus instability.

Putrajaya

The stated agenda for Putrajaya was to ‘decongest’ Kuala Lumpur by extracting the Federal civil service and dispatching it elsewhere. The civil service is essentially Malay-Muslim, however, and a less explicit objective was to pursue – and to represent – the Islamic agenda of the UMNO-dominated government.

A physical description of Putrajaya and an analysis of the politics of its production are dealt with in detail in *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya* but will be bypassed in the present paper. Cities inevitably convey messages about the societies that produced them and are in turn reproduced by them – in their image, as it were – and this is the present concern. An initial, albeit superficial reading of Putrajaya confronts the observer with a variety of such messages.

- There is the extraordinary act of placing the Prime Minister at the pinnacle of the ceremonial space of the city, at the head of its grand, ceremonial axis. Admittedly Putrajaya is officially referred to as administrative ‘centre’ rather than capital, but it is certainly far more than that – this is not a mere office precinct. The distancing of the executive and bureaucracy from the legislature, effectively abandoned in Kuala Lumpur, and then the celebration of the former, is a profoundly political action.
- While a palace for the King, Istana Melawati, came as a late addition to the project, this stands above the PM’s office



The Palace of Justice (Kompleks Kehakiman), Purajaya, seen here through the grand arch of the City Hall. *Photo by R. King*

and residence but removed, to one side. Its lack of a place in the grand set pieces of the city only serves to reinforce PM, executive and bureaucracy.

- The subservient positioning of the justice system is not unusual (it is also thus in Washington, Paris, Canberra), but in juridically-compromised Malaysia it takes on a special piquancy. The symbolism of its architecture links it to the PM and to Islam. Law, governance and Islam are thus aligned.
- Not only does the city remove the executive from the gaze of the legislature, it also symbolically turns its back on them: it is oriented south to the new

Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) – or is it more to be seen as the executive opening its arms, selectively, to a wider world? The orientation to the south might even be interpreted, albeit mischievously, as a nod to the imperial Chinese tradition!

All of these points could be seen as relatively non-controversial comments on a political agenda, albeit frequently ambiguous and unsettling (and no more so than in that linking of law-executive-Islam). However, political practices can also be seen, in large measure, as surface expressions of a deeper cultural substratum – beliefs, values and practices more broadly. There are aspects of the design



The Prime Minister's Office (Perdana Putra), Putrajaya. The use of domes is reserved exclusively for the Prime Minister's house and office, the Palace of Justice and the mosques. *Photo by R. King*

that raise profound questions of identity, self-redefinition and uncertainty. These issues emerge in the matter of the city's imagery – style, but also the subjects of that style.

The imagery of Putrajaya is not unexpected, as its domes, coloured tiles and polished stone and its axial set pieces are also to be found in the formality of Shah Alam, the new capital of Malaysia's Selangor state but also in a variety of recent developments in Kuala Lumpur. However, while the imagery may not be unexpected, it is certainly surprising when viewed in any historical context.

At one level, Putrajaya is simply at the end of a long line of formalist, domed, arched and arcaded architecture in Malay(sia), adopted notably for mosques but which has also 'jumped species' to offices, shopping malls and resort hotels. The line can certainly be traced

to Kuala Lumpur's Bangunan Sultan Abdul Samad (1897), built to house an earlier Malayan administration. That, however, is clear British Raj style and so the line of descent can readily be traced to Victorian England/India and its reinterpretation of an earlier, Mogul, Islamic tradition. Such a colonial line, however, is scarcely politically acceptable and so there has been a transformation of the tradition in something of a stripping or geometric simplification, both in its forms (domes, arcades, etc) and in its surface treatments and in alleged origins: the Middle East rather than Victorian India.

The Middle East referencing is explicit and intentional. So the Putra Mosque, certainly the most finely elaborated building in the city, claims a source in Uzbekistan. There are bridges of fanciful, over-designed, high-

tech engineering, but the most important bridge of all – the two-storey, 435 metre long Putra Bridge that takes the city’s grand axial boulevard from the man-made island, across the ornamental lake, to the Putra Mosque and the PM’s office on the mainland – is allegedly designed and constructed in accordance with Islamic architectural principles to resemble the Khaju Bridge in Isfahan, Iran. The Middle East referencing is especially interesting. In a 2003 series of interviews conducted by the author, major players in the Putrajaya story asserted that all significant decisions were taken by PM Mahathir. It is quite certain that the turn to the Middle East Islamic tradition was Mahathir’s. It is also important to see the turn in the context of Mahathir’s frequent expressions of anti-Western (and anti-Semitic) sentiment: the dilemma was how to be modern but not Western (perhaps more precisely, not American)?

There are other dimensions to the identification with the Middle East. It is the well-spring of the Islamic world; some of its nation-states are indeed modern (though sometimes also – ambivalently – sympathetic to the West); some are also decidedly rich, like Malaysia on the basis of oil, thereby potential sources of investment. Allied with Malaysia, they offer the prospect of an Islamic economic power bloc to stand against the West. Malaysia is relatively small. Thus to have leverage through its own region (via ASEAN) and through a more globalist, pan-Islamic bloc will give it the international status to which it feels entitled. The imaging of Putrajaya accordingly fits a grander agenda.

Kuala Lumpur

KL lacks the grand axis, vast scale, open spaces, political assertions, set pieces and Islamically-domed, Middle East-inspired monuments of Putrajaya. Its haphazard growth is reflected in the chaotic muddle of its streets and public places; it is blatantly multi-ethnic although the largest ethnic group are the Chinese; it is mostly a Chinese real estate and the Chinese

dominate its economy. It exhibits a vigorous street life and an exuberant, even raucous nightlife – all to the frequent outrage of the moral guardians.

There are many places of ethnic concentration and even of ethnic exclusion in KL, as in many cities. There are also, however, significant places that are shared and where ‘otherness’ is inescapable and hence ‘normal’. While Chinatown and the New Villages are Chinese, and Kampung Bahru and other Malay Reservation Areas and traditional *kampung* are Malay enclaves, and while the old prejudices and fears still largely divide the educational system, most residential areas would now present as more open. The city is generous in its spaces which bring the races together. The shopping malls are in the main common territory, though the parks generally are not. At its best there is real urbanity with all races represented and present, as is the whole range of wealth. In KL there are mosques, churches of many denominations, Chinese temples, though fewer Indian temples.

This diversity is not replicated in Putrajaya. Masjid Putra stands alone. Allegedly sites are reserved for churches and temples at the neighbourhood or precinct level but they are not yet in place, nor are they provided through the public process as are the mosques. Putrajaya would escape the cosmopolitan diversity, richness and tolerance of KL.

In its own terms the trajectory of Putrajaya’s power is ultimately perverse, namely to cast KL as its anti-utopian *alter ego*, a place of resistance and transgression. Seen against the utopian dreams represented in both Putrajaya and Kelantan-*kampung* space, KL is profoundly transgressive. One can also, however, reverse the glance: to a government seeking to woo the passing visitor, to present an image that might stand against that of other cities with which it would compete, the persisting *kampung* and certainly its PAS-Kelantan apotheosis are also transgressive. UMNO are caught in a contradiction.

Kuala Lumpur and Islam as insurrection

The final chapter of *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya* is termed “The Metamorphic City” and is concerned with the form of city that is emerging from the tensions between the *kampung*-informed, fundamentalist utopia of PAS-Kelantan on the one hand, and the high-tech, globally-connected UMNO-ideal of Putrajaya on the other. Both present rival, incompatible and irreconcilable visions for a future Islamic world. The book’s ultimate interest is therefore with ‘the interstices’ between these ideals, while its argument is that the traces of an emerging, open, creative, tolerant Malay-Muslim culture, at ease with ‘otherness’ and with its place in a wider world, may be detected in the decidedly interstitial cultural life of Kuala Lumpur.

On the evidence of history, the transformations which mark great creativity and leaps to new modes of thought and life are most likely to occur in those places and times where different cultures meet, in transitional places and at the confluence of traditions and civilisations (Kuala Lumpur?). Metamorphosis or life as change runs counter to the idea of

the unique, singular nature of identity. It is the vital principle of nature, the dynamic of cultural change, guarantee of personal freedom, the power at the heart of storytelling and creativity.

The wider discourse of Malay-Muslim identity proceeds especially through new film-making that questions establishment view of urban space, gender issues and inter-communal relations; there is a transgressive theatre scene and a disruptive field of music performance. Writers like Ziauddin Sadar and Farish Noor challenge both official and purist views of history. It is essay writing and journalism, however, that is the most out-of-control, using the Internet and the web-logs (blogs) to circumvent the official (and political party-controlled) press and to challenge both UMNO, fundamentalist-PAS and moribund Western assertions. In no small measure this new discursive formation is enlivened by its engagement with ideas of Islam and its concern with what might constitute a new, tolerant, globally-engaged Malay-Muslim community. In this sense, we may be witnessing Islam being invoked as part of an insurrection against aspects of its own distortions that have arisen at the hands of self-serving politicians.

Ross King is a Professorial Fellow in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning (and formerly its Professor and Dean) at the University of Melbourne. Educated as an architect and urban planner, he was also a graduate student under Louis Kahn at the University of Pennsylvania, where he also sat at the feet of such modernist luminaries as Le Corbusier, Lewis Mumford, and Arnold Toynbee. He has practised as an architect, planner and policy analyst, taught at the Universities of Sydney and Melbourne, and researched (among other things) the complexities of urban housing markets, the cultural contexts and economic effects of urban and landscape design, and theories of design. He is a frequent visitor to the countries of Southeast Asia, writing especially on Thailand and Malaysia. In 2008 he published *Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya: Negotiating Urban Space in Malaysia*, with NIAS Press and NUS Press. He is currently working on a book that explores the place of utopian and anti-utopian ideas in the generation (and de-generation) of the cities of East and Southeast Asia.



Between and beyond mosques and malls in Malaysia

Johan Fischer, Roskilde University

Exploring consumption practices in urban Malaysia, Proper Islamic Consumption (NIAS Press, 2008) shows how diverse forms of Malay middle-class consumption (of food, clothing and cars, for example) are understood, practised and contested as a particular mode of modern Islamic practice. The book illustrates ways in which the issue of 'proper Islamic consumption' for consumers, the marketplace and the state in contemporary Malaysia evokes a whole range of contradictory Islamic visions, lifestyles and debates articulating what Islam is or ought to be. The empirical material on everyday consumption in a local context reinvigorates theoretical discussions about the nature of religion, ritual, the sacred and capitalism in the new millennium.

What emerged from my research was the significance of understandings and practices of *halal* (lit. lawful or permitted) in modern Malaysia. This trend is not only detectable among Malay middle-class groups. Within the last few years *halal* has become a term that is no longer an expression of esoteric and localised forms of production, trade and consumption in Malaysia, but part of a huge and expanding globalised market. Modern ideas and practices of *halal* apply to more than just foods, e.g. to cosmetics, medication and health care products. In the modern food industry, a number of requirements have taken effect, e.g. to avoid any substances that may be contaminated by porcine residues or alcohol, such as gelatine, glycerine, emulsifiers, enzymes, flavours and flavourings and growing preoccupation with the proliferation of the concept of *halal* in a multitude of commodified

forms. I call these transformations of *halal* understanding and practice *halalisation*. After the fieldwork for my book I have also explored in another research project how the proliferation of *halal* commodities on a global scale is forging novel modes of production, trade and consumption on the one hand and Islamic diasporic identities among Malays in London on the other.

Quite literally, the homes of Malay middle-class families squeezed in between the mosques and the mall make up the stage on which the central theoretical and empirical problematics of the monograph are played out. Mosque and market in Malaysia are not only 'stages for the acting out of preordained parts; they are rather potentially 'fields of force', highly charged and full of social energy' (Gilsenan 2000: 173). Malay middle-class identity formation, I argue, should be



Islam on car rear window. Photo J. Fischer



A mini-market, Pasar Raya, in suburban Malaysia. Outside, Islamic books, pamphlets, cassettes/ CDs and newspapers are on sale. *Photo by J. Fischer*

examined in the interfaces between these highly symbolically charged domains: on the one hand, the invocation of Islam as a world view and a performance of acts of piety, and on the other, a range of consumer practices and lifestyle choices made by, and within, families.

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

within which the meanings of Islam and Islamic practice are being debated.

In scholarly literature, radical Islamic groups and discourses, are conventionally seen as rejecting consumption per se. I, however, argue that modern Malay Muslim identity in Malaysia is unimaginable outside the context of the emergence of a wide range of conflicting understandings and practices of consumption. Consequently, the question of what constitutes a typical Malay Muslim consumer is infused with confusion and uncertainty. Contested understandings, legitimations or valorisations of the morally proper and socially appropriate forms of consumption inevitably evoke the problem of excess, or when what is excessive to whom.

The above problematics may appear to refer only to a private and micro-social context. However, I show how the state, or more precisely, a particular state nationalist

vision of a high-consuming yet Islamic modernity is omnipresent as an authoritative discourse in contemporary Malaysia. The state's attempt at moulding a modern form of Malayness is intimately linked to challenging Islamic discourses or *dakwah*, each with particular ideas and standards of how to combine consumption and Islamic practice. In order to pre-empt these confrontations, the state aggressively engages in a re-conceptualisation of consumption that envisions the amalgamation of Malay ethnicity, consumption practices and Islam. This ongoing project, which started in the early 1970s, is intensifying in the context of economic growth and globalisation. It will be clear how nation-building and conflicting types of nationalism emerge as products of these immensely potent, but also confusing and ambiguous developments. All these transformations are of acute concern to the rising middle class in Malaysia, and particularly to the Malay middle class. This new middle class has actively been produced by the state and is promoted as a class of modern entrepreneurial, hard-working and consuming Malays.

In all this, a critique of the generally held idea that consumption essentially is intimate and 'beyond the state' is unfolded. In fact, I argue that the Malaysian state's presence in consumption is not only ubiquitous, but also constitutive of the everyday compliance with, and the authority and authenticity of, state reach and power. This line of reasoning contradicts, for example, the contention that through the privatisation of everyday life, material consumption to a large extent is beyond regulatory measures of the state, suggesting relatively free choices in this private sphere (Chua 2000: 18). On the contrary, the privatisation, domestication and individualisation of proper Malay Muslim consumption is intricately linked to 'effects' of the state. I call this relationship of overlapping and overspilling loyalties, compliances and dependencies 'shopping for the state', i.e. ways

in which particular forms of consumption have come to represent novel modes of state reverence and domination on the one hand, and, on the other, state delivery of spending power and privileges to some Malays.

Supportive of what I call patriotic consumption in Malaysia, shopping has become a patriotic duty in mass culture (Zukin 2004: 14). Therefore, a number of moral imperatives involved in shopping link the shopping of individuals and groups with national sentiments and discourses. Our decisions about where and what to shop separate us from others, but at the same time, shopping exposes us to the presence and gaze of others (Zukin 2004: 2). In this sense, shopping as a public activity is inescapably linked to the performance and spatial context of proper Islamic consumption. This study takes seriously the insight that shopping is 'the zero point where the whole economy of people, products, and money comes together' (Zukin 2004: 14).



Halal logo issued by the Malaysian state. *Photo by J. Fischer*

Halal beyond Malaysia

Malaysian Islam is perhaps the most state-regulated in the Muslim world today. Since the 1980s, this state-regulated Islam has standardised, certified and institutionalised halal. Ubiquitously, the Malaysian state brands its halal certification with a distinctive halal

logo. Arguably, of all the countries involved in the proliferation of halal on a global scale Malaysia is the country where institutionalised state certification of halal is most extensive. These transformations are discussed in *Proper Islamic Consumption*, but they also raise a number of questions that I address in an research project entitled 'On the Halal Frontier: Consuming Malays in London' that is in the process of being published as articles, book chapters and a book. Malaysia contrasts with the conditions in more fragmented and complex halal markets, where a plethora of groups, organizations and individuals have divergent ideas about halal.

This is the situation in the UK, for example, which has a sizeable Muslim population and is therefore a major market for halal. In 2006–2007, I conducted fieldwork among Malay consumers in London in order to gather research material on halal understanding and practice. I also carried out participant observation and background interviews with numerous halal producers and traders, Islamic organizations and food authorities, to discuss issues such as halal in scientific research, business and religion, ethnicity and trust, food scares, meat, halal and wholesomeness, the politics of halal and expanding halal requirements. Ritually slaughtered meat is the primary halal commodity in London; however, producers, Muslim groups and consumers are now subjecting a whole range of new commodities to various halal requirements. In

many parts of London, such as Finsbury Park and Whitechapel Road, halal has a distinctive presence on signs and in butcher shops and restaurants. Lately, an increasing number of halal certified products have been appearing in branches of UK supermarkets such as Tesco and ASDA. Paradoxically, in the eyes of many Malays in Britain, this proliferation of halal calls attention to a form of impotent state secularism. In other words, the more the culture of Islamic consumption asserts itself, the more the state's incapacity to define what is legitimate halal and, thus, the unity of Islam is felt. My ethnographic material from fieldwork among Malay Muslim migrants from Malaysia living in London shows that the proliferation of halal is formative of emerging Islamic identities, of the fusion of religion and consumption, of novel approaches to an anthropology of the state, and of diasporic material culture as well as forms of capitalism in the new millennium.

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Women and Islam in urban Malaysia

Sylva Frisk, Gothenburg University

Throughout Malaysia, religious educative activities have flourished and grown in popularity since the 1980s, developing out of the broad current of Islamization of Malaysian society. Women's roles in the Islamization movement have generally been described in terms of followers and supporters of the movement, whereas men, in their capacity as leaders of political parties or as religious ideologues, are presented as initiators. Relatively little has been said about women's participation in the process of Islamization from the perspective of women themselves. In her book Submitting to God. Women and Islam in Urban Malaysia, Sylva Frisk provides an ethnographic account of Malay women's everyday religious activities Kuala Lumpur, which balances this image. The focus is on religion as lived practice with an emphasis on the performance of religious duties, the acquiring of religious knowledge and the organisation of collective religious rituals, performed independently from men, in their homes and in the mosque. With its emphasis on women's active participation in Islamization and the leading role that women are increasingly taking within Islam, the book aims to work against common representations of Muslim women as either passive, sometimes unconscious victims of a male dominated religious tradition, or as victims who try to openly resist that very tradition.

The following excerpt describes the activities of one of the religious classes that I have followed closely over the years. It gives a glimpse of how women consciously craft themselves as religious subjects through the performance of religious duties and acts of worship and through religious virtues and attitudes like modesty and submissiveness.

The mosque that I visited on a frequent basis during fieldwork was built in 1979 at the same time as the development of the neighbourhood. Initially, the mosque did not have a women's committee. There was, however, a group of women in the community who did charity work and who dealt with matters concerning death – the ritual washing of the body, which has to be done by a woman when the deceased is a woman. Some women in the neighbourhood also met weekly to study Arabic in each other's homes and, eventually, these two groups more or less overlapped and in 1989 the women registered an association. The activities so far had nothing to do with the local mosque. The number of women taking part in Arabic study sessions grew and it became more difficult to

have them in the homes of the participants. The beginning of the 1990s was also a time when the government was becoming more aggressive in their use of the Internal Security Act against religious groups accused of deviating from Islam. Gatherings of more than five persons were forbidden. The women approached the mosque and made a request to use the lecture room in the mosque for their Arabic class. The mosque committee agreed and the women's association moved into the mosque and had soon expanded its activities.

General Islamic talks

The women's committee organized a number of classes in the mosque. The most popular was called 'General Islamic talks'. This class was conducted once a week and invited different religious teachers and scholar to share their knowledge. The General Islamic talk usually attracted from sixty to a hundred women each time. The reputation of the class had spread from the immediate mosque area and today many of the participants come from all over Kuala Lumpur. The popularity of the class was usually explained as being the result of the very good and eloquent teachers that had



The national mosque in Kuala Lumpur. *Photo by Dariush Moaven Doust*

been invited. The same kind of class was given at other mosques in nearby neighbourhoods and some of the teachers made appearances in several of these mosques.

Many of the women who attended this class on a regular basis would choose to come to class quite early to get a chance to meet up with friends and share news. This was also an opportunity for the direct selling of various items such as headscarves, cosmetic jewellery or handbags. The ingredient of 'gossip' and selling was frowned upon by some of the committee women and, a short while before the teacher was expected to show up, they would put on a tape recorder with an Islamic chant repeating the 99 names of God. Sheets with the text, written in Arabic, were distributed for those who did not know the song by heart. All the women would then join in the singing until they were interrupted by the arrival of the teacher. The singing was intended to create an atmosphere of spirituality instead of gossip –

the tongue often being referred to as the most dangerous part of the woman's body.

Most of the teachers invited to give talks had degrees from Islamic universities, either local or foreign. The content of the class varied. Sometimes it was a *tafsir* class where one or more verses in the Koran were interpreted by the teacher. *Tafsir* demands a high degree of general Islamic knowledge and Arabic and not all teachers were considered to be equally good at this. The best ones were those who could give deep explanations of the meanings, drawing both on their knowledge of Arabic and written sources other than the Koran. Another popular class was the class about the Hadith (reported doings and sayings of the prophet Muhammad). The attraction of this class also depended on how skilful the teacher was in his or her explanations and interpretations. The popular ones were those who could make out the contemporary meanings of the stories – those who could suggest how contemporary

Muslims should understand these stories. On one such occasion, the story told was one where the Prophet had criticized a woman for wearing too many gold bangles on her arms. The teacher focused on possible reasons for the critical attitude of the Prophet. Since gold, and especially women's jewellery, is a very important ingredient, both as savings and status, in the Malay lifestyle, the women were not only curious but also a bit worried about the content of this story. If the meaning of the story was that the Prophet had been critical of the woman because the apparent display of her wealth, then some women in the room were possibly in trouble. The women recognized that to flaunt wealth was sinful for men, and supported this view with the explanation that it could easily lead to envy and jealousy among other Muslims and thus challenge good relations within the Muslim community.

The very popular batik silk shirt worn by men on festive and formal occasions had been publicly questioned and debated from this perspective. On the one hand it was considered good for men to wear traditional batik instead of a Western (and non-Islamic) suit and tie since this was a sign of Malay (and Muslim) identity. But, on the other hand, the Islamic correctness of wearing expensive silk was questioned – an interesting discussion where the almost identical identity of 'Malay' and 'Muslim' was being challenged from an 'orthodox' point of view. With this discussion in mind it is not difficult to understand the slightly worried stir that the story of the gold bangles created in the room. The explanation of the story given by the teacher, however, emphasized the connection between many bangles and the exposure of a part of the body that should be modestly covered, rather than

having any connection with the display of wealth. The teacher argued that there was no support for the notion that women's display of wealth was considered sinful anywhere in the Koran or in any Hadith. Instead, the teacher suggested that the Prophet, in this case, had been critical of the way the bangles pushed up the sleeve of the woman's dress in order for the skin of her arm to be visible. The bangles would then make it difficult for the woman to guard her modesty. The women were obviously satisfied with this interpretation, but at the same time it did plant small seeds of concern in some of them. When I continued the discussion with a couple of women after class, one of them made the reflection that what had been revealed to them through this story, made her think about the dress she was wearing. It was a *baju kurong* of the latest cut – a loosely fitting tunic covering the hips and thighs worn over a long skirt – made of silk cloth with a beautifully hand painted flowery pattern in red, yellow and green. She held up her arm showing the way the sleeve was cut. It was wide and did not close around the wrist, just like the fashion prescribed. When she raised her arm the way you do when you want to attract the teacher's attention for example, the sleeve fell down in soft pleats around her elbow, showing the nakedness of her lower arm. It had never occurred to her that the *baju kurong*, which, for Malays, was the most common way of dressing in public situation, could be anything but Islamically correct.



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Muslims in Singapore

A secular state recruiting Islam to its nation-building project

Michael D. Barr, Flinders University

Since the foundation of Singapore as an independent state in 1965, the People's Action Party government has not trusted the 15 per cent of its population who are Muslims. Until the mid-1980s they were routinely excluded from National Service for fear of which way they might point their guns in the event of a confrontation with Singapore's larger Muslim-majority neighbours, and even today they are still subjected to open and public discrimination in the armed forces. These claims are not contentious in themselves since they are matters of public knowledge and are defended by the government at the highest levels. Less public but even more damaging to the welfare of the Muslim community has been discrimination against Muslims in education, employment and in the workplace – and in particular against the Malay-Muslim community, which makes up more than 90 per cent of Singapore's Muslim population.

It is all the more extraordinary, therefore, that this secular state not only runs the institutions of Islam in its domain, but has of late tried to use those institutions as a tool of nation building – seeking to use the network of mosques to enhance the integration of Muslims into a nation-state that has at all times treated them with attitudes that range from mistrust to outright hostility.

The following passage from my recently released book *Constructing Singapore. Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project* (written with Zlatko Skrbiš) explores some of the issues associated with this nation-building exercise, focusing particularly on the enormity of the task that the government has set itself.

The regime itself is convinced beyond doubt that Malays and Muslims feel very little affinity with the regime, despite the apparently contradictory evidence of Malay voting patterns (which have generally been pro-PAP for several decades)¹ and positive Malay responses to surveys on patriotism.² Ironically, some of the government's own responses to this

perception seem to have fed the very dissonance that it fears. This has been expressed in several ways. The first is the continuing refusal to trust Malays in the SAF. The mistrust has ameliorated to the point where it is now possible for Malays to become officers, and one has even become a fighter pilot, but we have Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's word that such trust is assessed on a case-by-case basis, and that Malay candidates face particular scrutiny precisely because of their race and religion (*Strait Times*, 11 March 2002).

We can also thank Minister Mentor Lee for a further piece of evidence that Malays feel excluded from their society. In July 2005 he volunteered an extraordinary assessment of the current state of multiracialism in the country:

[Multiracialism has] not been completely successful because the rate of intermingling and acceptance is faster among some groups than others. The Malay community now is centred on a mosque more than the other social centres we have built. That's the end result; we live with that (*ST*, 2 July 2005).

The statement was extraordinary for several reasons. First it singled out Malays for



Wearing the tudung can exclude you from school, jobs and promotion. *Photo by Michael D. Barr, 2003*

shunning interracial activities, whereas it failed to criticise the majority of Chinese Singaporeans who mix almost exclusively with their own race.³ Second, there is no evidence at all to support the suggestion that Muslims are centring their lives on the mosque.

That Malays have a very low participation rate in the official grassroots organisations is beyond question and has been a subject of discussion in Parliament,⁴ but we should be wary of jumping to the conclusion that Malays are heavily involved in activities centred on the mosque. Apocryphal evidence suggests that Singapore's Muslims generally shun the mosques except to facilitate their basic religious obligations and observances, and that they do this precisely because of the close association of the mosques with the government. MUIS

(Islamic Religious Council of Singapore) is the government statutory board that manages the mosques and Muslim affairs in Singapore, and it has come close to confirming its failure to build links with its constituency by its current campaign to make itself relevant. MUIS and kindred Muslim organisations have been collectively and separately engaged in major efforts to increase both their professionalism and their outreach into the Muslim community. For MUIS this has meant improving (and being seen to improve) its organisation of the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) (*CyBerita*, 28 November 2005), the quality of the (centrally issued) Friday sermons,⁵ and the collection of the *zakat* (tithe).⁶ It has also meant improving the standard of teaching in the *madrasahs* (Islamic schools) (*Berita Harian*, 25 June



Abdul Gafoor Mosque: trying so hard to be relevant. Photo by Michael D. Barr, 2003

2005), increasing the integration of *madrasah* education into the mainstream system of PSLE certification (*Berita Harian*, 11 July 2005) and improving the standard of teacher training in the *madrasahs* through courses run by the National Institute of Education and Edith Cowan University in Australia (*Berita Harian*, 3 July 2005; *CyBerita*, 15 December 2005). Indeed the basic structure of MUIS and mosques has been drastically restructured to make it more professional, with the creation of a MUIS Executive Officer (CNA, 18 October 2005; *CyBerita*, 19 October 2005). Much more



Malays engaged in a Civil Defence Force demonstration. Malay-Muslims are routinely shunted into the ranks of the Civil Defence Force and the Police for their National Service because the government does not trust them in the Army. Photo by Michael D. Barr, 2003

radical is the introduction of an office called 'Executive Imam' in the mosques.⁷ For 14 centuries mosques have managed with mere imams, but this is no longer sufficient to provide the levels of professionalism, family counselling and outreach required in twenty-first-century Singapore (*Berita Harian*, 11 July 2005). This intensification of outreach and professionalism was particularly noticeable in MUIS, but it manifested itself in a myriad of Malay and Muslim organisations, including the educational self-help group, MENDAKI, whose CEO has found himself door-knocking so he could engage the grassroots first hand (*CyBerita*, 5 December 2005).

Yet not only are MUIS and mosques improving their performance in their core business (the delivery of religious services); they are also reaching out into areas that might appear to the casual observer to have no connection with MUIS's statutory responsibilities. MUIS has even floated the idea of a 'constituency mosque' – one that 'want[s] to play a more active and significant role in the social community surrounding it', becoming something akin to a community centre servicing all the people in the neighbourhood, rather than just serving Muslims.⁸ The revision of priorities has taken MUIS and Singapore's mosques in surprising directions. For instance, since the mid-2000s, mosques and MUIS (in cooperation with the Muslim Kidney Action Council) have started working with the National Kidney Foundation to provide material and moral support for kidney patients – including business loans, counselling and subsidised vocational training classes (*Berita Minggu*, 10 July 2005; *CyBerita*, 31 October 2005). During the 2000s, a pregnant teenager in Singapore has been able to shelter in a home run by the Singapore Young Women's Muslim Association (PPIS – Persatuan Pemudi Islam Singapura) and social research into teenage pregnancy was being conducted by the mosque-based Islamic Research Association (*CyBerita*, 22 November 2005). More broadly speaking, young people



Buona Vista Community Club, Buona Vista. One of the mainstream, secular community centres shunned by Muslims. *Photo by Michael D. Barr, 2004*

could come to a mosque for sex education and young couples to join a family support network (*CyBerita*, 22 November 2005). Bored or troubled youths could also come to mosques to engage in graffiti competitions, indoor netball and soccer and even rock climbing, as part of the outreach to youth (*ST*, 29 July 2005). Families could join in the government's *Family Ties* social development programme through one of five mosques and they could call Family Help Lines based in mosques (*CyBerita*, 15 November 2005 and 14 April 2006). Volunteers began door-knocking in the housing estates to seek out those in need, thus raising the profile of mosques immeasurably (*CyBerita*, 27 October and 15 November 2005). MUIS was even using the MUIS Annual Grants under the Community Service Scheme to steer other Muslim bodies to use its preferred model of family assistance programme (*CyBerita*, 6 April 2006). Whether one is looking for Mandarin classes, for the opportunity to volunteer for community work cleaning up the local beach, or for a pregnancy helpline, the mosque became the place to

go (*Berita Harian*, 27 June 2005; *CyBerita*, 22 November 2005 and 23 January 2006).

This transformation of MUIS and the mosques was being conducted under the watchful eye (and probably under the explicit direction) of Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, Minister for Muslim Affairs, and was part of a three-year plan initiated in January 2004, which reached a critical point of determination at the July 2005 Mosque Convention.⁹ According to the convention's pre-publicity, it set out with the explicit purpose of 'shaping more mosques so that they can play a more active role in the lives' of Singaporeans (*Berita Harian*, 16 July 2005) through the types of strategies outlined above. The main purpose of the exercise was to put the mosques and MUIS in a position where they could foster a 'Singapore Muslim Community of Excellence that is religiously profound and socially progressive.'¹⁰ A major element of this was embedding deep in the minds of Singaporean Muslims an identity as Muslims living as a minority in a multiracial, 'cosmopolitan nation,' and accepting the social realities of such a position 'without

compromising their true stand as Muslims' (*CyBerita*, 3 November 2005). MUIS went to great lengths to promote this minority identity in a cosmopolitan society, including inviting Muslim scholars from Western countries to address local imams, and providing scholarships to send young Singaporean Muslims to study in the West.

We are not suggesting that there is anything wrong or mischievous with any of the initiatives taken by Yaacob Ibrahim or MUIS, but for our study the main significance is that such drastic surgery was deemed necessary to make MUIS and mosques relevant to the lives of Singaporean Muslims. The accumulation of this evidence suggests that not only are Muslims under-involved with state-based community organisations but also there was a strong disconnection between Muslims and their own Muslim institutions – which are, in any case, state-managed, right down to the appointment of the approximately 850 members of the Mosque Management Boards.¹¹

Notes

1 See, for instance, the 2006 General Election results, where the Malays voted for the PAP more strongly than other ethnic groups. This result can be perceived as pro-active support for the PAP, but we believe that it would be more accurate to say that it reflects the success of the government's co-option Malay community leadership and the concomitant failure of the Chinese- and Indian-dominated opposition

parties to build substantial links with the Malay community.

- 2 See, for instance, Chee Keng John Wang, Angeline Khoo, Chor Boon Goh, Steven Tan and S. Gopinathan, 'Patriotism and National Education: Perceptions of Trainee Teachers in Singapore', *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2006, pp. 51–64.
- 3 Ooi Giok Ling, 'The Role of the Development State and Interethnic Relations in Singapore', *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2005, pp. 109–120.
- 4 *Parliamentary Debates, Singapore, Official Report, Tenth Parliament*, Thursday 23 May 2002.
- 5 Yaacob Ibrahim, Speech by Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, Minister-in-Charge of Muslim Affairs, at the MUIS Work Plan Seminar 2005, 5 February 2005. Available as a Singapore Government Press Release at <http://app.sprinter.gov.sg/data/pr/200502-5998.htm>. Accessed on 15 November 2005. MUIS has always issued Friday sermons centrally. Today they are available on the MUIS website <http://www.muis.gov.sg/rservices>.
- 6 See MUIS website at <http://www.muis.gov.sg>.
- 7 See MUIS/Mosques website at <http://cmsweb.mosque.org.sg>. Accessed 15 November 2005.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Yaacob Ibrahim, Speech at MUIS Work Plan Seminar.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 See MUIS/Mosques website.



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This article is taken from his recent book with Zlatko Skrbis, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project* (NIAS Press, 2008) His other books are *Lee Kuan Yew: The beliefs Behind the Man* (Routledge, 2000; currently being re-issued by Talisman), *Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The Tepid War* (Routledge, 2002, 2004) and (co-edited with Carl A. Trocki) *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore* (National University of Singapore Press, 2008).

Islam in local contexts

Localised Islam in Northern Pakistan

Are Knudsen, Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI)

*As Clifford Geertz remarked in his *Islam Observed* (1968), the idea of a 'changing' religion is a contradiction in terms, as religion is fundamentally concerned with what is permanent and eternal. Still, one way to come to terms with religious change is to consider the many ways that religion is interpreted, by laymen and scholars alike. Social anthropologists like myself have naturally found a niche for themselves in local studies of religion, especially in what is often referred to as 'local Islam'. This article, based on my book *Violence and Belonging. Land, Love and Lethal Conflict in the North-West Province of Pakistan*, discusses the role of 'local Islam' among the tribesmen living in the Palas valley, a remote and inaccessible mountain valley located in the Kohistan District of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), Northern Pakistan.*

Almost without exception, the inhabitants of Kohistan, the Kohistanis ('mountainers'), belong to the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam. However, because of the area's isolation they converted to Islam later than their neighbouring ethno-linguistic groups. For this reason, the Kohistanis have been stereotyped as 'lax Muslims' (Keiser 1991: 31). Eager to prove the stereotype wrong, the Kohistanis have embraced new forms of Islam with more religious fervour and more puritan zeal than neighbouring ethno-linguistic groups. Additionally, most of the adult men in Kohistan lack formal education and, more often than not, are illiterate. This makes them dependant on the textual authority of the preachers and charismatic *mullahs* trying to advance their own brand of Islam. However, Kohistanis have also resisted elements of literate Islam. Therefore, there is as Michael Gilson (1990: 34) has pointed out, a continuation of 'beliefs and practices that ...[the 'ulema']... might consider un-Islamic but ...[are]... regarded as perfectly Islamic by their practitioners and constantly blended into popular cultural tradition'. But we might ask, is this new and sometimes 'hybrid' form of Islam best described as 'local'? And more fundamentally, is there anything such as a 'local Islam'? In particular, given the diversity of history and

society in Kohistan, can we speak of one 'local Islam' or many? In recognition of this problem Eickelman (1982) mentions the possibility of there being many 'Islams' – a plurality of different Islamic creeds and interpretations.

The problem with a 'local Islam' is that it is to some degree a contradiction in terms, because Islam is fundamentally linked to the notion of a religious and geographical centre, namely Mecca. What we can talk of, however, is a *localised* Islam, understood as local expressions of Islam that are linked to processes on a larger scale, some of them global, others national and others still, regional or local. Beginning with the former, the global rise of political Islam and Islamic militancy has perhaps been the most widely publicised phenomenon as well as the one to attract most scholarly attention. In Pakistan, Islamic militancy has been on the rise throughout the 1990s, and has increased the tensions between the country's Sunni and Shia communities. There has also been a rapid growth of Islamic political parties, some of them with a militant agenda. One reason for this is that on the national level, the Pakistani state has promoted Islam in an attempt to forge a national identity. Contrary to its intention, the state-sponsored Islamisation drive had a divisive rather than unifying effect on the society. Together with

this Islamisation drive, there was a process of political integration, made possible by extending roads to remote areas. Strung along these roads, a number of Islamic seminaries (*madrasa*) grew up, with most of the students coming from rural backgrounds (Malik 1999). (In rural areas, being a religious scholar – a *Maulvi* or a *Maulana* – is an honorific title and not only poor people, but also local dignitaries, send their sons for religious education). The majority of the *madrasas* belonged to the Deobandi sect of Islam, and many of their students returned to Kohistan as Islamic missionaries and village mullahs. The completion of the Karakoram Highway in Indus Kohistan in the 1970s opened the area to new economic, political and religious influences. In its wake, the Deobandi emissaries followed and as their influence grew, they pushed back the original Sufi influence that until then had been common throughout Kohistan. The building of the Karakoram Highway also increased emigration from Kohistan, and led to the formation of Kohistani diasporas that are now spread over the Northern Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province. These diasporas and the local grapevine that unites them, provide a channel for news and gossip, but also for long-term cultural and religious exchange between diasporas and their native area of Kohistan. In addition, Kohistanis travel widely and many spend the winter in urban areas doing menial labour or for educational purposes, including religious training in a *madrasa*. This means that even in the most isolated Kohistani communities, the men have for some part of their lives been residing outside their villages, where they have often learnt to speak but not always write Urdu, the Pakistani national language. As individuals and as members of local communities, many Kohistani men have therefore had broad exposure to non-local cultural and religious traditions, and have spent time learning these traditions as workers, friends, neighbours and students in rural and urban areas far from home.

Given this fact, it is understandable that there are methodological problems attached to the question of a 'local Islam' and how to study it. While communities are always 'local' in a geographical sense, individuals are not. The same goes for ideas, news and information that travel by word of mouth or with the help of electronic media. Despite the non-local nature of these influences, every analysis has to be, at some level, grounded in local realities. So, to what degree can we pick up on these influences, if we move on to an analysis at the 'local level'? In other words, how different does this picture become if we leave the region, and take a closer look at the Palas valley located on the east bank of the Indus? Is the 'local Islam' in the Palas valley in any important way different from the regional trend, and if so, why? Moreover, what can this tell us about the nature of a 'local Islam'? Are the people of Palas concerned with other and more 'local' discourses of what is Islamic practise and what isn't?

Unlike the situation in the more accessible areas of Kohistan, in Palas, there are no modern mosques with blaring loudspeakers. There is a spiritual tranquillity, which is both deep and profound. The old wooden mosques contain unique stylistic elements that bear testimony to an indigenous and *localised* form of Islam (Frembgen 1999). Nevertheless, this form of Islam was initially also an alien one, and was brought to Palas by emissaries from Swat during the seventeenth century. Islam, therefore, was a foreign import.

In the 1970s, following completion of the Karakoram Highway, the Palas valley was subject to a growing religious orthodoxy of Deobandi Islam spread by itinerant preachers. A few years later the *Tablighi Jama'at*, a proselytising Islamic movement with roots in pre-partition India, became established in the valley. The combined Deobandi and *Tablighi* influence made villagers change mortuary rites and abandon keeping wake at graves, and put an end to the women's ritual wailing during funerals. The villagers also abandoned

saint cults, and the professional musicians (*Dom*) were forced to leave the valley because their singing was considered un-Islamic. Does this mean that Islam in Palas was purged of its local character and that religious orthodoxy had eradicated local practices of Islam? The question is not easy to answer; it depends on which practices we single out for study. In the following, I will give some examples from Palas to illustrate the complexity of the situation. As will become evident, Islam, (and to Palas villagers there is only *one* Islam), often comes in opposition to what is considered 'local tradition.'

Despite the *Tablighi Jama'at's* influence in Palas and its criticism of lavish hospitality, hospitality is in many cases still beyond people's economic means. In defiance of the *Maulvis'* ban on singing, men and women still sing in private fora. There is a retreat from the public to the private sphere where these traditions survive. Although singing is subdued, it has not been eradicated. The belief in magic, and the use of amulets and charms, are anathema to Deobandi Islam and considered un-Islamic (Alawi 1987: 31). Still, men in Palas carry charms meant to help them entice village women, or render enemy bullets harmless. This practise is not seen as opposed to 'Islam', but in a strong sense embedded within it: the charms will only work their magic if those who wear them pray regularly.

Another example from Palas can be used to take this argument a step further. In my forthcoming book I describe the prevalence of romantic love affairs in Palas. Despite the fact that adultery is sinful according to Islam, something all villagers are highly aware of, love affairs are still a common practice in Palas. Local poetry abound with themes of romantic love and longing for the beloved, as described by Lila Abu-Lughod in her book *Veiled Sentiments* (1986), suggests that poetry

A Palas elder displaying his early-19th-century muzzle-loading rifle and bandoleer. Photo by A. Knudsen



is an acceptable medium for expressing these sentiments that otherwise run counter to Islamic injunctions against adultery as sinful and reprehensible. This, again, underlines the duality of the Islamic prohibition of love affairs and the villagers' tacit approval of them. The villagers are, I have suggested, operating on two discursive levels at the same time. Still, there is some evidence that Palas villagers are now more concerned with defending personal honour, that women charged with adultery are more often murdered, and that men more often killed or mutilated for similar accusations than earlier.

The problem of reconciling 'tradition' with 'religion' is a central concern for Palas villagers. Is, for example, the 'banning of cultivation' – i.e. preventing an adversary from growing crops – a legitimate or illegitimate practise? Here, the villagers' perception differs, and those who suffer from such bans are by necessity the strongest critics of them, arguing that the practice is opposed both to religion *and* tradition. Since the banning of cultivation is a foreign import – it was adopted from a neighbouring valley – is it a part of Palas tradition? And, in an egalitarian society, who is to decide? In many cases there is no clear answer, meaning that neither the Quran nor local traditions provide a ready answer. This therefore points to the possibility of more forceful individuals or groups trying to 'invent

tradition.' To understand such processes, I have in this article argued for greater attention to 'localised Islam' in order to understand cultural formations and traditions that contribute to religious heterogeneity.

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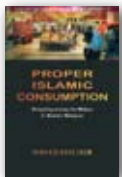
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