Being Malay and Muslim in a modern world
This book explores a central tension in identity politics: how the state, civil society and people in general may want to create and maintain cultural, religious and social cohesion while paradoxically their practices in everyday life often run counter to this. Malaysia is no exception. Here, a political elite maintains control and cultural dominance but must juggle political pressure from Islamic and Malay supremacists with that from moderate civil society groups. This gives rise to a complex interplay of domination, accommodation and negotiation between the state and its citizens. At the heart of this study is the conjuncture between Malay ethnicity and Islamic faith, hence its examination of the state discourse on ‘civilizational Islam’. However, other areas are also explored, including the arts as a contested space. The result is a thought-provoking study combining philosophical and social theory with anthropological insights.

‘This important study sheds new light on changing Muslim identities in contemporary Malaysia, questioning existing distinctions between state and civil society, religion and secularism and ethnicity and religion and calling for new ways of understanding processes of Islamisation in the modern world.’ – Joel S. Kahn, La Trobe University

‘It is simply a first-class piece of work, one of real intellectual distinction and substantive originality. It offers an important commentary on the current Malaysian situation, and how it has been sedulously fashioned over recent history, and so makes a significant contribution to Malaysian studies.’ – Clive Kessler, University of New South Wales

‘This marks an original and very timely contribution to Malaysian studies. Hoffstaedter has demonstrated the profound effects of state religious policies and ideologies upon the everyday identities of practicing Muslims. He does this with great ethnographic nuance and original theoretical insights.’ – Andrew Willford, Cornell University

‘Gerhard Hoffstaedter presents a thought provoking case study on the many social and political forces that have interacted to push Malay identity along an exclusive trajectory. … This is a dangerous pattern, unfortunately discernable also in other parts of the Muslim world.’ – Shahram Akbarzadeh, University of Melbourne
Modern Muslim Identities
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Modern Muslim Identities
Negotiating Religion and Ethnicity in Malaysia

Gerhard Hoffstaedter
Modern Muslim Identities
Negotiating Religion and Ethnicity in Malaysia
by Gerhard Hoffstaedter

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Preface and acknowledgments

This book tells part of a greater narrative about identity politics. At its core it is about sameness and how the state, civil society and people in general want to create and maintain cultural, religious and social cohesion, whilst paradoxically their practices in everyday life often run counter to this very aim. My research interests are based on broader understandings of what Heidegger calls being-in-the-world, or the way we relate to other people and places around us. My particular interests in contemporary Malay Muslim identity politics go back to my early travels in the region from 1999 onwards.

Much scholarly work has been produced on Islam in Malaysia, modernity in Malaysia and Malayness as a cultural construct. This book brings together these elements and interrogates what roles they play in forming Muslim Malay identities in contemporary Malaysia. Moreover, the book argues that a Malay elite is maintaining a hegemonic system of control and cultural dominance, whilst juggling incursions into its political sphere by Islamic and Malay supremacists on the one hand and moderate civil society groups on the other. The interplay between the state and its citizens takes many forms of domination, accommodation and negotiation, whilst various groups in the civil spaces are resisting, circumventing or setting the state’s agenda. The book traces the means the state deploys to homogenise, to define, to order – often assisted or animated to do so by civil society elements – and the ways people themselves react or act independently to order their own lives, identity and world views. I focus on a recently developed state discourse on Islam Hadhari or civilisational Islam which the government wants to see adopted in Malaysia and beyond as a progressive religious practice and ideology that encompasses Western modernity and Islamic heritage. Furthermore I look at the arts as a contested space, where the state and arts practitioners vie for control and licence to shape the nation’s imagination. Superimposed and interwoven are the major identity markers that the state maintains and people grapple with in their everyday lives. These are ethnic and religious in nature and highly contested from within and without. Being Muslim Malay and performing this identity are often two very different things.

A project such as this is never the work of one author alone and I am indebted to many people. As in any ethnographic study unfortunately the people we study, who open their minds, hearts and houses to us are often too many to list. Above all, I want to thank my host families in Selangor.
and Kelantan for their hospitality and generous support: Auntie Mariah for making me her *anak angkat* and Uncle Aziz for taking me into the midst of his house; Latifah and Jasmine who set me on my course all the way back in Kent and were the first research partners, interlocutors and friends; Af, Putri, Khairul, Azila and Airene, Zetty, Mut, Sue and Ain for putting up with me, the chats, *lepak* and friendship.

In the field I made friends and was lucky to meet a range of good-hearted and generous people who taught me much. I thank Aloysius Mowe for his invaluable guidance and enduring friendship; Sharaad Kuttan for putting me up and up with me, Nabila Nasir, Shanon Shah and Eddin Khoo for insights into Malaysian arts and heritage issues. I thank my official research counterpart Dr. Said Tawfik Al-Attas at the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia for his kind support in securing a research visa and the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies at the National University of Malaysia and its staff, in particular Sumit Mandal and Norani Othman, for their engaging discussions, guidance and support. I also thank the countless good people of Malaysia, who talked to me, listened, explained, endured, laughed, showed me and made me understand the best I could. I thank them all for their hospitality, openness and generosity.

This project has a long history. Mine started out at the University of Kent at Canterbury, where I started my enquiries into social anthropology, politics, international relations and Malaysia in particular. I thank my teachers there, who put me on the right tracks and encouraged me: Gülner Aybet, Alan Bicker, John Bousfield, Glenn Bowman, Roger Just, Bill Watson and Andrew Williams. I also benefited from an Economic and Social Research Council scholarship at Kent.

I am very grateful to the School of Social Sciences of La Trobe University for their generosity in supporting me to study and carry out research for three and a half years. In particular, I acknowledge the generous La Trobe University Postgraduate Research Scholarship, School of Social Sciences tuition fee waivers and Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences research grant. At the School of Social Sciences I want especially to thank Mary Reilly and Bronwyn Bardsley for their support.

Above all, I am grateful to Joel Kahn whose own work on Malayness and identity has been the inspiration for much of my work. Readers of my work have included Sharam Akbarzadeh, Chris Eipper, Clive Kessler, Andrew Kingsford, James Leibold, Angus McIntyre, Wendy Mee and Andrew Willford. I thank them for their insights, knowledge and expertise which im-
mensely helped my work and myself. I have presented parts of this book at conferences, seminars and workshops and thank all those who engaged with the material over the years. During my time at La Trobe and in Melbourne I thank Andrew Kingsford, Aurélien Mondon, Tien Eng Ng, Robbie Peters, and Zureen Zahari for their support through some testing times. I also thank the students I have taught at the School of Social Sciences at La Trobe University, the University of Kent and Chaucer College for debating with me and challenging my views in tutorials and lectures.

Clive Wake has given me endless encouragement. He has read most of my work, and never ceased to ask for more. He keeps me writing. Thank you.

During the conversion from thesis to book I received sound advice and guidance from Dennis Altman and support from the Institute for Human Security at La Trobe University. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for NIAS Press for their detailed and comprehensive report on my manuscript.

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All photographs are mine except where indicated.
### Glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABIM</td>
<td>Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACCIN</td>
<td>Allied Coordinating Committee of Islamic NGOs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adat</td>
<td>custom, customary law, traditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agama</td>
<td>religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agong</td>
<td>full title is Yang di-Pertuan Agong, or supreme ruler, of Malaysia, chosen from the council of sultans for a five-year period to preside over and represent Malaysia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>akidah</td>
<td>creed; in Islam especially issues Muslims hold strong conviction over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>article 11</td>
<td>in the Malaysian constitution pertains to religious freedom, also the name of an umbrella organisation of NGOs advocating the supremacy of the constitution vis-à-vis Syariah courts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>article 153</td>
<td>in the Malaysian constitution pertains to the rights and privileges of the Malay and other indigenous peoples of Malaysia and the role of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong in protecting them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASLI</td>
<td>Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BADAI</td>
<td>Badan Anti-Inter-Faith Commission, Coalition against the Inter-Faith Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bangsa Malaysia</td>
<td>Malaysian race/nation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BN</td>
<td>Barisan Nasional, National Front, the ruling coalition; its main constituent parties being UMNO, MCA, MIC and Gerakan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bomoh</td>
<td>shaman, traditional healer, who uses magic, spirits and religious power to intercede in medical or personal troubles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bumiputera</td>
<td>‘princes of the soil’; umbrella term for Malays and other indigenous peoples of Malaysia, as defined by the Malaysian government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPPS</td>
<td>Centre for Public Policy Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dakwah</td>
<td>missionary activities, especially amongst Muslims, calling Muslims back to their faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dalang</td>
<td>puppeteer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| DAP          | Democratic Action Party, a secular, social democratic party, born out of the Malaysian branch of the Singapore Hoffstaedter book.indb 10 02/03/2011 14:07
People’s Action Party (PAP) and dominated by ethnic Chinese
fatwa legal opinion issued by a recognised religious scholar or religious authority
FORKAD Front Bertindak Anti-Murtad, Action Front Against Apostasy
Gerakan Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia, Malaysian People’s Movement Party
GLC government-linked company
Hadith sayings attributed to Muhammad
hajj major pilgrimage to Mecca, the holiest site for Muslims, one of the five pillars of Islam (also see umrah)
HAKAM Persatuan Kebangsaan Hak Asasi Manusia, National Human Rights Society
halal permissible in Islam
haram forbidden in Islam
Hari Raya day of celebration
HINDRAF Hindu Rights Action Force
hudud penalties as prescribed by the Qur’an pertaining to criminal law, including for adultery, drinking alcohol, apostasy and theft
IFC Inter-Faith Commission
ijtihad independent judgement, individual reasoning
IKIM Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia, Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, a government think tank established by Mahathir in 1992
imam religious leader/preacher
ISA Internal Security Act, allows for indefinite imprisonment with bi-annual reviews
Islam hadhari civilisational Islam
JAIS Jabatan Agama Islam Selangor, Selangor State Islamic Affairs Department
JAKIM Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, Department for Islamic Development, which is part of the Prime Minister’s office
JAWI Jabatan Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan, Federal Territories Islamic Affairs Department
Jawi script Arabic alphabet adapted for writing in Malay; it contains classic Arabic letters and some that are unique to Jawi
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>jihad</td>
<td>struggle; greater jihad is the inner struggle for faith, the lesser jihad the more commonly known physical battle against others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kadi</td>
<td>judge in an Islamic court; in the Malaysian context predominantly involved in family law cases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KAF</td>
<td><em>Konrad Adenauer Stiftung</em>, Konrad Adenauer foundation, charitable foundation linked to the German conservative party (Christian Democratic Union)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kampung</td>
<td>village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kerajaan</td>
<td>Malay kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keris</td>
<td>dagger indigenous to the Malay world with a wavy curved blade, considered to have spiritual powers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ketuanan Melayu</td>
<td>Malay supremacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khalwat</td>
<td><em>syariah</em> offence of close proximity between two people of the opposite sex who are not blood relatives or married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIMMA</td>
<td><em>Kongres India Muslim Malaysia</em>, Malaysian Indian Muslim Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MACMA</td>
<td>Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARA</td>
<td><em>Majlis Amanah Rakyat</em>, Council of Trust for the Indigenous People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>masjid</td>
<td>mosque</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCA</td>
<td>Malaysian Chinese Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEGC</td>
<td>Middle Eastern Graduate Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIC</td>
<td>Malaysian Indian Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPF</td>
<td>Malaysian Professional Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mufti</td>
<td>jurisconsult; a specialist in <em>syariah</em> who can issue fatwas or legal opinions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUIS</td>
<td><em>Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura</em>, Islamic Religious Council of Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>murtad</td>
<td>apostasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mushaf</td>
<td>hand-crafted copy of the Qur’an; literally means binding or collection of written leaves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>negeri</td>
<td>state of the federation of Malaysia, e.g. Selangor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEP</td>
<td>New Economic Policy; positive discrimination policy for Malays and other <em>bumiputeras</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDP</td>
<td>National Development Policy, followed the NEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nusantara</td>
<td>Malay world that derives its meaning from the geographical expanse of the Majapahit Empire (1300–1500); in modern usage it refers to Indonesia.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OIC</td>
<td>Organisation of the Islamic Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operasi Lalang</td>
<td>‘Weeding Operation’; a government crackdown in 1987 that saw more than 100 activists, opposition politicians and other Mahathir detractors imprisoned under the ISA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orang Asli</td>
<td>literally ‘original peoples’; indigenous ethnic groups from the Malay peninsula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pantun</td>
<td>form of Malay verse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAP</td>
<td>People’s Action Party that has ruled Singapore since 1959 and briefly contested elections in Malaysia when both were united for the brief period between 1963–1965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAS</td>
<td>Parti Islam SeMalaysia, Pan Malaysian Islamic Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPI</td>
<td>Peguam Pembela Islam, Lawyers Defending Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pembela Islam</td>
<td>Defenders of Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perkasa</td>
<td>Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia, Indigenous Malay Empowerment Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERKIM</td>
<td>Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia, Muslim Welfare Organisation of Malaysia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PKR</td>
<td>Parti Keadilan Rakyat, People’s Justice Party, party run by Anwar Ibrahim’s wife Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qur’an</td>
<td>Koran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raja</td>
<td>monarch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raja muda</td>
<td>crown prince</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reformasi</td>
<td>reform; in Malaysia an era of reform was initiated by the arrest and detention of Anwar Ibrahim in 1998 with mass protests against the government and Prime Minister Mahathir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTM</td>
<td>Radio Television Malaysia; Malaysian department of Broadcasting that is a government agency under the Ministry of Information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salafism</td>
<td>movement to return to the practices of the ‘pious ancestors’ (Salafis) of early Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seni khat</td>
<td>calligraphy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shahadah</td>
<td>testimony of faith, in which Muslims declare that there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is his messenger; it represents one of the five pillars of Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>syariah</td>
<td>Islamic law; in Malaysia this is limited to the domain of family law; this is the Malay spelling, other versions include Shari’a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shirk</td>
<td>idolatry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIS</td>
<td>Sisters-in-Islam; a progressive Muslim women’s rights organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMS</td>
<td>short message service, a text messaging tool for mobile phones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufi</td>
<td>Islamic scholars of the mystical and spiritual tradition, often part of an order (tariqa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunnah</td>
<td>‘trodden path’ of Muhammad; the religious actions of Muhammad that are supposed to be followed by Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>surah</td>
<td>chapter of the Qur’an</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>surau</td>
<td>small site for prayer, often just a room, hut or small building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tablighi</td>
<td>missionary, ordinarily organised by the Tablighi Jemaat (missionary movement) with headquarters in Kuala Lumpur for Malaysia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tanah Melayu</td>
<td>Malay land, in particular the Malay peninsula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taqlid</td>
<td>‘imitation’; the following of accepted doctrines of the major law schools and rulings of religious scholars; the opposite of ijtihad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tariqa</td>
<td>Sufi brotherhood or order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tawhid</td>
<td>oneness or unity of God; a key element of Islamic monotheism; one aspect of tawhid is the oneness of worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TERAS</td>
<td>Teras Pengupayaan Melayu, Foundation for Malay Empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UiTM</td>
<td>Universiti Teknologi MARA, MARA University of Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ulama</td>
<td>Muslim religious scholars; usually used in its plural form to denote learned class of religious scholars; alim in singular form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ummah</td>
<td>community of Islamic believers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ummatan wasatan</td>
<td>middle nation/community, mentioned in the Qur’an; follow-up concept to Islam hadhari in Malaysia to denote moderate Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UMNO</td>
<td>United Malay National Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>umrah</td>
<td>pilgrimage to Mecca, also called the minor pilgrimage, which can be performed at any time of the year (also see hajj)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ustaz/Ustazah</td>
<td>(male/female) religious teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wahhabism</td>
<td>reform movement founded in Arabia by Ibn Abd Al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century with the aim to purify Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wakaf</td>
<td>charitable endowment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zukruf</td>
<td>motif</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Identity Formation and its Articulation

It's a muggy day in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s largest city. The sun is at its zenith and it is unbearably hot as I cross the busy six-lane street in Bangsar, Kuala Lumpur’s expatriate centre. There are two parts to Bangsar, the new and the old, the former full of bars and trendy cafés, shopping malls and high priced town houses, the latter a motley assortment of commercial houses, street side mamak (Indian Muslim) food stalls and the ubiquitous 7-Eleven. It is in the latter that I am meeting a friend, who will tell me about his life, its contradictions and tensions, most notably his identity crisis. This is a story of his life as much as it is about Malaysia itself, its people, their daily struggles to make sense of their identities as defining their very being and making them known to others. Faris¹ is in his late twenties and has grown up in a rapidly developing and increasingly economically rich Malaysia. He has grown up almost entirely under one Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, who was Prime Minister for twenty-two years, only handing over the reins to his successor Abdullah Badawi in 2003.²

Upon meeting someone in Malaysia one of the first questions to ask oneself, if not the person in question directly, is what race he or she is. ‘Race’ is used largely without the negative inflections it carries elsewhere and denotes ethnicity. Most often this is not difficult to guess, based on the racial and social profiling at which most Malaysians are very skilled. Names are often a giveaway, dress and language are another. Thus, external identity markers act as signifiers for racial categorising in Malaysia. Why the need to categorise? It may begin with where to meet, what to eat and where to eat. How one will talk with others and what one can talk about can all be affected...
by who one is talking to. My own identity at times became a hindrance or an uneasy opener of doors: a hindrance in so far as Germany is a part of the West with its decadent and anti-Muslim reputation, an uneasy entrée in so far as on rare occasions my interlocutors began to rave about Nazism and a presumed common enemy in Jews. As I say, this was very rare indeed, and my attempts at clarification were usually ignored, but it shows the willingness of people to judge upon national-cum-ethnic or racial prejudice. In Malaysia this is especially ubiquitous because racial identity is a key identity marker.

In order to understand Malaysian identities this chapter begins with a discussion of the main theoretical debates employed in this book, beginning with identity formation. I interrogate how people form their identity and negotiate it within the context of the nation-state, society, race and culture. A methodology discussion follows detailing where and how I conducted my fieldwork. A key concept is space and how the state and its institutions, individuals and civil society actors create it, operate within it and attempt to control it. I will discuss some theoretical underpinnings before showing how otherness is a key identity boundary marker in Malaysia. Islam and Malayness will be the primary identities I interrogate, and I explain their significance in the Malaysian context before analysing the social contract between Malays and non-Malays in Malaysia within a Maussian framework of the gift.

Identity and identities: Who am I?

Just now everybody wants to talk about ‘identity’ . . . identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty (Mercer, 1990: 43).

Identity, etymologically, derives from the Latin word *idem*, which means ‘the same’. However, identity is usually referred to as a marker of difference. Eriksen affirms that ‘in anthropological discourse, identity means *being the same as oneself* as well as *being different*’ (Eriksen, 1993: 60). Identity is a Janus-faced phenomenon, a threshold with two faces, one facing inside and the other facing outwards, into the world. Identity is at once something we feel to be inherent and natural as well as something frightening and ambiguous. Identity is schizophrenic in the sense that one’s imagined identity does
not correspond with the real. It is also ‘orthopaedic’ (Lacan 1977: 4), because it is being held together by a totalised body image.³

Identity is further fragmented in the way we relate to our surroundings. Heidegger’s concept of being-in-the-world is helpful in explaining this relationship (Heidegger, 1962). For Heidegger, a basic form of being is to be seen as a given, which simply exists as a fact of *Dasein* (there-being). Being-in-the-world is the relationship between *Dasein* and the world around us.⁴ However, Heidegger asserts that ‘the relation between human-realities must be a relation of being [and that] the relation must cause human-realities to depend on one another in their essential being’ (Sartre, 1996[1936]: 97). Thus the artificial and imagined wholeness of identity is constructed not by the individual alone, since the there-being of *Dasein* is always a being-with-others, because we are not alone (Heidegger, 1962: 155). Our identity is contingent on others and is shaped in co-operation with and opposition to others (Hegel, 1971; 1977). However, we do not just relate to others, to other human beings, but we interact with the entire world around us. The relationship between our inner sense of identity and the world around us is an instrumental aspect of identity formation and its articulation (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).⁵

This relationship also contains ambivalence, for Dasein can be reflexive or non-reflexive, authentic or inauthentic. Heidegger maintains that Dasein is ‘fallen’ as it manifests itself within the world and we have to grapple with this ‘fallenness’, which in fact will allow us to repossess our selves and transform the relationship into authentic being-in-the-world. The reason that this is a difficult project is because we are ensnared in the ‘they’ (*man* – German for ‘one’ or an impersonal ‘they’) of society’s historicised modes of being. The grey mediocrity of *theyness* envelops us and the way we see the world and ourselves. The state and its agents go to great lengths to shape and commandeer the ‘they’, to make it into ‘the people’, for instance. This allows the state and its institutions to act in accordance with the people, with their projected wishes and with their support. Heidegger points out that we are part of the ‘they’ for as long as we do not withstand and challenge it, i.e. challenge the inauthenticity of our being-in-the-world. Many Malaysians in the coming chapters have challenged and continue to challenge the abstraction of identity, stereotyping and other modes of ‘idle chatter’. However, the majority remain ensnared in a pathological state of being.

The way we relate to others and the environment around us is thus dependent upon the social, cultural and political prejudices of our surroundings (Ingold, 1993). This environment (*Umwelt*) we inhabit as a being-in-the-
world corresponds to Husserl’s ‘lifeworld’. For Husserl we are a part of the world and ‘this world is there for me not only as a world of mere things, but also with the same immediacy as a world of objects with values, a world of goods, a practical world’ (Husserl, 1982: 53). We experience this world in the everyday life as a lifeworld. Husserl draws attention to the inseparability of our being, self or consciousness from the world and the webs of meanings about that world we inhabit, because our being is deeply embedded in this world. Identity is the process of coming to terms with the dualism of existence (being-in-the-world) and the world we exist in. The paradox Heidegger addresses is one of on the one hand existing a priori within a context or a frame of reference, and on the other hand the world around us.

**Belonging to a people and a state**

Various conceptual frameworks of making sense of our place within this lifeworld such as culture, race and ethnicity have been filled with meaning and demarcated with boundaries so as to establish an inside and an outside (Hirschman, 1986). It is the borders of these categories that hold the keys to the identities themselves, as Barth has shown for ethnic identity (Barth, 1969). At the same time identity and identities straddle the fine line between caging us within particulars or drowning us in the universal (Césaire, 1957: 15). In Malaysia these motions are emphasised and exacerbated by rapid social change, which has placed modernisation and industrialisation at the top of the national agenda. This development provides a contextual framework for the state, its social pluralism and policies to address it. It is important to treat ‘particular states and patterns of community formation as part of a range of different outcomes of interrelated processes of modernisation – commercial expansion, European colonialism, migration and modern state and nation-building’ (Kahn, 2006: 173–174).

The nation-state has an important part to play (Bickerton et al., 2007), even though in international relations the state was said to be in decline not so long ago (Ohmae, 1990; 1995; van Creveld, 1999). Globalisation has not caused it to wither away, nor have international political structures taken its power. Thus, the nation-state remains a pivotal identity marker. The nation-state can also provide a stable and strong identity, backed by military power, media resources and tax revenues. With this infrastructure, states are able to employ identity, a national or a dominant ethnic one, as a strategy, for instance by creating a new aspirational identity. I look at some of the Malaysian efforts
to do so in chapter 3, where I examine the *Melayu baru* or New Malays and what Prime Minister Najib calls ‘glocal Malays’, i.e. Malays who are both global and local, whom the state is attempting to groom.

In some instances, the state is ‘created as a series of narrational artefacts, a representational economy’ (Alexander, 2002: 6), which is a bricolage of personal experiences and objects. There, the state’s reality and authenticity is based on largely personal relationships and experiences that are used to imagine it. This creates a ‘connection between the self and the abstraction of “the state”’ (Alexander, 2002: 6) as a bi-directional set of family ties within which one can feel safe and protected. In Malaysia, these connections are maintained through media propaganda and above all through courting and preserving a state-sponsored vision of Malay culture.

**Culture as race**

‘Western’ culture has instituted a hegemony and become global culture, but as a side effect has destroyed what were local, often national, traditions. These traditions have been replaced with versions of the greater cultural vehicle that is dominated by the omnipotent, omnipresent, yet very elusive ‘West’ and its Western culture. This is not a one-way cultural, economic and political flow, and several theorists argue that the process is reversing, with an increased vernacularisation and indigenisation of globalisation (Appadurai, 1996; Giddens, 1990) and even a revival of local culture (Featherstone, 1995: 92–94). Yet even the indigenised or vernacular versions present a significant change for societies all over the world; this change is ‘often deemed alien to the receiving societies’ (Akbarzadeh, 2006: 2). Many anthropologists want to protect and safeguard those cultures they deem under threat from this neo-imperial machinery that they partly created, but have lost control over. Many attempts at cultural salvaging, cultural revival and cultural pluralism are in fact ‘our’ feeble attempts to resurrect what we deem lost: culture. More precisely, what is being resurrected is culture as an interpretive framework of self and other:

> As a consequence, not only is the discourse of cultural difference an important part of the culture of modernism in different parts of the world in so far as it is part of a process of the production and reproduction of modern social life, so cultural difference too is part of the modern condition not just in the West, but now throughout the globe as well (Kahn, 1995: 132).
What Kahn sees as cultural difference is replicated in Malaysia in more outwardly racialised scenarios with racial categories. Goldberg, for instance, has shown that ‘the significance of race and the racist exclusions and oppressions that racial distinction is taken to license are modern state projects’ (2002: 161).

The modern state has often used, and abused, the seemingly timeless properties the state inherits from tribal, ethnic, cultural and religious difference. As Just aptly puts it, “culture” [and] language[,] give way to the intuitive perception of something less mutable, of something more fundamental, of something eternal: race’ (Just, 1989: 82). Malaysia is precisely an important case study and an interesting one, because culture and race are ensnared, and subsequently become mediated and read through the religious prism.

Otherness and self: ‘I am what I am not’

Sartre exclaims, ‘I am not what I am’ (Sartre, 1957[1936]: 64), in the sense that one cannot be a particular identity, be it a homosexual, a Malay or a Muslim, in the sense that this piece of paper is a piece of paper. He argues that:

To the extent that a pattern of conduct is defined as the conduct of a paederast and to the extent that I have adopted this conduct, I am a paederast. But to the extent that human reality can not be finally defined by patterns of conduct, I am not one (Sartre, 1957[1936]: 64).

Identity cannot be whittled down to one exclusive one, as it is the relation between the various roles one has that creates identity. In addition, Sartre shows that we are not what we are, or rather we are not what other people make us to be. We are not what we are objectified as, othered as.

The crisis of modernity, which some see as a crisis of identity, should to my mind be imputed instead to the fact that one of these two languages – the language of identity – has won out against the other – the language of otherness. In fact, the crisis of modernity would be better described as a crisis of otherness (Augé, 1999b: 58–59).

Augé uses the term otherness to depict how we are neglecting the relations between ourselves and the other by concentrating on sameness. As mentioned earlier, identity refers back to ‘sameness’ whereas Augé wants to reiterate the importance and precedence of the ‘other’ for our identity. Thus, Bowman calls for an identification with the other, rather than attempting or claiming to identify the other (Bowman, 1997). The problem often is that identity is being
experienced as a fact, something with an essence, which one can describe and command.

*Tracing historical trajectories*

Schlee argues that identity is always a product of the present, projecting its roots into the past (Schlee, 2002: 9). Thus, identity is constructed in the present, but made to seem like an age-old institution, with a long tradition and an innate content. This is needed because the past provides identity with heritage, traditions and depth through shared memories, which extends itself into the future through the collective belief in a shared destiny (Smith, 1992: 58). In the case of ethnicity Comaroff and Comaroff have argued that ‘while ethnicity is the product of specific historical processes, it tends to take on the “natural” appearance of an autonomous force, a “principle” capable of determining the course of social life’ (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992: 60). It is therefore crucial to uncover the genealogy of the present identity discourse (Foucault, 1972).

Much of Joel Kahn’s academic endeavour has been the anthropological critique of what turned out to be, in many instances, modern nation-state led projects to envisage culture through cultural identities. Thus, he argues modernity and the non-West are intrinsically linked in their developments from the very beginning and to this day (Kahn, 2006: xiv). Culture as a construct of elites (Kahn, 1992: 161; 1995: 132) must be seen to operate within a system of hegemony, which further complicates the processes of identity formation.

If all identity markers are based on constructed identity categories, such as race, nation or gender (attributes we are), or roles, such as profession, sexual orientation or political outlook (attributes we do), then Taussig is right to ask where this insight leaves us (Taussig, 1993: xvi). However, the task of the academy must be to appraise the chances this realisation gives us for change.

**Uncovering identities: Methodology**

*Ethnography*

Ethnography is the attempt to immerse oneself in another society or one’s own as a participant observer. The anthropologist attempts to grasp the ‘other’ in a holistic manner, i.e. in order to get a grip on the particular, the whole has to be understood. Conversely, first contact and first attempts at understanding an often alien worldview are through immersion in particulars
one finds in the field, such as rituals, feasts, celebrations, habits, written or oral traditions, keeping in mind the fluidity of ethnography. The overriding goal of this immersion is the achievement of understanding. This is the self-proclaimed aim of the anthropologist: to learn to understand the other and make sense of it for the self and thus for society at large. This book tells stories that are part of my fieldwork experience and the subsequent analysis of my

Figure 1 Peninsular Malaysia, fieldwork sites in Kelantan, Perlis and Selangor
data. My own bias cannot be wished away or excluded from this analysis, and thus I include the disclaimer that I aim not to reproduce reality but to tell stories and offer an interpretation of reality as I, as an ethnographer, have witnessed it (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Research is conducted to further our understanding of others and, inadvertently, to tell us something about ourselves. My own decision to study identity politics in Malaysia was partly motivated by the desire to find out what the Malaysian case may have to say in more general terms about living together in multicultural societies and in particular about how Malaysians negotiate a multitude of ethnic, cultural, religious and political identities.

I carried out multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus, 1995; 1998) in predominantly Malay communities in West Malaysia from December 2005 until February 2007 to investigate how individuals form, negotiate and express their identity. I was fortunate to be taken in by two families in particular, one in Shah Alam, Selangor, the other in Kota Bharu, Kelantan. This provided me with an insight into two families, who embraced me as an anak angkat (foster child) and allowed me to participate in their everyday lives as well as taking me with them on various excursions. Both are Malay families and of the, by now well established, Malay middle and upper middle class (Abdul Rahman Embong, 1998; Kahn, 1996; Shamsul, 1999). Both families have strong family heads. One was a resolute woman, an entrepreneur involved in the construction and design business, the other an orang tua (elder) of his community and also a businessman. Amongst the children of these two influential characters of my fieldwork, I found friends, interlocutors and guides to the social landscape of young adults of the Klang valley, which includes Kuala Lumpur and its premier satellite cities Petaling Jaya and Shah Alam, and of Kota Bharu in the northeast of peninsular Malaysia. The networks they opened up for me allowed me a look into the lives of the children of the Malay middle class, as well as tagging along with their parents.

I also travelled widely with my adopted families and by myself, most notably to Terengganu, Perlis, Melaka and Penang (see Figure 2). For example, it was a trip with my adopted family, to their home kampung (village) in Perlis for the Hari Raya Aidilfitri festivities that mark the end of Ramadan, which opened up a new field site for me, with several return visits. Apart from my involvement with these two families I approached government and local officials for more structured interviews and often resorted to a Malaysian pastime, lepak, or hanging out, to make contact and observe the everyday life around me. I installed myself in various street-side stalls, where I consumed innumerable
limau ais (lime juice with ice) and roti canai (a flatbread, served with curry sauces) whilst chatting to other customers, informants or the proprietors. I also hung around mosques and made contact with officials and those using the mosques to teach, pray and rest. Glaser and Strauss claim that ‘in field work...general relations are often discovered in vivo, that is, the field worker literally sees them occur’ (quoted in Hammersley, 1992: 192). This was very much my experience and I owe much to luck. The ethnographer has to be there to find out anything. Being there is, of course, the cornerstone of ethnographic fieldwork, assisted by the stock research methods of participant observation and interviewing people to gain information and understanding. I utilised some forms of visual anthropology, sketching scenes on a notepad, taking photographs and short digital videos. I found these methods to be intrusive at times and therefore counterproductive whilst in the field. However, they came in handy in the post-fieldwork stage, when the interpretation of symbols, spatial arrangements or scenes was enhanced by the visual reminders. Most interviews were informal, semi- or unstructured, because this allowed respondents to talk more openly about often very personal issues relating to their identity. Some structured interviews were conducted mainly with officials, who often demanded a set of questions in advance before agreeing to be interviewed.

**Going online**

The internet has become an invaluable tool for social science research. Not only are most newspapers online and have parts or their entire archive online, but online information has become a vital bridge to areas where other resources are minimal, state-controlled or simply not available. Researchers have pointed out the multiple problems with research on online communities, most prominently that online identities may vary from offline identities, as well as the benefits of a rich new field of study (Reed, 2005; Wilson & Peterson, 2002). I have only cursorily engaged with this burgeoning field for research. An important source of information is online news portals, such as Malaysiakini.com, an independently run website and Malaysia’s premier non-state-controlled news outlet, which has established itself as a news portal outside of strict government-controlled media. Furthermore, I employed web logs (‘blogs’), which are regularly updated websites with which their authors usually chronicle their lives, to find older news reports and get a sense of people’s reactions to them. Malaysia has a relatively high internet pene-
tration, although it remains clustered around major urban centres. However, George shows that internet political activism is not dependent on internet penetration alone, as there are higher levels of online political activism in Malaysia compared to Singapore (George, 2005). Online activism depends largely on a vibrant offline activist community (see Abbott, 2004). Blogs have become very influential in Malaysia of late, with its most prominent blogger, Jeff Ooi, running for and winning a seat in the federal parliament for the opposition party Democratic Action Party (DAP) in the 2008 elections. Most of Ooi’s campaign was run online, which attests to how important the dissemination and consumption of blogs has become.

**Globalisation**

I always tried to put whatever I saw into a wider context. Gaining an inter-regional outlook and comparative angle was very helpful as Muslim Malay identity in the Malay peninsula cannot be accounted for by a purely localised and bounded concept around the fieldwork locality or one specific group. The interconnectedness and interwovenness of people’s lives and their perceptions of themselves and the world at large are instrumental in the processes of identity construction and its articulation. This interconnectedness is nothing new, rather it is part of human history. People moved and move, meet and interact, and modern globalisation has given this process a new intensity. I revisit this notion in chapter 6 when I trace remnants of a cosmopolitan regional Malay identity.

The forces of globalisation have increased the flows of information and people between the West and Southeast Asia as well as between the Islamic homeland in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. In this complex matrix of cross-national communication and exchange I posit that identity is a key to make sense of the world around oneself and to find a locus in time and space for the individual. Of particular interest to me is the juncture where individuals negotiate their identities with these outside forces acting upon them and how these forces become interwoven into the existing cultural matrix. The way people negotiate and find their identities is elementary to understanding inter-personal as well as inter-group interaction and its implication for the individual as well as for society in general. This interactive and diverse relationship between the individual and the community is especially relevant in the Malaysian context, where a multitude of ethnic, economic, religious and political identities exist competing against each other.
Identity formation

The main locus of identity formation remains the ‘heat of the hearth’ (Carsten, 1997), where the family, a close network of friends and relatives, has a lasting impact on a person’s identity formation process. People undergo a long process of socialisation into a specific group, be it ethnically, racially, nationally or otherwise determined (Banton, 1998: 196–198). In most cases it is a combination of many groups, above all the family as a primary group, with ethnic, national or regional affiliations surrounding it. The vital role of education in this process is a starting point for learning about and understanding how social identity and a person’s lifeworld are constructed and ‘given’ to members of such a group. This can take the shape of teaching students about national heroes, ancestors or important achievements of one’s kin, ethnus or nation.

Bourdieu’s concept of **habitus** is helpful in understanding the patterns and practices of this process. Bourdieu reinterpreted the concept of **habitus** to be ‘the end product of structures which practices tend to reproduce in such a way that the individuals involved are bound to reproduce them, either by consciously reinventing or by subconsciously imitating already proven strategies as the accepted, most respectable, or even simplest course to follow’ (Bourdieu, 1976: 118). This self-perpetuating system of creating identities again and again highlights the need to study the way this is done in practice (Bourdieu, 1990: 64–65). Socialisation is an active as well as a passive process. The elite, elders, parents and others are charged with education, fostering and nurturing influence and defining identities and roles, which will be passed down to the next generations, or to outsiders coming into a given group. This can be a child being reared in a given society, a spouse achieving a new set of identities through marriage, a foreigner, migrating to another country or a religious convert attaining a new place and role in life through a ritualistic process of conversion.

These external influences on individuals that shape their identities include norms, culture and all of Augé’s contemporaneous worlds, i.e. the many worlds that are overlapping and happening simultaneously, thus acting upon the individual’s identity (Augé, 1999b: 89–91). From these processes we derive external identity markers, sets of roles and identities which exist a priori. Constructivist theory says that identity is the product of more or less conscious creation. Thus, at its most extreme it proclaims the ‘radical de-ontologizing of objects as such’ (Luhmann, 1995: 177). Identity becomes a fabricated fiction, in super-modernity, even to the extent that ‘fiction imitates fiction’ and fiction
becomes a point of reference for other fiction (Augé, 1999a: 115). In such a world identity is devoid of authenticity. This is not to devalue the political power ethnic, political, religious and cultural identities retain. Talking about the role of feminism in addressing gender identities, Terry Eagleton points out that ‘the grim truth remains that women are oppressed as women – that such sexual categories, ontologically empty though they may be, continue to exert an implacable political force’ (Eagleton, 1990: 24). Indeed, I am not arguing that identity is fictitious, but that identity is largely a fiction in the way it is told, read and imagined (Anderson, 1991). The ethnographer therefore cannot ask anymore: What is identity? This question has been made redundant by the increased complexity and fictionality surrounding identity. The real question becomes: How is identity fabricated? What processes make people who they believe themselves to be? This book looks at a range of processes that operate to fashion identities, secure them and perpetuate them, whilst other processes are negotiating around said identities, resisting them and in some cases fighting them. To uncover these processes I now turn my attention to ‘where’ they can be uncovered. The concept of space is critical in this context.

Spaces and places of and for identity

Lefebvre (1991: 33–39) sees space as a ‘dialektique triplicité’ or triple dialectic, a threefold experiential phenomenon: namely, as perceived space (in the physical environment), as conceived space (the semiotic abstraction that informs how people negotiate space as well as the space of corporations, planners, politics) and finally as lived space (the body lives life in interaction with other bodies). The latter two intersect and appear to have deep fault lines running through them. Forms of conceived or abstract space aim to control and thus come into conflict with lived or social space, which arises from practice and transcends the conceived boundaries of regulated forms. In this latter formulation then notions of possibilities and opportunities for agency are opened up. However, they will only be realised or have a chance of realisation if these possibilities can create or operate in a suitable space (Lefebvre, 1991: 59). I aim to elucidate some of these spaces and possibilities, looking at the establishment and protection of Islamic spaces in the media, through state policies, and in everyday life through the use of icons, government initiatives and discourse, in chapters 3–6.

As mentioned earlier, the nation-state remains an important actor vis-à-vis globalisation. The nation-state as an organisational unit remains a highly
contested category that nonetheless plays a pivotal role in creating and maintaining a national space and a representation of this space as a concrete place for a (national) people (Anderson, 1991; Daniels, 2005; Kahn, 2006; Leibold, 2007; Milner, 1995). The state is no lone actor in this enterprise nor is it the sole proprietor of power to control all the three aspects of space that Lefebvre mentions. Clearly, the institutions of the state, e.g. the government and army, have a primary role to play in controlling perceived or physical space along its international borders. However, perceived and lived spaces present the state and the researcher with more difficulties. How can we conceptualise the state in Malaysia? The state as a unified organisational unit in Malaysia is ambiguous because the federal government is in competition with some of the thirteen state governments, controlled by opposition parties. Moreover, when I speak of the elite that is in control of the state and its institutions, I am talking about a fractured and often divided elite. Partitions of society abound along racial, class and political lines, leading to a tension between the elements of the structure of the state and the elite itself. The elite in Malaysia is divided principally along ethnic lines. However, the Malay elite itself is fractured.

Most notably there remains a split between the secular, largely English-speaking and Western-educated, elite and the Islamic elite, mostly Malay-speaking and educated in the Middle East, Pakistan or Southeast Asia. The multi-ethnic economic and political elites on the other hand are intertwined with large government contracts and systems of patronage. To speak of ‘the elite’ can therefore be problematic and when I use the term I usually refer to those who have accumulated most power in a given arena. The secular elite is still (largely) congruous with the political elite, although I will show how this relationship has changed and why. The Islamic elite operates both within and outside of the state apparatus and is much harder to define. I will show how the interplay between the economic, political and religious elites is paradoxically causing Malays to be disadvantaged by the system that accords them a range of advantages. Political wranglings are common between elites, especially within the political sphere. Moreover, there are a number of bureaucracies with differing degrees of autonomy that form part of the state apparatus. Most notably, the Islamic authorities can and will act on their own behalf. I will discuss the problems this can cause in chapters 3 and 5. Finding the state becomes an issue in trying to determine who is doing what.

Following Foucault’s notion that power is everywhere (Foucault, 1990), Yael Navaro-Yashin talks of the multiple ‘faces of the state’ to make sense of
the political in public life in Turkey. She argues that the political is everywhere and ‘the concept of power figures in multiple forms that muddy the circumscribed institutional arena’ (Navaro-Yashin, 2002b: 3). Indeed, her usage of ‘public life’ as the arena in which the public (state and people) creates and changes the political is akin to my usage of Lefebvre’s space. For both present a metaphorical and sometimes physical place where a range of actors who cannot be easily categorised interact, produce, and articulate the key debates, norms and identities. Similarly, civil society, which is often interpreted as the opposing realm to the state, is just as problematic in its conceptualisation. In Malaysia civil society tends to be framed within the context of the reformasi (reform) movement13 of the 1990s (Verma, 2002; Weiss, 2006). These liberal and democratic movements reflect the renewed interest in civil society following the rise and subsequent success of social movements in Eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s.

Civil society has its roots in classical philosophy, with much of the recent literature relying on either a neo-Marxian or a Gramscian reading of the concept. For some capitalism has all but destroyed civil society (Chatterjee, 1993; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Hardt & Negri, 1994), whilst others see civil society as the battleground for power (Cox, 1999; Ramasamy, 2004b). Civil society is therefore laden with political meaning and burdened by democratic and liberal connotations. Habermas’s public sphere (Öffentlichkeit) mediates between the state and the private sphere and should offer a way out of the binary mindset (Habermas, 1989). Yet Habermas operates within a public/private framework that sees the system (state) attempting to colonise the lifeworld (being-in-the-world) (Owen & Ashenden, 1999: 156–157).14

As with much of the literature, especially from the New Left, the state represents a coloniser and the individual a progressive and democratic agent. This book takes issue with these notions as the case of Malaysia and the specific developments of an Islamic and conservative civil society will show. I return to this discussion in detail in chapter 4 where I show how projects of a Malaysian Islamic civil society as well as a resurgence of Islamic NGOs are threatening the entire space Gramsci’s civil society and Habermas’s public and private spheres occupy. I employ the notions of space, public space and Islamic space to circumvent the above-mentioned binary oppositions, such as the one between the state and civil society, that have become a mainstay of much social science research (Mitchell, 1990). Within these spaces the state, civil society actors and individuals all engage in negotiating the form of these spaces. Of course, not everyone has the same resources, power or access to
these spaces. However, the spaces are fluid and malleable and retain a sense of openness towards all who engage in them.

Sexuality and otherness

My enquiries into identity focus on the politics and culture of forming and maintaining a Muslim and Malay identity. Sexuality and gender are important aspects of identity (Stivens, 1998a). Indeed, women are key bearers and embodiments of identity markers, such as the nation, the family, religion and race (Ong, 1995; Peletz, 1996). Although there are many hidden issues simmering just below the surface related to gender and sexuality, I decided that they are too vast to do them justice in the context of this book.

The Malaysian state has largely ignored the issue of sexuality, usually claiming that there is no homosexuality in Malaysia. Indeed, as long as homosexuals are not seen the state seems not to care. There are occasional crackdowns, particularly by the Islamic authorities, on suspected hangouts. However, one of the ironies within the Islamic legal framework is that an unmarried couple of a man and woman can be arrested for indecent behaviour relatively easily. For instance, if they are caught in a house together by themselves they can be charged. A homosexual couple, however, would have to be caught ‘in the act’ in order to prove that the two men or women were engaged in any illegal activity. Thus, there are hardly any arrests for this offence.15

Since Malaysian Islam has an orthodox view on homosexuality, many gay rights activists work within other activist circles and on other related topics to pursue an opening of spaces for their own practices and lifestyle. Women’s issues and especially the attempts to liberalise legislation and work towards equality between men and women are a fruitful area for homosexuals to engage in and fight for. The arts sector is another area where gay rights issues are repackaged under ‘freedom of speech’ and ‘freedom of expression’.

Whilst in neighbouring Indonesia a more open Muslim gay persona can be inhabited, the heightened status of Islam in Malaysia’s constitution makes such a position untenable and its policing comprehensible (Boellstorff, 2005: 581). There has been a marked change in discourse in Malaysia around homosexuality over time, from relative tolerance to one around perversion and its pariah status as a ‘Western disease’ (Peletz, 2002: 20, 240, 243). This change in attitude has as much to do with the rising orthodoxy of Islamic discourse due to Islamisation as with the infamous Anwar trial, wherein Mahathir accused his deputy Prime Minister of corruption and sodomy. The trial
brought a range of sexual terminology into the mass media and into everyday
collection (Shamsul, 2001: 212).

Self and other in Malaysia

Malaysia is comprised of eleven states in peninsular Malaysia and the states
of Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo. Historically, it is largely a construct of the
British East India Company and its expansion into Southeast Asia. However,
it was not until its independence in 1957 and the secession of Singapore from
the Federation in 1965 that Malaysia was unified in its current form. Today
it is one of the most rapidly developing countries in Southeast Asia. With
a population of 27.17 million in 2007 (Department of Statistics Malaysia,
2008), Malaysia is home to a multi-ethnic society, where the Malay and other
indigenous people, who are defined as *bumiputera*, literally ‘princes of the
earth’, comprise 65.1 percent of the population. The second major ethnic
group is people of Chinese origin, who comprise 26 per cent, followed by
people of Indian origin, making up 7.7 per cent (Department of Statistics
Malaysia, 2000). In addition, there are a number of Indonesians, Thais,
Filipinos and other ethnic groups. Each ethnic group brings with it its own
language and culture, and adheres to different religions. Ethnic groups are
divided along religious lines with most Malays being Muslim, most Indians
being Hindus and the Chinese mainly Buddhists with a rapidly increasing
Christian minority. Politics is highly ethnicised within the ruling *Barisan
Nasional* (National Front) coalition that is dominated by the United Malays
National Organisation (UMNO). They represent Malay interests, whilst the
Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress
(MIC) represent the two largest minorities, Chinese and Indians. The
ethnic divide is further complicated by the NEP (1971–1990), or New
Economic Policy, which was followed by the NDP (1990–2000), or National
Development Policy, both of which involve affirmative action in favour of
Malays and other *bumiputeras*. Malays are defined according to their ethnic
and religious identity as it is enshrined in the Malaysian constitution. The
constitutional definition of this group states that a Malay is a person who
professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language and
conforms to Malay custom or ‘*adat*’.20

The country’s pluralist society is the product of an influx of people from
South-western China into Southeast Asia dating from 2500 BC, the intro-
duction of Chinese as traders and miners and Indians as labourers on plantations and as colonial officials by the British colonial power in the mid nineteenth century, and more recently the influx of mostly Indonesian economic migrants. The Malays traditionally constituted the rural population, whereas the Chinese tended to move into urban areas. Since the inception of the NEP, a Malay middle class has mushroomed, building strongly on Malaysian moves to modernise and a buoyant economy. After the NEP ran out, the New Development Policy was initiated to continue the long road towards economic power-sharing and economic parity, especially between Malays and Chinese. Most recently the ‘National Vision Policy’ was launched in 2001 with one of its aims a 30% bumiputera economic stake by 2010. How this is measured and when this goal is achieved are contested questions as I explain in chapter 3.

Identity definitions and defining characteristics in Malaysia are complex and sensitive issues. There are varying dichotomies and identities vying for power and inclusion in or exclusion from overarching identities. However, these simplistic cultural/racial denominators tell us little about the fringes and the complex negotiations of identity both within and on the margins of these identity markers. Most notably there has been a gradual identificational shift from being Malay to being a Muslim (Nash, 1991: 698; Peletz, 2002: 231). Indeed, a new dichotomy has evolved, between Muslims and non-Muslims (Zainah Anwar, 1987).

The state in Malaysia remains based on its plurality in that a Malaysian citizen is quickly inscribed into one of four groups, in which he or she ought to be situated. Malay identity is the most heavily guarded and fought over of these identities. The state has an unequivocal interest in maintaining Malay identity boundaries and inscribing it with its own discourses. Not only are Malays the most populous ethnic group and have electoral weight, but their position as beneficiaries of positive discrimination puts them in a category apart and in many ways above the other ethnic groups. The remaining identities of Chinese, Indian and others (lain-lain) are less politicised; however, they remain essential as identifiers. Malaysia as a nation-state still relies heavily on the imagination of difference within its constituent power-sharing political groups, which are based on ethnicity. This difference is exacerbated by the increasing withdrawal of people into cultural bubbles and the process of ethnic cocooning. Both act to reinforce one’s own identity and lead to a withdrawal from shared spaces. I will elaborate on modes of inclusion and exclusion, in particular the role Islam plays in this, in chapters 5 and 6.
Malaysia as Muslim or Islamic country

Malaysia is not an Islamic state. However, Islam is the religion of the federation of Malaysia, as defined in the country’s constitution. Each state has an Islamic council, which controls the interpretation of Islam; within the government, the Prime Minister’s office has another council to keep a federal check on Islamic activities. In 1976 there was a constitutional amendment to override the relatively equal status of religions. Since then the state has been allowed to fund Islamic organisations and projects specifically for Muslims.

I use the term Muslim country for Malaysia, as it denotes a country with a majority Muslim population. Although the numbers of religious adherents is a debated subject, Islam is the dominant religion in terms of followers and Muslims are in the majority. The problems religious identity markers evoke will be dealt with in chapters 2 and 3. Suffice it to say here that Islam and Malayness go hand in hand, giving religious adherence a political edge, hence the disputes over exact statistics.

To make matters more confusing, the then Prime Minister Mahathir proclaimed that Malaysia was already an Islamic state in 2001, and this was reiterated in 2007 by Deputy Prime Minister Najib (Bernama, 2007e). These proclamations are contentious and have raised fears amongst ethnic and religious minorities, especially the Chinese and Indian constituencies. However, these sorts of proclamations have to be read with a political grain of salt, as they are usually a means by UMNO to defuse their main rival for Malay votes, PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia – Pan Malaysian Islamic party), and their Islamic credentials. As to whether Malaysia is an Islamic state or not, others have written in more depth about the textual and historical reasons for such a label (Martinez, 2001). Without doubt the Islamisation of the state apparatus has created a state that is neither secular nor close to Turkey’s laicist version, even though it shares some recent developments. As in Turkey, Islam has been gaining ground within politics steadily and is now in a political mainstream position. Islam is invoked at public rallies and in speeches; it is made to seep into everyday life, much to the dismay of the laicist and secular elite and parts of the middle classes in the metropolitan centres of Turkey and Malaysia. They are wary of this increased attention to Islam in politics and the subsequent changes within and to laws, politics and society.

The state is much more entangled with Islam in Malaysia than in Turkey, of course, not least with Syariah laws in force for its Muslim citizens. Control over Syariah pertains to the state’s power of making law and therefore is an
essential part of the state’s enactment of its sovereignty (see Roy, 2007: 11). Legal issues and the control and policing thereof will be dealt with in chapter 3. To sum up, identity in Malaysia has become imbued with religious indicators, especially for Malays, although there is a marked polarisation taking place amongst Tamil Hindus (Willford, 2002; 2006) and evangelical Christians (Ackerman & Lee, 1988; Lee & Ackerman, 1997).

**Alterity: Being the other’s self**

In the Malaysian case, alterity (otherness) is still based on race/ethnicity, as exemplified by the following case. At a public forum entitled ‘Panic Buttons – Culture and Crisis in Malaysia and the Region’ a group of speakers were debating identity politics and the arts in Malaysia and other parts of Southeast Asia. In the question and answer session, a young man called out to one of the speakers, John Pang, at the time a visiting fellow with the Institute of Strategic and International Studies and former member of staff of the Higher Education Minister. The young man asked John what identity he thought he was. He added that his name was ‘Fadli’ and again asked John to guess his identity. John was non-committal, trying to circumvent the question by disagreeing with the labelling of people, but Fadli kept pushing until John gave in and said:

“Well. I don't know. It sounds like an Arabic name. You're probably, in Malaysia, legally a Malay.’

This was all Fadli had wanted: to be identified by his ethnicity and thus prove his point, namely that identity is a simple, essential matter. Indeed, he replied:

“You're right. It's obvious. So, no problems there.’

For Fadli the essence of identity was visible on his skin and could be heard by the sound of his name, and there was no complication – it was simple. Other speakers turned to the subject matter, identity, and tried to point out that identity is not a matter of black and white categories, that it can be situational, contextual and complex. Any debate about the complexities of identity and the histories involved often come up against resistance like that of Fadli, for whom identity has an essence and its essentialist character is precisely what makes it so appealing. It is easy and ready to be employed. There is no fluidity, no debate and no engagement. His comments are symptomatic
of a self-identification amongst Malays as naturally Malay and racially Malay that thus builds on the politically and culturally established image of a Malay.

As a counterpoint I want to introduce Fanon’s view on a similar moment of one’s identity being placed into subjectivity from the outside. Fanon recounts his encounter with a young child in Paris that broke his self-image and recomposed it in an objectified manner. The child hailed him with a ‘Look a negro!’, which at first amused him. However, the child became frightened of the ‘black man’ and Fanon declares:

> On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. . . . My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day (Fanon, 1967: 112–113).

Here Fanon’s self-identity is transformed by the outside acting upon him and re-shaping him according to the existing norms and cultural beliefs of the social and political environment of French society. Accordingly, Du Bois has pointed out in his writing on ‘double consciousness’ that identity is formed in the recognition of each other (Du Bois & Edwards, 2007).22 Such a struggle between competing identities can be a fertile ground for ethnographers to acquire information on how people deal with the multiplicity of identities and their inherent ‘otherness’. In Malaysia I certainly saw a lot of competing identities overlapping with each other and causing friction between each other. Whereas in some multicultural states dual identities or ‘hyphenated identities’, such as Vietnamese-Australian or Chinese-American, can envelop and better describe these overlapping identities (Watson, 2000: 98–99), the exclusivity of Malaysian identities has hitherto stymied such advances. For Fadli, his name alone provided recognition and he saw nothing wrong with being objectified purely as an ethnic identity.

In Malaysia identities retain a foundation of a primordial and essentialist origin. Often identities are invoked that seem innate, unquestionable and holistic. They seem at least to aim at holism to the extent that the identity is full of content and can be made into a primary identity. Thus, even ‘blank banners’ (Ardener, 1971: xliii, lxxxi), empty symbols and signs, can be filled with identificational content and used as identity markers by people. In this way a ‘pure signifier, having no referent, signifying only itself’ can become an identity, as long as it is consumed as such (Baudrillard, 2005: 198). The prevalence of both essentialism and primordialism as emic (internally and
culturally specific) concepts for identity construction and its articulation will be further explored in chapters 2 and 3, the consumption of Islam as a symbolic identity in chapter 5.

The social contract between ‘us’ and ‘them’

Two seminal dates in modern Malaysian history are the 31st of August 1957, the date of independence, and the 13th of May 1969, the day race riots began in Kuala Lumpur that unsettled Malaysia. The former brought independence to Malaysia from the British, the latter instituted a system of positive discrimination that haunts Malaysian politics and society to this day.

Constitution

In 1955 UMNO, MCA and MIC (the three main ethnically based parties, representing Malays, Chinese and Indians) established a contract to work together and share power under the roof of one Alliance party. This agreement was upheld after independence and has weathered many storms, electoral and otherwise, and remains in force today. The agreement between these parties was seen as the basis for an expedient independence and the acceptance of the constitution. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that the ‘constitution was considered by many as a “social contract” between the ethnic groups in the country’ (Shamsul, 1999: 95). The informal agreement was that non-Malays would receive citizenship and be naturalised and in exchange Malays would receive concessions on several fronts. Islam became the religion of the federation and the Malay rulers became heads of state, heads of Islam in their respective states and took over the British High Commissioner’s role of protecting the rights and privileges of Malays and other indigenous peoples. These protections and privileges included quota systems for the civil service, Malay land reserves and scholarships. The Reid Commission, which drafted the constitution, wanted these privileges to remain after independence since a sudden withdrawal would have caused hardship, but suggested a review of these terms after fifteen years. There was never to be a review.

In 1969 Malaysia’s simmering ethnic tensions exploded in racial riots in Kuala Lumpur, with ensuing violence across the Peninsula. It was precipitated by anxious competition between Malaysia’s ethnic communities over their place in the new Malaysian nation. The 1969 election was fought on the
Identity Formation and its Articulation

Sensitive issues of education and language and resulted in political upheaval (Andaya & Andaya, 2001: 297). In the May 10th federal elections voters abandoned the Alliance (UMNO, MCA and MIC) in favour of non-Malay parties such as DAP and Gerakan (Malaysian People’s Movement Party), whilst PAS made deep incursions into the Malay vote. The Alliance’s two thirds majority was gone and they only attained 48.5 per cent of the popular vote. Gerakan and DAP supporters were ecstatic and went on a victory march through Kuala Lumpur on May 12th taunting Malays and veering off the official marching path into a Malay settlement in the city centre. Incensed and agitated UMNO supporters staged their own rally on May 13th which deteriorated into unprecedented acts of violence throughout Kuala Lumpur and beyond, with sporadic outbursts of violence until July 1969. To curb the violence the government called a state of emergency that lasted until 1971 and implemented far reaching Malay affirmative action policies, most notably the New Economic Policy to boost Malay ownership of the Malaysian economy. The NEP provided a legal framework for Malay positive discrimination. It was understood that this action was to compensate for the Malays sharing ‘their’ country with others. This interpretation of the social contract as a *quid pro quo* can also be seen through the prism of the Maussian gift (Mauss, 2002[1954]).

**The gift, Mauss and the social contract**

The gift is a part of the greater whole, of a social fact, that is exchange. Graeber points out: ‘Mauss himself saw his work on gifts as part of a much larger project, an investigation into the origins of the notion of the contract and of contractual obligation’ (Graeber, 2005: 410). Trade and gift exchanges between communities are usually a positive mode of co-operation and hospitality. However, the gift has an ambiguous history. The gift provides the giver power over the receiver.

‘Gift’ in its Germanic etymology can mean both poison and present. This goes back to Germanic and Scandinavian customs, whereby a drink would be exchanged to establish relationships. However, the drink-present may be poisonous, therefore there was always a sense of uncertainty of the donor’s intent (Mauss, 1997: 30). Indeed, those who did not abide by the law of the gift might become its victim. In this context citizenship can be seen as a poisonous gift. Even a gift intended as a positive present can still bear a poisonous aftertaste. One can say that the imagined social contract in its
various forms, imagined by Malay nationalists as enduring and by Malaysian multiculturalists as void, has poisoned the relationship between the former contractual partners.

Thus, the contract, never formalised, remained an open-ended exchange. The lack of clarity on what the social contract is has left the constitutional bargain vulnerable to political interpretation and ‘no nation can be securely grounded if the founding charter of its existence is confused or contested’ (Puthucheary, 2008). In order to ‘share the nation’ Norani Othman et al. argue that the ambiguities inherent in such a vague contract must be talked about in a mutual and co-operative spirit (Norani Othman et al., 2008). However, such aims are far from being realised in the present climate. The prevalent interpretation continues to be that the Malays bestowed the ‘gift’ of citizenship upon non-Malays with the trade-off that Malays are guaranteed a ‘special position’. With any gift comes indebtedness and Malay politics remains largely based upon recuperating the debt they feel is owed by non-Malays.

But who owes whom and how much? This depends on when the social contract starts. Malik Imtiaz Sarwar, a prominent lawyer, activist and president of the National Human Rights Society (HAKAM), takes issue with this problem:

First, there is a constitutional debate. This has been articulated more recently in the last two years or so. Some academics in local universities say that the social contract discussion which we all believe started in 1957 with the Constitution actually started on May 13, 1969. The 1957 Constitution is being rejected as a postcolonial legacy that does not adequately reflect the aspirations of one particular community. This is how it is being put across, and there is therefore a constitutional debate about where exactly all of us fit in. If we take 1969 as a starting point, it establishes the privilege system or at least a mindset operating, which allows for divisions between the Malay community and the non-Malay community (Anon., 2006).

Indeed, ‘after the 13 May 1969 riots it was elevated to a binding and cast-iron “social contract” which became sacrosanct to control or prevent communal differences’ (Cheah Boon Kheng, 2002: 51). The race riots and their violence have become a threat the political establishment uses to curtail debate and discussion. The unwritten social contract has become a defining constituent of the political landscape.

Kelly and Kaplan argue that ‘social contracts not only put races in their places but made the places for races . . . they were not generally negotiated
with or by them’ (Kelly & Kaplan, 2001: 197). Although there was representation of Malay rulers and Alliance party members (the forerunner to the still ruling National Front) at the Reid Commission conference, and opinions were canvassed by the Commission during their consultation time, the ethnic divide was all too apparent in the negotiations. In 2007 the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) filed a class action suit in London to the tune of 4 trillion US dollars against the British government for 150 years of exploitation. They are seeking redress for the deal they received, but never made themselves. Furthermore, they demand equality as well as an end to racism, Malay privileges and Islamic extremism in Malaysia. This is the real threat and problem facing Malaysia now: a bottom-up social contract is demanded and as the state loosens its grip on civil society, various groups are coming out to contest the status quo. Chinese, Indians, secularists, women, Malays all want to keep what they already have and advance towards what they believe is owed to them. Each group is shoring up support and internal group unity for their cause. The Malay reactionary camp, meanwhile, is adamant in halting any non-Malay advances towards equality as this extract from a recent speech by the crown prince of Kelantan, Tenku Faris Petra shows:

> Therefore, the rakyat [people] must unite and never raise issues regarding Malay rights and special privileges because it is a quid pro quo in gratitude for the giving in of citizenship (beri-paksa kerakyatan) to 2.7 million non-Malays into the Tanah Melayu [land of the Malay] federation (Ong, 2008).

Any form of multiculturalism is based on mutual respect and recognition. However, multiculturalism has to deal with the constant internal tension of the division of society along racial/ethnic/cultural lines. Malays are awarded the highest level of state-sponsored recognition with their ‘special position’ as the owners of tanah Melayu, the Malay land. In fact, equal recognition from the state is precisely what the non-Malays (or rather the non-bumiputeras) are fighting for. The Malaysian social contract guarantees the superiority of Malays. The gift that was given to the people of Malaysia by the British, independence, was never theirs to give and thus the recipients of the political gift, the ruling National Front that has ruled Malaysia since independence, are faced with the grave prospect of rethinking their position within the Malaysian political landscape. The social contract will be further explored in chapter 5.
Marginalising identities

The social contract provided the foundations for a system of governance based on inequality and exclusion. Its codification in the constitution of Malay hegemony vis-à-vis non-Malays set up tensions between nation-building and Malay racism, Malayism or Bumiputrama in Malaysia (Ho Khai Leong, 2003; Muzaffar, 1985). In chapter 5 I employ aspects of Kimmerling’s (2003) concept of politicide as a useful theory to think with in order to make sense of the systematic modes of exclusion operating in Malaysia. Usually, politicide in Malaysia would refer to the exclusion of non-Malays, who are commonly split into the crude categories of Chinese and Indians. It is in this light that many studies have elucidated modes of exclusion, inequality and discrimination against non-Malays. Much has been written about the marginalisation of Indians (Fee Lian Kwen, 2002; Khoo Kay Kim, 1993; Muzaffar, 1993; Ramasamy, 2004; Stenson, 1980). Willford, for example, argues that Indian/Tamil identity is contingent upon Malay Islamic modernism (Willford, 2006). Similarly, Heng Pek Koon asserts that ethnopolitics and a Malay hegemony created and maintained a sense of a common Malaysian Chineseness (Heng Pek Koon, 1998). The ‘use of popular religious symbolic media to formulate and express political attitudes’ (DeBernardi, 1994: 136) has been a strategy of the Chinese in Malaysia to construct identity in a non-confrontational way vis-à-vis Malay political dominance (DeBernardi, 1994; 2004). Carstens argues that the category ‘Chinese Malaysians’ is a grossly oversimplified label, because there is a range of identities encapsulated within this category, ‘in a constant state of flux’ (Carstens, 2005: 232).\(^{25}\) The status of Chinese as outsiders or pariah figures is also seen within a regional context of transnationalism and diaspora (Ong & Nonini, 1997; Suryadinata, 2004). Much work has been published on the plight of the Orang Asli (indigenous inhabitants of Peninsula Malaysia) and the way the Malaysian state has tried to assimilate and forcefully integrate them into Malaysian society and the economy (Dentan et al., 1997; Endicott & Dentan, 2004; Gomes, 2004; 2007b; Nah, 2003; Nicholas, 2000; Zawawi Ibrahim, 1998).

On the one hand there is a clear discrimination of Chinese, Indians and Orang Asli as minorities, whose place as equal Malaysian citizens is contested by the Malay majority. On the other hand there is another level to discrimination and ultimately politicide in Malaysia. I contend that a Malay elite is stripping away and allowing Muslim and Malay reactionaries to strip away the rights of the Malay majority through the policing of Islam.
I will not engage with the exclusion of Indian Muslims, who are arguably doubly excluded. On the one hand they are marginalised for being non-Malay, on the other hand they are Muslims and therefore subject to Islamic laws they have little control over. My aim, rather, is to trace how Malayness has become imbued with what I will call Islamicity and how this process is the basis for the structural politicide, or the stripping away of political will and power, of the majority Malay population. However, I will also show that it is not all doom and gloom, for these processes are being contested, resisted and subverted resulting in an overall ambiguous scenario for Malay Muslim identity in particular and Malaysian identities in general.

The remainder of this book is structured as follows. Having outlined the general theoretical foundation and background to the following debates, I turn my attention to the origins of Malayness, the role Islam plays in it and the relationship between the two in chapter 2. Chapter 3 deals with the state and its agents. In particular, I show how the state and its agents create and control Islamic space, Islam and Muslim identity through a range of Malaysian government projects such as Islam hadhari. In chapter 4 I present a number of non-state actors that are vying for influence and power. On the one hand progressive civil society and the arts are trying to overcome the homogenised and bounded identities of Muslim and Malay, on the other conservative NGOs and Islamic authorities are guarding these identities against losing their prestige and supremacy. Chapter 5 discusses what I call Islamicity, or a form of Islamic space that accords prestige to those who can radiate and employ it. I also look at those people who perform and consume Islam and those who try to circumvent religiosity. In chapter 6 I discuss how Malayness was once a cosmopolitan and fluid identity and how the current modes of identity articulation are exclusionary and based on negative tolerance to the detriment of all Malaysians, paradoxically especially Malays, who are subject to a politicide against them. Before we can arrive at these arguments we have to revisit the origins of Malayness and question why Islam became such an integral part of Malayness.

Notes

1 Most names of informants have been changed to secure anonymity. Those who are in the public domain and who were told during interviews that they are ‘on record’ are identified with their real names.
2 After poor results in the 2008 elections Badawi stepped down in favour of his deputy Najib.

3 This totalised body image is created during what Lacan calls the ‘mirror stage’, an important part of a child’s development from the universal to a self-identity. When a child identifies with images of itself in a mirror, it begins to differentiate itself from its environment and sees itself as the mirror image (Lacan 1977). This process of introjecting the outside into the self is the beginning of a process of othering. The child is seen to become fixated on its image as an entirety and whole being, lacking the recognition that a person cannot be his or her image (see Erikson, 1968: 159–161), thus establishing a situation where the I is dependent on the other (in this case its image).

4 Indeed, ‘taking up relationships towards the world is possible only because Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, is as it is’ (Heidegger, 1962: 84), thus Dasein becomes individualised as being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962: 233).

5 ‘The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thought and all my explicit perceptions. Truth does not ‘inhabit’ the ‘inner man’, or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: xi).

6 Herzfeld calls this relationship ‘cultural intimacy’ (Herzfeld, 1997).

7 I use the term ‘race’ in its Malaysian setting, where debates about race and ethnic identity are often conflated to mean the same thing and are in themselves highly contested identity markers (see Kahn, 2001: 124–126).

8 There has been a conscious shift in anthropology towards a direct reflexive ethnography of the home and the self in recent times (Jackson, 1987).

9 Olivier Roy has made extensive use of online sources such as blogs, websites and discussion boards in order to track down the globalised and often virtual ummah (Roy, 2004).

10 Blogs and the internet in general had a profound impact on the 2008 elections in Malaysia, with most opposition candidates employing blogs to inform their supporters and spread information through unofficial channels. The opposition is disadvantaged in Malaysia, as the main sources of news, i.e. newspapers and television channels, are owned and controlled by government parties.

11 My book follows a more recent trend in Malaysian studies that sees Malaysian identity formations within a larger frame of global and regional processes (Goh Beng Lan, 2002; Kahn, 1992; 2006; Ong, 2000b; Ong & Nonini, 1997).

12 This is also Heidegger’s point when he claims that the inauthenticity and what he calls ‘falling’ of Dasein are in fact the everyday modes of Dasein (Heidegger, 1962). The inauthenticity then is normal and like Sartre’s bad faith, or self-deception, inescapable (Sartre, 1957[1936]).
13 Reformasi, or reform, began as a movement in the wake of the 1997 Asian financial crisis and Mahathir’s controversial dismissal of his deputy Anwar Ibrahim. Politically it was expressed with the inception of Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front), which challenged the ethnic-centred political parties in the Barisan Nasional.

14 This colonisation is akin to what Anderson called ‘penetration’ in the Indonesian case. The Indonesian nation-state was born against the backdrop of a liberation struggle that resulted in ‘the penetration of the [postcolonial] state by society’ (Anderson, 1983: 482–483) which in turn was reversed and resulted in a penetration of society by the state during the New Order rule under Suharto.

15 The issue of homosexual sex remains a fascinating taboo in the wider society and has been used as a potent political tool against former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, for instance.

16 The make-up of the category of bumiputera is extremely contested. It was mainly created to include the various ethnic groups of Sarawak and Sabah, when they joined the Malaysian federation, whilst many Orang Asli (lit. ‘original peoples’ or indigenous) groups from the Malaysian peninsula remain excluded. As Nicholas (2005) argues Orang Asli are theoretically included in the bumiputera category, yet excluded when it comes to affirmative action that the state provides for Malays and other bumiputeras. On the production of Malay indigeneity vis-à-vis Orang Asli claims, see Nah (2006).

17 This figure includes all bumiputeras, i.e. Malays and other indigenous people of both East and West Malaysia.

18 UMNO, MCA and MIC are the three strongest parties in the coalition and based on ethnic groups. There are a number of other parties, mainly in Sarawak and Borneo that are also part of the coalition. The National Front has won every federal election since its inception.

19 Shamsul argues that the Malaysian Constitution became the single most important modern institutional tool for moulding and conditioning Malaysian Islam . . . In other words, religion (that is, Islam) became the ethnic identifier (of “Malayness”) for the Malays’ (Shamsul, 2005b: 465).

20 Of course all the above ethnic labels are highly contested identity markers, and issues of Malayness and its complexities will be touched upon in the following chapter. However, for the purpose and constraint of this book they will not be further pursued.

21 I borrow the term ‘cocooning’ from futurist Faith Popcorn who used it in the 1990s to predict people withdrawing into the safety and comfort of their homes, from where they will socialise, shop, entertain themselves and increasingly live their lives (Popcorn, 1992).

22 This must also be seen within a Hegelian framework of the life and death struggle for recognition, which is the precursor to the master-servant relationship (Hegel, 1971; 1977).
23 DAP and Gerakan were especially jubilant and surprised at their electoral success because Gerakan was a new party and DAP had just reconstituted itself from the People’s Action Party (PAP) after Singapore had left the federation in 1965.

24 As Mondon has shown for the extreme right in Australia and France, the definition of reactionary is in relation to equality (Mondon, 2011). Reactionaries seek to maintain the unequal status they enjoy based on class, race or religious identity. In the Malaysian case they are reacting against the potentiality of equality, and any moves towards equality thus become a target.

25 For recent discussions of Chinese as minorities in the predominantly Malay states of Terengganu see Tan Chee Beng (2002) and Kelantan see Teo Kok Seong (2003) and Winzeler (1985).

26 Members of two Indian Muslim organisations have been lobbying for Indian Muslims to be called Malay, with all the ensuing privileges and duties. The Malaysian Indian Muslim Congress (KIMMA) has for a long time demanded to join UMNO, whilst the Malaysian Indian Muslim Youth Movement (GEPIMA) wants Indian Muslims to be known as Malays as they comply with the constitution’s definition of a Malay (NST, 2008a).
2. Malayness and Islam

The roti canai arrives with a fresh lime juice, and the story continues. When Faris was born, he tells me, his parents went to a clinic in the city, because the facilities were better than in the countryside. The doctor filled in the birth certificate on which he recorded the baby’s ‘race’. Faris’s parents, both of Indian descent, were present. The doctor did not ask them what race they were, as both parents were Muslims and dressed in what the doctor must have perceived as Malay dress, and subsequently filled in ‘Malay’ as Faris’s race, although neither of his parents is Malay. With the stroke of a pen Faris’s ethnicity was determined. With the birth certificate it entered the public domain and thus became a reality with which Faris contends to this day. His brothers do not share his racial category; each time the doctor had either asked the parents or known the parents personally. Legally Faris is the only Malay in his family, the ‘black sheep’, he quips.

Malayness: Becoming and being Malay in Malaysia

This chapter will explore what Malayness means and trace its roots through history. Islam features as a key element of Malayness today. Thus, I will discuss the origins of Islam in Southeast Asia and its arrival in Malaysia as well as contemporary debates within Islamic and religious studies about Islam as a social, theological and political force. Subsequently, I develop Islamicity as a space and form of Islamic religiosity to better understand the way people identify with Islam and as Muslims. Islam became a world religion with an inclusive ethos. However, in Malaysia being Muslim is intricately linked to being Malay and I will provide a look at the special position Malays enjoy in
Malaysian Islam and their own worldview, especially vis-à-vis an unsettling other, Chinese Muslims.

The discursive process of Malayness is an ongoing one, a constant re-definition of what it means to be Malay. There is considerable literature on the origins and proliferation of the identity marker *Melayu* or Malay (Andaya, 2001; Barnard, 2001; 2004; Collins, 2001; Kahn, 1994; 2006; Kessler, 1992; Milner, 1982; Nagata, 1974; Raffles, 1818; Reid, 2001; Shamsul, 2004a; Souchou, 2003b; Spaan et al., 2002; Sutherland, 2001; van der Putten, 2001; Wazir-Jahan Begum Karim, 1992; Winstedt, 1961). Malays are considered to have migrated from Taiwan, the home of Proto-Austronesian speakers, around 2500 to 1500 BC and south-eastern Sumatra and Borneo are seen as the homelands or at least formative places in the process of Malay ethnic formation (Andaya, 2001). ‘Malay’ is fraught with historical and especially political significance, which has changed over time and remains constantly contested and challenged (Kahn, 2006; Shamsul, 2004a).

Indeed, projects like the *Melayu raya* or *Indonesia raya* (Greater Indonesia) were part of the nationalist discourse in the 1930s and up to independence, with visions of a greater Malay nation or *bangsa Melayu* spanning vast parts of maritime Southeast Asia (*Nusantara*). Some Southeast Asian Muslim intellectuals, following a greater exchange with the Middle East and thus the Islamic homeland, envisioned a Southeast Asian ‘*watan*: a non-ethnic transnational ecumene’ (Kahn, 2006: 98). However, these projects were buried by the rigid spatial boundedness of modern nation-states, which are the heirs to their imperial histories. As Reid (2004a: 2; 2004b: 9–12) shows, the conflation of ‘Malay’ as a toponym located on the Malay peninsula and an ethnonym for the people who lived there was the result of eighteenth and nineteenth century British Orientalist writing. This process increased with the British expansion in the Straits Settlements of Pulau Pinang (Penang), Malacca, now known in its Malay spelling Melaka, and later Singapore (see e.g. Raffles, 1818).

**Malayness transformed by colonialism**

The fragmentation of the Malay world with its present-day borders owes much to the division of the archipelago into ‘spheres of influence’ between European and Asian colonial powers in the nineteenth century. The British signed treaties with the Dutch to the west and south and the Siamese to the north of British holdings in the Straits Settlements (Andaya & Andaya,
Malayness and Islam

2001: 125–126). The Pangkor treaty of 1874 that settled a succession dispute opened the way for British involvement in administrating the peninsular Malay states.

The transformation of Malayness from a regional identity to a ‘supralocal’ and eventually national one is manifest in the rationalisation process that was in part initiated and in part accelerated by the institutionalisation of identity and its social, political, religious and cultural forms (Lee & Ackerman, 1997: 33). Thus, the British imperial power was the paternalistic overlord/creator/manager of this transformative process, which is continuing.

The British were ambivalent about further acquisitions in the region and expansion was timid at first and limited to the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca and Singapore with only a gradual sphere of influence extending onto the peninsula. The Colonial Office saw further colonial acquisitions as costly affairs, in addition to possibly upsetting strong neighbours such as the Siamese. Thus, the British involvement with the Malay sultanates was never as comprehensive as it had been elsewhere, above all in India. The experience of India and the British involvement in religious affairs there had proved problematic at its best:

Fearing the expense of war or police suppression, and perhaps remembering the turmoil which followed the abolition of monarchy in Burma, the British believed (in the words of one senior official) that without the sultans the “Malays would become a mob” (Milner, 1995: 195).

All these factors contributed to the British leaving the sultans a degree of freedom, especially when it came to their ceremonial position and their status in society. In order to compensate the rulers for an increasing British lead in political and economic affairs, the sultans were given free reign over cultural and religious affairs. The sultans used these powers to establish institutions and bureaucracies dealing with Islamic affairs and customary practices. The collaboration of the majority of the Malay nobility ensured that the British colonial system retained Malay rulers and their families as legitimate authorities. It is no coincidence that the early post-independence Malaysian political elites and cabinets were dominated by Malay aristocrats. British education policies favoured English-educated aristocrats who underwent training in the largely secular political system and protestant work ethic of their overlords (Triantafillou, 2004). In some ways, the colonial administration was successful in maintaining relationships between the Malay nobility and the peasantry.
However, the *kerajaan*, or ‘the condition of having a raja’ (Milner, 1982: 114), was in decline. As Milner explains, Malays in pre-colonial Southeast Asia believed that the rulers owned the land and they were the ‘Raja’s slaves (*pateks*)’ (Milner, 1988: 31). The British severed this bond, largely by mapping states into distinct spatial entities, which was accompanied by a shift in naming states *negeri* (previously a settlement) as opposed to *kerajaan* (Milner, 2003: 176). The power relations were disembedded from their social milieu. Rulers were no longer able to act as protectors of *adat* (Malay customs) as formerly, thus diminishing their power base and weakening their symbolic ties with the people. Today these ties exist only for some royalists in any meaningful way, while for most the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* (supreme ruler)\(^2\) is seen as a ceremonial head of state who represents neither any real power nor any allegiance.\(^3\) Malay rulers remain however constitutional protectors of the Malays, which gives them a racialised portfolio, which in turn means that their status means even less to non-Malays.

The British themselves were worried about the fate of the Malays in Malaya and established themselves as protectors of Malays. They gave this position to the *Yang di-Pertuan Agong* at the time of independence. Thus, the British established the sultans in the realms of Malay supremacy over immigrants and provided for Malay access to civil administration jobs (Harper, 1999: 18–20). Subsequently, ‘Malayness came to be defined in terms of the three pillars of *agama*, *bahasa* dan *raja*, i.e. the Muslim religion, the Malay language, and the aristocratic government of the sultans’ (Shamsul, 1997: 209). These three main civilisational forces persist in the constitutional definition in the form of identity markers. According to Article 160 (2) of the Malaysian federal constitution, “‘Malay’ means a person who professes the religion of Islam [*agama*], habitually speaks the Malay language [*bahasa*], conforms to Malay custom [*adat*]’ (Malaysia, 2006 [1957])

The problem with *adat* is that it is too convoluted and regional in its multiple incarnations (for instance, *adat perpatih* in Negeri Sembilan and parts of Melaka, *adat temenggong* in the rest of the peninsula) and thus does not easily lend itself as a unifying character.\(^4\) The further withering of *adat* as an important part of Malay identity can be seen in the demise of the role of customs and customary law in the *Majilis Agama Islam dan adat Melayu* (Council of Islamic religion and Malay Custom). In the state of Selangor this council has dropped the protection of Malay *adat* altogether, in name and policy, and now operates as *Majilis Agama Islam* only. In rulings where *adat* may oppose Islam, the latter is given pre-eminence. The council’s main vision
now is for the further Islamisation of society and the enforcement thereof in the respective states it operates (Zaleha Hassan & Cederroth, 1997: 49).

Malayness and the nation

Bahasa Melayu (Malay language) similarly is regional and was born out of a trans-regional context of interactions across the Southeast Asian archipelago and so is too diffused to give a strong homogeneous sense of identity, sameness and of identification for Malays. Within the nation state the Malay language was opened to all Malaysians as the main medium of instruction in schools as part of the education policy of the 1970s and 1980s and ‘therefore cannot be used as an avenue for expressing Malayness’ (Muzaffar, 1985: 358). More recently, former Prime Minister Mahathir wanted to reintroduce English, the colonial lingua franca, as the main language of the education sector, in his push to make the New Malays (Melayu baru) into the capitalist class of the future. English remains the most important language in large cities and the preferred medium of the upper (middle) class, albeit with Malay inflections. That leaves Islam as a primary identity marker of note. Indeed, as has been pointed out elsewhere as far back as the 1980s, the ‘last remaining bastion of Malayness is that of religion’ (Nagata, 1984: 57). Indeed, Chandra Muzaffar offered an accurate adumbration of the role of Islam in the late 1970s, when he wrote that ‘no other cultural symbol of the Malay community can be as effective’ in expressing ethnic identity in a modernising Malaysia, which for Muzaffar was most potently expressed in its urbanisation (Muzaffar, 1985: 358).

The nation-state was all but declared dead by the forces of globalisation in the late 1990s (Hardt & Negri, 2000; Ohmae, 1990; 1995; van Creveld, 1996; 1999), but its resurrection or rather its continual reign as the locus of power and decision-making is more evident than ever. In Malaysia, too, in spite of its authoritarian credentials, the state seemed for a while to wither on the streets of Kuala Lumpur, as the reformasi movement in the late 1990s gained momentum following the meltdown of the Malaysian economy in the 1997 economic crisis that swept through Southeast Asia. However, the then Prime Minister Mahathir rode the storm by asserting state control of the financial markets and shutting down oppositional politics and civil society.

Today in Malaysia the nationalist narrative of consociational harmony and the reinforcement and boundedness of the three main cultural, ethnic or racial groups of Indians, Chinese and Malay dominate. These groups embody a seemingly inherent Indianness, Chineseness and Malayness. The spaces betwixt
and between cannot exist in a narrative that depends on the constant othering, which in turn is based on clear and enforceable lines between these major ethnic groups. The fact that people continually ‘fall through the gaps’ and have identity markers that are a result of arbitrary decisions or sheer coincidence, only reinforces these lines between the groups. Thus, the arbitrariness and constructedness of identities and their application and the assignment of racial, ethnic or cultural identity are part and parcel of the way people negotiate and navigate everyday life in terms of their own self-identification and the identification of others (see Kahn, 1992: 162–163).

The pigeonholing of people into categories is nothing new or even problematic. As Mandal points out, it is not the existence of ethnic difference that poses a problem, but rather the ‘reification of these communities into neatly defined and separate races or ethnicities that affirm primordialist notions’ (Mandal, 2004: 63), thus drawing boundaries that become immutable. People need to place others and themselves into categories to make sense of the world, to order the world. Accordingly, the state seeks to do so with its citizens, ordering them according to sex, age, domicile etc. to make sense of who is allowed to vote for a government and where, who lives where and who requires what services. The racial categorisation in Malaysia is part of an ordering of people into categories to make sense of the population, but it is also a political tool.6

Demographics are often used and abused by the state and its institutions to control people by disciplining them into certain categories of surveillance. The politics of race in Malaysia is all about numbers, as they translate into power. The British introduced the census into the Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca and Singapore) in 1851 and the Federated Malay States (Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang) in 1891. A census was conducted at ten-year intervals, expanding their scope in 1921 to the states of Johor, Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu, and Brunei. The census data are important as they make or break majorities. However, with the inclusion of the ethnically more complex Sabah and Sarawak into the federation of Malaysia in 1963, a new category was created to include indigenous Muslim and non-Muslim ethnic groups in these territories under the umbrella term bumiputera (literally princes of the soil).7

Malayness as hybridity

Whereas bumiputeras are a category in a biopolitical numbers game to attain numerical supremacy, Malayness means a lot more to people who describe
themselves as such. It carries cultural, religious and ethnic weight. Placing it in its historical context however can quickly dissolve much of the perceived attachments that fill Malayness with emotional baggage as to its meaning as an identity. Kahn, for instance, sees Malayness as an

... interstitial category, since Malay identity in this period [pre-colonial and early colonial] involved speaking the regional lingua franca on which modern Bahasa Malaysia as well as Bahasa Indonesia were based, interacting with people of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds, inserting oneself into Islamic religious and commercial networks, making the pilgrimage to Mecca or to Muslim holy sites within the Malay world, establishing relationships with and often becoming socially embedded within local agrarian communities (Kahn, 2005: 166).

Such a flexible interpretation of Malayness relies on the mobility inherent in the Malay world of pre-colonial and early colonial times. At the time a range of hybrid identities made their lasting impression in the region. The *peranakan* (literally locally born) refer to the mixed heritage of the Straits Chinese, the Baba Nyonya, or the *Jawi Peranakan*, the descendents of Indian Muslims who integrated into the Malay lifestyle and language or indeed the *Chitty Peranakan*, who speak a Tamil with Malay inflections and have otherwise assimilated into the Malay lifestyle. These forms of hybridity deal with hitherto self-proclaimed difference, often civilisational, racial and/or national.

These differences are on a grand scale and a fusing of two bounded wholes creates a new one. Seeing Malayness in terms of similar hybridity is problematic, because that presupposes two bounded entities that come together in a new hybrid (Friedman, 1994; 1999). This is clearly more the case in peranakan identities. This is an oversimplification, but I want to draw this out to show that Malayness is and was not hybridity, but would have been a space for interaction, a regional interstitial space that was appropriated for interaction between two parties of different backgrounds, ethnicities and homelands. It was an interactional tool kit based on necessity. Thus, Malayness was more akin to say Europeanness, a space for interaction that is not prescriptive, but open to the circumstance, the place and the time of the interaction.

Malayness, thus conceptualised, was a means for interaction in the South-east Asian context. This must be placed historically, and relying on written sources to achieve this is difficult. These spaces emerge when people transcend their communities and seek out that which is beyond their immediate
locale. Malayness is often used to refer to the Malaccan sultanate and its subjects; indeed Malacca is hailed as the birthplace of Malayness in most early Malay writings (Matheson, 1979). It is also at this time that Malayness as an open and fluid concept enabled a relatively easy incorporation of Islam into the Malay cosmos. However, the shifting character of such a concept is important, as Milner points out, with the notion of ethnic fluidity as a ‘process of “Malayization” in which peoples on the periphery of a sultanate were gradually absorbed into the kerajaan, adopting its language and culture. [Whilst] the reverse movement, away from the kerajaan, might also occur’ (1998: 159). The concept and, I would argue, its usefulness were eclipsed by the emergence and subsequent dominance of the modern nation-state in the way people order their world-view, self and other identities and their being-in-the-world.

*Malayness and the kampung*

The Malayness that resonates most in modern parlance is one that is based on culture and in particular a cultural nostalgia for the kampung (village), in which it is grounded (see Hoffstaedter, 2008: 144; Kahn, 1994). The kampung is the foremost site for the annual Hari Raya Aidilfitri celebrations at the end of Ramadan. Families reunite in their hometowns and the motorways clog up with the urban middle class streaming back to their rural childhood homes. On occasions when I joined people on this trip, I was struck by the anticipation and dread. The younger generation foresaw a time without satellite television, video games and entertainment, whilst the older generation looked forward to the slowness of village life. For them the kampung tended to signify a simpler and in many ways more authentic lifestyle that they had to give up in the modern, fast-paced urban conglomerates they now inhabited. Both groups looked forward to the homemade delicacies as did I. The staple was ketupat, sticky rice encased in a palm leaf delicately woven into a square, served with beef rendang, diced beef stewed in coconut milk and spices. Eating traditional home cooked meals with family and friends for several days in a relaxed environment evokes a strong bond between all those sharing this experience. With little electronic entertainment traditional games were brought out. I spent hours playing congkak, a Southeast Asian board game in which marbles are quickly moved between holes in a wooden board. This brings the younger generation in contact with traditions they hardly find in the city.
This maintains some of the traditions associated with the kampung. However, what is less known and certainly less propagated is the rich social history of the kampung as the place where the ‘other’, other Malays, Indians and Chinese, were domesticated and embedded into everyday life (Carsten, 1997; Kahn, 2006). Marriage was a common mode of incorporating others into the community and assimilating otherness. In addition, villages and communities created shared migratory histories to forget some parts of their histories and remember others (Carsten, 1997: 262–275), which made it possible to share history and therefore a future together:

The process of forgetting about one’s ancestors is linked in Langkawi to the positive creation of kinship. It is by dressing, eating, bathing, sitting and speaking in the right way that one gradually becomes a Langkawi person. In local ideas, kin are not sharply defined in opposition to non-kin. Nor is identity inherently given at birth; it alters throughout life. People become kin, that is, complete people, through their shared activities in houses, through eating and living together in the present, intermarrying and having children and grandchildren in the future (Carsten, 1995: 329–330).

Whereas in the modern disintegrated and fragmented city and by extension in the modern nation-state the ‘other’ is recognized as such through institutionalised modes of inclusion and exclusion, the kampung provided immigrants a place in history and a process of becoming local. Today, the ‘other’ is excluded from representation, for the other’s presence now becomes a threat as alien and foreign. Ironically, Malayness is purged of this migratory history and is portrayed with a sedentary settler imagery describing those who own and live on the Malay land (tanah Melayu). The intrinsic link between Malayness and the land is illustrated in a study I conducted on representations of Malayness in cultural theme parks in peninsular Malaysia, in which I demonstrate how Malays are portrayed as owners of the land and other ethnic groups as transient occupiers (Hoffstaedter, 2008: 152). This process is not unique to Malaysia or Southeast Asia, as Ferguson recounts similar patterns of appropriating folkish themes for a resurgent identity in the case of Zambia:

The growing and cosmopolitan urban middle class, meanwhile, was using an imagined, idealized rural “tradition” in a different way: to attack colonial domination and to open up some space between their own urban modernity and the specifically Western modernity of the white settlers. In political terms, African nationalists in this period
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glorified rural folkways and explicitly sought to construct an authentic “Zambian-ness” out of ruralist themes as an alternative to Westernism (Ferguson, 1997: 142).

Islam in society and the state

While Malayness remains rooted in the kampung, it has become an Islamic kampung. Malayness has increasingly become synonymous with Islam as an identity marker. This development has a long history and this section traces the origins of Islam in the region and how it came to infuse and later take over Malayness. Islam has a multitude of meanings and it is essential to ask what Islam we are talking about in this context. Islam and being Muslim are different things and the relationship between the two is akin to the earlier discussion on Heidegger’s being-in-the-world, the relationship between being and its environment. Muslims experience this relationship of being part of a major religion in different ways. This section lays the groundwork for understanding this relationship in Malaysia, which I will expand on in chapters 4 and 5.

The spread of Islam

Islam in Southeast Asia has always been associated with plurality and diversity (Ellen, 1983: 23). The coming of Islam to the Southeast Asian archipelago was filtered through trading ports (Alatas, 1985; Drewes, 1968; van Leur, 1955). In addition, Sufism played a crucial role because its inclusive Islamic teachings were able to accommodate Buddhist and Hindu elements into Islam (Al-Attas, 1969; Johns, 1961). It is very likely that some traders were Sufis and members of tariqas (Sufi brotherhoods), so Sufism had an important role to play in the dissemination of Islam in Southeast Asia (Johns, 1995). Traders were well suited to the Islam to which they were exposed, as they were on the move a lot, making ancestor or spirit worship difficult. A religion with a universal claim and universal abode thus offered the new converts portability of faith on their trading and travelling voyages (Reid, 1988: 151).

Early adherents did not have to make a radical change to their customs, habits and lifestyles, as a simple shahadah (testimony of faith) would be enough to become a Muslim. However, ‘a selective renunciation of past habits’ was required (Reid, 1988: 140). Islam also fitted well into the Malay cosmology of the Malay kingdom or kerajaan. Sultanates could base their power on the association with a universal religion, which formally did not do
away with local spirituality, laws or customs (Milner, 1995: 147). Thus mystic Islam and Sufi traditions appealed to the rulers as a seamless perpetuation of Hindu and Buddhist traditions in new clothes. It was not until much later that Wahhabism, and radical and progressive Islam as social forces became threats to the rulers.

Modernist ideas that swept Arabia from the mid nineteenth century onwards were to create a critical mass of Muslims who were willing to fight for a modernist version of Islam influenced by Wahhabi thought. The movement emerged most strongly in India, the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, where thinkers like Al-Afghani, ‘Abduh and Rida promulgated a reform of Islam. Their aim was to unite Muslims, emphasise *ijtihad*, or individual reasoning, over *taqlid*, or the uncritical acceptance of the Islamic rulings of religious authorities, and to expel the West from Muslim lands and Muslim minds. Lapidus draws a distinction between Islamic reformism by the *ulama* (religious scholars), which centred on the purification of Islamic belief and practice by imitating Muhammad, and Islamic modernism by the elite and intelligentsia, which strove to imitate the West in some ways, be it state governance, science, military knowledge, education or the economy, in order to compete with the West (Lapidus, 2002: 461–462). In the Malay world this conflict was played out between the *kaum tua* (old generation) conservatives and *kaum muda* (young generation) modernists (Roff, 1967). The kaum tua had the institutional powers at their disposal, supported by the British-induced institutionalisation of Islam. However, the kaum muda faction were soon threatening the traditional powers and attempts to democratise Islam were seen as disruptive by the ruling classes or *ulama* and Malay elite (Roff, 1983; 1998). Thus, whereas previously Islam in Southeast Asia had been used as an ideology to perpetuate regimes (sultanates) at a time of their decline – and indeed they reached a renewed impetus after their initial conversion – Islam could be and was now used as a tool of social resistance by subverting the order of the sultanate (Ellen, 1983: 72–73; Milner, 1982).

Islam is a universalistic project as proclaimed by its theological basis of the Qur’an, the Islamic holy book, the Sunnah, the actions of Muhammad, and the Hadith, the sayings of Muhammad. Yet it provides the impetus and vehicle for an array of particularistic identities as it becomes embedded (Shamsul, 2005a), syncretised (Geertz, 1976) and takes root in new surroundings. Islam is continually torn between an inward turmoil of dissent and separatism and its outwardly universalist and unitary project.
Kahn (2001) argues that there are a multitude of universalisms, each with a different slant on what values are the necessary underpinnings of its form. Many Muslim groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt have followed a political universalist project that strives to bind all its followers together in the ummah, the Islamic form of an ecumene (Gilsenan, 1982: 216). Muslims subscribe to Islamic credentials and thus become bound together in a large imagined community. Today the Malaysian government and its agents (bureaucracies, think tanks, media outlets etc.) try to curtail particularism and define their own universalist projects within the nation-state boundary. The religious bureaucracy operates to define and police the religious sphere. This policy has a long tradition and not only colonial powers were adept at using the divide-and-rule principle to change power relations. Lubis (2005) has shown how the indigenised Islam of the Mandaling was marginalised and the authority associated with it, most notably that of leaders of ethnic groups or sects, eroded. The Malaysian state accomplished this by centralising religion and religious authority under the stewardship of an official Islam or a state Islam.

Theory and practice in Islam

The tension between universalism and particularism is also inherent in the tension between the theory and practice of Islam. Kessler (1972) has drawn attention to the dialectical opposition of Islamic social theory or vision and Islamic social practice. Islam, according to Kessler, collides with reality as all religions do, but Islam’s collision is more pronounced as it purports to possess the final social theory for humankind. Thus, its believers have to bridge the gulf between what they see and do in their daily lives and what the religion prescribes. Roff terms this the dialectic between ‘that which ought to be (and its discovery) and that which is’ (Roff, 1983: 323). The constant rephrasing and renegotiating of these forces is the driving force for ‘ideational and actual’ change (Bowen, 1993; Ellen, 1983; Kessler, 1978; Roff, 1983: 324).11

What is striking is the frequent conflation of theology and practice or the belief that they should be congruent. Being Muslim is often measured against adherence to a variety of Islamic markers. This leads to the conflation of theology (what Islam is supposed to be and what Muslims thus have to do) and practice. The distinction is between Muslims, as practitioners, and Islam, which many Muslims see as God’s word and therefore perfect. Muslims and their religiosity are constantly measured against theoretical precepts and not against how they
practise the religion (Abu-Lughod, 1991). Furthermore, some observers have focused on the bearers of Islam, what I will call people emanating Islamicity, as ideational personifications of Islamic practice (see Geertz, 1968). External, formalistic modes of being Muslim are often used to identify and label Muslims. The most obvious and often quoted are the five pillars of Islam, which are to be followed by Muslims and comprise the shahadah or testament of faith, the salah or five daily prayers, zakat or alms giving, sawm or fasting during the month of Ramadan and the hajj or pilgrimage to Mecca. However, there are also the six articles of belief, which pertain to the internal manifestations of belief. They are tawhid or the belief in God as the one and only God, mala’ika or the belief in the angels, belief in the holy books, belief in the prophets, belief in Judgment Day and belief in predestination. Yet we have not just a dichotomous relationship between faith and faithful; there is a further question about Islam itself. Can we see it as a bounded, singular entity? If so, only to the extent that ‘Islam can . . . be seen as a single discursive field – a “lifeworld” perhaps – yet one whose borders are constantly changing’ (Mandaville, 2001: 56). Islam, then, is a concept in the fluid sense, that encapsulates a range of interpretations and remains open to continuous change.

Religiosity

How can we conceptualise religiosity within the Islamic lifeworld or in this case Islamicity? Is it to be analysed as scripturalist, fundamentalist or liberal or any other way as a world-view, a pair of religious goggles which blind, obscure, clarify, enlighten or darken one’s vision of self and life? Is it simply the adherence to a norm of religion prevalent within a given society? The term religiosity originated as a pejorative term to describe actions and moods that were too passionately religious and therefore too credulous forms of religious practice (Toynbee, 1957: 162–163). The term here denotes a similar phenomenon, however without the moral implications. I do not want to judge people’s beliefs but attempt to make sense of the modalities of people’s religiosity.

Whitehouse (1995; 2000; 2002) differentiates doctrinal and imagistic modes of religiosity. This distinction draws on Weber’s (1947) distinction between charismatic and routinised authority as well as Gellner’s (1969) distinction between image-based versus literate forms of religiosity. However, Whitehouse goes beyond both and is interested in the different ways people experience religion:
Doctrinal and imagistic modes of religiosity are not types of religion but organizing principles for religious experience and action. It is very common for both modes of religiosity to be present within a single religious tradition (Whitehouse, 2002: 309).

Whitehouse draws attention to the two different ways of experiencing and maintaining religiosity. The doctrinal mode is routinised and is focused on the transmission of narratives and stories (Whitehouse, 2002: 297–298). The imagistic mode is ‘highly arousing’ due to its violent, ecstatic or extreme nature, tends to be of low frequency and involves the retention of very emotional flashbulb memories (Whitehouse, 2002: 303–304). These two forms of religiosity can nevertheless be brought together in the ‘iconic consciousness’ (Alexander, 2008). There it is combined and understood as narrative and symbol/signifier. The doctrine or underlying narrative/story provides the literary and substantial backdrop for the consumption and celebration of visual and sensual icons. I shall return to the issue of iconography and the uses and abuses thereof in the section on ‘performance of religious identity’ in chapter 5.

For now suffice it to say that all these interpretations of religious phenomena focus on what the authors see as the most salient aspects of religiosity. Indeed, they all point towards modes of being religious and modes of enacting religiosity, for these are quite different. Being religious is an inward-looking position, one where religion and a religious life has an impact on morals, one’s position to and in life. The enactment of religion is an outward-looking position whereby religion is seen as a force outside of the self, an entity that can be consumed or played as a role. The latter is often an important agent in making people into the former. The internalisation of ritual and other elements of belief through their constant re-enactment has been documented elsewhere (Mitchell, 2001; Whitehouse, 2002). It is interesting to note that the ramifications of repetitious behaviour can also have adverse effects, when belief becomes objectified in continuous repetition (Žižek, 2006: 353–354).

Planes of Islamicity

Religiosity combines being religious and enacting religion. Religiosity is the way religions become enacted, performed and ultimately transformed. Religiosity can be hegemonic as well as counter-hegemonic. In the case of what I will call Islamicity or Islamic religiosity in Malaysia, there is a sense that it means the same across the interpretational divides that usually mark religious diversity. For instance, many Muslim defenders of the secularity of
the constitution of Malaysia do so based on Islamic values and charge their opponents with not being ‘true’ Muslims. Haris Ibrahim, a prominent human rights lawyer, has led the way in using the Qur’an as a method to challenge and berate the Muslim reactionaries in public and on his blog. On the other side fundamentalists call their Muslim opponents ‘apostates’ for their perceived lack of Islamicity, for which I provide more detailed case material in chapter 4. Another attempt to Islamise the debate is by claiming Western concepts as intrinsically Islamic. Thus the shura (consultation) is interpreted as democracy (see Al-Azmeh, 1993: 79). When I spent time with tablighi (Muslim missionaries) I saw a group of people sitting together on the floor debating. I asked one of the people sitting at the back of the room what they were doing. He told me it was a shura and explained that all their meetings are based on mutual recognition and equality and thus are very democratic. He assured me that they were more democratic than the West, because their mode of decision-making was based on Islamic principles. In both cases Islam is evoked as arbiter of whether one’s actions and views are Islamic. Selective reading and interpretation allows both camps to occupy a religious high ground. As a result neither can engage with the other in any meaningful way.

The degree of ‘Muslimness’ or Islamicity is a matter of theology as well as practice, concerning both ‘jural orthodoxy’ and the individual’s being-in-the-world (Ellen, 1983: 56). Others have employed Islamicity to denote how Islamic a person is (Cragg, 1957; Poston, 1992; Račius, 2004). Thus, ‘Islamicity pertains to individual level [sic] of religious consciousness’ (Račius, 2004: 168) or ‘valid Islam must be existentially achieved by the Muslim’ (Cragg, 1957: 33). I want to go beyond that and delink Islamicity from the individual and his or her individually endowed Islamic awareness, Islamic being or internal Muslimness. I want to argue that Islamicity ought better to be understood as a transcendent discourse of and for Muslims. As such it is part of a conceptual framework that nonetheless can be incorporated, literally at times, into their being, whilst remaining often aloof and scholarly. Thus conceptualised, Islamicity is the personification of Islamic space, the embedding of an all-encompassing worldview into personal belief, and also the silk chains on Muslims veiling their movements discreetly in fine threads of ever-increasing religious meaning.

Much of my fieldwork material relates to how my middle-class Malay respondents couched their understanding of their Malay and Muslim identities in a larger context that they were often far removed from and knew little about. Their engagement with Islamic theology was minimal and most of their
Islamicity and Malayness were actually constructed and reinforced in every-day interactions, rather than deep and meaningful intellectual reflections. The fact that they were Muslim was not their choice and many respondents were simply rationalising their Muslim identity by plugging into Islamicity, i.e. into people and ideas around them that they knew to be instilled with an Islamic presence. In some cases people told me about their Islamic identities by way of what their ustaz (religious teacher) had told them, others told me about the Qur’an and constructed their identity around the universalist message of Islam and others still rejected Islamicity. The advantage of seeing Islamicity as space is twofold. First, it leaves its substance and essence flexible and slightly detached. Secondly, space is something that people can inhabit, occupy or avoid, three terms which clearly describe and capture my experience of Islamic identities in Malaysia.

What is Islam? What are Islams?

The diversity of Islamic identities is important to note, because it leads to the question of what Islam is or what Islams are that people identify with. Following Lukens-Bull (1999) and Varisco (2005), we have to reassess this question before we can attempt to answer it. Lukens-Bull argues that the point of departure should be the very definition of Islam, i.e. the ‘submission to God’. What is to be analysed and defined, then, is ‘how one should go about submitting to God’ (Lukens-Bull, 1999: 10).

In Islamic consciousness the shahadah, or ‘bearing witness’, is instrumental, for what is being witnessed is the realisation of facts that pre-existed one’s own cosmology and Weltanschauung, most notably that there is no God but God (Allah) and that Muhammad is his messenger. The moment of shahadah is repeated over and over thus firmly placing the creed within the believer and internalising the doctrine. Unconditional belief in these statements as facts is paramount for they underpin the rest of the Islamic Weltanschauung. Their place in Muslims’ lives cannot be refuted, debated even, for they are seen as unshakeable truths, logical precepts for Islam as a way of life (see Smith, 1981: 126). In many conversations I was told that ‘the shahadah must be done with mouth and heart’, otherwise one ceases to be Muslim.

Islam is a religion and a way of life. Its theology provides the basis for all aspects of life and offers a framework for how to live as a Muslim. Its main sources are the Qur’an, the collected words of God as transmitted through his last messenger Muhammad, the Hadith, the sayings and trad-
itions of Muhammad, and the Sunnah, the ‘trodren path’ or customs of Muhammad. All three are considered canonical sources. Textually there is a strong sense of sameness and universalism in and for Islam, as texts like no other instrument of a religion talk to the growing ‘worldwide confessional community’ (Bowen, 1993: 185). Texts are the domain of theology and theologians, trained to decipher, contextualise and authenticate them. They form the basis of many religions and often act as their moral, legal and social frameworks. However, the Islamic texts were collected after the death of Muhammad and subsequently have been disputed (Crone & Cook, 1977; Wansbrough, 1977). The Qur’an, the backbone of the religion, was collected and correlated after Muhammad had died and thus is infused by and subject to the work of people, with their own agendas, positions and interpretations.

Today the emancipatory notions of reform that swept the archipelago from India and Egypt around the turn of the twentieth century have been consolidated into the policies that the Malaysian government uses to subsume progressive and other Islamic tendencies it deems appropriate or sees as too large a threat to ignore. Otherwise, the government will act to co-opt, curtail or destroy such movements, especially if the government sees its power base at risk or under any threat. The UMNO-led government has been in competition with PAS and Muslim civil society groups to forge and maintain Islamic credentials. There have been many attempts by groups to establish competing versions or images of Islam in Malaysia, a form of competing Islams. Thus, for instance, the dakwah (calling back Muslims into the faith) of the 1970s and its varied responses set the tone for the government’s own Islamisation projects. Bottom-up revivalism and reformism, and in a few cases radicalisation on the fringes, was supported by the main Malay opposition party PAS, or a variety of Muslim organisations, such as Muslim youth movements (ABIM), women’s groups (Sisters in Islam), or Sufi-revivalist movements such as Darul Arqam. All were competing amongst each other and with the state-sponsored discourse of what it meant to be a Muslim in Malaysia. The government’s response was its own Islamisation project: an attempt to introduce a type of hyper-rationalised post-modern social engineering from top down (Stauth, 2002).

The former Prime Minister Mahathir was instrumental in securing the Malay position, especially by fostering Islamic values in his administration and Malaysia as a whole and portraying Malaysia as an Islamic state, which was partly a reaction to calls for an Islamic state by PAS. The co-option of
the then ABIM leader Anwar Ibrahim into the UMNO leadership further spurred the Islamisation push, with the creation of Islamic institutions such as the Islamic International University, several government-backed think tanks and the implementation of ever more Islamicised laws.

So what does Islam in Malaysia look like today? How can one define it in Malaysia? I will show that there remains a diverse range of experienced and conceptualised Islams. Most notably, there is a competition between the reactionaries or traditionalists and the progressives. The reactionaries use Islam as a purifying agent, to eliminate pre-Islamic and modern cultural elements from what they perceive to be the religious domain. This process started with the religious revival or *dakwah* movement that swept the world in the 1970s and which had a major impact on Malaysian Islam (Hussin Mutalib, 1990; Muzaffar, 1987; Nagata, 1984; Zainah Anwar, 1987). Intermittently this revivalism has carried on to de-Malayise Islam in Malaysia by toning down cultural displays in conjunction with promoting Islamic ones, in some cases banning cultural art forms for their supposed un-Islamicness. In addition, it has overlayers Malaya traditions and cultural forms with Arab ones, as these are seen to be more pure in an Islamic sense. Women’s roles have also been affected by the progressive Islamisation of *adat* on the one hand and the de-*adat* isation and Arabisation of Islam in Malaysia on the other (Wazir-Jahan Begum Karim, 1992). Islamisation in Malaysia remains highly politicised as PAS and UMNO have been for some time involved in a fight to out-Islamise each other, thereby neutralising the internal political foe and competitor for the Muslim/Malay vote.

There is a tension between those who want to use Islam in this way and those who approach Islam from a broader, more inclusive perspective. This tension operates within the state apparatus as well as outside it. In chapters 3 and 4 I explain how the Islamisation process, as interpreted by scholars at government think tanks, aims to purify the Malay language, culture and civilisation, whilst PAS-controlled Kelantan is attempting much the same in their fight against Malay art forms. However, other voices are making themselves heard within the government. The Unity, Culture, Arts and Heritage Ministry’s (formerly Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage) Department of Culture and Arts director Datuk Norliza Rofli has highlighted her commitment to women’s rights and gender politics in the arts. She is also actively implementing programmes to teach Malaysian arts in schools; so instead of teaching the piano, the state will fund *gamelan* (an orchestra of gongs, drums and brass plates) music classes. Her priority is to promote
traditional singing and dancing, which is in line with the once Culture, Arts and Heritage Minister Rais who spearheaded a revival of Malaysian arts and heritage (see chapter 4). The federal state has been supporting the grassroots with funding for these programmes. Norliza Rosli told me:

Malaysian culture to me, on a personal note, is tolerance. Malaysian culture is a deep appreciation and understanding of so many different art forms and we are so blessed to be in Malaysia . . . Malaysian culture is a tapestry . . . like a songket [Malay cloth embroidered in silver and gold thread].

At times during the interview, she lapsed back into the racialised rhetoric so often heard: ‘Chinese culture has and is receiving lots of sponsorships, because the Chinese control the economy. So what happens to the Malays then? (…) And the dying arts are the Malay arts.’ To her religion, in particular Islam, is hindering the Malay arts and that is why they are in danger. The solution, she argues, is that the arts can survive, but only if they are not associated with religion. Indeed, she noted: ‘Few Malays will go to Indian dances if they are associated with Hinduism. Only if it is on mutual ground.’ Segregation based on religion remains strong and religion remains an inhibitor of intercultural engagement. I return to the theme of the arts as battleground in chapter 4.

Ethnicity revisited

Ethnicity or race remains a powerful identifier for self and other. This process of identification has a long history and seems to oscillate between primary and secondary identity. In the late 1970s Clammer wrote:

It could be argued that there has been a general decline in the definitiveness of ethnic boundaries in Malaysia and Singapore in recent years, that is, that being a “Malaysian” or “Singaporean” takes priority in identity ascription over “race”, and that everybody is gradually becoming assimilated to some form of multiethnic national culture (Clammer, 1979: 15).

Today the pendulum has swung back as race rears its head once more as a primary identity marker. Harper (1999) rightly points out that the British colonial history of Malaya has had and continues to have a profound impact on how Malaysian politics plays out as well as how identity politics therein are debated, formed and reiterated. A short-lived venture by the British to establish a more inclusive Malayan Union in 1946 was opposed by UMNO
and finally dissolved in 1948. The Malayan Union had been an attempt to provide equal citizenship rights to Malays and non-Malays and to create a Malayan nation-state for all ethnic groups living within the Malayan British colonies (Cheah Boon Kheng, 2002: 13–14). The fervent UMNO stance on matters of Malay political supremacy led to the British establishing the Federation of Malaya (Persekutuan Tanah Melayu, literally government of the Malay land), which restored power to the Malay rulers and upheld Malay political supremacy. Thus, the identity categories that the British established and promoted within its Malayan colonial holdings, namely Malay, Chinese and Indian, have endured in Malaysia and seem as firmly entrenched as ever. However, although these categories have remained intact since colonial times, their substance has changed significantly and I would argue that their continuing appeal is mainly due to their constant reinvention. This has happened in the political realm due to the communal structure of politics, where ethnic-based parties represent their ethnic communities. Furthermore, the issue of the special status for Malays, and since the 1970s for bumiputeras, has remained an important division especially between Malays and non-Malays. The dividing line drawn between those who are eligible for affirmative action and those who do not qualify has caused rifts and continues to cause problems in terms of who is a Malay, who a bumiputera, and how one is to exclude some and include others. 

A way out of this politicised ethnic dilemma was widely discussed throughout the 1990s: bangsa Malaysia, or a Malaysian race/nation. Mahathir mentioned it in a speech he gave in 1991 on ‘vision 2020’, a comprehensive plan to make Malaysia an industrialised country by 2020. Since then bangsa Malaysia has been widely discussed by the moderate wing of civil society and the political opposition as the concept to overcome racial segregation between Chinese, Malays and Indians and to mould the Malaysian nation state into a more coherent, rationalised and, thus, modern construct. It was hoped that politics and political parties would become non-communal, secular and multi-racial. However, race as an identity marker and racial profiles as identity signifiers were too engrained in the political landscape to be supplanted (Weiss, 2006: 82–83). This process would take time and a lot of political investment to move it along. The proclamation of bangsa Malaysia was never intended to be a national policy, as Mahathir only referred to it in passing as a ‘united Malaysian nation’. What was intended was most probably the attainment of a people united through full involvement in the routines and rituals – ‘the cultural infrastructure’– of the envisioned advanced economy of
Malayness has attained an elevated position in Malaysia through British colonial policies that resulted in Article 153 and the constitutional ‘responsibility of the Yang di-Pertuan Agong to safeguard the special position of the Malays and natives of any of the States of Sabah and Sarawak and the legitimate interests of other communities’ (Malaysia, 2006 [1957]). This ‘special position’ is used to maintain ketuanan Melayu (Malay supremacy) in the political sphere and retain positive economic discrimination. These elements of Malay privilege will be dealt with in later chapters. Here, I want to draw attention to the coming together of the belief of being special and thus deserving of special rights based on racial inheritance and religion. Many of my informants believe in their special rights based on what they learned in history lessons at school. This was coupled with another aspect of empowerment: the religious. I want to recount an episode from my fieldwork...
that demonstrates the intricate interplay of racial and religious identity: the rationalisation of a cataclysmic event.

*The myth of the surviving mosque*

The prevailing popular discourses of making sense of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami in Sumatra and along the western Indian Ocean, which killed hundreds of thousands of people, revolved around divine power (Cody, 2005). Amongst my informants questions were raised about why the epicentre of the underwater earthquake that triggered the tsunami was just off the coast of Aceh, the first Southeast Asian place where Islam had taken root and one of the local centres of Islamic scholarship. One recurring explanation I was given informally was that it was the wrath of God against those who had once been endowed with the most Islamicity in Southeast Asia but who had since been led astray. Proof of this theory was often provided in the form of photographic evidence. Which brings us to one of the mysteries of the tsunami: the survival of a mosque in Banda Aceh (see Figure 2). It was one of the few

![Figure 2: Aceh mosque after the tsunami, Jan. 4, 2005 (© US Navy Photo)](image-url)
buildings intact after the tsunami hit Aceh. Images of the intact mosque surrounded by devastation and rubble were widely circulated on mobile phones, websites and emails. Most of my informants had heard of the story that after the tsunami no house remained bar the mosque, had seen pictures or had read the internet postings. In fact several mosques had withstood the tsunami in Aceh, pictures of which were circulated by news reports, blogs and army personnel (who had taken pictures from helicopters). The prevailing interpretation given was one of divine intervention. Only God could have made this possible and the fate of Aceh was seen as a reminder of the power of God.

In the last decade, catastrophes in the form of natural disasters have struck the Muslim world exceptionally hard. Earthquakes in Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, Indonesia as well as the tsunami in Southeast Asia have claimed countless lives, caused misery and raised one question for many Muslims: Why us? Muslims have been ostracised since 9/11 on a social level. The Palestine issue as well as Iranian nuclear endeavours and the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan have put a bloody and politically indelible mark on Muslims. Whenever I talked to my Malaysian interlocutors, I was told the story of the Aceh mosque, an image so powerful that it was reiterated again and again. One day I asked Ali
why he thought all this was happening, and why now. His answer, reflecting a common view, went something like this:

It is because Muslims are not following the true Islam anymore, they are becoming modern, influenced by the West, liberal and losing their way. Thus, God is punishing them for their lack of faith. However, he is not punishing good Muslims or their preachers. Just look, the mosque, [it] stands proud, untouched by nature.

Of course, the image is so powerful that no one asked about how the mosque was built or which materials had been used in comparison to the houses around it. This did not matter because the story operated as a myth to comfort and console that belief is not tainted by nature’s intervention and that God stands above nature.

The Islamic arts centre (more of which in chapter 4) in Shah Alam received a purportedly one-thousand-year-old copy of the Qur’an that was dispatched to them from Aceh two weeks prior to the tsunami. This too was interpreted as a sign that God intended his holy book to be rescued by the staff of the arts centre. The staff felt honoured that they had received this precious gift and have taken good care of the book. With it they are also ‘taking care to preserve the “true message” of Islam’, they told me. They have the copy on display (see Figure 3) with the DHL pouch it was delivered in to prove the arrival date and means of transport. The accompanying placard reads:

Received on the 10th and 14th December 2004 just before the cataclysmic Tsunami event which caused thousands of deaths in Banda Aceh. A sign that proves Allah s.w.t. [subhanahu wa ta’ala, most glorious and exalted] promise that he will protect the sanctity of His Book.

So upholding Islam is of the utmost importance in demonstrating belief and the inherent Islamicity of the political and social lifeworld, i.e. the experiential world around us. This becomes a special mission for special people. Malays are privileged as Malays by the Malaysian state and privileged as Muslims by God. In Malaysia both are de iure and intrinsically linked to each other.

Chinese Muslims

Upholding Islam is tested not just by nature, but also by the internal ‘other’. Chinese Muslims are a very small minority; only one per cent of Chinese
Malaysians are Muslim (Saw Swee-Hock, 2006: 21). However, their place in the Malaysian Muslim community is contested. Tabitha Frith has argued that when Malays confront the ‘not-so-other’ Chinese Muslim they suffer from ‘the most ontological insecurity’ (Frith, 2000: 129). This identity crisis is due to the conflation of Malayness and Islam in Malay identity. The issue of the construction of Chinese mosques in Malaysia serves as an interesting case in point. Hitherto no such mosques have existed. PERKIM (Muslim Welfare Organisation of Malaysia) and the muftis (jurisconsults) of Perlis have come out in support of such an endeavour, after the refusal of a building permit in Negeri Sembilan made the headlines. The politicking and obstacles this uncovered show how deeply religious identity in Malaysia is aligned with racial/ethnic identity. Indian mosques have a long tradition in Malaysia and Indian Muslims are a common sight. However, Chinese Muslims, whether converts or Muslims from China, are uncommon. The issue is exacerbated by the perception that Malayness is the opposite of Chineseness (Nagata, 1997: 99–100). Most Chinese Muslims are Chinese men or women who convert to marry Muslims in Malaysia. Tellingly, it has been in the supposedly most conservative Malay state of Kelantan and its ‘Islamic city’ capital of Kota Bharu that MACMA (Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association) is building a complex with a Chinese halal (permissible in Islam) food court and a Muslim education Centre.

Meanwhile in Kuala Lumpur a Chinese convert, Ghazali Koh, told me that all the Malay racial overtones of a Muslim identity in Malaysia are the result of a misplaced and misinterpreted Malay identity longing for authenticity and uniqueness. He, like many Muslim converts in Malaysia, is the product of a marriage conversion, but claims to find many scientific truths in the Qur’an that have made him a strong believer. He has subsequently studied the Qur’an and Islam enthusiastically. According to Malaysian Syariah laws, a Muslim can only marry another Muslim. Any non-Muslim marrying a Muslim has to convert to Islam before he or she can get married. Since murtad (apostasy) is virtually impossible, there is a steady trickle of converts embracing Islam in order to get married to their Muslim partners. Like many converts, be it to a new religion or ideology, Koh embraced wholeheartedly what he saw as the emancipatory politics of Islam, one of universalising equality, the great leveller of men and women of all backgrounds and futures.

On another occasion I attended a lecture by Hussein Yee, a Chinese Muslim ustaz, who reminded his predominantly middle-class Malay listeners of Muhammad’s ‘farewell sermon’, which is related via several Hadiths, in which Muhammad is said to have summarised his teachings. Yee said that
Muhammad's message was universal and that 'Islam was for all mankind, not just for you Arabs, not just for you Malays, Pakistanis or Indian Muslims.' Elements of Muhammad's sermon are disputed and seen as later additions, among them the call for equality between Muslims (Goldziher et al., 2006: 72, 98). However, in the context of Yee's lecture it is interesting to note how he placed himself as a convert into a tradition and attacked the Malay hegemony as 'owners' of Islam in Malaysia. Indeed, it is ironic that many new converts embrace Islam for the very values that are ultimately denied to them in the Malaysian context because of the intrinsic conflation of religious and ethnic identity and the subsequent discrimination, positive and negative.

This chapter has traced the relationship between Malayness and Islam that was set in motion by early conversions of Malay rulers and institutionalised under British colonial rule. The following chapter discusses how this disputed terrain of Malayness and Islam in everyday lives and politics is appropriated and controlled by the state and its agents.

Notes

1 Raffles reified and described Malays as 'one people, speaking one language, though spread over so wide a space, and preserving their character and customs, in all maritime states lying between the Sulu Seas and the Southern Ocean, and bounded longitudinally by Sumatra and the western side of Papua or New Guinea' (Raffles, 1818: 103).

2 In Malaysia, sultans of the federal states take turns in becoming Yang di-Pertuan Agong or supreme ruler, and therefore Malaysia's Head of State, for a five-year period on a rotational basis. The current Yang di-Pertuan Agong is the Sultan of Terengganu, Sultan Mizan Zainal Abidin.

3 Indeed, drawing on Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and their thesis of the invention of traditions, Kessler points out that the British monarchy with its invented pageantry and ceremonial performances was used as a blueprint to consciously 'traditionalise' the Malay monarchies (Kessler, 1992: 141). This made the Malay monarchies more European and therefore comprehensible to the British (Harper, 1999: 19).

4 Adat perpatih is a set of local customs of the Minang people who started emigrating from the Minangkabau heartland in central Sumatra to the West coast of the Malay peninsula around 500 years ago. It still operates in Negeri Sembilan and Naning in Melaka and is distinguished from other adat by its matrilineal descent. It has a continued relevance for its adherents and has managed to adapt and survive, albeit weakened in Negeri Sembilan (Peletz, 1988). Hadler, working in the Minangkabau heartland in West Sumatra, comes to similar conclusions.
regarding the resilience of *adat*: ‘the victorious buffalo of Minangkabau custom survived all challenges’ (Hadler, 2008: 180). In 2006 Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, the director of the Institute of the Malay World and Civilisation (ATMA) at the National University of Malaysia, organised Negeri Sembilan Persuakun Adat Perpatih Food & Cooking Festival, a major cultural and food festival to celebrate *adat perpatih*, which received media attention and approximately 8,000 visitors (Suzieana Uda Nagu, 2006).

5 The Asian financial crisis from 1997–99 affected almost every currency and economy in the ‘Tiger economies’ of Southeast Asia. Most countries took up International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans and agreed to structural adjustment packages that reshaped state policies and restructured their economies in the aftermath of the financial crisis. Malaysia did not, largely because Mahathir asserted himself over Anwar Ibrahim, his deputy, who was in favour of less government spending and of economic reforms. Mahathir prevailed by pegging the Malaysian Ringgit to the US Dollar. He kept on bailing out major Malaysian corporations with government funds and sacked Anwar from his cabinet in 1998 amidst alleged sodomy charges against him.

6 Scott talks about making a population legible (and easier to manipulate) for the state (Scott, 1998).

7 As to the success of the Malaysian state in subsuming them and winning elections see Shamsul (2004). For an historical analysis of the role of the census and the legacy of British influence for the making of racial categories in Malaysia, see Hirschmann (1986).

8 For a discussion on the *kampung* as a site of Islamic morality and the construction thereof in Malay literature, see Banks (1990).

9 The *Hikayat Patani* reports for the Malay Patani region ‘that the raja became a Muslim inasmuch as he gave up worshipping idols and eating pork; but apart from that he did not alter a single one of his heathen habits’ (Teeuw & Wyatt, 1970: 152). I thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing me to this rich resource.

10 Some scholars have argued that Islam was ‘only a thin, easily flaking glaze on the massive body of indigenous civilization’ (van Leur, 1955: 169) and that conversion did not mean giving up Hindu and pagan rituals (Gullick, 1965). In contrast, others have argued that Islam was the crucial transformative force that turned Malay society away from magic and myths towards rationality and reason (Al-Attas, 1969).

11 Hodgson circumvents this dualism by focusing on the Muslim aspiration of achieving a united Islamic civilisation, a process he terms the ‘venture of Islam’ (Hodgson, 1974).

12 See Varisco (2005) for a recent critique and unpacking of Geertz’s usage of Weber’s ideal and imagined types.
Religiosity came into general usage during the nineteenth century, when Britain was said to suffer from a decline of religiosity, a contested claim, for Brown shows that it was the imagined decline and threat of religion’s demise that spurred the last age of Puritanism from 1800–1963 (Brown, 2000).

Haris Ibrahim maintains several web presences. His Islamic attack on Muslim reactionaries can be found at http://www.accin-badailies.org/, his regular blog at http://harismibrahim.wordpress.com/

I thank Andrew Kingsford for drawing attention to this article, which seems the first academic mention of Islamicity.

I use discourse following Foucault who ascribed great importance to it: ‘In any society there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize, and constitute the social body and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated, nor implemented without the production, accumulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subject to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth’ (Foucault, 1980: 93).

Interesting in this context is also the debate over how far religion, unity of a religion and representation of a religion are the products of processes of recent reification, writing and reading processes. In the case of Islam the Orientalism of Western agents, scholars and writers is largely responsible for its reification. During the colonial period, when the European powers expanded their dominion across the globe, Islam was encountered and reported on, fetishised and reified (Bulliet, 1994; Dabashi, 2004a; b; Said, 1978). For a fascinating look at how this has affected Hinduism, see Pennington (2005). For a similar analysis of Chinese religion, see Feuchtwang (1991).

Indeed, Akbarzadeh goes as far as to state that ‘Islam is what Muslims make it to be’ (Akbarzadeh, 2006: 2).

For a critique of the espoused equality in Islam in textual sources, see Goldziher (2006).

Although Wansbrough and his students Crone and Cook have come under much criticism for their, often, radical stance on the historicity of the Qur’an, i.e. that it was compiled much later as a redaction and a revisionist account of the advent of Islam, their theses do point towards problems in the reliance on Islamic sources for the history of Islam and its most important and most revered texts.

Dakwah (‘calling’) is a term used to describe the Islamic revivalism starting in the 1970s; in the Malaysian context it is mainly concerned with missionary work among Muslims, to ‘invite’ Muslims back to Islam and enhance their Islamicity (Hussin Mutalib, 1990: 74)
22 For a discussion on the role of Chinese Muslims in Malaysian history, see Rosey Ma Wang (2003).

23 Most states have no provisions for apostasy, such as Selangor, whilst others allow it if a Syariah court decides to grant it. However, in most such states it is an offence to attempt to leave Islam in the first place. The only state that has allowed Muslims to change their religious status is Negeri Sembilan and all cases there were people who had converted to Islam recently to get married and were seeking or had finalized divorces from their Muslim spouses.

24 The relevant section of the farewell sermon as related by Ibn Hanbal: ‘All mankind is from Adam and Eve; an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor does a non-Arab have any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black, nor has a black any superiority over a white – except by piety and good action. Learn that every Muslim is a brother to every Muslim and that the Muslims constitute one brotherhood.’

25 See Rosey Ma Wang’s discussion on the reassertion of Chinese Muslim cultural heritage vis-à-vis Malay Muslim dominance in Malaysia (Rosey Ma Wang, 2005).
3. Ordered Spaces: Naming Places and Defining Boundaries

As the only Malay in an Indian family, Faris says, he is often approached by family members to apply for permits, loans and other government initiatives in which Malays get substantial savings or better rates. He says most of these forays are meant as a joke, although there is a sense of resentment that can boil over when someone is knocked back. He says he has never taken any handouts, because he sees the other side of the coin, where non-Malays with better grades do not get university scholarships or even places at public universities. But for all the positive discrimination there is the down side of religious policing hitting that is Malays the hardest. Once, he tells me, he was at a nightclub with friends and the police burst in for a raid and what they did was divide everyone inside into two groups: Muslims and non-Muslims. A few of his Muslim friends tried to mingle in the non-Muslim crowd and get out, but the ID check immediately identified Muslims from non-Muslims. One of his friends made it out though because he had applied to change his name under a now defunct law. Changing his name from a Muslim sounding one to a Christian one made detection harder, as previous ID cards carried no religious identification, while the new ones clearly state what religion the holder is. The name change saved his friend a lot of trouble that night. However, the loophole is closed and the religious authorities have an easier time pursuing ‘deviants’.

Malayness and Islam have come to bear on identity and identity politics as outlined in the previous chapter. They are also integral to understanding space, as it is lived in, inhabited and occupied, in Malaysia. These are public and private spaces that are full of symbols, signifiers and, I will argue, Islamicity. This chapter is an interrogation of the public space in Malaysia and what role race and religion, i.e. Malayness and Islam, play in it.
The state is a key actor in the public space as it seeks to control and inscribe it with meaning. I demonstrate this by using the government project of Islam hadhari as an example. The state may be the key actor, but there are a range of actors who are part of the state, yet who either act of their own accord or are not subject to stringent government control. I have alluded to the difficulties in identifying and defining the state in chapter 1. The state is a contested terrain. Islamic bureaucracies are an example of agents of the state, which often act on their own choosing. The state has had the most lasting and visible effect on Islamic space in the physical manifested space of the city, and I take Putrajaya and Kota Bharu as examples of Islamicised spaces. This is a jumping off point to enter the world of politics and law, which are the driving forces in Islamicising conceived and lived spaces, i.e. the spaces that are imagined and experienced.

Islamicity and Islamic space

These imagined and experienced spaces are part of Lefebvre’s (1991) triple dialectic of space (see chapter 1). I now want to turn to Islamic space. The Islamic space this chapter deals with is primarily the conceived space as it is articulated by the state institutions, its planners and executives. Politics and the state are the prime movers in conceiving and shaping Islamic space in Malaysia at present and their ascent to dominance has been a steady one, stretching far back in rudimentary form to the founding Islamic sultanate of Malacca, where Islam was first instituted as the state religion. Its codification and elaboration was aided and manifested by the British in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At that time, Malay society was transformed profoundly in religious, political and economic terms (Khoo Kay Kim, 1972; Milner, 1995). This process was to have a lasting effect on the way Islam is infused within the state structures at all levels (Harper, 1999; Kahn, 2006; Milner, 1982). Malay adat was largely sidelined, based on the British Indian experience, and the subsequent codification of laws was based on the belief that Muslims here as there were ‘unheretical members of some idealized and uniform civilisation’ (Ellen, 1983: 51). This allowed the British to deal with people in racial categories, which were based largely on religio-ethnic categories. Malays being Muslims, most Indians being Hindu and Chinese split between Buddhist and Christian. This racialised field of identity politics has remained powerful in shaping the conceived space people live in.
Racial and religious spaces

The domination of public space and thus abstract or conceived space is extended in the domination and reordering of what Lefebvre (1991: 49) calls the ‘formal relationships’ in which abstract space functions.

Figure 4 Putra mosque, Putrajaya
Ordered Spaces: Naming Places and Defining Boundaries

5. Prime Minister’s residence, Putrajaya

In *spatial practice*, the reproduction of social relations is predominant. The *representation of space*, in thrall to both knowledge and power, leaves only the narrowest leeway to *representational spaces*, which are limited to works, images and memories whose content, whether sensory, sensual or sexual, is so far displaced that it barely achieves symbolic force (Lefebvre, 1991: 50).

Nowhere is this more evident than in the new administrative capital of Putrajaya, which has been filled with various stages of Islamic architecture celebrating the golden ages of Islamic civilisations. Figure 4 depicts Putra mosque at the heart of Putrajaya with its eclectic Islamic influences ranging from Persian gates to an Iraqi minaret, laden with symbolic meanings – for instance the minaret has five tiers to represent the five pillars of Islam. Figure 5 shows the Perdana Putra (Prime Minister’s office) with its green domes, symbolising both Islamic architecture and the colour of Islam. The most striking architectural elements of Putrajaya are Middle Eastern in origin (King, 2007) and this creates a link between Malaysia and its role within the Islamic world as a new leader and worthy successor to past glorious Islamic civilisations.

**Figure 5** Prime Minister’s residence, Putrajaya
Putrajaya was the brainchild of former Prime Minister Mahathir. His plan was to relocate the administration and civil service from the congested Kuala Lumpur. This has largely worked, especially with the affordable housing for low level civil servants in Putrajaya that has improved their living conditions. The town itself was founded in 1995 and continues to grow with the opening of new housing developments and the relocation of government offices. Putrajaya is located around a meandering lake and enjoys many green spaces. West of Putrajaya is another planned city, Cyberjaya, which accommodates high tech companies, and educational and research and development facilities. Both were built on former rubber plantations that are about half way between Kuala Lumpur and the new international airport. The conceived space, in Lefebvre’s terminology, of Putrajaya is one on a spatial planning level, which is as Scott (1998) has shown for the urban planning of the expansive open spaces or plazas in Brasilia often in little relation to lived space:

The plaza is best seen . . . from the air.
This plaza is a symbolic center for the state; the only activity that goes on around it is the work of the ministries (Scott, 1998: 121).

Informal public space is physically erased from the spatial outlay. Putrajaya lacks this space and it will take time for tactics to evolve to recapture it. Another aspect of Putrajaya is its residential zones that are supposed to emulate a kampung lifestyle, social and moral, with houses grouped together and with communal back (and front) yards to foster a ‘kampung social organisation’ (Bunnell, 2002: 1695f). The state wanted to create a modern and urban kampung.

The whole debate around rural versus urban and kampung versus the city has been challenged and unpacked to show that these interpretations offer no understanding of either locality nor do they further any analysis such as this. For, as Kahn (1992) and Thompson (2004) have shown, the kampung can be used as a modernising agent and the kampung is already a socially urban space. Thompson proclaims:

This is not to say that social life in Sungai Siputeh [a Malay kampung] is just like Kuala Lumpur or Penang, or for that matter Tokyo or New York. However, in important ways, it is perhaps more like the social life of such urban centres than it is like the imagined rural idyll that appears in official discourse, everyday narratives and even some academic writing (Thompson, 2004: 2372).
Just as Putrajaya expounds the government’s vision of the nation, other places are replicating ethnic and cultural spaces. Examples include the Kuala Lumpur central market. The central market in the heart of Kuala Lumpur used to be a wet market before it was transformed into a *pasar budaya* (cultural market) for tourism in the mid 1980s. Since then it has sold Malaysian arts and crafts. It was re-zoned in 2006 into three laneways for cultural souvenirs. Shops in the three lanes sold specific items relating to its lane’s theme. The themes were: Chinese, Indian and Malay, thus replicating the broad ethnic make-up of Malaysia. This move ties in with the Malaysian tourism credo of ‘unity in diversity’ that also displays the tri-cultural ethnic make-up of Malaysia (Hoffstaedter, 2008). It also replicates ethnicity as defined by contemporary Malaysian political reality, in so far as the three main constituents of the National Front coalition are based on these three ethnic groups. This zoning conveniently puts people into groups based on ethnicity and represents them and their heritage as bounded entities. As Sumit Mandal, a Malaysian academic and cultural commentator notes, such zoning spuriously reproduces uniform and homogeneous ethnic and cultural entities, ‘especially in the light of excluding others such as West Malaysian *Orang Asli*, Chindians [Chinese Indians], Eurasians, and many others’ (Mandal in Surin, 2006b).

Furthermore, residential buildings and new developments are projecting ethnicity in Malaysia. One such example I came across was a new development in Pahang, in the east of the Malaysian peninsula. Zenith Aim, the developers, created ‘the first multicultural themed commercial square built in Malaysia’ (Zenith AIM, 2006). According to its website and newspaper advertisements:

*Putra Square* is a multi-function development, unique on the east coast of Malaysia, in its provision of very lastest [sic] multimedia technology facilities. The complex is listed as 4th National high-tech City. It features a hotel, convention centre, office tower and a multicultural themed shopping mall.

The four shopping alleys are Construction Alley, Malay Alley, Chinese Alley, Indian Alley. Each alley provides an individual character to suite [sic] the discerning shopper. The Bazaar Malaysian provides an extra rewarding to our visitors.

The first multicultural [sic] themed commercial square built in Malaysia.

Live here with the people and cultures that make Malaysia the great country that it is today, while still enjoying, through the excellent facilities, the differences that make life so meaningful. Take advantage of the diverse cultural experiences here and it will enrich your life. Your life
will change forever after you have been exposed to the wealth of different cultures found here (Zenith AIM, 2006).

The underlying logic of the ordering of these spaces along racial lines is that it reflects in some ways the nation and thus the small development represents a miniature version of Malaysia. Of course, there is also the inherent belief that the image or simulacrum represented is good and worthy of a replication in miniature. It is meant to ‘enrich one’s life’ with the cultural infusions, a concept I have previously critiqued in the less opaque replication of a Malay-centric idea of the multicultural nation in the cultural theme park ‘Taman Mini Malaysia’ in Melaka (Hoffstaedter, 2008). What Putra Square is also attempting is to bring together modernity (‘multimedia technology’, ‘high-tech city’) and culture (the ethnic themes). This seems to suggest that culture and modernity are seen as antithetical and the latter needs to be protected and maintained with clear zoning arrangements so that each culture retains its perceived purity and difference. Cultures are seen to co-exist, in a multicultural model reminiscent of the 1990s, which saw cultures as bounded entities that ought to be accorded group-differentiated rights and identities (Kymlicka, 1995). This view and its reiteration through a material form, in this case an entire streetscape, act to reinforce the image of Malaysia as a tri-cultural country, where cultures live side by side and do not exist as part of each other in a fluid melange.

The Islamic city

The representation of Putrajaya as an Islamic city is primarily through its architecture. However, Islam itself is considered an urban religion and according to some Western scholarly opinion most *kampungs* could be termed Islamic cities, for they have a mosque, a market and a public bath (Abu-Lughod, 1987). Abu-Lughod’s definition is based on French scholarship on the Middle East and thus bears little resemblance to Malaysian villages or towns. However, running water or a stream may fill in for the public bath and so we have Malaysian Islamic cities galore. Thus, we are presented with a real problem as to what constitutes an Islamic city or what makes a city ‘Islamic’ (see Hourani & Stern, 1970). Raymond cautions:

For the time being, it is wise to resort to the notion of a traditional city marked by “regional” aspects (Arab in the Mediterranean domain,
Ordered Spaces: Naming Places and Defining Boundaries

Irano–Afghan and Turkish), but naturally fashioned in depth by the Muslim population that organized it and lived in it (with its beliefs, institutions, and customs, all profoundly impregnated with Islam) (Raymond, 1994: 18).

The Muslim population has a crucial role to play in infusing such an Islamic city with Islamicity. In the 1970s and 1980s new housing estates and satellite cities that are now part of the urban sprawl around Kuala Lumpur and elsewhere became important sites for the Malay middle class to imprint Islam on their newly built neighbourhoods as well as forge a common Islamic identity based around their local surau (prayer room/house):

Mainly as a result of educational and proselytizing activities of reform minded surau-based groups and individual ulamak, there emerged in Bandar Baru Bangi Malay-Muslims who were forward looking, present-orientated, and who were constantly striving to bring common Malay-Muslim identity to a higher level of Islamicity (Zaleha Hassan, 2001: 136).

The state has taken a more active role in sponsoring the building of mosques and surau in new developments since then. A milestone of the Islamisation process was the naming of Kota Bharu as ‘Islamic City’ in 2005 by the Kelantanese Chief Minister and PAS spiritual leader Nik Aziz. This created a visible signifier, making it more distinctively Islamic and legible as such (see Scott, 1998). The proclamation attracted national press coverage, new billboards declaring its new Islamic status were put up all over Kota Bharu and an exhibition in the state museum, which highlights its Islamic credentials, was installed. Kota Bharu is the capital of the state of Kelantan in the northeast of the Malay peninsula. Although it is the biggest city on the east coast, it retains the character of a sleepy rural township far removed from the hustle and bustle of other Malaysian cities like Kuala Lumpur or Penang.

Kelantan is the only state in Malaysia that is governed by PAS exclusively and it has enacted numerous Islamic laws for its citizens. Kelantan thus observes Friday as the weekly day off with most offices and banks closing on Thursday afternoon and opening again on Saturday, to allow the predominantly Muslim Malay inhabitants (around ninety-five percent) to attend Friday congregational prayers. Most shops remain open, although trade does slow down over Friday. Shops and market stalls tend to be staffed by women who do not have to attend Friday prayers. So what makes a city like Kota Bharu
Modern Muslim Identities

Islamic? According to the local and regional inflections of Islam and Malay culture, as interpreted and institutionalised by PAS, it is the adherence to the five tenets of charity, cleanliness, peacefulness, knowledge and obedience. As an information board in the State museum reads:

The philosophy and concepts used in the building of Kota Bharu, The Islamic City, [are] basically based on Al-Qur’an and As-Sunnah. These are to ensure the survival of five substances of human needs: religion, life, mind, progeny and possessions.

Its implementation, however, has irked some people, as the main Islamic tenets that regularly get reviewed and enacted are those policing morality in the city, such as a ban on indecent and ‘sexy’ clothing for women (Zulkifle & McIntyre, 2006). This is certainly the case in Malaysia, where urban areas are generally more heavily morally policed than rural areas, where Islam is less controlled and most diverse and heterogeneous.4

The political centre (Kuala Lumpur) tends to react against these PAS imposed religious edicts and I was often told by friends in Kuala Lumpur that Kelantan was a ‘special case’ and as such did not warrant much attention. Muslims there were seen as different and the gesturing of PAS was seen as just that, political moves to incense its political rivals UMNO. Indeed, in Kota Bharu itself, the strictness of PAS-proclaimed bans was questionable.

Once, I was queuing at a checkout line in a stationery store in the centre of Kota Bharu, when I noticed little signs above the checkout counter, signalling that the queue I was in was for women only. I felt embarrassed at having not seen these signs earlier and quickly moved to a line for men-only. I looked around and it seemed like no-one had noticed. Then, a woman started queuing behind me. I was at a loss at what to do, should I tell her about the rules, surely she had to know, or was it allowed for women to join men only checkouts but not vice versa? I was confused and felt strangely uncomfortable with a woman in such close proximity. To make matters more confusing, I noticed that the checkout clerk at the ‘women only’ checkout was a man! I broached the subject with some informants over a (non-alcoholic) drink later that day and they reassured me that the signs were a political move and only seen in large stores where this sort of gender segregation was possible. ‘Clearly a small shop will only have one till!’, said one. For all the rules and political gestures, life in everyday interactions remains fluid and highly ambivalent.
Policing Islam: controlling Islam

As spaces become ordered according to ethnic politics and religious doctrine, views and interpretation, it is important to shift the focus now onto the mechanisms, past and present, used to control these spaces. This section takes a wide historical look at the genealogy of one of the key concepts in legal opinions about Islamic doctrine and practice, *ijtihad* (individual reasoning). It is important for the current state of affairs to take in an, albeit short, look at the complicated relationship between individual freedoms awarded to and blind faith demanded from Muslims. The latter is currently in high demand and the question is: who is able to control Islam and thus have power over Muslims?

**The demise of ijtihad**

With the slow fading away of the practice of *ijtihad* in the Muslim world, the state and religious authorities have gained a monopoly on shaping religious understanding and making its policy (Schacht, 1964). Individual reasoning is discouraged by the *ulama* or clergy and the state and its agents as it spreads otherness within a group or even dissension from this group.

The role of *ijtihad* in Mecca and Medina at the time of Muhammad was one of prominence and importance. Al-Umari (1991) recounts a story to this effect. During the time of Muhammad, Khalid ibn al Walid was sent to invite people south of Mecca to Islam. Prior to the Battle of Hunayn, he set off with a 350-man expedition. Owing to linguistic problems, the people he encountered could not articulate to him that they had already converted to Islam and he subsequently killed some of them and took others as prisoners. Upon the expedition’s return, the matter was brought before Muhammad, who immediately distanced himself from Khalid’s actions. However, Muhammad ‘did not punish him or demote him from his position of leadership in the army, because he had made *ijtihad* and had blundered’ (al-Umari, 1991: 172). Thus the practice of *ijtihad* was of utmost importance for Muslims and even if horrendous actions were based on it, the fact that one had practised it and followed one’s inner deliberations sufficed to show good intent and good faith. Throughout the centuries after Muhammad’s death the ‘exercise of such effort (*ijtihad*) became an obligation upon the entire community’ (Waines, 2003: 76). There was no sin attached to it, even if one
was wrong; reward in the afterlife was secured for following the instruction to apply *ijtihad*.

Over the years an elaboration of Islamic law and with it that of *ijtihad* took place. The theory, expounded by Muhammad, had become common practice. Until sometime in the tenth century this held true. Then something changed and the role of *ijtihad* was reversed. Whereas before it was seen as an honourable and good thing to practise *ijtihad*, the tide turned and the practice fell into decline and irrelevance. This time is often referred to as the ‘closing of the doors of *ijtihad*’ or the ‘closure of the gates of *ijtihad*’. This occurred at a time when Islamic law, *Syariah*, was becoming ever more professionalised and a general consolidation took place. The earlier creation and spreading of law schools was generally followed by a scaling down of discourse and the establishment of a framework for *Syariah* (Anderson, 1957: 16). Thus the law ‘schools had de facto created a law syndicate and had monopolised Islamic orthodoxy by even agreeing to disagree on contentious issues’ (Anderson, 1957: 16). The jurist ash-Shafi’i had bridged many schisms in the ninth century with his ‘doctrine of abrogation’ and furthered the centralisation of Islamic jurisprudence. Two centuries later many members of the *ulama* and the ruling elite, the Caliph and sultans, might have wished to perpetuate the status quo, which was still the golden age of Islam, by making the then contemporary eternal, by closing the gates of *ijtihad*. Thus Islamic law can be seen to become the victim of its own inventive methodology. The mysticism which began to surround *ijtihad* prevented further practice, aided by a demonisation of those who did not comply. All this was part of the sacralisation of the golden age of Islam. This conscious act could also have been intended to forge unity among the increasingly dispersed *ummah*. For a growing disparity of Islamic traditions and interpretations was threatening to break up the Muslim empire internally.

Increasingly the ‘otherness’ of converted people and their traditions and customs could no longer be bridged by the sheer force of Islam. This, linked with the gradual disintegration of the Abbasid Empire and the fall of Baghdad in the tenth century, left Islam politically in a crisis. It may have been the wish of the *ulama* to cease further practice of *ijtihad* until Islam was once again strong enough to reassert itself politically. Theologically many believed that all major problems and issues had been dealt with by the eminent jurists of Islam’s first four hundred years and their interpretations ought to reign supreme forever. Therefore the practice of *ijtihad* had to cease, for it would only muddle up the order that had been created. Others saw not the ‘gates of *ijtihad*’
but the ‘gate of judgeship’ closed, for the number of mujtahids, those jurists who were qualified to practice *ijtihad*, had drastically declined and therefore the practitioners, not the practise, were disappearing (Hallaq, 1997: 243). According to Hallaq (1984) this process took place between the twelfth century and the sixteenth century. In order to account for such a drastic change in practice, Hallaq argued, the gates of *ijtihad* as well as their closure were invented by the ulama to allow the law schools to fully attain and maintain authority (see Hobsbawm, 1983).6

Beyond the role of *ijtihad* the ulama have performed the role of gatekeepers of religious interpretation (*Deutung*) as a whole. The ulama ‘guarded the Word as text’ (Gilsenan, 1982: 31). They acquired authority from textualising and transforming the word into text and making it accessible to believers. This can result in a multiplicity of texts and a multiplicity of meanings and readings of the text. Thus, followers had a degree of choice as to who they would follow. However, in Malaysia today most aspects of religious interpretation are controlled and strict codes enforced by the state Islamic authorities.

**Institutionalising Islam**

The state attempts to impose its desired form of Islam. However, the government as the most powerful part of the state does not have the legitimacy or the power to simply enforce its Islamic vision. In Malaysia the federal structure
decrees that the individual states have the power to enact legislation with regards to Islam. The sultan is the head of Islam and as such the final authority in his state. Before legislation reaches him, it goes through an advisory council on religion (Majlis agama Islam), which is made up of notable scholars, jurists, officers from the state’s Islamic affairs department (Jabatan agama Islam) and the state mufti presides (see Figure 6). This structure is mirrored on a federal level where the Yang di-Pertuan Agong takes responsibility and authority over all states that do not have a sultan, which includes Melaka, Penang, Sabah, Sarawak, and the three federal territories of Labuan, Putrajaya and Kuala Lumpur (see Figure 7).

JAKIM is a part of the Prime Minister’s department and has been used by the government to identify and contain non-orthodox Islamic groups (Riddell, 2001: 264). The state religious departments, however, operate in a power and interest vacuum vis-à-vis the central state bureaucracy and the government. The power of these religious authorities is largely derived from the monopoly they hold over the interpretation of and policing of doctrinal Islam in Malaysia. The government increasingly finds it difficult to keep some of their actions in check. The elite, who have partly contributed to the rise of these institutions to appease the growing dissent of traditional and conservative Muslims in Malaysia, are not particularly interested in what they do and how they go about their business. Class still plays a significant yet largely unseen and untold role in Malaysia, where the elite have successfully used

![Figure 7](image_url)
race, ethnicity and religion as dividing forces, to segment social movements and contain them. In order to do so, the boundaries of identities have to be maintained and policed. Gilsenan notes that

\[
\ldots \text{displacement is part of the overall process whereby certain classes and groups that are politically and economically dominant in society legitimize a form of religion that increasingly relates to a specifically class view of how Islam is to be defined, practiced, studied, taught, and authorized. This will be the “real” and legitimate Islam, which will be sanctified by its concentration in shrines of modern study and display (Gilsenan, 1982: 211).}
\]

Thus, the elite fashion a ‘real’ Islam or authoritative Islam, which is nonetheless internally contested. The syncretic Islam of the first wave of Islamisation and conversion beginning in the twelfth century has given way to scriptualist and modernist notions, based on the Islamic revival from the nineteenth century onwards to the most recent wave of Islamisation in the 1970s. The contestations over which Islam is allowed and which is not prompt tensions and a struggle for power. Teaching or following so-called deviant interpretations can be seen as a national security threat and thus can lead to heavy-handed police action and incarceration under the ISA (Internal Security Act).

**Policing Islamic deviance**

This was the case with Al-Arqam, a Sufi-revivalist movement, which was run by Ashaari in the 1980s and early 1990s and finally disbanded by the government in 1994, with some of its members arrested and interned under the ISA. This harsh treatment of a hitherto respected *dakwah* organisation caused outcries and confusion as to what the government’s, above all the Prime Minister at the time, Mahathir’s, policy towards Islamic revivalism actually was. Al-Arqam and Ashaari’s followers wanted a deep transformation of society towards Islamic nostalgic and/or utopian ideals, which stood in direct opposition to what Muhammed Syukri Salleh (1994: 109) calls ‘pseudo-Islamisation’, a version that focuses on the ‘institutional and ceremonial level’ of the state and society, which Mahathir and after him Badawi have been pursuing. Al-Arqam’s founder Ashaari followed the Salafi (‘righteous ancestors’) movement and wanted to return to the roots of Islam and create an Islamic state of mind in the people, then extend this to villages and ultimately the state (Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, 1998: 267–268). This
philosophy was not often voiced for fear of government reaction, but was in fact Ashaari’s long-term strategy. The apolitical outward appearance and inward-looking set-up facilitated a positive media image most of the time. However, increasingly Al-Arqam’s attempts at creating a state within the state along ethnic lines for Muslim Malays displayed a clear anti-UMNO, anti-co-option, anti-inclusion of other ethnic groups sentiment and the assertion of a Malay/Muslim supremacy (Nagata, 1984: 191). These notions were actively exaggerated by the government, although Ashaari claimed that Buddhists and other ethnic groups were involved in Al-Arqam business activities and free to join. Yet such chauvinistic associations were disdained by Chinese and Indians, who were increasingly becoming important swing voters and a basis for UMNO’s political power.

At the same time Ashaari allegedly also stated that he would be the next Malaysian Prime Minister and plans for an Islamic utopian state, spanning the South East Asian archipelago, surfaced (Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, 1998: 209). Such hubris was new to a political system where there are many parties, but where UMNO always rules. All these statements came a year prior to the elections and Ashaari seemed to challenge the ruling elites in the wake of his entry into the political forum. Calling the governing elites ‘thieves and robbers’ certainly caused a stir and did not help his cause (Shenon, 1994: 4). The government was shocked at the new face Al-Arqam was showing and revised their strategy. Simultaneously Al-Arqam had secured some high-profile conversions of politicians, especially UMNO members, and civil servants. Around seven thousand government employees were said to have joined Al-Arqam, sparking worries about an internal threat of a long march through the institutions.10 The government responded with threats of disciplinary action against civil servants if they did not quit Al-Arqam. Mahathir was becoming increasingly concerned about his hold on power (Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, 1998: 248). The elections were also approaching – they were finally called for 1995 – and Al-Arqam deemed themselves ready to move their struggle for an Islamic society to the state level (Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, 1998: 268). Before ‘coming out’ into the political domain Al-Arqam had used their well-placed contacts, informants and insiders to modify and soften its ‘militant anti-government policies’ (Nagata, 1984: 151). However, although the penetration of government and the civil service in particular was apparent, the reason was not because the Al-Arqam leadership was actively trying to undermine the existing regime, but because so many civil servants had become disillusioned with the government’s Islamisation policies and had
joined Al-Arqam. Thus, Camroux (1996: 864) suggests that the main reason for Al-Arqam’s ban was their appeal to the Malay urban professionals, and others affirm that ‘in Darul Arqam probably lay a nascent yet autonomous and dissenting Malay middle-class’ (Maznah Mohamad, 2001).

The government needed a more clearly stated offence by Al-Arqam to clamp down on them and found it in a veiled military threat. Rumours about a militia trained in southern Thailand, ready to infiltrate Malaysia, circulated and there was even talk of a ‘suicide army’ (Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, 1998: 227). Malaysia’s Minister for Religious Affairs, Othman, quickly called Al-Arqam the biggest security threat to the Malaysian state since the communist insurgency. It is interesting to note that most of these allegations came from the state-run Islamic councils. No proof was ever brought forward. In fact, the whole rumour was based on a single photograph of people wearing Al-Arqam robes and holding guns. Yet these allegations sufficed to use the ISA to intern Al-Arqam members.

Another government strategy to subdue Islamic competition is to pursue what they see as deviant sects through religious juridical proceedings under Malaysian Syariah laws. Policing through the court system has increased and has become a ‘first line of defence’ of state-controlled Islamic orthodoxy in Malaysia (Peletz, 2002). Apostasy laws have been used to persecute dissenting opinions. Charfi shows that the ruling elites have used apostasy as a political tool to curb dissent, and opposition to their position and their version of Islam, throughout Islamic history (2005: 51). Furthermore Charfi asserts that the often violent repression of dissension contributed to the ultimate decline of the Muslim world as it stifled progress and innovation. Ayah Pin (literally father Pin) and his now infamous teapot sect is such a case amongst many in Malaysia. Ayah Pin is the self-assumed identity of Ariffin Mohamed, who claimed to be an incarnation of several religious figures, amongst them Jesus and Muhammad. He assembled around him a group of followers in a small settlement in Terengganu where he built a giant teapot, to symbolise the purity of water, a giant umbrella and other colourful buildings. This settlement was known as ‘sky kingdom’ and he as king of the sky. Fatwas (Islamic legal opinions) outlawing Ayah Pin and his group as deviants have been issued in Terengganu, Selangor and Melaka, meaning that he is wanted in these states and no followers may practise their beliefs there. The mufti departments of Malaysian states issue fatwas decreeing certain practices and groups as deviant, and this becomes law as soon as it is gazetted by the sultan of the state. The fatwas thus present an
independent law-making complex that can outlaw aspiring religious groups, individuals and their practices.

The fatwas issued against Ayah Pin were based on a series of allegations against Ayah Pin culminating in his claim to be God and his eventual renunciation of Islam in 2002. He has since fled to neighbouring Thailand. However, some of his followers are standing trial in Terengganu in the Islamic courts. The group’s sky kingdom commune in Terengganu was demolished and although there are reports of some followers still living in the vicinity, the group has been disbanded. Their demise came not only at the hands of the Islamic law apparatus, but was aided by local vigilantes who attacked the commune the day before state officials came to demolish the complex. These seeming impromptu outbursts or threats of violence and reprisals against inside ‘others’, i.e. others who are on the boundaries of identities, be they ethnic or religious, have become more pronounced and commonplace.11 In the case of the sky kingdom the fact that the group was made up predominantly of Malay Muslims made their action all the more problematic, as they were seen as traitors by some fellow Muslims for ‘letting down’ their religious community, which quickly saw sky kingdom members brandmarked as apostates and thus formally outsiders of the Muslim ummah on one level and the Malay community on another.

The rise of fatwas to determine who is in and who is out, what is right and what is wrong, relates to the role of ijtihad. It must be noted that ijtihad is not always a tool of progress and moderation, seeing that the Iranian mullahs and Saudi Wahhabis also want it back (Roy, 2007: 49). Indeed, it can lead to ‘tinkering’ and be misused by preachers (Roy, 1994: 103–104). In Malaysia, Badawi declared that opening the doors of ijtihad was a vital step forward to progress, especially for his Islam hadhari, or civilisational Islam. However, with less and less debate open and allowed, any internal resistance or even challenge to the norms has been made more difficult.

Thus, after the closing of the gates of ijtihad and the consolidation of textual interpretation, belief was less and less a matter of personal reflection and interpretation, and more and more about consuming faith from a religious authority in blind faith or taqlid (Alatas, 1979). Reflexivity on a range of issues was and continues to be deemed blasphemous by the ulama and the state. The Satanic Verses controversy stands out as an example of a Muslim being reprimanded with utmost severity for talking about Islam in a non-sanctioned way. There are numerous examples where questioning a tenet
of Islam, a surah’s (chapter of the Qur’an) interpretation or even a political stance can result in heavy penalties. By deeming such actions blasphemous the authorities, be they an imam, a religious savant with respect in the community or a government official with religious training, can easily crack down on and stifle any attempts to debate, talk about or even just question any part of Islamic doctrine. The fines in Malaysia can vary from state to state. For the federal territories and Selangor the Syariah law states:

4. (1) Any person who teaches or expounds in any place, whether private or public, any doctrine or performs any ceremony or act relating to the religion of Islam shall, if such doctrine or ceremony or act is contrary to Islamic Law or any fatwa for the time being in force in the Federal Territories, be guilty of an offence and shall on conviction be liable to a fine not exceeding five thousand ringgit or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years or to whipping not exceeding six strokes or to any combination thereof (Malaysia, 2006).

The penalties act as a threat against and a containment of Islamic counter-hegemonic discourses and ideas, and foster blind faith in the state-sponsored akidah (creed).

In the early twentieth century the ‘dog spittle debate’ about whether the heir apparent and younger brother of the Kelantanese sultan could keep dogs or not raged in Malaysia, attracting large crowds to public meetings. The debate centred on the degree of ritual pollution of dog saliva. The two camps that emerged illustrate the conflict over authority within the ummah at large at the beginning of the twentieth century. On the one side were the modernists (under Sufi and Wahhabi influences) and on the other the established ulama (Islamic learned class) (Roff, 1983). Today such open debate would be unthinkable. Indeed, this issue has been firmly codified now in the popular consciousness in that most Malays will stay away from dogs and some are afraid to touch them, because they fear God’s punishment. Zariah, a ten year old girl, had been taught by her ustaz (religious teacher) in Islam classes that touching dogs would engender God’s wrath on judgement day. Thus, she and her friends would not touch a dog. However, Zariah’s family, uncommonly for a Malay family, kept a dog. Although the dog was kept outside the house, the children did see and interact with it, but were afraid to touch it. They wanted to play with the dog, and take it for a walk, but they required me to put the leash on its collar, for they claimed that they could hold the leash, just not touch the dog. On one occasion I brought Zariah to the local surau for
her Islam lesson, with the dog in tow. After the lesson she informed me that the *ustaz* had threatened to exclude her from class if she touched the dog. Likewise, when I watched the film *Gubra*, a love story between a Chinese man and a Malay woman, in the cinema the mainly Malay audience gasped loudly at one scene in which an *ustaz* picks up a sleeping dog on the road and carries it to the side of the road. I was told that this scene was highly unlikely in real life and actually offended them, because it offended Islam. The association of a symbol of Islam, in the form of the *ustaz*, with something seemingly universally accepted as *haram* (forbidden in Islam) was seen to belittle their religion.

This conservative attitude is driving a consolidation of a conformist and statist Islam in Malaysia. Coupled with that is a transferral of cultural capital from Malay supremacy to Islamic supremacy. For the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar, Islam was seen as a ‘powerful tool for asserting Malay rights, rather than being an end in itself’ (Riddell, 2001: 242). Thus, the Malay rights movement was equated with the *ummah*, ethnicising and re-rooting an otherwise universalising term (Riddell, 2001: 241–242). Malay supremacy is based upon the informal social contract at the time of independence whereby Malays were given special rights in exchange for citizenship for Chinese and Indians. Thus, today both Malay and Islamic supremacy have been equated with each other and conflated into one. Since Malays are still portrayed as disadvantaged economically, at least by the government and a number of Malay civil society groups, there remains a perceived need for a remedy and further protection.

**Talking about discrimination**

The continuing silencing of alternate voices in this regard is telling. In 2006 the independent research institute Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS), which in turn is run by the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (ASLI), issued a lengthy report titled ‘Corporate Equity Distribution: Past Trends and Future Policy’ on *bumiputera* equity holding in Malaysia. The government’s target under the New Economic Policy and the following affirmative action programmes such as the New Development Policy is for *bumiputera* to achieve 30% of equity in the Malaysian economy and it claims that the figure is at 18.9%. The Economic and Planning Unit, a part of the Prime Minister’s office, is tasked with computing these figures. CPPS used a different way of calculating the equity share, they included 70% of government-linked
companies, and thus came up with a significantly higher figure of 45%. The government and its allies could hardly contain their outrage and issued a string of statements, in which they first and foremost chided ASLI for allowing the seed of mistrust in the government figures to be implanted and fester in the minds of Malaysians. Badawi warned all parties to stop the debate about the NEP and bumiputera equity as it involved accusations against the government (Malaysiakini, 2006). Khairy Jamluddin, Badawi’s son-in-law and UMNO Youth deputy head, put it thus:

Let’s not draw up a report that triggers anger (among many people) and then simply concede to having made mistakes. The damage is done already (quoted in Fauwaz Abdul Aziz, 2006a).

Angry dismissals of the CPPS findings were followed by revelations of the government’s methodology of computing equity numbers, but no change in government policy. The CPPS director Lim Teck Ghee had only a couple of months prior to this study given a plenary keynote address to the Malaysian Studies Conference on ‘Development: The Unfinished Agenda’, in which he outlined the need for a decisive agenda to address poverty across the racial divides, which was reiterated in this report. He had put his reputation and job on the line to demystify further the need for economic crutches for Malays as a racial group. The CPPS report was later retracted by ASLI president Mirzan Mahathir, former Prime Minister Mahathir’s son, due to what he called ‘flaws in the methodology’. Lim Teck Ghee resigned in protest.

Race and religion continue to feature in and determine Malaysian politics. The only viable alternative in the last couple of decades was the opposition movement Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front) which fielded candidates for the 1999 and 2004 elections. In 2008 it came together under a new banner of Pakatan Rakyat or the People’s Alliance and was comprised of socialists, Islamists (PAS), DAP and the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar’s Parti Keadilan Rakyat or People’s Justice Party (PKR). It had been the perceived incompatibility between the Chinese-dominated secular DAP and the Islamist Malay PAS which in 2004 had caused a major rift on religious grounds. PAS would not renounce their position on making Malaysia an Islamic state (although they had left this out of the 1999 Barisan Alternatif manifesto), which led to dissent and mistrust along religious lines during the 2004 elections. The parties then went their separate ways and the movement was, for the time being, contained (see Lee Hock Guan, 2003: 190–191).
However, the parties reconvened and caused a stunning election upset in March 2008, which saw the opposition coalition *Pakatan Rakyat* take control of five state governments (Perak remains contested after three defections and several court cases) and diminish the ruling coalition’s two thirds majority on a federal level. Subsequently, the ousted UMNO Selangor Chief Minister Khir Toyo warned that:

‘There are only a few Malay Exco members (being mentioned). We don’t want to see the new opposition-led state government to practice discrimination and hope that they heed the racial sensitivity of the Selangor people’ [...].

When asked what he meant by racial sensitivity, Khir did not exactly answer the question but said that he does not want the new state government to prevent people from executing their religious rights (Syed Jaymal Zahiid, 2008).

The continuing aid for Malays now extends from economic help to help for a religious community, with the further Islamisation of Malaysia as a result. The referral to racial sensitivity was also a veiled threat to heed Malay supremacy and reflect it in the number of appointments. Shoring up race and religion as flashpoints is a political move to divide people into essentialised identities.

*Scaremongering or the culture of fear*

Political strength is maintained by the elite by maintaining the strong identity divisions within society and every now and then exacerbating relations between communities to breaking point to force all parties to refrain from any political agitation because of the possibilities of violence. In fact, the threat of violence, not from the state, but from within society and its constituents is a common theme in the media, state discourses and coffee shop parlance. People’s mistrust of each other based on stereotypes, hearsay, propaganda and other fear-mongering is at an all-time high. With the use of modern technologies rumours spread like wildfire. Every week there would be one panic or another on email lists, text messages or other forms of the modern grapevine. Often I would receive messages of rapes, mass conversions and brutal killings. They all followed a similar pattern of depicting a heinous crime, followed by a far-away location so as to render it difficult to verify easily and the names or ethnic/religious community status of the perpetrators.
In November 2006 a text message made the rounds claiming that a mass conversion of Muslims to Christianity was about to take place in Ipoh, Perak state. This is the Malay text and my translation as I received it:

Sejumlah Melayu akan dibaptiskan oleh Dato Azhar Mansor Ahad ini di Gereja Silibin IPOH. Seramai 600 plajar Poli teknik Unku Omr Ipoh telah msuk Kristian baru2 ini. Pendedahan oleh Mufti Perak ptg ini di masjid Negeri. Sampaikan SMS kpd orang-2 yang mahukan ISLAM.

A number of Malays will be baptised by Dato Azhar Mansor this Sunday at Selibin Church, IPOH. 600 students of the Unku Omar Polytechnic School in Ipoh have converted to Christianity recently. The Mufti of Perak has exposed this at the state mosque this evening. Pass this SMS to people who are for ISLAM.

The power of rumours and gossip was evident when an angry mob of a reported one thousand protesters descended on the Catholic Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Selibin, Ipoh, wanting to interrupt the ceremony and stop the conversion. They were confronted not by 600 Muslims converting, but 98 Indian children being baptised. Firstly, the legitimisation through the use of a religious authority, in this case the Mufti of Perak, is important. Secondly, the invocation of Azhar Mansor is significant. He is a national icon and celebrity for circumnavigating the world alone on his yacht and still holds the east-bound world record for doing so. There had been widespread rumours about the conversion of Azhar Mansor. It is common over lunch or at the coffee shops to spread gossip and create rumours and I heard this one many times myself: that a Malay national hero, who had sailed across the world, had apostatised and had become a Christian whilst abroad. This was framed not just as a national betrayal of sorts, but more as a personal attack on other Muslims’ and especially Malays’ sense of self. A national icon had to remain as he was. If it turned out that he was not what he claimed to be, he would have to be removed from the Malay, read Muslim, pantheon of heroes.

Indeed, the text message rumour forced him to come out in the open and give a press conference where he denounced the rumours and denied his conversion vigorously. He even got the Mufti of Perlis to come out in his defence and proclaim that he still was a Muslim to appease the fear-mongers and quash the rumour-mongers. The Mufti of Perak on the other hand was used in the text message to validate the claim and thus mandate action. He later admitted to having talked about this at his mosque and claimed he had been duped by a woman who had told him of the imminent conversion with
some gravitas and sincerity. The later police probe yielded no conviction as they could not prove that the text message was started by her and passing it on was not a crime (The Star, 2006b).

Legal wrangling, conversions and identity
Apostasy is not taken lightly by these reactionaries and apostates who leave Islam have to go underground or abroad. Conversions can go undetected as a matter of conscience for some time. However, because issues like marriage or children make contact with government agencies inevitable, one's identification by the state apparatus becomes a major point of contestation. Although some conversions seemingly go unnoticed by the media and state institutions, these often occur on the periphery of state control and media attention, i.e. rural settings where conversions often predate independence and the subsequent codification of religious identity in laws and the classification of people into set religious categories.

The rigidity of these categories is intrinsically linked to political contestations in the nation-state setting, as discussed in chapter 2. This is amplified by the ongoing religious stand-off between the prominent role given to Islam in the constitution vis-à-vis article 11, the freedom of religion clause (see Appendix 1). Historically, this paradox goes back to the Reid Commission, which was formed to create a Malaysian constitution prior to independence. The trade-off at the time of independence was that a new Malaysian state was to grant full citizenship to recent immigrants – the British, especially, had encouraged Indians and Chinese to settle in Malaya – for a safeguarding of special rights and roles for the indigenous population of the peninsula, i.e. the Malays. Orang Asli were largely ignored in these discussions as the British colonial apparatus dealt with Malay rulers who had little interest in incorporating the Orang Asli into the privileged position of Malays.15 Thus, Malays as an ethnic group attained special positions, which have been expanded since independence, and the dominant religion of Malays, Islam, was made the religion of the federation.

The growing Islamisation and institutionalisation of Islam in Malaysia has created a legal system that often cannot cope with contentious issues that are often more of a political than legal nature. The fight, however, is acted out in the courtrooms and in front of judges, both Islamic and civil. This leaves the public largely out of the picture as mere observers and allows the government to influence the outcomes, none of which have been surprising.
Recent court cases have included the Lina Joy and Moorthy cases. Lina Joy is a Malay convert to Christianity, who had successfully changed her name from Azlina Jailani to Lina Joy, her Christian name, in 1998. However, her attempts at having the label ‘Islam’ removed from her identity card were rebuffed. The main problem was one of perceived competing jurisdictions between Syariah and civil courts. The latter turned her away, arguing that anything to do with Islam would be under the purview of Islamic courts. The federal court ruled against her in 2007 in a much-anticipated ruling with a two to one majority. The dissenting judge Richard Malanjum made the point that making Lina Joy petition an Islamic court for her apostasy would force her to incriminate herself. This is pressing, as most states do not have any legal provisions for Muslims to apostatise, whilst some have penalties of prolonged detention in so-called Islamic Rehabilitation Centres. In fact, only the state of Negeri Sembilan has records of Muslims being allowed by the Syariah courts to apostatise. In these cases it was exclusively people who had previously converted to Islam for marriage and upon divorce wanted to return to their earlier faith. This, in fact, is part of Lina Joy’s desire to apostatise. She wanted to marry her Christian partner. In Malaysia, Muslims are not allowed to wed partners of any other faith, thus forcing numerous non-Muslim partners every year to convert or split up. The latest ruling effectively diminished Joy’s chances of legally marrying her partner in Malaysia and changing her religious identity on her identity card. She has been in hiding and is believed to reside abroad (Perlez, 2006).

Lina Joy’s legal team focused on the constitutional freedom of religion in article 11 of the federal constitution that according to them should apply to all Malaysians and stand above the Syariah court system. Constitutional primacy is legally antecedent to all subsequent legislation. However, in Malaysia religious jurisdiction of the Syariah courts increasingly competes with civil and at its highest-level constitutional jurisdiction. The main difficulty the government faces is in straddling the fine line between religion and secularism, between rights of Muslims and non-Muslims, between divine law and man-made law. Political opponents of the National Front such as PAS often use this line of attack to argue that the government is not Islamic enough. Islamicity and its performance remain an important political tool to rally the Malay vote.

The Moorthy case pertains to M. Moorthy, a well-known Indian man, who was a member of the first Malaysian expedition to reach the top of Mount Everest. After an accident in 1998 he had been paralysed and another accident had him admitted to hospital in a coma, to which he succumbed in
late December 2005. His body was taken by the religious authorities and buried according to Islamic burial rites, against the wishes of his family. The authorities claimed that he had converted to Islam and that there was documentation to prove this. However, his family disputed this and were adamant that he had remained a Hindu. Of contention moreover was that Moorthy’s wife was not granted a hearing at the Syariah court, whilst the civil court dismissed her case, because they deemed it outside their purview, thus dismissing non-Muslim claims and rights vis-à-vis Muslims (Aliran, 2005)\textsuperscript{17}.

One of my informants in Kelantan, himself a former Syariah court appeals judge in Kelantan, gave me his views on the Moorthy case. He opined that:

> These things are issues of the law and not social commentaries. The media attention is destructive, for it polarises the ethnic communities. The Moorthy case should have been appealed at the Syariah appeals court and should never have been discussed in the civil court. Non-Muslims have access to these courts too and can demand a fair judgment.

He remained adamant that all matters pertaining to Islam must be referred to the Syariah courts and non-Muslims ought to be heard there as equals. On the other spectrum of the debate some people were optimistic, because they interpreted the lively debate around the issue as proof that under Badawi everyone could voice their opinions, especially in light of the debate remaining fairly civilised and non-violent.

In response to the wrangling over the possibility of name changes of converts such as in the Lina Joy case and associated worries over conversion in general, Perlis Islamic authorities took action. A fatwa \textit{keputusan} (decision), an ungazetted decision by the fatwa committee, unbinding, yet made public, was issued on the question as to what ought to happen to a woman who converts to Islam and then decides to apostatise and leave Islam. This is the Malay text with my translation:

\begin{quote}
Masalah Wanita Yang Memeluk Agama Islam Telah Kembali Kepada Agama Asalnya Dan Minta Ditukarkan Semula Kepada Nama Asalnya (sebelum Islam)

\end{quote}
pula, jika telah keluar Islam maka hilanglah tanggungjawab Islam pada perkara ini (Jawatankuasa Syariah Negeri Perlis, 2006).

The matter of a woman convert to Islam who has returned to her original religion and asks for her name to be changed back to her original name (before Islam).

By law that woman is an apostate and must be ordered to repent within three days. And in failing to do so, she has to be executed, according to Islam; however, because this country has not enacted Islamic law fully, it [the execution] cannot be performed. Based on Imam Abu Hanifah’s opinions, the woman must be imprisoned for life. Meanwhile in the matter of the name, Islam loses responsibility once said woman has left Islam.

The powers, on the whole unchecked, of fatwa committees and the whole Islamic bureaucracy are quickly becoming a grave political and legal issue. Fatwas are binding on all Muslims in Malaysia, thus allowing these committees to make law for Muslims without parliamentary oversight or even input. In many cases the threats against them of cabinet members is enough for the Islamic bureaucracies to withdraw, but increasingly they can rely on support from Islamic civil society organisations to back them and their demands, if need be with public demonstrations. All these forms of contesting, policing and controlling Islam have to be seen within the wider state projects of and for Islam in Malaysia, to which I turn my attention now.

Notes

1 This aspect of social engineering of Putrajaya has backfired, as most houses have resorted to putting up steel bars on all windows and doors to protect them from burglars. Instead of opening up the space and sharing it, the inhabitants have withdrawn into their houses even more.

2 Amongst others, Kota Bharu lays claim to being the Mecca of Southeast Asia, a major site of pilgrimage for mainly Cham Muslims of the Mekong delta. To this day, there remains a ‘Kampung Cham’ on the outskirts of Kota Bharu. There is a range of material available on discussions about the spatial Islamisation of Kuala Lumpur (see Gomes, 2007a; Sardar, 2000; Willford, 2003: 100–101; 2006).

3 Some mosques and community centres also run Thursday night prayers and lectures.

4 This is partly because some village communities are strong enough to withstand external policing efforts (they tend to police themselves) and partly because
the enforcement officers are stationed in or near cities and tend to patrol their environs most.

5 Badawi called for the reinstatement of *ijtihad* by scholars and Muslim jurists, but saw the degradation of Islamic knowledge as a problem. One of his answers was to create ‘New Malays’ who would be able to cope with Islamic religious knowledge and fast-paced economic and social modernity. See the end of this chapter for further discussion.

6 The notion here is that the invention of tradition served a particular function, especially favouring the ulama and their power over legal authority and the pooling of legal authority in various law schools so as to avoid a further widening of available jurisprudence within, as well as curtailing the development of any further, law schools.

7 In Perlis the constitutional Malay ruler is called the ‘Raja’ and in Negeri Sembilan the ruler is elected and carries the title of ‘Yang di-Pertuan Besar’ (great ruler). I use sultan as a shorthand for all constitutional Malay rulers.

8 The most prominent examples of religious authorities overstepping their powers and circumventing government orders have been the periodic formation of so-called snoop squads to spy on Muslims behaving ‘indecently’ in Melaka and Putrajaya.

9 When Al-Arqam was finally dismantled in 1994, all assets (approximately $US 120 million) were frozen and turned over to the state, and imprisonment and house arrests followed for the key governing members of Al-Arqam. Its leader Ashaari appeared on national television and denounced his ideas and teachings, upon which the top echelon of Al-Arqam were rehabilitated by the state and became involved in various business interests in Malaysia (Metzger, 1996: 123–124, 126). There seems to have been a tacit agreement between Al-Arqam and the government that in return for the peaceful dissolution of Al-Arqam and the promise to stay away from religious and political endeavours in future, the government would leave Ashaari and his inner circle to pursue their lives in relative freedom. More recently there has been another crackdown on Al-Arqam’s businesses, operating under the name of Rifaqa, especially in Selangor state. JAIS stated that Arqam was being resurrected and was spreading false teachings, using the profits from their business interests.

10 This phrase was coined by Rudi Dutschke, a German New Leftist of the 1960s. It pays homage to Mao’s long march to victory in China, but is mostly influenced by Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks, which advocate culture as the new battleground for the left, rather than fighting the state openly in revolutionary war.

11 Death threats against apostates and their lawyers are an indication of the potential for violence, as are the heightened anxious reactions some Muslim groups have towards freedom of religion or the secularity of the constitution, of which more later.
12 I have discussed the social contract in more detail in chapter 1.

13 The main problem with the government’s methodology to assess value is that the government does not take GLCs, which are major shareholders of the Malaysian economy, into account and is based on par value of shares, not the market value. This undervalues companies greatly. In addition, accounts for companies like Petronas are not publicised and remain sources of government slush funds.

14 I asked one of my informants in Shah Alam why he thought these Malays felt incensed enough to protest and in some cases threaten violence. He responded: ‘If you tell me 100 Muslims want to convert, I feel angry, I don’t know why.’ After much coaxing, he went on to explain that people who want to convert ‘see it [Islam] as a game, like or don’t like, (…) they take it too easy, not serious. I feel sad if people want to apostatise (murtad).’

15 For a discussion on the role of the British at the time of independence and the change in policy, during the Malaysian state’s subsequent fight against communists (the Emergency), vis-à-vis Orang Asli, see Nah (2003; 2006).

16 Death threats from radical Islamic individuals and groups were issued against Lina Joy and one of her lawyers Malik Imitaz Sarwar (Muda Mohd Noor, 2006).

17 Article 121 (1A) states that ‘The courts referred to in Clause (1) [High Courts] shall have no jurisdiction in respect of any matter within the jurisdiction of the Syariah courts.’ This is an ongoing problem for many cases, most notably a number of women, whose husbands converted to Islam to gain sole custody of their children, which Syariah courts will invariably do (see for instance Fauwaz Abdul Aziz, 2006b).
4. Engineering Muslim Malay Identities

The government has and continues to maintain a strong grip on society in Malaysia. Faris knows what his limits are when it comes to challenging the state. Coffee shop talk like this, he says, is fine. No one is going to go to prison for that, especially not now. Thus it’s not all bad, for Faris is optimistic about Badawi and Islam hadhari, a progressive state-sponsored Islam that he believes will allow people to talk about what we are talking about, openly and in public. ‘Having grown up under Mahathir, that will be a nice change,’ he says. Since Mahathir stepped down, his successor Badawi has moved to open public debate and allow previous taboos to be aired in public. Indeed, there was great excitement when Mahathir finally gave up power and allowed a seemingly moderate and circumspect Badawi take the reins of power. Faris explains that Badawi had informed civil society groups of government policies and had often been a willing conduit between progressive civil society groups Faris was working with and the government.

The resounding electoral victory in 2004 of Barisan Nasional (National Front) under Abdullah Badawi, or Pak Lah, as he is known in Malaysia, was seen as an endorsement of Mahathir’s chosen political heir and especially his brand of the continued Islamisation process: Islam hadhari. It was also a sign of support for the largest political party and traditional defender of Malay rights, UMNO, and its endeavour to recapture the Malay vote, especially the rural Malay vote, from PAS, which has as one of their defining party credos the establishment of an Islamic state.

Against this backdrop of competition between PAS and UMNO over the Malay, and therefore the Muslim vote, I wish to track a key 2004 election concept employed by UMNO to sway the Malay vote towards itself: Islam
hadhari. Badawi’s new Islamic concept of Islam hadhari, or progressive Islam, seemed to have struck a chord, not just with Muslims, but with non-Muslims, too.

During the 2004 elections, Islam was a key factor, as PAS tried to capitalise on its Islamic credentials. Badawi and UMNO countered this by introducing Islam hadhari as their own Islamic vision for Malaysia. Kling (2006) argues that Islam hadhari was first used in 2001 and ‘by 2002 Abdullah, as the then deputy prime minister, began to speak of Islam hadhari as a general concept for Islamic development’ (Kling, 2006: 181). Kamaruzzaman Bustamam-Ahmad (2006), on the other hand, argues that Islam hadhari was first introduced in 2002 and used mainly to seek ways of implementing an Islamic state in Malaysia. The main driving force he identifies is JAKIM (Department for Islamic Development) and a group of ulama within it. He places Islam hadhari firmly within the long Islamisation project of the former Prime Minister Mahathir. It can thus be seen as part of the government’s ongoing Islamisation and modernisation drive. It is also important to remember that Badawi was in charge of Islamic policies before 1982, when Anwar’s co-option into government meant that Badawi had to give up his portfolio to Anwar Ibrahim’s Islamic visions.

Islam hadhari can be translated as ‘progressive’ and ‘civilisational’ Islam, something to be proud of and to aspire to. It also had the desired effect of making the rural PAS vote a vote for regression and non-development, whereas a vote for UMNO and its version of Islam signalled a vote for development and progression.1 Thus, it could be seen as an effective electoral tool to undermine PAS support (Chong, 2004b). This strategy could be deemed successful during the 2004 election campaign with UMNO wiping out PAS support, ending PAS control of the state of Terengganu and minimising their electoral base in Kelantan.2 Of course, there is a range of reasons for the big swing towards the ruling coalition, but Islam hadhari remained the most visible election tool for recapturing the Malay vote (Liow, 2005). After the electoral success, UMNO and Badawi in particular continued to promote Islam hadhari.

What role, then, does Islam hadhari play in Malaysia? Will it be a novel form of Islamic or Malaysian multiculturalism, or another ‘blank banner’ (Ardener, 1971) or political project? Here I argue that Islam hadhari presented the possibility of a new form of multiculturalism and a means of representing Malaysia as both a progressive and a deeply Islamic country, but that it has failed to take root in society because it runs counter to both progressive and conservative elements in civil society (see chapter 5).
Islam hadhari

Islam hadhari is often described as the former Prime Minister Badawi’s pet project and he appears to be its leading voice and proponent. It was officially declared in early 2004 and is envisaged as a state-sponsored discourse of a ‘progressive Islam’ for Malaysia and a blueprint for other Muslim developing countries. Islam hadhari is often translated as ‘progressive’ Islam, which paradoxically aims to bring Islam back to basics, back to its original form, as well as project it into the future. Since its inception as government policy, it has been slow in taking off, trickling only slowly down the various government levels and into the wider public, as I will demonstrate. It is supposed to be, in theory, both a bottom-up and a top-down movement traversing the public and private sphere equally; it has, however, been the government-sponsored think tanks and intellectuals who have spearheaded the project, above all the Prime Minister. Badawi has been promoting it through seminars and speeches and continues to do so. Recently a collection of Badawi’s speeches has been edited in book form by Dr. Syed Ali Tawfik Al-Attas, the director-general of the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM), which has been instrumental in disseminating information about Islam hadhari (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, 2006b). Indeed, Ali Tawfik Al-Attas was one of the first to explain the basic principles underpinning Islam hadhari in a biography of Badawi he co-authored in 2005 (Al-Attas & Tieh Chuan Ng, 2005).

According to Badawi himself, Islam hadhari has a 10 point agenda:

1. Faith and piety in Allah
2. A just and trustworthy government
3. A free and independent people
4. Mastery of knowledge
5. Balanced and comprehensive economic development
6. A good quality of life
7. Protection of the rights of minority groups and women
8. Cultural and moral integrity
9. Protection of the environment
10. Strong defenses

These principles are very broad and remain open to interpretation. Badawi further elaborated on them in Sydney, in a lecture he gave to the Asia Society in April 2005:
These principles are acceptable to our non-Muslim population or for that matter, to our non-Muslim colleagues in the Government. With these principles to guide us, with our consistent and continuing record of improving governance for the people, and by practising and observing a high commitment to public accountability, Malaysia offers a modest working model of renewal, reform and, perhaps, *renaissance* in the Muslim world. I do not pretend that Malaysia has all the answers to the many problems of the Muslim world. I am also aware that different countries need different solutions to their problems but I do believe that Malaysia can be a showcase of what it is to be a successful, modern Muslim country (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, 2005, my emphasis).

I will return to the issue of a renaissance in the next chapter when I trace the concept through other Islamic modernities and their proponents. My reference here is to the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim’s book, *Asian Renaissance* (1996), which elaborates on an earlier Malaysian project and conceptualisation of the role of Islam in Malaysia.³

Islam hadhari represents Badawi’s reconceptualisation of Medina society and the covenant of Medina. This was the first social contract of Islamic society (Serjeant, 1964). It also evokes the beginning of the Islamic state at the time of the Prophet. There are liberal elements evident within early Medina society, such as the protection of minorities or *dhimmi*, that engender debate throughout the Muslim world to this day (Feener, 2004: 4).⁴ Thus, at the time of the Medina covenant, non-Muslims, people of the book (Jews and Christians) – although this category was later expanded to include other religious groups – enjoyed a relatively protected status under the emerging Islamic state. As W. C. Smith, writing about the Pakistani case, pointed out in 1951, democracy may in fact be worse than an Islamic state for non-Muslim minorities, because if Muslims treat their minorities unjustly, then democracy will only give them the ‘constitutional authority for doing so without let or hindrance’ (Smith, 1951: 25).

Badawi continually made sure to cast Islam hadhari in an inclusive light, as in the following, taken from his address to an audience of Indonesians at the Syarif Hidayatullah Islamic University in Jakarta, which honoured him with an honorary doctorate in Islamic thought:

*Islam hadhari is a manhaj, progressive approach for all Malaysians whether they are Muslims or non Muslims. There is no cause to fear any discrimination or persecution on account of religion because the*
Malaysian Constitution guarantees freedom of worship. In any case, every Malaysian citizen irrespective of race or religion is equal before the law (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, 2006a).

In reiterating the role of Islam hadhari in Malaysia and beyond, Badawi made a stand for the moderate Islam he had espoused so much on his visits abroad. He was intent on re-making the picture of Malaysia left by his predecessor, Mahathir, and re-orienting it away from an Asian tiger and anti-Jewish pariah towards a moderate Islamic ideal type that the West as well as the Middle East could and should embrace. That must have been the vision of his speech-writers and ideologues.5

However, simultaneously everything was unravelling back at home. Whilst Badawi was spinning tales of a modern, global Malaysia, where a moderate Islam is safeguarding and safeguarded, where a constitution reigns supreme allowing all Malaysians to live without fear of discrimination, thousands of Malays congregated at a Bandar Baru Bangi mosque and swamped the Federal Territory mosque in Kuala Lumpur to attend forums on ‘The Syariah and Current Issues’ and to hear about Islam being under threat. These forums were organised by the Front Bertindak Anti-Murtad (FORKAD), or Action Front against Apostasy, and Pembela Islam (Defenders of Islam).6 Their aim was to call upon Muslims to fight for Islam, which for them meant the negation of individual rights (especially as they are guaranteed in the constitution) and therefore the absolute prohibition of apostasy for Muslims. Their reasoning and rhetoric was simplistic and couched in a culture of fear. The agenda was centred on recent cases of apostasy and ‘speakers called on the authorities to continue with what they said was the historic tendency to strengthen the country’s Islamic institutions and not weaken them’ (Fawwaz Abdul Aziz, 2006c). The forums called for the defence of Islam on all fronts, especially political and legal, where the forums’ organisers and participants saw the state project of Islamisation as under threat.

In many ways, Islam hadhari can be seen as the climax (for now) of the Malaysian Islamisation process, but also as a new Malaysian government project alongside a range of other government-sponsored projects. The government, as well as civil society organisations, has had a great respect for scholars of Islam, so much so that most aspects of Islam are in the hands of scholars or the ulama, or at least subject to consultation with them. They can be found throughout the Malaysian academy, in government-sponsored think tanks, in state bureaucracies and, of course, in mosques. Badawi, with
his *ulama* family background and himself a holder of an Islamic degree, is therefore the perfect spokesperson for Islam hadhari. Yet, his explanations and speeches on the topic have been exceedingly vague and non-committal. Indeed, the administration has on many occasions shied away from clearly spelling out their understanding of Islam hadhari, leaving it for academics and commentators to create a political and discursive space for it. This leaves the politicians relatively free from criticisms and allows the public to warm to a product that might itself not be refined and fully created, thus allowing for a degree of public agency in creating this Islamic space (Chong, 2005: 582).

**Malaysian political projects**

Islam hadhari subsumes all Malaysians into a new construct, which holds sway over the Malaysian political and public sphere, because it is a government initiative. It aims to institutionalise not just Muslims under the tenet of Islam hadhari, but everyone in Malaysia, thus hoping to break up the previous allegiances of people to local imams, Sufi schools and other localised influences. It is therefore a move towards governmentalising and institutionalising identity markers and especially ‘discursive processes through which individuals and groups construct cultural identity’ (Kahn, 1998: 23).

Islam hadhari is supposed to appeal to non-Muslims and Muslims alike, on the one hand allowing multiculturalist idealism to operate, whilst on the other not only claiming to represent and speak for Muslims, but more inclusively for all Malaysians who believe in [one] God – which seems to reiterate the aims and objectives of *rukun negara*, or national ideology. The *rukun negara* was instituted in the early 1970s as a reaction to the race riots in 1969 and is modelled on the Indonesian *pancasila* (five principles). The five principles of *rukun negara* are: Belief in God, loyalty to king and country, upholding the constitution, rule of law, and decorum and morality. These principles coincide with five levels of status and roles and also with the potent number five in the five pillars of Islam. Islam hadhari seems to bring these longstanding policies together and back into the public discourse, after they had been sidelined and forgotten (NST, 2004b; 2006; Watson, 1996: 318).

There has been a steady flow of grand projects over the last twenty years, most of which are based on a vision or an idea, before they are slowly turned into government policies with real effects. Their focus has shifted over time from nationalism to Islam and economic development. One of the enduring ones is *Wawasan 2020* (vision 2020), which was proclaimed by the then
Prime Minister Mahathir in 1991 at the time of the Yugoslav ethnic strife. Mahathir wanted to protect Malaysia from a similar fate by providing security, stability and economic prosperity, which would appeal to all Malaysians. The vision is based on Malaysia’s plans to be fully industrialised by the year 2020 and has been upheld by Badawi and the Ninth Malaysia Plan. After the Asian financial crisis of 1997, economic growth was so high that it could sustain Malay positive discrimination and keep Chinese discontent marginal. But as the economy has slowed down, ethnic tensions have slowly been resurfacing and the government’s all-pervasiveness and authoritarian guidance has been openly questioned.

Anwar Ibrahim, Deputy Prime Minister under Mahathir, also offered a range of Malaysian projects during this time. I will elaborate one of these projects, masyarakat madani (civil society), which Anwar placed within an Islamic framework of civilising society, in chapter 5. Another of Anwar’s projects, Islam madani or modern Islam, is based on a humanist and individual-centred interpretation of Islam (Anwar Ibrahim, 1996). Thus, self-discovery, intellectual empowerment and personal liberties are integral to progress. However, Mahathir’s economically progressive Islam won out during the 1990s and forcibly so after the imprisonment of Anwar and his public humiliation. After Anwar’s release from jail in 2004 predictions of a resurrection of Islam madani in the near future surfaced (Chong, 2004a).

Rather than withdrawing from society, as some dakwhah (revivalist) organisations such as Al-Arqam had done, Anwar was propagating an open and public Islamic discourse and revival. The ghettoisation of revivalists, often proclaiming the revival of Medinan society and a visible Arabisation of their groups in dress and custom, was seen by Anwar as the antithesis of his projects, which were designed to compel Islam to face up to modernity and the reality of a multicultural and multiracial Malaysian nation (Riddell, 2001: 243). Islam hadhari seems to extol similar values and aspirations, albeit in a more comprehensive way than Anwar’s projects. It is not so much about the facing up to the difficult realities, but more about the radical subsuming of those very realities into an Islamic discourse.

Anwar was always a proponent of pluralism and has acknowledged Hindu, Buddhist and other religious identities and movements within Malaysia (Sardar, 2004: 297). His ideas of tolerance, if not equality, were central to his message and based on the ideals of the convivencia of Andalusian times.7 This is both a look back at an Islamic golden age, and also forward towards the future, where the West is supposed to learn from Malaysia and its interactions
between religions and cultures, at a time when most Western nation-states face the multicultural reality of their populace. Sardar (2004) sees Anwar’s Malaysian projects and indeed his own in the light of the Andalusian *convivencia*, not Medinan society and the associated contractual nature of living together. In both Anwar’s and Badawi’s projects, then, there is an element of nostalgia, a nostalgia ‘in which the past is viewed as the epitome of coherence and order, something which was more simple and emotionally fulfilling, with more direct and integrated relationships’ (Featherstone, 1995: 107). These movements towards a golden age in Islamic history, a golden age of utopian ideas of living together with the always present ‘other’, be it in the form of religious, cultural or racial other, are a common reaction to the rampant loss of tradition and cultural integrity in the wake of modernity’s onslaught as well as increasing migratory flows. One academic sees Islam hadhari functioning ‘as an in-between space between religiosity and “rootlessness,” Islam hadhari performs as a discourse of ethics and values for the cosmopolitan Melayu baru who can negotiate different cultures and ethnicities both within and beyond the Malaysian nation’ (Chong, 2005: 584). This notion of an existing cosmopolitanism of the New Malay/middle class of Malaysia suggests that Islam has hitherto been a limiting force for Malays to experience the world, especially the capitalist world, and suggests that the progressiveness of Islam hadhari is in its seeming ability to bridge and combine modernity with Islam’s nostalgic golden past.

**Islamisation**

Naguib Al-Attas has been at the forefront of inscribing the golden past of Islam onto the present with his intellectual project of de-Westernising and Islamising knowledge. This process created a whole generation of scholars, politicians and entrepreneurs for whom Islam became a central prism through which their policies, successes and work were seen. The aim was to make Islam an all-encompassing way of life, rather than ‘just’ a religion. This initiated a process of historical revisionism (Farish A. Noor, 2004a) that recast Malay history as Malay-Muslim history. Islamisation disembedded the individual through the ‘liberation of man first from magical, mythological, animistic, national-cultural tradition opposed to Islam, and then from secular control over his reason and his language’ (Al-Attas, 1993: 44). Islam is seen to enable Malays in terms of heightened intellectual abilities and the introduction of Islam is interpreted as a fundamental shift in Malay history.
and the development of the Malay mind. Naguib Al-Attas even suggests that Malay history begins with Islam, because it is then that philosophy, science and other intellectual accomplishments take off in the Malay world, enabled by Islam and the Arabic language that transformed Malay and rendered it in Jawi script (Al-Attas, 1969; 1972).9

In an interview with me, his son Ali Tawfik Al-Attas, director of IKIM, reiterates:

Islamisation, true and proper, it means, first of all, you have to remove the pagan characteristic from language, from culture, from civilisation. That is what Islamisation means. Therefore, if somebody was a Hindu, a pagan, when he accepts Islam he rejects all those idols, that is Islamising; that is Islamisation. Not what the government is doing. Not wearing hijab, this kind of thing is not Islamisation. That is just like a fashion show, a ritual, a ritual interpretation. Therefore you are not using Islam anymore as a unity, as a unifying element, but rather as a means to get people together.

Ali Tawfik Al-Attas traces the idea of unity between the Malays to the role of Islam at the time of independence. This unity, he claims, has been lost (Al-Attas & Tieh Chuan Ng, 2005: 55–56). The project seems to rest on the belief that the erasure of Malayness and its substitution with Islamicity must be carried out through the creation of a new philosophical basis for Islam in Malaysia and securing the role of Islam in the state. As new identities take shape, old ones are scrutinized. Ali Tawfik Al-Attas notes that the main problem has been that Islam is awarded only token status in politics, which has de-valued its role, which was once enshrined in the constitution of the country and in UMNO policies in particular. Thus, the proclamation of Islam hadhari by the new UMNO regime has to be seen as a continuing bid to re-engage Islam with UMNO politics (Al-Attas & Tieh Chuan Ng, 2005: 57–58).

Ali Tawfik Al-Attas claims that Islam hadhari has been practised without a break since the time of Tunku Abdul Rahman, the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, evident in the setting up of an Islamic bank, the Lembaga Urusan Tabung Haji (Pilgrim’s Management and Fund Board), an International Islamic University and an array of other institutions to benefit Muslims (i.e. Malays) (see Al-Attas & Tieh Chuan Ng, 2005: 57–58). This new progressive Islamic approach, however, is mainly the work of one man, former Prime Minister Mahathir, who initiated most of these projects. His aim was indeed to promote a form of Islam that would disarm the fundamentalist wing in
Malaysia, namely PAS, and swing its supporters back to UMNO. Indeed, if UMNO were able to use Islam hadhari as a strategic ploy to effectively depoliticise Islam, what *raison d’être* would PAS have?

**Competing discourses**

In going against fundamentalism and other fringe groups, Islam hadhari as a universalising effort also represents a state-sponsored and academic High Islam muting low or folk Islam. It is a modernising project to overcome particularism and forge a coherent national Muslim body (Gellner, 1994: 22–24). The transnational *ummah* is, at best, a long-term future vision of some groups. The more immediate aim is to form a Muslim nation within the nation state’s boundaries, with as little deviant elements as possible. Muslim sects are continually flushed out, although mostly when or if they seem to have the potential to become a risk politically (such as Al-Arqam in the 1990s).

Islam hadhari can be seen as a form of High Islam, as it has been referred to the universities and government-sponsored think tanks and, thus, passed firmly into the hands of scholars. However, there is still little comprehension of what it means and, increasingly, there are moves by some scholars to appropriate it and interpret it in their own way and within different contexts. Thus, an array of seminars has sprung up, centred around Islamic think tanks such as IKIM and the International Islamic University, where a multitude of Islam hadhari presentations are offered to the interested listener, generally conducted in Malay and often by junior academics and interested amateurs. Some of the seminars I attended seemed to have simply added the words ‘Islam hadhari’ to their current research, which in my opinion devalued both. An Islam hadhari seminar series at IKIM covered the ten principles of Islam hadhari and even one on ‘Islam hadhari: an understanding for non-Muslims’. These events are heavily promoted to other academics, in order to start framing more and more research in Islamic and especially *hadhari* terms. In this vein Ali Tawfik Al-Attas proclaims that the definition of Islam hadhari is ‘understanding the present age in the framework of Islam’ (Al-Attas & Tieh Chuan Ng, 2005: 140). The educational outreach also includes worldwide trips by IKIM and government officials to address university students on Malaysian government scholarships abroad on the importance and essence of Islam hadhari.¹⁰ The state has invested five million ringgit (approximately 1.6 million US dollars) to build fifty-two Islam hadhari nurseries in Terengganu (NST, 2008b). The latest push to develop academic knowledge on Islam
Islam hadhari is the establishment of an institute of Islam hadhari at the National University of Malaysia in Bangi alongside the Syeikh Abdullah Fahim Chair for research on Islamic civilisation (Bernama, 2008; UKM, 2008).

Islam hadhari is placed in the tradition of Gellner’s ‘urban elite’, High Islam – where support is forged in order to change the form of government by making it more Islamic. However, a revitalisation of the general Islamic consciousness of the populace has yet to materialise. Some observers and many of my informants saw Islam hadhari as no more than an election tool and simply a new dress for something old. Thus it may be of interest to explore Islam hadhari as a ‘blank banner’ (Ardener, 1971). These are signs of identities which are not linked to specific programmes but which can be realised as icons, like empty shells or signifiers, and which can be filled with situational meaning that can shift and change over time. Bowman (1994) has used this concept in his research on Yugoslavia, where there existed state patronage for supplementary identities to disperse federation-wide anti-statist solidarities (divide and conquer strategy), but once conquered they had to be put together again under an encompassing Yugoslav identity.

In Malaysia, Islam hadhari was envisaged as subsuming multiple identities under the roof of Islam, thus making it a universalising identity marker. Islam hadhari can be conceptualised as overarching both the public and private spheres. Islam or being Muslim is used as an umbrella terminology to subsume local and individual identities into manageable and easily typified identity markers and a hegemonic system of representation. As we have seen in chapter 1, in Malaysia the state has divided people into categories: bumiputera (princes of the soil), Chinese and Indians. Bumiputeras themselves can be divided into Muslims and non-Muslims. Furthermore, the state keeps a check on ‘deviant’ Islamic practices or organisations through state Islamic councils and a federal Islamic office, thus facilitating a mode of control over both the public and private sphere. The Malaysian state has inherited and created a set of sometimes contradictory categories. Islam hadhari seems like an attempt to create yet another, albeit an all-subsuming and universalising category.

**Islam hadhari as universalising discourse**

Access to public or political space is a key element in identity formation and, indeed, its articulation for Muslims, as a minority as well as a majority in many cases. Access motivates the way Muslims are represented in public as well as in political discourse through oversimplified typologies such as
Fundamentalism or Islamism, as against their real, lived being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1962). Thus, both socialisation and enculturation experiences are significant for identity formation and its articulation in the public as well as the private sphere. Regulating, denying and curtailing access to the ‘nationally constructed universal public sphere’ (Sanadjian, 2002: 120) is the state’s means of regulating identity discourse. Islam hadhari is thus used to appease Muslims whilst muting the voice of the Other (Chinese, Indians and Orang Asli) and subsuming the Other into the dominant discourse. The government is fashioning Islam hadhari into an inclusive conceived space for all Malaysians within an Islamic framework.

Sanadjian, writing about Muslims in Britain, shows the ways in which Muslims are being pulled back into the Western political and universal mainstream as tolerant, peaceful and democracy-able citizens of Western liberal states (Sanadjian, 2002: 121). In a similar way, Islam hadhari is creating a ‘fictitious universality’ (Balibar, 1995: 56–57), pulling Malays/Muslims into its web of meaning and into its newly created semiotic space. Through this process the government achieves representational powers over Muslims. Thus the abstraction of the concept of Islam hadhari serves to subsume the individual as much as the Islamic discourse as a whole within it. This universal representation, to use Balibar’s terms, is a hegemonic construction through which the individual remains institutionalised and recognised (Balibar, 1995: 58). Thus, the abstraction of the concept of Islam hadhari serves to subsume the individual and his/her particular identity, whether Malay, Indian or Chinese, into itself. This conceptual framework relies on ‘the fact that it is produced inasmuch as particular identities are relativized and become mediations for the realisation of a superior and more abstract goal’ (Balibar, 1995: 58). This goal is yet to crystallise in the Malaysian context. However, the first goal of disarming PAS’s electoral support based on its Islamic credentials was met, at least in the 2004 elections.

The dichotomy between universalism and particularism, between the belief that ‘all people shall be treated according to the same criteria (e.g. equality before the law)’ and that ‘individuals shall be treated differently according to their personal qualities or their particular membership in a class or group’ (Lipset, 1979: 209), is fused into one all-subsuming discourse. For, as Balibar (1991: 54–56, 63–64) contends, racism and humanism, and particularism and universalism, are intrinsically linked. One does not exist without the other, or rather one inhabits the other. Thus, any humanistic approach or project, such as parts of the reformasi movement, had to envisage
its doctrine with the ‘Other’ in sight in order to phrase its demands. And even universalising projects from the state’s side, such as the bangsa Malaysia project, one of the former Prime Minister Mahathir’s initiatives to create a Malaysian nation, had marginalised some groups: primarily Indians, women and indigenous peoples (see Kahn, unpublished).\textsuperscript{11}

Islam hadhari is all about overcoming the exclusionary models of Islamisation. The government is aiming to achieve a form of co-existence under an Islamic inclusionary model of society by subsuming the bangsa (race/nation) into the theological domain.

\textit{Islam hadhari and multiculturalism in Malaysia}

The Malaysian government has presented Islam hadhari as a novel Malaysian/Islamic form of multiculturalism in the making, i.e. a set of political strategies to deal with a multicultural society. It was, in fact, recommended to other Muslim countries at the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) meeting in Mecca in December 2005 as a model to be adopted by all OIC members (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, 2006b: 168). Considering other current Muslim alternatives such as Iran or Pakistan, the Malaysian case certainly does seem capable of serving as a model, especially as these countries also continually have to face up to their multi-ethnic realities.

Framing identity under the aegis of Islam hadhari is also used in national imagery, especially at the new administrative centre of Putrajaya, with its Persian-inspired national mosque and Prime Minister’s office, projecting itself into the glorious past of Islamic civilisation (see Figures 4 and 5).\textsuperscript{12} Islam hadhari manifests in unequivocal terms the dominance and institutionalised permanence of Malay superiority in the political sphere. UMNO was strengthened by Islam hadhari’s appeal across ethnic lines, whilst coming ever closer to a de facto Islamic state, in which new forms of Islamic statism are experimented with and executed.\textsuperscript{13} This was most evident in the 2004 elections when non-Muslims embraced the potential of Islam hadhari.

The problem of moulding complementary images to present the ‘nation’ as Islamic and modern, Islamic and democratic, Islamic and multicultural persists. As the elite’s imagination and ordinary people’s perceptions have not yet coincided, Islam hadhari has a long way to go. Islam hadhari remains an elite conceptualisation of the Malaysian state as deeply Islamic and ultra-modern, especially vis-à-vis the traditional kampung imagery of the Malay peasantry. It attempts to square the perceived representational circle.\textsuperscript{14} This is most vividly
displayed by early marketing images disseminated in 2005 on a government website, which depict the then Prime Minister Badawi between the ultra-modern Petronas Twin Towers, still the tallest ‘twin towers’ in the world, and the Putra mosque in the administrative capital Putrajaya, resplendent in Persian and Arab architectural influences.15

Islam hadhari subsumes the state and civil society and thus attempts to offer a Muslim multicultural alternative to Western forms of multiculturalism by universalising Malaysian identity under its (blank) banner. It embodies a progressive agenda, focusing on personal as well as national development and, on a civilisational plane, by alluding to an Islamic civilisational past embodied in a possible ideal of the Medina society.

Criticisms have been mounted against Islam hadhari, most notably by the opposition PAS. However, the most damning indication so far has been the lack of popular support. Internet blogs as well as other non-governmentally controlled media rarely debate Islam hadhari, and if they do it is to document the lack of engagement people have and feel with it. A survey, conducted by Patricia Martinez in 2005, showed that ‘ninety-three per cent had heard about Islam Hadhari, but only 53.3 per cent were able to state that they understood it’ (Martinez, 2006).

The failings of Islam hadhari
‘Ordinary people’ on the street are largely unimpressed by this new government policy of Islam hadhari. At least those people I spoke to saw it more as a fad that will pass. One informant of mine in Kelantan said that ‘We have Islam, what do we need hadhari for? Why separate? Islam is one.’ This was echoed by a spirit medium I introduce in the following chapter. When he was channelling a spirit of one of the companions of Muhammad, I asked him what he thought of Islam hadhari and he replied that: ‘Everything is the same; Islam is complete and one.’ This view was widely held by detractors and is reminiscent of a key feature of Islam, tawhid or the oneness of God. PAS is at the forefront of this critique that places Islam hadhari at odds with the one-ness of worship by claiming that Islam hadhari is a new form of Islam (Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid, 2006: 116). One senior PAS official said: ‘There is only one Islam and there is no Islam Hadhari’ (NST, 2004a). Website discussions and internet blogs have not focused on it; corruption and nepotism still dominate these. The Islam hadhari concept is still relatively new and the discourse it has started and which is gravitating around it is still in the making,
so naturally I have focused on its possibilities. Potentially this is just another blank banner and election tool, but such cynicism in Malaysian studies can be tiring. Maybe Islam hadhari will be filled with relevant content and enthuse the people, who are still on the margin, watching, albeit uninterested. What is missing is a level of ‘cultural intimacy’ (Herzfeld, 1997) between Muslims and the government-sponsored Islam hadhari they are supposed to identify with.\footnote{16}

The academic endeavour of Islam hadhari is still being popularised. The media output has been increasing as the concept is pushed through the various government media outlets, most notably IKIM radio and the government-controlled newspapers. Already, censorship of negative publicity, or publicity perceived as such, has begun, as in the case of Nik Aziz, the Kelantanese Chief Minister and PAS’s spiritual leader. Government ministers attacked his article opposing Islam hadhari in the PAS publication *Harakah Daily*, whilst PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang, who wrote a book declaring Islam hadhari a deviant form of Islam, was reported to have had copies of his book seized by Home Affairs Ministry officers in some states (Arfa’ezah Aziz, 2005).

Even Badawi’s own bureaucracies had to be enthused. One of the principal aims of Islam hadhari is to apply Islamic values in the administration. The media has already reported that ‘Abdullah said the public delivery system was now in line with the principles of Islam hadhari mooted by the government’ (Puah, 2006b). However, when I asked the head of the enforcement section at JAWI, the Islamic Religious Department of the Federal Territories, about the role of Islam hadhari in her work, she responded with a short and clear-cut: ‘Tiada kaitan’ (‘no connection/relevance’). This suggests that the concept has a long way to go, when the people charged with enforcing Islamic principles in the country’s principal city have not yet embraced it, or even been briefed on the role it ought to play in their work. It also highlights the often-ambivalent attitudes of elements of the Islamic bureaucracy towards the federal government. The dissemination of Islam hadhari follows that of previous concepts and its long incubation period may attest to the internal resistance or apathy it is encountering. Whatever the reason, for it to make the changes Badawi hopes to see in the future it must be made more public and more relevant.

Islam hadhari may be something of a red herring in that it does not drive the state’s overall policy as such, although the administration is trying to make it look that way. Nor has it grown out of a popular Islamic movement; thus, it has received little if no acceptance from Muslim organisations beyond
government control. Rather, it has been the fantasy of some elements of the administration, a fantasy that could well be the, or at least a, key to dealing with the Malaysian religio-cultural mosaic. However, its slow inception at the state level coupled with a low uptake in society means that, conspicuously especially among the Muslim public, Islam hadhari faces an uncertain future, with Anwar and Najib and other potential leaders waiting in the wings with new and novel concepts and projects. The writing is on the wall. Soon after the main opposition coalition had taken over the state governments of Penang and Selangor following their success in the March 2008 elections, they discontinued the promotion of Islam hadhari (Malaysiakini, 2008). For all its potential and possibilities, Islam hadhari, Badawi’s largest project for Malaysia in terms of social transformation, seems doomed. Badawi and his state apparatus were incapable of creating a new Islamic identity for Malaysia and Malaysians. The competition of essentialised Malay and Islamic identities remains too powerful.

Islam was developed into a state system, a system of and for governance, a moral compass, a harbinger of hope and order, an all-encompassing religious ideology. This did not happen overnight but as a civilisational cycle over hundreds of years beginning with Muhammad’s prophethship and his steep ascent to religious, political and military leadership. Subsequently, it was under the Abbasid dynasty (750–1258) that what Mandaville calls a ‘Muslim political society’ emerged (Mandaville, 2007: 34). The Abbasid caliph Al-Mahdi in the late eighth century intervened in Islamic doctrine and used his powers to persecute groups and people who did not correspond to the prevalent orthodoxy (Lapidus, 2002: 73). With Islam’s demise in, at least, the field of state governance and its humiliating defeat on battlegrounds, beginning with its expulsion from mainland Europe in 1492 and the subsequent colonisation of its heartland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, came an unbridgeable gap between doctrine and reality, between golden past and present, between superiority based on scripture and belief and powerlessness in the real world. Muslims reacted in different ways to these developments around them. The Islamic modernists and secular nationalists looked to the reform of the state and economy to make Muslim societies stronger and able to stand up to the Western powers, whilst the ulama and Sufis largely wanted to return to Islamic ideals and reform individual behaviour (Lapidus, 2002: 457).

Malaysia has had its share of all these movements trying to imprint their vision. However, it is the notion of a return to a golden age that is resonant in much of the Badawi administration’s projects. I have outlined Islam hadhari
and will elaborate on the revival of new Malays in the following section. Suffice it to say that there is a continuing perception amongst Muslims in Malaysia that they lack the power to decide on matters related to governance, the state and international affairs, which is partly being played out in terrorism (abroad) on the one hand and acts of political defiance on the other. These acts of defiance mask or attempt to mask the actors’ relatively powerless status. The alternatives that are occasionally tabled all come from the golden past, by now a mythical landscape, where all desired elements of a perfect state, even a perfect democracy, are present. This utopia, where Christians and Muslims coexist, where social justice reigns and a benevolent ruler presides is used as a template for the ‘new Muslim polity’ – a more perfect model of the democratic state than the hegemonic western one, based on Christian values and the horrors of countless wars, not least two world wars. There is little to object to in this, except that every attempt to create this heaven on earth has failed and retains its utopian rhetoric.

The rhetoric and discourse then simply replicate a thinking of superiority, in terms of having numerous blue-prints for forms of governance that are better than the West has to offer, predating Western notions of democracy and the modern Western nation-state. The Andalusian model and Medinan charter both sound like stories from the Arabian nights, which can be used to lull Muslims and non-Muslims alike into a state of acceptance and belief: belief that this can once again become reality. Dreams and hopes become attached to these utopian musings and night after night we long to hear how the story ends. But it does not end, it remains a story, whilst programs are enacted on the ground while we are dreaming, and unlike Scheherazade’s stories the moral is not one of redemption, but of letting the groundwork be put in place for those dreams to become nightmares.

New Malays: a revival of sorts

Since Islam hadhari has yet to prove a successful project for re-imagining the nation, the Malaysian government has unearthed another project that had lain dormant for some time. This new agenda is the creation of a Malaysian civilisation based on both Malays and their rootedness in Malay culture, and on the sanctity of Islam, whilst nurturing a global mindset. This may sound like political posturing and empty phrases, but this project goes back to the emergence of a more potent and active Malay nationalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s.
During that time Badawi was one of the authors on the UMNO youth committee involved in a book project entitled Revolusi mental or mental revolution (Senu Abdul Rahman, 2004 [1971]). Senu Abdul Rahman headed this attempt to look at possibilities to develop and change the Malay mindset, which was considered a hindrance to development. This book was debunked and attacked by Alatas (1977), who saw in UMNO’s project no more than the reproduction of the colonial mindset and its stereotyping of Malay backwardness, which had been internalised by those calling for a mental revolution.

Unsurprisingly, Badawi kept pushing for a mental revolution with his various programmes, most prominent of all Islam hadhari. Unsurprising also is the recent re-publication of the 1971 book ‘Mental revolution’ in English. The tying together of progressive Islam and the nation-state is reminiscent of the time of decolonisation in Southeast Asia, when Muslims became part of a range of nationalist movements in the region. Interestingly, Alatas, a key postcolonial writer and founder of the Gerakan party, was already proposing a ‘progressive Islam’, the name of his journal published while he was in the Netherlands between 1955 and 1956, which fused modernity into an Islamic framework (Abaza, 1998: 139–148).

Moving beyond Mahathir’s (1970) social Darwinism that saw Malays as inferior and therefore in need of a mental revolution, the new Malays today, according to Ali Tawfik Al-Attas, should revisit the glorious past and learn lessons from Islam: ‘What is needed is a change in mentality. The only way to achieve this, according to Abdullah [Badawi], is to once again emulate the rich intellectual tradition of Islamic thought’ (Al-Attas, 2006: xxiii). Badawi has subsequently called for the creation of an ulul al-bab – the intellectual vanguard – that is supposed to spearhead a Muslim Malay civilisational revolution. Is this the fruition of the supposed Malay mental revolution, forty years in the making, of Malaysian politics from UMNO Youth’s Mental Revolution (Senu Abdul Rahman, 2004 [1971]) and Mahathir’s Malay Dilemma (1970)? Changing the Malay mindset is back on the agenda and this time it is not merely to achieve equal status with the other Malaysians, but to go beyond previous goal posts and breach the global. Malays it seems have outgrown, or have to outgrow, Malaysia. However, the task is not simply to become global citizens, but to remain firmly rooted within tanah Melayu at the same time.

The new Malay, then, is the synthesis of a globalised homo economicus, able to flourish in the global economy, and a rooted man of faith. At a conference titled ‘Human Capital Underpins Exemplary Race’ organised by
the Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris’s Malay Civilisation Institute, Deputy Prime Minister Najib said:

> We have to be superb in the urban as well as the rural areas and we also have a role to play in the world. We want Glocal Malays pivoted on the virtuous Malay culture and rooted in the sanctity of Islam (Bernama, 2007c).

What both Najib and Badawi have done is to revive the Islamic golden past and reconfigure globalisation as the modern face of an age-old process, one in which the Muslim world one thousand years ago was a key player and leader (Bernama, 2007b). The New Malays thus are both to look back, not at the kampong, but at an Islamic Arabian glorious past for their roots, and accelerate forward towards a global Western economy. The former is a reminder that Malay Islamic identity is essential and essentialist, whilst the latter protects sustained economic support for Malays in order to achieve economic parity and superiority. Indeed, Najib reiterated that the Malay agenda to uplift the status of the Malays remains UMNO’s raison d’être:

> In this struggle for the Malays, it must be firmly said that there is no time limit within which we must achieve our targets. For as long as our goals are not achieved, we will continue the struggle, deploying every available resources [sic], for the sake of our people (Najib Abdul Razak, 2006).

Underlying the push to mould the Malay mind and foster a young generation that they hope will fulfil the dreams of the elders is the rhetoric of fear and having to struggle for their rights in a world that has seen Malays colonised by the White Man and internally economically subdued by the Chinese. This is the myth the Melayu baru (New Malays) build on, and the orator Najib put it poetically in a pantun, a Malay poetic form, when he was speaking at a political gathering on the theme of ‘Reaching for the Stars – Elevating a National Civilisation’:

> Peace, Prosperity and Harmony
> An elevated civilisation our destiny
> Here in our beloved country
> Let us contemplate resolutely
> The ideals of a struggle, eternally (Bernama, 2007a).

The struggle is invoked again and again, and during another speech Najib went on to call on the youth to become New Malays and take up the education the
state wants it to: a strong faith in Islam and the nation, i.e. UMNO (Najib Abdul Razak, 2006).

The conflation of ethnic political allegiance and Islam has been the running theme of this chapter. PAS and UMNO are continually engaged in competition over the majority Malay vote and use Islam as way to lure voters and then police their actions. The state in all its forms is engaged in ordering spaces along ethnic and religious lines. In order to do so it has limited discussions and maintained ethnic and religious boundaries. Islam hadhari is a particularly ambitious project to subsume all Malaysians under its banner, whilst retaining control over Islamic doctrine and practice. The government has tried to redefine Islamic space in Malaysia with Islam hadhari and subsequently push out PAS and its manifesto for an Islamic state. However, the competition over Islamicity is tough and the state is not the only actor. Indeed, the universalising project is stalled because the power of parochial identities such as Malayness, as exemplified by the New Malays, remains too strong. The following chapter will examine the role of the arts and Islamic civil society in the fight over Islamicity and Islamic space.

Notes

1 ‘Hadhari’ is an interesting choice of word, as its translation as ‘civilisational’ conjures up an interpretation in line with Ibn Khaldun, who, in his seminal work *Muqaddima*, sets up a city – countryside, urban – rural, or even high – low (Gellner, 1994) dichotomy, between the ‘umran badawi’, the rural ‘primitive’ civilisation, and the ‘umran hadari’, the most developed and urban civilisation (Khaldun, 2004 [1967]).

2 After recapturing the state of Terengganu UMNO wanted to reverse PAS’s policies and use it as a launching pad for Islam Hadhari. UMNO established a state-level directorate for Islam Hadhari and welfare affairs and changed the state motto to *Islam Hadhari, Terengganu Bestari* (Islam Hadhari, intelligent Terengganu).

3 It is unclear whether Badawi wanted to challenge Anwar’s renaissance vision as set out in 1996, but Badawi seemed to want to carve out his own niche in the competitive arena of Malaysian political concepts.

4 The role and applicability of *dhimmi* in the Malaysian context is discussed in detail by Martinez (Martinez, 2001: 495–499). In more general terms the role of protection for *dhimmi* is contested, as revenues derived from higher taxation of *dhimmi* were important to early Arab invaders in the first wave of expansion following Muhammad’s death.
It is rumoured that Chandra Muzaffar, a well-known social activist and academic, was one of the speech-writers for Badawi on this occasion, and it fits into his project of a universal and inclusive Islam, at once open to the West and a power-broker within the Muslim world.

See Appendix 2 for a leaflet (in Malay) distributed by FORKAD prior to the rally at the federal mosque, which sets out their motivations and agenda. I also further discuss their politics in chapter 5.

Convivencia, or co-existence, refers to the period between 711–1492, when Muslims governed parts of the Iberian Peninsula and lived in relative peace with Christians and Jews. Like other golden ages of Islam, the convivencia is used as positive imagery and somewhat out of context. Although non-Muslims were granted protection under Muslim rule, there were also pogroms, persecution and constant warfare with neighbouring Christian kingdoms during this time (Majid, 2004: 24).

Abaza (2001: 88–106) gives an excellent account of Naguib Al-Attas’ life, influence in Malaysia and intellectual mission. Amongst those he most influenced was Anwar, who was at one stage his student. He has also been influential in the formation of a more Islamic cultural policy in Malaysia that is aimed at unifying Malays as Muslims. It is important to note that Ali Tawfik Al-Attas is his son and the sociologist Hussein Alatas, who debunked the myth of the lazy native, his brother. All are Syeds and their Yemeni heritage and lineage traceable to Muhammad has had different impacts on their lives. Alatas Romanised his name, whereas Al-Attas was immensely proud of his Arabic descent.

Jawi script is a form of Arabic script that has been adapted to enable writing the Malay language. It spread throughout the Malay world with the introduction of Islam in Southeast Asia.

In addition, in June 2008 the Malaysian government funded and organised a conference at the University of Wales, Lampeter in the United Kingdom, in which Malaysian students presented papers on Islam in Malaysia, with an emphasis on Islam hadhari (Anon., 2008).

For a more detailed discussion on bangsa Malaysia, see Ooi Kee Beng (2006a).

Kessler (1992: 141) draws attention to the Indian connection in terms of the architecture of central Kuala Lumpur with its ‘Mughal’ style railway station and administrative buildings, which were commissioned and designed by the British and fully embraced by the Malay monarchy, along with a range of Indian ‘traditional’ ceremonial performances that act as legitimising and authorising agents.

For a detailed discussion on whether Malaysia can be termed an Islamic state on the basis of Shafi’i jurist Al-Mawardi’s Al-ahkam as-sultaniyya, see Martinez (2001).
Kessler describes the dualism between archaism and modernity in Malaysian politics as a ‘paradoxical modernity of a politically persuasive contemporary Malay cultural traditionalism’ (Kessler, 1992: 155).

Putra mosque itself is at once technologically modern – its sound systems create an atmosphere of intimacy in a hall that accommodates 10,000 worshippers – and steeped in traditional Islamic architecture. The website has been changed by the new administration and rebranded as ‘ummatan wasatan’ referring to the moderate or middle nation/community. This is an updated version of the moderate Islam/moderate Muslim that Islam hadhari sought to instil.

For Herzfeld, ‘cultural intimacy’ is ‘the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality’ (1997: 3). In other words Islam’s current pariah status in the world is supposed to work towards creating a sense of inner belonging for all Malaysians under Islam hadhari. This is crucial, as Badawi aims to use Islam hadhari as a nation-building tool for all Malaysians.

Mahathir’s Malaysia and Ahmadinejad’s Iran both carved out a niche with their anti-Western posturing and outspoken anti-Semitism.

Alternative Islamic modes of governance include a resuscitation of the caliphate, especially one based on the first four successors of Muhammad and the establishment of an Islamic (nation) state (see Eickelman & Piscatori, 2004: 30–35). I have already discussed the inclusion of contractual arrangements such as the charter of Medina and the convivencia of Al-Andalus (Andalusia) earlier in this chapter.

I use ‘man’ with caution here, but there is little mention of the role of the new Malay woman in this project. For a discussion of the role of women in the new Malay discourse and new Malay middle classes, see Stivens (1998b).
5. Other Malays and Malaysia(n)s: Resistance and Change

Faris takes out a packet of cigarettes, offers me one and lights up. As he exhales the first drag, he looks intensely around him, then points at a mid-rise building across the street. It used to house a plethora of civil society groups after reformasi, the period of the late 1990s and early 2000s, when change was in the air and youth groups and artists were congregating in Bangsar Utama. He tells me that he was part of many of the groups and fought against Anwar’s sacking by Mahathir and Mahathir’s authoritarian rule. Groups such as Universiti Bangsar Utama and Artis ProActiv were rallying for democracy and many students from the close-by Universiti Malaya took part in discussions, rallies and underground activities. Mahathir’s 2001 crackdown on some of the key activists and their imprisonment under the infamous ISA (Internal Security Act) shut down many groups and a recovering Malaysian economy meant that students drifted into their graduate jobs. Faris tells me this with a look of nostalgia for the time of his student days that seemed more meaningful, full of resistance and fighting for a different future, a different Malaysia. He says he has focused his own efforts on other organisations which he believes have more clout than those grassroots student groups he used to belong to. Wistfully, he adds, ‘It’s more important now, with the extremists at our gates. They have slowly and quietly taken over. We have to be extra vigilant and fight their attempts to create an Islamic state while we party and sleep.’ His worry is that the reactionary Islamist forces are surreptitiously creating the groundwork for an Islamic state and at some point will be able to present a fait accompli to their antagonists.
Resistance and co-option: a divided civil society

As outlined in the previous chapter, Malayness and Islam have become state projects that have become primary and primordial identity markers and markers of difference. This chapter presents a range of civil society actors who are manipulating, resisting and influencing the state’s control over Islamicity, Islamic space and Malayness. Whilst there has been a burgeoning civil society for quite some time in Malaysia (see chapter 1), its efficacy has been mostly played out behind the scenes in swaying government policy rather than public opinion. Progressive organisations, such as the Women’s Aid Organisation and Sisters in Islam (SIS), for instance, have been very successful in lobbying behind the scenes rather than staging demonstrations to attain their policy goals in addressing women’s rights. Parts of ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia, Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement) were co-opted by the government with the inclusion of its then leader Ibrahim Anwar into Mahathir’s Barisan Nasional government in 1983, whilst Al-Arqam was shut down by the government (see chapter 3). Thus, civil society groups, be they religious, economic or ethnic, are kept under observation by the state so that they do not grow to a size and influence to challenge the state.

Most groups followed the course of voicing mild dissent in public, whilst lobbying government officials to achieve their goals in private. This is slowly changing as emboldened Malay and Islamic supremacist civil society takes to the streets with great effect. This chapter defines and traces both progressive and reactionary developments in Malaysian civil society. Civil society, like the state, is another contested space in Malaysia where Malayness and Islam are fought-over concepts. In such a situation the state has no choice but to take sides with those purportedly defending Malay rights and Islam. This strategy has been employed by conservative civil society with much success as the examples in this chapter show. I suggest that the tactics and strategies for which the state is opening space are being employed by the reactionary camp with much greater ferocity than by the progressives.

Opening Islamic spaces

As we have seen in the preceding chapter, Islam has been used as a way to conceptualise the entire Malaysian state. External signifiers such as an Islamic infrastructure provide visible symbols of Islamic space. The rise in Islamic
education facilities (Shamsul, 2005b), Islamic banking and the continued mosque building programmes are but a few examples of this process. Islam is a regional and indeed international prism, which the government and civil society actors are using, imagining and conceptualising. The transnational flows of information, ideas and discourses have enabled almost every place to be within reach in an instant, have accelerated information exchange and have enabled a ‘travelling Islam’ (Mandaville, 2001) to be accessible to most people. The internet, with its chat forums, email lists and discussion boards, CD-ROMs, tapes and mp3 audio files with everything from the azan (call to prayer), fiery sermons, prayer timetables for travellers to advice on the interpretation of Islam, has inundated people with information. The results have been mixed.

In Malaysia, civil society groups have been emerging to counteract state-sponsored universalising tendencies that uproot individuals and then re-root them in specific historical and social contexts. Some Islamic fundamentalist (dogmatic) movements are riding the waves of individualisation and the prominence of civil society (Roy, 2007: 68–69) to attract a large following on the internet and on single-issue platforms. Many reactionaries in Malaysia hope that, by capturing civil society, the state will follow, as indeed some of the cases that this and the following chapter expand on show. Olivier Roy cautions that the growing individualisation of religiosity and belief does not mean that Muslims will become secular, but that a range of outcomes can follow: ‘either liberal forms of Islam or neofundamentalism’ (Roy, 2004: 149). The Malaysian political elite are hiding behind a veil of ignorance of many of these developments. Undoubtedly more access and more information have led to more openness in terms of people being able to read, listen to and watch items on and about Islam and its practices. However, the government’s gradual loss of control also means that extremism and religious fundamentalism have spread their influence and access. The hailed opening up of spaces for civil society that accompanied Badawi’s inaugural election win as Prime Minister in 2004 was used by all civil society actors to spread their messages and policies. Everyone was trying to occupy the newly opening space.

Civil society and democracy

In chapter 1 I outlined some problems with the concept of civil society, the public sphere and the dichotomous relationship between the state and civil society. These issues are compounded by the problematic assumption that
the opening up of political and social space in hitherto authoritarian regimes opens these spaces to elements sympathetic to the West and democracy. It is argued that a strong civil society is a condition of democratisation and an engaged citizenry to fortify the democratic process (Linz & Stepan, 1996). Much of the focus of academic studies has been on social movements which were changing political systems, regimes and ideologies worldwide especially during the late 1980s and 1990s (Keane, 1988b; a; Weiss, 2006). The process of social mobilisation that led, in most cases, to democratic reforms was seen as a prototype of a global push towards democratisation by civil society groups. Indeed, Weiss has outlined the democratising and reform-minded role of civil society in oppositional politics in Malaysia that includes the aim of overcoming communalism in politics (Weiss, 2006: 109).

However, this presupposes a dichotomy between the state and civil society which is debatable on a theoretical and historical level (Jesudason, 1995; Navaro-Yashin, 2002b: 130–137). Civil society is also seen as a ‘bulwark against anarchy, the Church, the Leviathan state, and most recently against totalitarianism’ (Chabal & Daloz, 1999: 18). In the postcolonial African experience civil society has often been seen as a counter-hegemonic force. Gellner maintains:

> Civil society is that set of diverse non-governmental institutions which is strong enough to counterbalance the state and, while not preventing the state from fulfilling its role of keeper of the peace and arbitrator between major interests, can nevertheless prevent it from dominating and atomising the rest of society (Gellner, 1994: 5).

The Malaysian case unsettles these liberal interpretations of civil society, because in Malaysia it is a part of civil society that has wielded its power to influence the state and its policies regarding Islam, so much so that the reactionary and Islamic orthodox forces want the state to intervene on their behalf.³ Civil society is as much the pro-democracy organisations and NGOs working for better working and living conditions, as it is the various fundamentalist movements, often proclaiming similar ends, but with radically different means. As Hefner warns regarding the Indonesian case, ‘not all laterally organized organisation are necessarily democracy enhancing. Quite simply, there are civil and uncivil ‘civil’ associations’ (Hefner, 1998: 36). He makes the further point that these organisations can be ‘crossect by ethnic, religious, or ideological divides’ and are not always ‘democracy-good’ (Hefner, 2001: 9). These reactionary and conservative forces in Malaysia have been extra-
ordinarily successful in creating a culture of accommodation and have even been courted by the government.

Labels of reform-minded, liberal, progressive and orthodox, reactionary and conservative here (see Figure 8) hark back to the fundamental shifts in eighteenth-century European history. The French revolution and the threat to and demise of the sovereign monarchy, aristocracy and church power engendered a reaction from the Catholic Church and other parties to redress the fundamental changes and restore pre-revolutionary order. This process culminated in the concerted action under Metternich and the period of restoration of monarchical and Church power following Napoleon’s final defeat at Waterloo in 1815. Reactionary then meant looking back to often imagined ‘traditional values’ based on an order that predated the contemporary political and social conditions (Ogg, 1913). Al-Azmeh has pointed out the similarities between Catholic and Islamic fundamentalism,
namely the ‘moralization on and in religious terms of private life, authoritarian invigilation and management of society reformed according to institutions that make this possible’ (Al-Azmeh, n.d.).

**Malaysian civil society**

As noted in the previous chapter the then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar in the 1990s put forward his version of the concept of *masyarakat madani* (‘civil society’). The rethinking and refashioning of modernity he envisaged was part of a larger Asian renaissance he saw in the making (Anwar Ibrahim, 1996). Masyarakat madani was envisaged as a modern and progressive civilised society, based on ethics, morality and spirituality, firmly placed within an Islamic framework. This concept is different from Western notions of civil society (Al-Attas, 1976; Derichs, 2001). Its emphasis is on civilising (through Islamising) the entire society, while the concept of Western civil society emphasises the rule of the citizens. Anwar Ibrahim popularised masyarakat madani in the 1990s as ‘civil society’, with the dissemination of publications and the creation of a university institute for Chandra Muzaffar, a prominent social activist and founder of Aliran, a human rights group. Malay leaders, however, used this concept and took it to mean that ‘civil society supports the objectives of the democratically elected government rather than fostering political autonomy and social initiatives as common practice’ (Norani Othman, 2003: 129), thus neglecting the sovereignty of the people and disembedding it from state autonomy. However, as other studies have shown, it is precisely the devolution of power and a strong civic engagement of the people that makes democracy work (Putnam et al., 1993). Jesudason (1995) argues that in Malaysia, the middle class, especially the Malay middle class, is intrinsically linked to the state, as it is the main beneficiary of the state policies that led to its creation. As beneficiaries of a privileged position the middle classes are unlikely to disturb the status quo.

For civil society groups it is a balancing act between tight government controls and a gradual opening up of space for civil society. This means groups are continually trying to gain access to and maintain public spaces in which to operate. In Malaysia one such space is the coffee house, in which people meet and discuss as well as act out subversion and dissent. The *kopitiam* (traditional coffee house) has been largely replaced by places such as Starbucks, which regularly host poetry readings, amateur music acts and other performing arts. Thus, it plays a part in creating and then maintaining a public sphere or space
that is open and democratic (Habermas, 1989). Such spaces exist on all sides and for all sides. A coffee shop in Shah Alam is the open space and public place for people seeking to force or entice the state into following a regressive Islamisation process ever further. This is not to caricature localities but to point to the way places become politicised and the openness of spaces does not of itself guarantee open and inclusive discussions (cf. Habermas, 1989: 1–2).

Taking control

In Malaysia it has become evident that orthodox and fundamentalist Islamic groups are fully able to utilise lenient policing by state authorities to propagate and increase their power bases. Organisations like ABIM (Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement), TERAS (Foundation for Malay Empowerment), MPF (Malaysian Professional Forum), BADAi (Coalition against the Inter-Faith Commission) and most recently Perkasa (Pertubuhan Pribumi Perkasa Malaysia, Indigenous Malay Empowerment Organisation) are some of the bigger organisations that have consolidated power and influence (see Figure 8).

Liberal and progressive organisations that attract little or no government funding are dependent on Western backing from organisations such as the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAF).6 These civil society organisations are falling behind in the power they can project. In addition, they have had to deal with attacks on their foreign connections. At the UMNO general assembly in 2006 an UMNO member, Shahbudin Yahya, attacked organisations like Sisters in Islam, the Penang Global Ethic Project and the Inter-faith Commission (IFC) (Husna Yusop, 2006). Opponents of especially Western foreign organisations sponsoring and financing projects and organisations in Malaysia put KAF and other donors under intense scrutiny. Shahbudin Yahya alleged that KAF was involved in activities that threatened the status of Islam in Malaysia. He added: “I am not saying this without any basis; I have all my proof. They produced books on liberalism and pluralism in religion, with the support of KAF. They produced videos,” he said, while waving a CD containing a video clip.’ (Husna Yusop, 2006). The mention of liberalism in itself is seen as a threat to Islam in the conservative camp. Rumours soon circulated about what else KAF had been up to, which other Malaysian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were funded by them and what their real agendas were. This shows the power of the reactionaries. They could make up stories, disseminate them effectively via
SMS, the internet and word of mouth and influence how ordinary people perceived certain civil society groups.\(^7\)

In Malaysia the state can seem at times overbearing in its authoritarianism. But more worrying for progressive civil society is the influence of the reactionary NGOs and civil society actors. They are now actively shaping the discourse on Islam. Civil society in Malaysia can be an annoyance or active agent for the state and its patrons, depending on individual issues and policies. However, in simple terms, many conservative and right-wing Muslim NGOs and their religious counterparts have been used by and have utilised the state to further their own agendas.

Public space has become non-negotiable for many Muslim Malays, as they see it as theirs and not up for discussion. Civil society groups like Sisters in Islam want to make Islam a private matter, and reduce state intervention. Others, who seemingly have broad support in government institutions, want to Islamise public space further. Each group claims to have the ‘silent majority’ behind them. The often radical and conservative elements of Muslim civil society in Malaysia are better organised and thus speak with louder voices. They are tremendously effective, especially since they now have supremacy over the public space and what is and what is not said, what can and what cannot be said. As Martinez has pointed out, degrees of silence on such matters,

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\text{... of unwillingness to be chastised as being against Islam or an infidel, or even being seen as ‘less Islamic’ or accused of ‘insulting Islam’ define the majority of middle-class Muslims. It is this silence of the majority that enables public discourse to be dominated, through default, by the minority who want an Islamic state. This minority’s stridence defines Islam and Islamisation in Malaysia beyond their proportion to the population of Muslims (Martinez, 2004: 47).}
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So whilst reactionary groups such as TERAS (Malay empowerment movement) try to retain the public space for the Malays and Islam, the government is backing them with warnings such as Badawi’s that sensitive issues should be talked about with caution, if at all. These groups are working towards creating an exclusory space for Islam and talking about Islam. They are monopolising what can and what cannot be said, printed, painted, sung, communicated in any shape or form about Islam, whilst pushing for their often fundamentalist and orthodox interpretations of Islam.

Civil society in general and NGOs in particular have acted as both grounding and universalising agents in debates over government policies, iden-
Some groups have pursued local issues, whilst others only get engaged in bigger projects, sometimes well beyond the nation-state boundaries. This is evident on both sides of the religio-political divide.

In the case of Malaysia, Muslim civil society groups and non-governmental organisations that I see as reactionary occupy a diverse range of positions. There are revivalist movements, which want to proclaim an Islamic state modelled on the state at the time of the prophet Muhammad, the golden age of Islam, whilst others want to return to the glory days of the Malaccan Malay sultanate. They all share the vision of a return to a glorious time when Muslims ruled the world or at least ‘their’ land. To me the key to calling these groups reactionary is their ideological underpinnings. In most cases these can be identified as patriarchal, monarchical or in some sense Malay or Muslim supremacist.

Progressive civil Islam

On the other side of the spectrum sit the progressive and liberal elements of civil society. One of my informants, Al-Mustaqueem Mahmod Radhi, a well-educated Malay who is director of the Middle Eastern Graduate Centre (MEGC), is part of the progressive camp and has consequently been funded by various Western agencies, as Western aid is often the only means of sustaining and working at all on progressive or liberal Islam in Malaysia. Amongst his accomplishments is the publication of several short tracts ranging from meditations on freedom, interest (riba), interfaith marriage, the relationship between Islam and the West to terrorism. Heavily influenced by modernist thought and an active engagement with Western as well as classic Islamic texts, he attempts to educate his Malay readership and open up debate (see for example Al-Mustaqueem Mahmod Radhi, 2007). He personifies on many levels what more optimistic observers have seen as a more inclusive and democratic civil society (Hefner, 2001), popular cosmopolitanism (Kahn, 2006) or national cosmopolitanism (Souchou, 2003b). Souchou identifies a ‘rupture of the obsessive communalism that has traditionally defined Malay nationalism’, which is being expressed in what he calls a ‘national cosmopolitanism’, a form of cosmopolitanism that is ‘somehow located, and entrenched in and incited by specified national and regional conditions’ (Souchou, 2003b: 222). This fits Mustaqueem’s profile, as he was involved with ABIM (Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement) and UMNO student organisations in Jordan during his
study there and even offered to open a branch for PAS, too. He attempted to get Malay students to organise study groups and interact with each other. Back in Malaysia, he has worked with a wide range of civil society actors from all ethnic backgrounds and he has engaged with Indonesian scholars, activists and functionaries across the region. Thus, he seems firmly rooted at home, whilst working with others within and outside of Malaysia on opening up discourse on Islam in particular. ‘Sisters in Islam’ is a prominent progressive Muslim feminist movement, which has similarly been engaged in transversal politics (Norani Othman, 2006; Zainah Anwar, 2001).

However, the people driving these movements or organisations represent a cosmopolitanism not found in Malaysia on the ground, but firmly located in the (upper) middle class or elite that is as at home in Singapore, Australia, the US or the UK as global citizens, as they are in Kuala Lumpur or Penang. Thus, this form of cosmopolitanism is mostly embedded in transversal politics and struggles (cf. Foucault, 1982: 780), such as feminism or human rights. Their allegiance as cosmopolitans, then, lies in the universality of experiences, both perceived and real, of those with limited power to speak. As Yuval-Davis (1997) notes, transversal politics are based on a constant rooting and shifting; thus one remains grounded in one’s national, feminist or local identity prism, whilst allowing for a new open space to hover and be occupied at various times. Transversal struggles are also important for radical Muslim organisations and individuals, aired via internet blogs and websites, on issues such as Palestine, the erosion of morality and the Westernisation (read de-Islamisation or secularisation) of society. Their focus is often on the Muslim heartland and the ummah in general. Thus new flows of allegiance, facilitated by information technology, have been fostered across the nation-state borders as well as within the nation-state across racial or ethnic lines.

The arts fighting for survival and a voice

The arts are a contested space. The arts are at once an expression of a people’s culture and a counter-culture. I focus on four aspects of the arts in Malaysia and how they relate to Malayness and Islam. The first is a detailed look at the fight between PAS and the traditional arts in Kelantan. Here the state is pitched against civil society, which in turn is supported by the federal government in the perennial UMNO–PAS struggle. The second is a state-sponsored organisation that produces hand-crafted copies of the Qur’an. Their aim is
the indigenisation and Malayisation of the Qur’an using Malay signifiers. The third is a performance art event that was held outside of the state’s purview, yet was subjected to state intervention on the grounds that it insulted Islam. The fourth vignette provides a glimmer of hope in the form of an exhibition of Malay artists who tackle head on some of the main themes of this book, namely the relationship between Islam and Malayness.

The mak yong saga

In 1990, PAS came to power in the state of Kelantan. It immediately started a programme of Islamising the state with such measures as the introduction of separate checkout lines for men and women at supermarkets (mentioned earlier), urging women to wear the headscarf and the banning of many traditional performance art forms like wayang kulit, shadow puppet theatre, and mak yong, a form of theatre and storytelling which is often invoked ritually for healing purposes. The reasons the state government gave for the ban ranged from the view that women and men together on stage was not allowed in Islam, to the claim by Kelantan Chief Minister Nik Aziz that ‘we need to purify our local theatre from those alien elements’ (Prystay, 2006). What he meant was the Indian/Hindu and therefore pre-Islamic content of many stories and epics told through the art forms. Wayang kulit is traditionally based on Hindu epics. The Kelantanese state government took exception to this in particular as well as to the animistic elements in mak yong performances, which are not allowed in the Islam PAS wants practised in Kelantan.

Let me quote at some length Eddin Khoo, director of Pusaka, a Malaysian NGO engaged in the study and documentation of traditional arts, to illustrate how he views the discrepancy between the state’s portrayal of traditional performing arts and the lived experience in Kelantan, where he predominantly works:

Theatre as ritual, theatre as collective need, theatre as individual yearning, theatre as a very complex construction of human understanding – understanding of the self, understanding of human psychology, understanding of the nature of illness – and I felt all of these things needed to be documented, they needed to be intellectualised and they needed to be collected so that we can prove to ourselves that we actually originate from a very long, elaborate and complex cultural self, you know. That is very complex philosophically.
It’s also very complex historically in terms of the influences that have shaped it, and more importantly, how it has negotiated those influences to build a very distinctive and unique culture for itself, especially at a time in the 1990s and now, when there seems to be a great desire to culturally cleanse a lot of the collective self, and also kind of homogenise our culture through politics. And politics as pronounced and promulgated through a culture of sloganeering and a culture that really lacks any sense of introspection (Khoo quoted in Surin, 2006a).

The purging and cleansing of Kelantanese cultural heritage by PAS to create an art form that is in line with its Islamic views is thus refashioning history and with it a part of self-identity. Not just the performing arts are affected by this process. Farish Noor, who wrote a book with Eddin Khoo on wood carving in Malaysia, reports:

Back at the home of Nik Rashidi [a prominent local woodcarver], we discuss the future of Malay woodcarving in the age of religious revival - ism and rampant consumerism. Nik laments the fact that the Malaysians people no longer appreciate their own traditional art and culture: “We talk about our ‘Asian values’ and our pride in our past. But where is this appreciation and how is it reflected? Businessmen and the rich elite in the cities just want to buy our woodcarving to decorate their mansions and apartments, while the religious leaders tell us that our carvings are un-Islamic because we still depict images of the Hindu Gods, deities and natural spirits. But our traditional carvings are our only link to the past, with nature around us and the living elements that keeps [sic] our art alive: This is our Malay art, because it comes from the land and it breathes the history of our people. If we cut off our links to our ancestors, we would be like a ship without a compass; a people without history” (Farish A. Noor, 2004b).

This disembedding of culture in Kelantan has left its marks over the last fifteen years of PAS rule. The state museum in Kota Bharu highlights the plight of the local arts. In 2006 gamelan instruments and shadow play figures were languishing under an inch of dust on the top floor, with exhibits and pictures of mak yong, wayang kulit, manora dance, kertok coconut drums alongside traditional sports and games of Kelantan and the east coast such as kites (wau bulan and wau puyuh) and examples of main gasing (top spinning). Few visitors would venture into this dimly lit showcase when the entire ground floor was utilised to demonstrate the achievements of the Islamic city of Kota Bharu and Kelantan in very different frames of reference. The forgotten
arts on the top floor have been replaced by an exhibition that seems to have become permanent and is more in line with government directives, as its objective is ‘to ensure that the declaration celebration of Majilis Perbandaran [municipal council] Kota Bharu as an Islamic City 2005 is a cheerful and jubilant one’ and ‘to inform today’s generation of the Islamic civilization in Kelantan and its development’, as the posters read. The exhibition is made up predominantly of posters with pictures and short texts to highlight the history of Islam in Kelantan, the Islamic education facilities, the role of the Sultan of Kelantan and Chief Minister Nik Aziz in making Kota Bharu the first Islamic city and the future plans for development.

Kota Bharu’s proclamation as an Islamic city was the culmination of a series of projects under the banner of Islamisation. The federal state and PAS in Kelantan and until recently in Terengganu have continually aimed to further political control over Islam and the way it may be practised and taught (Stauth, 2002: 196–198). The state taking control and circumscribing Islamic policy is not new to Kelantan and the legal manifestations of Islamic conformity were started with the creation of a Majilis Agama (religious council) in 1915 (Roff, 1983: 326, 335). However, the extent and politicisation of such policies, especially against the arts, is a recent phenomenon. PAS previously

![Figure 9](image_url)  
**Figure 9** Training the next generation of mak yong players, near Tumpat, Kelantan
held the state for eighteen years following independence, when there was no concerted action to move against the arts. The arts are now seen as a threat, as they offer and indeed propagate the multiplicity and plurality of being Malay and Muslim. They show alternatives, challenge the audience and above all, they have power. This power operates not in the direct way of changing someone’s perception of reality, but by highlighting arts and culture, which are non-conformist. This facilitates an undermining of dominant discourses and an articulation of difficult identity questions. The arts, in all their forms, present pictures of a Malaysia that is as yet not finished, or as Shamsul puts it, a ‘nation-of-intent’ (Shamsul, 1996: 328). The arts signify not just forms of multiple histories and pasts, but also of multiple futures. This is something the government does not tolerate, for its vision of the future may not be contested, its social engineering mechanisms may not be tampered with or exposed. For the Islamists in or outside of government the arts present a dangerous melange of culture and thereby race, as for them being Malay is synonymous with being Muslim and a multiplicity of cultural forms within the Malay tradition is seen as a threat to a consistent and self-referential identity marker ‘Malay’. Thus, the arts as a cultural platform have direct impact on the representation of religious identity. This is the most fragile territory for discourse as the government will mute discussions of, and some Muslim and Malay NGOs will oppose, anything pertaining to Islam.

However, the arts are flexible, adaptable and resilient and have endured. In reality, the Kelantanese state government does not have enough religious officers to enforce the ban, especially in rural areas. The religious police retain a strong presence in urban areas, as these are easier to police with a higher population density and fewer established community networks that can render an area less legible (Scott, 1998) or thwart policing action outright. Thus, in many rural areas in Kelantan the religious police have less of a foothold in the community and less success in getting people to inform on their neighbours and kin. As a result performances have continued in secret, but the recruitment of students has been hindered and the art forms are declining.9

A group of performing arts students from Sunway University College, which is located near Kuala Lumpur, were prevented from watching a mak yong performance in Kelantan in 2006, after the Kelantanese state authorities got wind of it and banned the spectacle at the last minute. Since the art form has been awarded UNESCO World Heritage status, the federal government has been eager to politicise the issue surrounding the ban, resulting in a political conflict between UMNO and PAS.10 The federal authorities wanted the ex-
posure a UNESCO affiliation brought, especially since its application for UNESCO world heritage status for Penang and Melaka had been continually declined by UNESCO. Until very recently mak yong represented the only UNESCO affiliation in Malaysia apart from natural wonders Gunung Mulu and Kinabalu national parks. Mak yong’s importance as a tourism icon and cultural treasure is evident and the Kelantanese state government has never doubted its tourism potential. There are PAS-sanctioned versions, or ‘versi baru’ (new versions), of mak yong and other banned art forms in a specially created ‘international tourist space’ in the state capital, Kota Bharu. These performances are run at the cultural centre or Gelanggang Seni in the centre of town. This performance space is contained and controllable and thus presents no threat to the state; indeed, as the performances are scripted and approved by state officials, they represent an Islamicised performance of traditional arts. The performances are attended by domestic and international tourists, although there were few international tourists compared to domestic ones on the occasions I visited.

As noted above, the wayang kulit performances are traditionally based on the stories of the Mahabharata or the Ramayana, the two major Sanskrit epics. From early on the art form was inscribed with religious stories and Hindu traditions that helped spread Hinduism throughout Southeast Asia. The stories that were incorporated in various art forms often merged with local narratives over time. In Kelantan the state authorities demanded that the Hindu elements be deleted from the performance and replaced, if possible, by Islamic ones. Thus, Sri Rama, or Ramachandra, the heroic protagonist of the Ramayana, became Rahman. Name changes such as this are often made to appease authorities, whilst keeping story lines intact. In fact, one dalang (puppeteer) told me that he plays at the Kelantanese cultural centre, but not with the new state-approved puppets, and although he talks of Rahman and Siti, his audience knows he is talking about Sri Rama and Sita. Other performers use the Muslim pseudonyms only for the first couple of minutes before changing back to the Hindu names. One puppeteer made it clear that he does not play the new state-approved wayang kulit (‘versi baru tak main’). The performance itself is often used as a tool of resistance against the authorities through artistic tactics such as humour (see Figure 10). One commentator on heritage issues, who has seen several mak yong performances, told me that players are often subversive, yet in a very subtle way because they do not want to fight an open battle with the authorities. Such an openly critical stance would be counterproductive and, indeed, the role played by Kuala Lumpur-
based NGOs, commentators and the government in their support has not been greeted with all-out welcome by mak yong players. Many wish to be left alone rather than be heralded as the new defenders of civil liberties and freedom of expression.

One story is telling in this regard. Abdullah bin Ibrahim (Dalang Dollah Baju Merah), a grand master of the wayang kulit, was invited to speak at a state-sponsored meeting on wayang kulit. He did not turn up at the meeting and upon being asked why, he answered that he could not decide whether to take the car or the motorcycle. Here the performer was subversive, but in a subtle way, dodging the real question with a joke. He did not challenge the authorities outright, for cultural performers are caught between trying to do

**Figure 10** Puppet of an ustaz who plays a fool in one dalang’s stories
their best to preserve a complex performance art form, whilst contending with a rigid PAS Kelantan state government ban. The Kelantanese authorities have since lifted the ban provided that Islamic and local themes are substituted for the Hindu ones.

The federal government entered into a fight with PAS over mak yong, with the promise of fifteen million ringgit of federal money for a new cultural centre in Kelantan to rebuild and maintain the performing arts. Former Culture, Arts and Heritage Minister Rais was at the forefront of efforts to promote mak yong and other dying arts under threat by the PAS ban. Rais also offered training and degree programmes in traditional performance arts at the National Arts Academy (The Star, 2006c). Thus, Kelantanese performance artists now have to walk the tight-rope between appeasing the local state authorities by performing revised and updated Islamic and local tales, whilst being offered federal money to maintain their traditions (see Figures 11 and 12).

Rais’s agenda was to revitalise Malay culture and heritage. When the last weekly newspaper in jawi script, Utusan Melayu, was forced to cease publication due
to low readership, he vowed to revive it with federal money (The Star, 2006a). His approach was also more liberal and inclusive towards heritage. On 2 August 2006 he officiated at the re-launch of ‘Heritage Asia’ magazine, an international magazine looking at Asian cultural heritage sites and their conservation (Chan, 2006). The Heritage magazine, promoted by the Minister, will be distributed to schools in the Klang valley and through its civilisational look at history will provide a plural image of Malaysia as home to many civilisations. He has also been an outspoken critic of the continuing trend to Arabise and de-traditionalise Malay culture (Wong, 2004). Thus, he argues for a revival of Malay culture, with an Islamic trajectory, but one in a localised rather than a generic Middle Eastern Islamic context. This trend may be seen in the light of a reactionary globalisation, where increased international and inter-regional connections and ties are used to reify and ‘protect’ a culture that sees itself under threat. Ironically, one of those threats is deemed to be globalisation, or at least the Western version of it, which is often equated with the spread of American cultural images or a striving to create a local culture based on so-called Western values (see Akbarzadeh, 2000).

Figure 12 Government representatives with press junket observing performances, near Machang, Kelantan
2006: 2). Barber illustrates such a dialectical opposition in his thesis on ‘Jihad versus McWorld’, where religious fundamentalism and nationalism, both operating as parochial forces, oppose a capitalist globalising and universalising project (Barber, 1995).

Selangor Islamic Arts Park Complex

At this juxtaposition of Malayness and Islam is an interesting project in Selangor, the wealthiest and most populous state in Malaysia. Here, Islam provides the revival of Malay culture with a mission. One level below the federal bureaucracy, the individual state, in this case Selangor, is busy creating its own counter-imagery of Islam and culture. In Kelantan the PAS government is engaged in establishing and promoting its interpretation of Islam as state culture to the detriment of some of the local arts. State patronage of the presentation and furthering of Islamic arts has become a recurring theme. The Selangor state government, for instance, founded the Selangor Islamic Arts Park Complex, a museum and exhibition space for Islamic art in the state capital of Shah Alam. The building was a wakaf (charitable endowment) from the state government. The Sultan of Selangor launched the facility in 2003.

Figure 13 Selangor Islamic Arts Park Complex, calligraphy studio
and at its opening said that ‘apart from being a tourist attraction, the centre would also serve as a symbol of Islamic growth that kept pace with modern development’ (Salina Khalid & Baharom, 2003). The centrepiece of the complex is its exhibition of the first Malaysian mushaf (hand-crafted copy of the Arabic Qur’an), which took three years to complete, and ongoing projects aim to further students’ abilities to master the techniques needed to copy the Arabic script. With this feat Malaysia joins a select and small group of Muslim countries that are capable of producing mushaf.

Another feature is the ‘Nur Fatimah’ project, which aims to create the first female, hand-crafted copy of the Qur’an in the world. Further along, the finished Malaysian mushaf incorporates designs from all Malaysian states and thus aims to frame the holy script in a local setting by using designs of Malaysian flora and fauna as images of an inseparable link between nature and culture as well as culture and religion, thus re-inscribing cultural images with religious meaning. Sixty-five staff members are working in a range of departments bringing to life parts of the mushaf. This includes work on the zukruf (motif), designing the flowers that represent each state in Malaysia and adorn the chapter openings, and the seni khat (calligraphy), where a few calligraphers are busily copying pages of the Qur’an (see Figure 13). One problem has been retention of staff, especially calligraphers, as it takes a lot of patience to work on one page in such detail and for a long time.

Translators work on translating the Arabic into Malay and work in tandem with others to achieve an overall ‘Malayisation’ of the Qur’an or present it within a Malay framework. A new project also includes an English translation, and the foundation has been in communication with German clients to produce a hand-crafted version in German. A research and development unit includes an imam and an in-house ustaz, who has degrees from Al-Azhar University in Cairo and the International Islamic University in Malaysia. Both consult on religious matters. However, they also have to submit a copy of the mushaf to the Ministry of Home Affairs, which has a special department that monitors versions of the Qur’an. In order to publish their own version, they had to submit and consult with government officials to obtain approval. Tensions arise when there are conflicting views on Malaysian Islam. The spawning of a government bureaucracy to oversee Islamic doctrine and practice federally has not helped, increasing rather the range of opinions and interpretations that flourish within the bureaucracies and beyond. This level of bureaucracy at times sits beside, and at times above, the individual state authorities, which adds to the confusion of who speaks for Islam. Thus, in the
individual states and in Malaysia generally, the arts and heritage community, whether co-opted by the state into its service or, paradoxically, in contesting the state from its boundaries, is instrumental in reproducing and refashioning the content and image of Islam.

Artists as activists, probing the limits

Between 6–9 April 2006 the first performance art symposium in Malaysia, ‘Satu Kali’ (one time), took place in Kuala Lumpur. It was an international symposium with workshops, performances and discussions on a variety of themes ranging from art theory to art as activism within the region. In Malaysia and Southeast Asia many performing artists are activists, because their performances are acted out in the public sphere, loud even when silent, and present in a shared space. They cannot be hung on a wall and admired or shut away when deemed inappropriate and their art is often of a testing nature, testing in the sense that it tests the borders of what the public and the state will tolerate, for there has been no support for these artists, at best toleration. It is thus both the public and the state who work in tandem to maintain borders of public decency, morals and hence censorship. Often it is not state agencies that send their agents to keep watchful eyes on artistic performances, but the public, viewers and guests, who take offence and lodge police reports or otherwise alert authorities.

It is not surprising therefore that this symposium was cut short by the intervention of the authorities at the behest of a troubled attender. A police report was lodged that Islam had been insulted and organisers and the authorities decided to close the proceedings early. The irony was that the organisers had scheduled what they thought to be the most controversial performances for the last day. These performances were going to be of an explicit nature, featuring nudity, and were thus expected to lead to much debate and possibly offence. However, no one was to see them. Someone had been offended by the way Islam was portrayed by some performers the night before. On the night in question performers had included a Malay allegedly eating pork and drinking beer and a plate bearing the Arabic word for God was smashed against a wall. These acts were seen as ‘insulting Islam’, resulting in the whole symposium being halted. Although these performances could be confronting, some including audience participation, they had to be read within the context of the performance art symposium. During the police questioning other complaint were alluded to, such as an alleged live tattooing
and the general atmosphere of people sitting around and acting ‘unislamically’. My own observation was that most participants at the venue were artists, students and academics who were schooled in interpreting the performances. The complaint was raised by a person who did not share the same level of cultural capital, experience and tolerance. It transpired that a family member of one performance art student was the one who lodged the complaint. This was most unfortunate as the organisers had already done their best to ensure that all venues for the performances and talks took place in privately owned properties so as to evade public scrutiny. Increasingly, there is an air of tension between the state and its authorities and the users of the public space they police. The closure of such performance space as soon as there is a hint of religious debate is telling. Indeed, as a leading commentator on issues of race and ethnic identity told me: ‘There is an appearance of civility, but the slightest provocation causes clashes.’

The staging of alternative religious views, for that is how these performances must be seen, is not allowed by the state. What Peletz observed ten years ago still holds true today:

The state has increasingly reserved and exercised the right to define all alternative religious discourse as counterhegemonic and subversive, and thus not only an affront to the dignity of Malays, Islam, or both, but also likely to engender religious or ethnic tension, thereby threatening communal harmony and national security (Peletz, 1997: 238).

The government ban on so-called black/death metal music illustrates this move to focus on deviant practices. The government and media seized on infringements of moral values and religious sensitivities to substantiate their claim that black/death metal was un-Malaysian, anti-religious, especially implying deviant to Islam, and a corrupting influence in general. This began in 2001:

As in other countries, heavy metal has been accorded bad press in Malaysia and has been identified with violence and aggression. Attempts have been made to regulate heavy metal particularly black/death metal because of its alleged influence on the values and behaviour of Malay youths. In July 2001, Malay black metal fans in Kedah, Penang, and Selangor were accused of practising satanic rituals such as drinking goat’s blood, tearing up and stepping on the Koran as well as wearing T-shirts and sporting tattoos with satanic imagery. About 100 Muslim youths (14–15 year olds) particularly in the northern state of Kedah (described as the center of black metal cults by officials) were caught
at shopping complexes and sent to the police station for body checks, urine tests, and questioning. Malay students in selected schools in the three states were strip-searched for tattoos and other black metal accessories (Tan Sooi Beng, 2002).

This crackdown on a music subculture happened during the *reformasi* period of the late 1990s, when the state resorted to authoritarian means to curb dissent and the rise of domestic political alternatives. This process was documented across the region, especially in Indonesia. Regional networks based on personal relationships and shared experiences have become important in identifying and responding to regional issues and threats. As Mandal (2003) points out, it was only recently during the *reformasi* period that artists from Indonesia and Malaysia drew inspiration from each other and used their experiences in relations with an authoritarian state to learn from each other. Thus, today the arts community is learning from and responding to regional struggles and experiences. The case of Indonesia and the resurgence there of Muslim extremists, who are attempting to curb artistic freedom as well as freedom of expression, is one such example. The recent debates surrounding the anti-pornography bill and publication of an Indonesian version of *Playboy* sparked strong emotions. Conservative and reactionary Muslim forces allowed this to spill quickly onto the streets and turn into violent clashes. In Malaysia the situation is more muted and open aggression is rare. State control and Muslim ultra-conservatism are less visible, and thus maybe more powerful. The promotion of social order by the state and elites has gained mainstream acceptance and this state/elite hegemony is rarely contested in public (Althusser, 1971; Gramsci, 1971). I have noted earlier that progressive civil society tends to operate behind the scenes in order not to cause an uproar, whilst conservative NGOs have only begun employing concerted action recently.

Artists today face a state that is homogenising identity constructions and their cultural expressions internally whilst presenting a reproduction of ethnic stereotypes and cultural heritage, rather than allowing open spaces for debate and discussion. The demonising of certain art forms, such as black/death metal in Malaysia, has been used by the state to shut down performances under the guise of moral policing. I have mentioned other arenas in the arts and civil society where state policies seem to be closing the doors to alternatives. However, some observers, such as Zawawi, are more hopeful. He believes in ‘an alternative “demotic discourse”, based on “multiculturalism”, [...] becoming equally important’ (Zawawi Ibrahim,
Zawawi remains optimistic about alternatives finding their space vis-à-vis a Malay-dominated National Cultural Policy, and sees the cinema and youth culture in particular as sites of cultural contestations of Malayness (Zawawi Ibrahim, 2003b).15

At a forum that I attended in early June 2006 under the banner of ‘Crisis, Performance, Rights’, workshops and discussions took place in Kuala Lumpur to address the recent state interventions in the arts and what artists should do about this (McKay, 2006).16 The forum culminated in an open discussion entitled ‘Panic Buttons: Culture and Crisis in Malaysia and the Region’, where these issues were debated by artists and commentators from the region, encompassing Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. Artists, film makers, academics, students, journalists and commentators debated for two days on themes based on Victor Turner’s thesis of the social drama and its starting point: crisis (see Turner, 1980). The social drama unfolds with a breach in the social fabric, upon which crisis sets in, followed by a redressive process that results either in reintegration or the recognition of an irreparable schism. The organisers, who were artists, activists and academics, identified a crisis in the arts in the region and focused on this part, as they are hoping to identify and become part of the redressive phase as actors with their own agenda. Indonesian writer and activist Goenawan Mohamad raised the issue that there was no social fabric to be ruptured. Indeed, if the social fabric is already divided or fragmented, the rupture and ensuing crisis is no crisis, or sudden breach, but the result of logical and recurring competition between different segments of society. As these segments compete for the state’s attention, for individual power and recognition and at last for the state itself, their demands and positions will differ and become mutually exclusive. This split is most notably felt within the Muslim factions and their visions for the future, but is compounded by the rigid ethnic divisions, drawn along party lines, that persist in Malaysia.

Ethnic labels, as Bauman (1997) shows, are markers that people themselves use to differentiate self and other, be it in his field site of Southall, England, or on a larger scale in Malaysia. The ethnic labels therefore reflect the homogeneous and reified culture, something tangible and something the people can experience. People who adhere to the ethnic markers are not just stakeholders in a community or political group, but become distinctive, cultural agents placed within a set and stable community (Bauman, 1997: 211). They allow themselves to be essentialised into a stable identity. However, this also means they can only act in accordance with this set identity. Thus,
the Malaysian government’s continuing exclusion of the domestic ‘other’ (Kahn, 2001; 2006), its demarcation of public spaces and imagery, and its furthering of and support for a Malay ultra-conservative religious nationalism are creating and maintaining a dangerous ontology for its Malay citizens (see Kapferer, 1988: 7). For,

\[\ldots\text{it was through the symbolic construction and sustaining of a social order capable of encompassing others that Malay political order was historically established; that is why in the present as in the past, attempts by non-Malay minority groups to repudiate, contest, or redefine the presuppositions of their cultural encompassment are experienced as threats to the integrity not only of the political order but to the majority’s paradigmatic cultural identity as well (Kessler, 1992: 138).}\]
Given the racialised political sphere in Malaysia, where political allegiance and ethnic identity go hand in hand, it may not come as a surprise that the cultural sphere too is heavily racialised. Although Mandal (2001; 2004) argues that the arts can be a site of ‘transethnic solidarity’ and contestation, this seems to be in decline in Malaysia. It is true that many arts events and artist groups foster a transethnic and cosmopolitan space, especially in the metropolis Kuala Lumpur. However, often these groups exist within a cosmopolitan and elite setting. As noted previously, the much hyped bangsa Malaysia has not achieved a critical mass of support to become a founding block of a new Malaysian politics, and little Malaysian culture has emerged as its symbolic counterpart. No signifiers have come forward to denote a ‘truly Malaysian’ identity. The tourism brochures point towards unity though diversity, but this is no more than a sloganeering device at present. Therefore it is all the more important to have a strong arts community ‘negotiating a new path’ and testing the boundaries (Mandal, 2001: 162). Only when the arts can test the limits of acceptance and tolerance of identity can they help shape them. One such example was an art exhibition called ‘Faith, Plurality and Freedom’ I reviewed for a Malaysian online arts magazine (Hoffstaedter, 2006). A group of young artists from Studio Dikala Jingga in Shah Alam exhibited paintings that delve into the heart of today’s identity crisis for many Malays.

The paintings problematised Malay identity and its inherent link to Islam as its chief identity marker. Thus, one painting (see Figure 14) depicts a Muslim Malay version of Rodin’s thinker, sitting on a pile of books, wearing a scull cap and lost in thought. The desperation of this individual and his visible inner struggle encapsulates what the painter, Haris Ahmad Hamsani, calls the need for the Malay community to ‘think about our culture, rethink what we do and what our culture is about’. Another painting was inspired by the American movie ‘Crash’, which portrayed the tensions in American multiculturalism. The young female artist told me how the film gave her an impetus for displaying the diversity and internal contradictions of Islamic identity, showing how messy identity is. In a series of paintings she showed people of the three main ethnic backgrounds in Malaysia (Malay, Chinese and Indian) performing solat (Islamic prayer), thus opening Islam to all and in a way delinking Islam from Malay identity. However, she went further and showed that Malaysian identities are all rojak (a mixed salad), i.e. mixed together, and ‘sometimes Chinese are like Malays and Malays like Indians and Indians like Chinese’. Although there is still an essentialising of the three main ethnic groups, as they remain distinct entities in her discourse, and there is a silence of other minorities, especially Orang
Asli or even Eurasians, her work is an important contribution in the present climate. For these artists are working in a heavily restricted climate, where the political pervades almost everything and identities are tightly guarded bastions of self-identification and political modes of othering. By treading the fine line of questioning the prevalent discourses without formally transgressing them, the artists are testing the waters. By rediscovering Malay and Islam as contested and hybrid identities (Barnard, 2004; Kahn, 2006), what some of them called the rojak identities, the artists want to see themselves at the forefront of unravelling the dual government fabric of ‘diversity in unity’ or external plurality versus internal homogeneity.

**Reactionaries and conservatives storm the citadel**

With the departure of Mahathir from office in 2003 and the assumption of office by Badawi, a man generally seen as less strong and more willing to open spaces for civil society, expectations ran high, especially in the liberal and progressive camps. This meant there were hopes for greater civil liberties, less government involvement and restrictions in such matters as free speech and a general hope for more openness. One of my informants told me that with Mahathir’s resignation a new dawn came for Malaysian politics. This view was echoed by others I interviewed who were engaged in liberal political, women’s rights and arts civil society organisations. Badawi’s initial policy shifts bolstered this perception, especially on the part of the liberal elite and artists, who began to push boundaries of expression and voiced their opinions louder than ever. Many topics hitherto shunned or only talked about in hushed tones in coffee shops made an appearance on TV, in newspaper articles and other mainstream media. One of these topics was the growing Islamisation (see chapter 3) of the state bureaucracy and society in general that had taken hold of Malaysia since the successful dakwah movement of the 1970s and Anwar’s cooption into federal politics by Mahathir in the 1980s. Some civil society groups began to question more vociferously state policies and directives and aimed to bolster support for the constitution.

**Article 11**

However, the tussle in Penang on 14 May 2006 over an ‘Article 11’ forum, a road show organised by several Malaysian human rights and advocacy
groups to promote awareness of the freedom of religion rights enshrined in article 11 of the federal constitution (see Appendix 1), shows how quickly public space can be shut down by parts of civil society, in this case members of ultra-conservative Muslim groups. These groups included PAS, FORKAD (Action Front Against Apostasy), BADAII (Coalition against the Inter-Faith Commission) and TERAS (Malay empowerment movement). The organisers of FORKAD, for instance, see their efforts in opposing apostasy and the right to freedom of religion in the vein of past opposition to apostasy, both theological and historical. They distributed pamphlets (see Appendix 2) via the internet and during demonstrations against apostasy at the federal mosque in 2006, mentioned earlier. In these pamphlets FORKAD takes a historical look at riots and demonstrations against a court ruling in Singapore that granted custody of Maria Hertogh, a Eurasian girl who had been raised a Muslim by a Malay woman, to her Dutch Catholic parents. FORKAD asserts that today there are no demonstrations to stop Muslims from committing *murtad* (apostasy). But FORKAD also quotes a surah from the Qur’an and Hadiths to support their mission to stop apostasy. Having couched their aims in theological and historical terms, they begin to make their case for NOT allowing Malays to leave Islam. They ground this assertion in the federal constitutional definition of Malays as Muslims and they stress that ‘The Malay race, particularly in Malaysia, is the only race in the world that uses the clear definition in the constitution.’ The pamphlet then moves on to discuss the Lina Joy case in detail, including information about Lina Joy, for instance, that she ‘looks typical Malay and is of Javanese descent’. FORKAD proceeds to identify the enemy in their eyes: lawyers like Malik Imtiaz Sarwar (who was Lina Joy’s lawyer and is an outspoken defender of a secular constitution) and the civil society coalition Article 11 who argue that Islam is subject to the constitution and therefore the religious freedom awarded to ‘persons’ in article 11 of the Malaysian constitution.

They were able to mount a small demonstration with their supporters outside the hotel where the forum was taking place, calling for its immediate closure. The police who were called to the scene attempted to disperse the demonstrators but eventually told organisers that it was ‘too dangerous’ and that they (the police) ‘would not be able to guarantee their [organisers’ and participants’] safety’. Thus the forum was closed. The same happened at the next forum in Johor Bharu, where a larger crowd had turned up to demonstrate against the discussion on the constitutional rights of Malaysians. Again the police were unable to prevent the crowds from interrupting and ending the
forum. This time Badawi stepped in and, sensing the growing discontent of the Muslim reactionaries, called for a stop to constitutional discussions.19 Thus, a coalition of 21 Muslim civil society groups under the stewardship of TERAS president Mohamad Azmi Abdul Hamid has become a vocal exponent of the political right and ultra-conservatism in Malaysia with surprising power at their disposal.

Reportage on the incident was muted in government-controlled papers on the day following the closed forum. Independent news agencies such as some Chinese dailies, Malaysiakini.com and The Sun newspaper, covered the events. One day late, the other mainstream papers carried reports, having obviously waited for government guidance as to how to report on the events. One of the ministers in the Prime Minister’s department, Nazri, called the protesters ‘stupid’ and thus opened the space for debate and public opinion to be aired. Badawi was not in the country during the forum and its dissolution; he was at the Islamic State University in Indonesia, receiving an honorary doctorate in Islamic thought for his progressive Islam hadhari (see chapter 3). On the day following his speech espousing a progressive Islam and equality before the law for all Malaysians ‘irrespective of race or religion’ (Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, 2006a), Badawi returned to a Malaysia that had been unsettled by the two aforementioned demonstrations, depicting the ugly face of an utterly regressive and exclusionary Islam and its politics. Once back Badawi shut down any further debate on both the Inter-Faith Commission and Article 11. No more forums were to take place, no more road shows, no more discussion. Again, his closing of space was couched within a rhetoric of maintaining peace and unity and the necessity not to arouse the Islamists unduly. This is an example of a civil society group having a direct effect on the state and its policies.

Penang Global Ethic Project

Sometimes agents of the state get trapped in between the fault lines of the reactionaries and progressives in civil society. In 2006 a travelling exhibition, ‘World Religions – Universal Peace – Global Ethic’, was mounted in Penang. It celebrated the commonalities of the world’s major religions as a basis for the exchange of ideas and dialogue. The exhibition was funded by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (see above), the Soka Gakkai Malaysia (Selangor branch) and the Malaysian Interfaith Network. The first is aligned with the ruling conservative party of a major Western state, the next is a Japanese Buddhist revivalist movement and the latter an umbrella organisation of most
major progressive and alternative religious and philosophical movements in Malaysia. The exhibition travelled to the United Nations headquarters in New York, Germany, Switzerland, Austria and the United Kingdom and was scheduled to return to Malaysia to be exhibited in Kuala Lumpur at a government think tank, the Institute of Strategic and International Studies. However, at the last minute permission to exhibit was rescinded by the Institute. They recoiled after some Islamist civil society groups mounted a campaign against the exhibition on the grounds that it put all religions on the same footing, thus belittling Islam, which in their eyes reigns supreme above all others.

The Penang Global Ethic Project has recently made it into the Lonely Planet guidebook and has therefore become a tourist site for tourism consumption, whilst remaining a contentious issue politically. It was also listed on the Tourism Penang website until 2006, but vanished thereafter. The politics behind the scenes shows how the secular elite are playing a dangerous game, courting very different players at different functions and levels. The Konrad Adenauer Foundation, for instance, has sponsored and supports initiatives both of Prime Minister Najib and former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar, whilst being attacked at the 2006 UMNO general assembly as a Western agent influencing Malaysian politics and undermining Islam (see above, also Husna Yusop, 2006).

The Inter-Faith Commission, the Penang Global Ethic Project and Article 11 all challenged the dominance and supremacy of Islam as an undeniable, static and closed entity. It was precisely the prising open of spaces for discussion between races, religions and citizens that scared the reactionaries so much, because this process of opening up challenged their positions as guardians of what they see as a bounded whole, Islam. Inter-faith initiatives, for instance, present a threat to the special status of Islam as the country’s religion and subsequently to Malay privilege. Just as the Inter-Faith Commission would level the playing field between the religious affiliations in Malaysia and therefore between the ethnic communities, the global ethics project would attribute one universal ethics to all religions and all races.

**Muslim Brothers**

‘Muslim Brothers’ is an organisation set up as a counterpoint to Sisters in Islam and is run by a retired Nestlé executive, Taib Hashim. It is part of the growing number of conservative Muslim NGOs with an exclusionary agenda.
It is exclusively male, made up of mainly Syariah judges and lawyers from Shah Alam, and retirees. They maintain a Malay language website from where they disseminate their views and ideas. Initially its founder wanted to name it Brothers in Islam as a direct reference to Sisters in Islam. However, he told me he was dissuaded from doing so by SIS executive director Zainah Anwar. The name was therefore changed from what would have been a progressive and liberal reference point (SIS) to one of the most orthodox and conservative reference points: the Society of Muslim Brothers, also known as the Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist reformist movement founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna in Egypt. It propagates a return to the fundamentals of Islam, an Islamic state and the way of life of the salaf or the first generation of Muslims (Commins, 1994: 133ff). The name change became programmatic.

I first met Taib at a PAS fundraiser in Klang in Selangor, where I sat at his table. I was invited to the event by another informant of mine. The event featured a panel talk with Nik Aziz, the spiritual leader of PAS. We fell into conversation and he told me he was not a PAS member but interested to hear what they had to say. His biography is typical of the hybrid Malay identity of his parents’ generation. He has a Malay father from Melaka and Chinese mother from Yunnan, who converted to Islam. He said he looks Chinese, but has a ‘dual mentality’, Malay and Chinese. His family is further internationalised with his wife being a Sharifah, a descendant of the prophet Muhammad; but he said that her ‘religious education and belief and practices have been diluted’.

At a later interview at his house, I asked him about his Muslim identity. He said that he was born a Muslim and therefore just is Muslim. Education features widely in retaining one’s Islamicity and especially so when one has a position of added Islamicity, in the form of emanating Islamicity as does the name Sharifah, which sets up one’s credentials as a descendant of the Prophet and of Arabic stock. He explained that the ‘precious gift’ of Islam comes with responsibilities. He described his Islamicity and that of his wife:

> And how I look at it, if I were to comment on my wife’s side, put it this way, even though they’re descendants of the so-called Prophet’s link, their religious education and religious belief, or I call it religious practices has already been very much diluted. Education on understanding of Islam is taken for the fact that we’re born Muslim, we’re Muslim. So it’s fair to say she takes for granted I’m a Muslim, I must – and I’m fortunate to be a Muslim. So I should take care of that religion like jewels. This is, this is, the – I would say – the treasure that has been given to me.
If I’m the father, if I know Arabic, I know the Qur’an, more or less, if my children just know how to recite but don’t know Arabic, how much offended would I be? I say, look, if I’m a Muslim I would want to cast it as Muslim because I would believe the fact that it’s not a choice that I want or I don’t want, I should be treating the religion like jewels, that I have, which I should not spoil.

But when you look at the in-depth of her understanding of religion, I would say she’s still struggling, she’s still trying to find a way and means to study the Qur’an, understand the Qur’an in the language of Arabic which she until now, she’s tried her best, she doesn’t know. The practices of Islam, now she’s learning from the so-called, the small mosque and suraus and madrasahs. And small women’s education that is been done in the evenings. And she’s benefiting from it, taking advantage of early retirement. She was working in a government institution of course, and she opted for early retirement. So she occupies her time to mix with the group and do these studies.

These study groups, many of them all-female, have become quite popular with housewives and early retirees. Seeing that the retirement age is fifty-five, many people who retire then have dedicated their retirement time to the further study of Islam, in many cases to reacquaint themselves with Islam and the observance of Islam after years where work and family pressures left little time for daily Islamic rituals and study. Lecture theatres and community halls fill during the morning and early afternoon for lectures and discussion groups on special themes or question and answer sessions, whilst upper-class study groups meet at a sponsor’s house often followed by a communal meal. These study circles are mainly run by an  ustaz who gives a short talk on a topic and then takes questions from the group. I attended several such meetings where the lectures were mostly at an introductory level and mostly introduced with stories from Muhammad’s life and how whatever he did is still relevant today. Many of the participants I spoke to attend these meetings as a substitute for the mosque because of a difference in teachings (these meetings tended to be less political than mosque lectures) and because the mosques are segregated, whereas mixed audiences tended not to be segregated in these informal sessions. Taib went on to talk about his wife’s efforts in attending these places and learning more:

And it is not easy, I can tell, it is difficult. Until now she’s still improving and she’s still learning, she’s still trying to appreciate Islam in the true sense. Now, let’s look back from her educational background. She was educated in the English education. In spite of the fact that she came in
from the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad link, the failure that I see here is in ensuring that a Muslim understands Islam before he or she goes into other modes of understanding such as the mode of [Western] education. The parent at that point in time has already adopted the fact that being in Malaysia we subscribe – I mean, they themselves at that point in time subscribe to the fact that if you are educated, you get your education, you are an accountant, you are an engineer, you are a doctor, you’ll be, you’ll be a successful person. Success is measured at that point in time not as being a Muslim, but by being able to have a paper that you can work, that is being recognized by the governmental institution and this is where they want their children to be. And now they put her [his wife] in this institution, God bless her, she was successful. Yes, she graduated, she graduated as an accountant, she was a manager in Bank Pertanian, she was, when she stopped work, the audit manager of that institution. Superb. But what is missing here, being a tail member of the prophet’s strings, from one of the Syeds and Sharifahs string, sad to say that religion doesn’t come free for you. That is not like a computer, we install the program and you are automatically, you know the a to z of Islam. You don’t know. You have to learn. You have to go through the process of learning at home, learning in institutions, where it teaches you what Islam is, teaches you Arabic. Because you are in this community here [Malaysia], you speak Malay, English, you don’t speak Arabic. You had to go to school to understand English.

His own education was at a Catholic school in Melaka, where he had to sing Christian hymns and read the bible. He told me that he was a rebel and stood up to the Christian schooling methods, which got him excused from any further Christian activities. However, he was not content with his own ‘salvation’ and he continued to fight for all his Muslim classmates to be excluded from any Christian activities. He described this moment as an important part of his life in terms of his religious identity and how he wanted to practise it:

I was at the St. David High School Melaka. And St. David High School is one of the missionary schools in Melaka that requires their students other than Muslim to attend church ceremony first thing in the morning. Every day if I’m not mistaken. And the Muslim students are put in a room, they are given a religious teacher to sit down and talk, and teach them about religion. And sometimes this religious teacher doesn’t come, and so we sit down and talk ourselves and make noise. So, at that point in time I already have this spirit of, I said, no. Something’s not right here. How can the Malaysian government allow this school, a missionary school? And I happen to have friends all around, I’m friends
with Chinese, Indians, and they say, ‘Look, Taib. I don’t like Christianity! I’m a Hindu. I’m a Buddhist.’ One day Jacob, a teacher, asked all of us to go into the hall, and we had to sing Christian songs and do prayers in Christian, and I said, ‘Look, what is this? OK. [to his friends] You don’t like it? Yeah.’ Then I ask a few more students. But what can I do? We are all forced to use the hall, and then that’s it! Otherwise, they’ll take action against us. For instance, if we arrive to school late, they will consider us as a, a latecomer, and then we have to stand in the sun, or run around the field. So what I did is write a letter, to the Ministry of Education in Melaka at that point in time, and complain, and I sent a copy to the school, saying that it’s unacceptable. Remember at that stage I was in form 2, or form 3. That means I start being a rebel, what do you call it, a forerunner? Ah, a champion. Then, I was waiting for the result. The next week, I got an announcement, from the headmaster, saying that he is sad to say, that we got a complaint from parents, that we are forcing students to take part in missionary education in the hall, and now, we will stop this immediately, we’ll only do this after school hours, and you’ll not be forced, whoever wants to join in, can join in, otherwise, you’re free. So I said, [in an excited voice] oh, you feel great, you feel, good. I continued the Islamic religious class after school. So, those who are interested to continue in the religious class, they can come after school hours. They can still go to the classes and study religion and take an exam if they want to. So that’s it! So, that’s how I study my religion.

In the midst of the interview he rose and excused himself to attend to the *asr* (afternoon) prayer. After ablution he disappeared into a room that was sectioned off with large window panels from the main family room upstairs. On the walls were framed Arabic calligraphies, the floor was carpeted. This was his family’s prayer room inside his house, his own *surau*.

Upon his return he told me a story I had heard before from Muslim missionaries. The story is supposed to portray the convincing nature of Islam and it revolves around high-level conversions, such as the conversion of a Christian bishop:

I come across your bishop, who has been converted to Islam, who said, ‘Yes, in our Bible, there are clauses saying that Muhammad will come after Christianity. But this clause has been manipulated and some have been erased from it.’ I do not know, I have reason to believe him, and that’s all he said. So I’m looking for the truth in this, basically. And as far as I’m concerned, universally, Islam recognises Christianity. So, that is one thing, we are not a threat. We’re not the enemy. Except that, you [Christians] have been misled by your team [Christianity], which has
rewritten the Bible. But this is not my saying, but from the ex-bishop who left Christianity.

Asked whether he believes the Qur’an to be the unadulterated words from God, he responded that he believed that the Qur’an had not been changed and it was only interpretations that had changed meanings and Islamic practice. He further argued that it was his study of other religions that had finally made him realise the truth of Islam and his understanding of Islam.

This is where, through my platform, I want to have forums where I want to talk about issues that are raised by Zainah [Zainah Anwar, the executive director of Sisters in Islam] and the team, or, any other Muslim community and their team, so that I can get these learned guys [imams, scholars, judges etc.] to come and talk about the issues. But, that in itself is not enough.

So his intention is to inform Muslims by bringing in scholars and learned authorities to educate and disseminate information. He would in effect be facilitating such meetings, airing both conservative and progressive views. However, the last sentence is a warning of sorts. His subsequent attacks on SIS and their forceful defence of human and especially women’s rights makes any meaningful platform for discussion doubtful:

In addition Zainah is saying that, why are only men given the chance to interpret the Qur’an, and make their own decision? Men are biased. Now I’m in business, ok? When we have to make a business decision, and we have ladies there, they said, can you show us your statement of account, your previous six months record, can you do this, can you do that? Are you sure that you guys are making money? Uh, before we make that commitment what’s your previous trend? We say, eh don’t waste time lah. We know it works! Sign, gone. Man to man decisions are very fast. And sometimes we are biased. And I know I want to help this guy, ok go ahead! Approve it and done. This is a typical characteristic of men’s behaviour.

However, if we have women in a women’s organisation, then, let them be. Fine. But if it’s mixed, men will never want to click with a woman.

Brothers in Islam. I call myself Muslim Brothers. Because I want to create a platform where I’m bringing in all the learned, local learned. Whereas, Zainah is bringing in overseas learned. This is what I don’t subscribe to, because she’s projecting more the overseas learned opinions, where the environment may be right for these learned to have liberal projects.
Here Taib is making a distinction, based on gender bias and clear misogynistic tendencies, between his men’s club and the Sisters in Islam’s women’s club. He wants to portray himself as a man of action. Towards the end he is making another distinction between local and international Islamic scholarship and clearly he wants to position himself and his group as firmly rooted and also isolated in a Malay provincialism.

Although hostile to SIS’s emancipatory arguments and human and especially women’s rights discourses, his group was relatively open in that it did want a form of dialogue, at least in the beginning, with Sisters in Islam and recognised Zainah Anwar and her work as legitimate and Islamic. Others are not so open. Sitting on the verandah one evening in Petaling Jaya, Kuala Lumpur’s suburban satellite city, I heared the local imam’s tirade over the loud-speaker wafting over from the nearby mosque, denouncing Zainah Anwar and SIS as having committed *murtad* (apostasy). This is considered a cardinal sin and with the fragile demographics of Malaysia, where communal politics is based upon a Malay majority, apostates could become the tipping weight in the scales of communal politics. The threat of apostasy has political ramifications and all the more so in a climate in which the Perak Mufti Harussani Zakaria, who heads the National Fatwa committee, claimed that there are 250,000 apostates in Malaysia, of which 100,000 were converting to Christianity (Ekmal Yusof, 2006).

**Fighting apostasy**

In chapter 3 I mentioned the case of Lina Joy, a Malay convert to Christianity, who has become a pariah of Islamist groups and embodies the fear of these groups. Taib Hashim during our interviews had told me that ‘In Islam you are either in or out, there can be no small transgression.’ He had taken great interest in the Lina Joy case, and later I was to find out that he had taken action. Together with PAS officials, he had filed a police report against the Church of Our Lady of Fatima in Brickfields where Lina Joy was baptised in 1988. His claim was that the church had contravened article 11(4) of the federal constitution:

State law and in respect of the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya, federal law may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam (Malaysia, 2006 [1957]).
Modern Muslim Identities

The outcome is unknown, but the audacity is telling, for Article 11 refers to religious freedom in Malaysia. Taib and members of other reactionary Islamic groups see themselves as crusaders and defenders of Islam and are taking action in all possible ways to further their aims. These groups mobilise the government and public opinion in two ways. If the government has similar views to a civil society group, be that on the liberal or conservative side, it will allow the group some space, open media access or encourage the NGO publicly. Thus, the government influences the NGO to mobilise people for a cause. On the other hand, a civil society group, if it opposes the government on a particular issue or wants to sway it its way, can mobilise people through its networks and bring them out on the streets, or just threaten to do so. The government then has to respond and take a position on the issue. Civil society actors can therefore influence each other and be influenced by each other.

Islamicity, like most concepts associated with identity, is about an imagined sameness, how it is produced and reproduced. Shamsul has coded this process of identity formation into two spheres, distinct yet overlapping; distant yet within reach: authority-defined social reality and everyday-defined social reality. It is the powerful elite versus ‘the people’ in their everyday lives (Shamsul, 1998: 18–20; 2004a: 147–148). The dichotomy is naturally overdrawn and Shamsul sees these two frameworks not as dichotomies, but rather as two ways identities are articulated. I have argued in chapter 1 that these binaries (state–civil society) are problematic and contested (Mitchell, 1990). That is why I see space as a more conducive way of conceptualising the ways identities are produced within two social realities. Indeed, tactics provide a way to traverse this dualism. De Certeau in his book on the practice of everyday life employs a useful way to conceptualise and operationalise these processes of identity formation. It is a matter of strategy versus tactics. On the one hand, we have the strong, the elite, with access to and control over space and institutions that they use to objectify the social environment. Thus, they have the power to create and realise social order. This is a form of Gramscian hegemony and authority-defined reality. On the other hand, there are the weak or ordinary people, who lack access to space that is open enough to enable change, can nevertheless act to question, subvert and ultimately change small aspects of that reality. De Certeau says:

I call a ‘strategy’ the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an ‘environment’. A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as a proper (propre) and thus
serve as a basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, ‘clientele,’ ‘targets,’ or ‘objects of research’). Political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model.

I call a ‘tactic’, on the other hand, a calculus which cannot count on a ‘proper’ (a spatial or institutionallocalisation), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance (De Certeau, 1984: xix).

Tactics lack permanence and sufficient power to impose and materialise order of any kind: that is the domain of strategy. Tactics rely on spaces, which are improper (non-propre), where strategies do not lay claim or have let down their guard. It is therein that opportunity for change lies. People remain agents and act in a range of ways to make sense of the reality they confront on the one hand, and to attempt to actively change it on the other. However, this relationship remains problematic. Agency is already couched within an established framework, a lifeworld. Thus, being-in-the-world and the attempts at agency are always contingent on our embeddedness in the world and the power relations around us. Willford discusses the ambivalence and contingency inherent in Tamil resistance to a Malay Muslim hegemonic framework in Malaysia, and in the assertion of Hinduism and a revival of ‘Tamilness’ by Tamils (Willford, 2006).

Khoo documents similar problematic tactics through Malaysian films in general and the stories of traversing the surveillance structures (Khoo Gaik Cheng, 2002: 99). I return to some tactics Muslims employ in the following chapter. However, although the elites tend to have a key role in various local Islamic discourses (Lukens-Bull, 1999: 9), the elite in Malaysia has largely been a stabilising force intent on preserving the status quo of a secular constitution vis-à-vis a growing Islamisation of society. Thus, in the practice of everyday life it is the reactionaries, conservatives and other religious groups that often find tactics to slowly gnaw away at the implicit social contract made at the time of independence, and to change the society, the political sphere and the country. Helping them are other actors, who operate within Islamic space, yet largely outside of the state’s purview. These people have captured Islamicity and are using it to influence others. Whilst some people flock to their presence, others are busy evading Islamicity.
Notes

1 For a discussion on how the internet has also become the staging ground for religious conflicts in the Moluccas, see Bräuchler (2007).

2 Roy defines neofundamentalism as ‘a common intellectual matrix that can nevertheless be manifested in different political attitudes’ (Roy, 2004: 232) that includes tablighi, Wahhabis, Salafis and many who simply call themselves Muslims (in the sense of true Muslims). The emphasis is on religiosity, rather than theology, a topic I will return to in chapter 6.

3 See Hefner (2000) for the Indonesian case study, although Hefner argues that civil Islam in Indonesia is a powerful force for democracy.

4 As Ogg put it: ‘... the line was sharply drawn between the republicans of the Left, who wished to maintain the Republic and with it a liberal measure of democracy, and the reactionaries of the Right, who began by insisting upon a restoration of clerical privilege and bourgeois rule and ended, in the days of the Legislative Assembly, by clamoring for a restoration of monarchy itself’ (Ogg, 1913: 329).

5 Masyarakat madani derives its impetus and substance from Anwar’s mentor, Naguib Al-Attas, who saw it as embedded in Islam and its all-encompassing system of governance, society and ethics (Al-Attas, 1976).

6 The Konrad Adenauer Foundation is a non-governmental foundation named after the first conservative chancellor of Germany and is the Christian Democratic Union's charitable arm. Although it is officially not part of the political party, it does maintain strong links to the party, which is currently at the helm of a coalition government in Germany.

7 White has shown that in Turkey the Islamists have been apt at using what she calls vernacular politics to greater effect than the secular elites. The Islamists have managed to effectively engage with local and cultural groups and win over hearts and minds (White, 2002).

8 I have singled out these two cities, as they form the metropolitan centres of Malaysia most incorporated into global flows and are the homes of most civil society groups, especially the ones discussed in this chapter. Penang is an important site for urban middle class civil society groups, which are engaged in global civil society as well as grassroots concerns. For more detailed information see, for instance, Kelly (2003).

9 Students are often educated and tutored in less formal ways and often remain under the radar of state detection in the rural hinterland. They are assisted by outsiders and organisations aiding indigenous arts, such as Eddin Khoo and his organisation Pusaka, which has garnered federal support and recognition for its
efforts to keep alive Kelantanese art forms, their practice and the education of younger generations.

10 Fahmi Fadzil joined the Sunway College group and has written about the latest mak yong controversy, where UMNO and its Barisan Nasional partners’ control over the mainstream media brought the mak yong tussle to the nation’s attention (Fahmi Fadzil, 2006).

11 UNESCO did finally admit Melaka and Penang to their influential list of World Heritage sites in July 2008 (UNESCO, 2008).

12 Technically the Ramayana is an elongated ‘episode’ within the Mahabharata, but in terms of performances the two are treated as separate stories with some recurring characters.

13 In my discussions with staff one senior member told me that: ‘There are government guidelines on which version to use, but if Saudi Arabia says this way is obsolete, then all Muslim countries need to adapt.’

14 The exact wording of the police report cannot be confirmed, as it can only be accessed if and when the police press charges, which it has not done at present. Thus information pertaining to which other performances were listed and/or other circumstances which led to the lodging of the report are based on interviews with people who were interrogated by the police following the making of the report. It should also be noted that the report was lodged with the police by only one member of the audience.

15 Also see Khoo Gaik Cheng’s Reclaiming Adat (2006) for a detailed discussion on the role of contemporary films and literature in imagining alternative interpretations of Malayness to the dominant homogeneous Malay-centric cultural policies.

16 Benjamin McKay has written for kakiseni.com about the forum (McKay, 2006). I was present as an observer.

17 Another researcher whom I met in the field wanted to study transethnic solidarity amongst artists in Kuala Lumpur and Penang and could hardly find any heterogeneous groups of artists in 2006.

18 Rimbun Dahan’s artist in residence scheme is a notable exception, bringing international artists to a more rural setting, on the fringes of the Klang valley. [http://www.rimbundahan.org/home.html]

19 In a speech Najib, then deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, referred to constitutional discussions as threats to Islam and Malays as the protectors of Islam in Malaysia. Speaking at the UMNO general assembly in late 2006: ‘Lately, we have been faced with various issues that have threatened the position of Islam. We have seen the rise in wrongful teachings, apostasy cases and we have seen groups protesting Constitutional provisions relating to Islam, namely Article 11 and Article 121(1A) of the Federal Constitution. All of these are assaults on the
sanctity of Islam and attempts to shake the *akidah* [faith] of the ummah’ (Najib Abdul Razak, 2006).


21 Syed/Sharifah is an honorific title given to descendants of the grandsons of the prophet Muhammad. It establishes a direct link of the name holder to the Islamic heartland and in some circles still holds a degree of respect and reverence.
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.

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.

Then I 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 PERKIM² facility a new convert to Islam was given a kain pelikat (a light sarong worn by Malay
men). 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. Many are bomohs (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 bomohs 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
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, overlooking 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 übertäglichen oder übermenschlichen oder mindestens spezifisch außeralltäglichen, nicht jedem anderen zugänglichen Kräften oder Eigenschaften [begabt] oder als gottgesandt oder als vorbildlich und deshalb als 'Führer' gewertet wird (Weber, 1976: 140). 

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. 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. 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 disenchantment 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 religions 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
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. During 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
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.’ At one religious lecture I attended in Petaling Jaya the uestaz (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. 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 kampungs 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’,\textsuperscript{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 khalwat15 – 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.

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
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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 *bomohs* 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.
7. Between a Cosmopolitan Ethic and the Politicide of the Malays

While we wait for the satay to arrive, we see a bus go by with the Malaysian tourism slogan on its side: Malaysia – Truly Asia. I turn to Faris and ask him what he thinks of it. He smiles. He’s been in advertising, so he knows they are selling a product and Malaysia does have it all, ultra-modern cityscapes, shopping, an exotic hinterland of jungles, rivers and unspoilt beaches – well, if you go far enough. The beaches on the western side of the Peninsula are dirty and overbuilt, he adds. And culture, of course, yes, plenty of culture. Malay, Chinese, Indian and other indigenous ethnic identities all have stories to tell, things to perform and tourists to entertain. As long as the government is sponsoring this multicultural fantasy, all these groups will see themselves as different and separate from each other. They will remain Chinese or Malay and not be Malaysian. ‘Can’t one be both?’, I ask. One can hope. The politics of identity remain fractured, divided along racial and religious lines.

Even if he like others chooses to call himself ‘Malaysian’, change is slow. He points out that there are many politicians who have a mixed heritage of mamak or Tamil and Malay heritage. Both Mahathir and Anwar have Indian ancestry and both have been vocal proponents of Malay and Islamic supremacy during their respective terms in office. Exclusion and discrimination are never far it seems. He adds: ‘Although we’re all truly Malaysian, it seems it is deemed that some are more Malaysian than others.’

Malayness reconsidered

This chapter draws together the multiple strands of an argument that Islam and Malay identity have become so intertwined that Malayness has been transfused with Islam and, because of Islam’s internal universalising logic,
has disembedded Malay hybridity. I noted in chapter 2 that Malayness has a fluid history and I revisit this history within the context of renewed academic interest in cosmopolitanism. Whilst Malayness has a cosmopolitan heritage, one can read too much into this and I warn that the cosmopolitan Malay was largely a product of expediency rather than a political project to create a universalising discourse around Malayness. This chapter will further show that a de facto multicultural Malaysia has to remember its roots, whilst creating a new cosmopolitan ethic and intercultural platform for exchange, if it wants to succeed as a nation-state. Although alternative spaces and identities exist (see chapter 4), I postulate that the elite, to maintain its power base, have instituted a system of exclusion and othering over time that culminates in a form of politicide against its main constituents, the Malays themselves.

Uncovering cosmopolitanism

Malayness and thus Malay identity have been shown to be a product of historical exchange, over time infused with a variety of cultural, social and religious traditions. As a point of departure for this chapter I want to take the recent debate around cosmopolitanism and its incarnation in the Malay world, in particular Malaysia. Khoo Gaik Cheng (2007) has drawn attention to Malaysian independent films that transcend the pluralist prism of racialised politics by adopting a cosmopolitan outlook, whilst Souchou (2003b) argues for a ‘national cosmopolitanism’ of the Melayu baru or New Malays, which is to displace racial boundaries in Malaysia. Kahn’s notion of cosmopolitanism is based on a historical exploration of ‘a heretofore suppressed narrative of cosmopolitan Malay-ness’ (Kahn, 2006: xxiii), grounded in historical interactions in the Malay world. Kahn also claims that today ‘alternatives to the national narrative are in the making’ (Kahn, 2006: 172).

Cosmopolitanism has in the last decade or so gained much attention in cultural studies, anthropology, sociology and politics as a prism to explain and foster forms of globalisation, especially forms of cultural globalisation. Diaspora studies, transnationalism and globalisation have all been infused with a rediscovery of Kant and new forms of cosmopolitanisms. Some have used cosmopolitanism as a programmatic tool for their respective disciplines (Beck, 2002; Kahn, 2003b) or as a methodological tool for explaining the world and possibly making it a better place (see Archibugi & Held, 1995; Cheah & Robbins, 1998; Ong, 1999).
**Cosmopolitanism**

It is not that we are without culture but we are drawing on the traces and residues of many cultural systems, of many ethical systems – and that is precisely what cosmopolitanism means. It means the ability to stand outside of having one’s life written and scripted by any one community, whether that is a faith or tradition or religion or culture – whatever it might be – and to draw selectively on a variety of discursive meanings (Hall, 2002: 26).

Hall’s definition succinctly points this discussion towards three issues that must be taken into account: (1) the role of culture and ethics in cosmopolitanism, (2) the power of prescriptive meanings and (3) cosmopolitanism as a means to have the capacity ‘to stand outside’ oneself and these prescribed meanings. Kahn’s (2006) conception of a popular and practical cosmopolitanism is such an ‘outside’ or interstitial space for communication, rather than a project or ethics. This space is the betwixt and between space that separates and unites us, that is part of us and yet eludes us. Kahn discusses interstitial spaces as not inhabited by people per se, but by the moment of contact, the moment of hybridity. Interstitial spaces are spaces of interaction, spaces of opportunity and possibilities. Similarly, Bhabha sees hybridity as an ‘interstitial space’, in which . . . social differences are not simply given to experience through an already authenticated cultural tradition; they are the signs of the emergence of community envisaged as a project – at once a vision and a construction – that takes you ‘beyond’ yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the political conditions of the present (Bhabha, 1994: 4).

The practice of this form of cosmopolitanism is based on everyday interactions, the reality of life and the practice of everyday life. It is grounded in humanity, not in a positivist sense, but in a practical, expedient sense. Thus, my own attempt to critically engage the concept with a focus on the necessity and thus the expediency of cosmopolitan interaction is at once subsumed by this view that indeed most interactions are based on necessity, but that it is part of the cosmopolitan interaction. Thus, the interaction is what makes it cosmopolitan or not: if there is change, a transformation of thought, then the interaction can be said to be cosmopolitan. However, I contend that cosmopolitanism must go beyond that, beyond being mere being-in-the-world. I use ‘being-in-the-
world’ in the loosely Heideggerian sense of the ‘self’ relating to the material world and others around it; being embedded not just in a locality, but in the way we interact with this locality (see chapter 1, also Dreyfus, 1991; Heidegger, 1962). Cosmopolitanism is a project of acknowledging and engaging with the other, not just tolerating it. Cosmopolitanism is more than just a space betwixt and between identities, more than just an interstitial space. It incorporates a political project, if not a Kantian (1795) one then at least an active engagement with the other through communication, and thus in my view cannot be defined through cosmopolitan practice in the aforementioned limited way.

**Interculturalism and political cosmopolitanism**

Bharucha (1993) talks about interculturalism in the arts in a similar way: as a priori. Interculturalism or cultural exchange and fluidity are ‘natural’ or at least precede modernity and the nation-state. Boundaries and their static character are, thus, a recent inhibitor to otherwise pre-existent cultural flows. I have argued along similar lines when I deconstruct Malayness. Bharucha forcefully argues for a re-imagining and re-casting of these flows as equitable and culturally enriching ones. Whilst arts practitioners are attempting to do just that, the state intervenes to curtail interactions other than the ones they wish to encourage. Intercultural exchange must go hand in hand with any form of political cosmopolitanism, for they can build on each other, expanding on openness and understanding, whilst they can also enable openness in the first place. One critique often made in this context is that intercultural arts practitioners occupy a privileged space and are thus in an elite cosmopolitan bubble (Friedman, 1997; Mandal, 2003: 186; Vertovec & Cohen, 2002: 5). This is exactly what Bharucha addresses when he argues for an interculturalism that engages the ‘other’ whilst resting on firm ground of its own. What Bharucha brings to the debate here is the question of the terms of exchange in interculturalism as well as the position of the individual involved in the exchange, i.e. the power relations of exchange. If these remain Western centred, any form of cosmopolitanism or interculturalism will revert to a form of neo-colonialism (Bharucha, 1993), imperialist nostalgia (Rosaldo, 1989) or colonial necrophilia (Hage, 2008).

**Archipelagic cosmopolitanism**

Although Hannerz has been critiqued for propagating an elite conception of the cosmopolitan (Werbner, 1999), his definition remains critical here:
A more genuine cosmopolitanism is first of all an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance to openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity. ... There is the aspect of a state of readiness, a personal ability to make one’s way into other cultures, through listening, looking, intuiting and reflecting (Hannerz, 1990: 239).

Important here is the active nature of the cosmopolitan, the willingness to encounter, engage and communicate with an ‘other’. The coming together of:

A mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation, or by some other factor (Bakhtin, 1981: 358).

In this definition of hybridisation Bakhtin differentiates between an unconscious, organic or unintentional hybrid and a conscious, artistic or intentional hybrid. Thus, I propose the term archipelagic cosmopolitanism to describe the process of organic or unintentional interactions within a relatively open space (see Bakhtin, 1981: 358). Archipelagic cosmopolitanism, I contend, is a cosmopolitanism that was enabled by ecology. Seafaring maritime empires and communities that spanned the Southeast Asian archipelago had interactions with their neighbours, much like the Mediterranean Sea, as an integrated system of trade, migration and thus constant interaction (van Leur, 1955). These interactions ‘generated a more cosmopolitan atmosphere and a greater receptivity to foreign cultural influences’ (Wertheim, 1980a: 11). This occurred in the plural cosmopolis of Southeast Asia vis-à-vis European nations imposing their socio-economic structures. This space was subsequently closed off first by colonial powers and later the nation-state in ever increasing rigidity, closing the gates to this form of cosmopolitanism. Archipelagic cosmopolitanism was thus the result of pragmatism and expediency at a time when such encounters were possible. Thus, this form of cosmopolitanism flourished intermittently in Southeast Asia between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries due to increased commercial links. But it collapsed thereafter due to an economic downturn and the consolidation of religious divisions within Southeast Asia (Reid, 1988: 326–329). These developments have a cyclic pattern, whereby people connect, disconnect and reconnect over time. Ties diminish due to economic, political or other factors and can remain closed for long periods of time.
Globalisation has changed the relative boundedness of the constituents of these ties. Where ties would be made between heads of state, kings, sultans, emissaries or traders, today ties can be made and broken by anyone. This also limits or diminishes the value of some ties, i.e. two people meeting over the internet and exchanging views and then abandoning the ties has little or no impact on, say trade relations. However, this also means that we increasingly become exposed to the other end of such ties with human faces attached, rather than figures, flags and fanfare. Early ties between Malaya and China, for instance, resulted in a cultural exchange over centuries, with people settling and inter-marrying, adopting and altering customs, traditions and culture.

Thus, a cosmopolitan identity such as ‘Malay’ could develop and flourish in a pre-colonial environment. Even in an early colonial world, where the main opponent is not the internal other, or the other at the border, it can remain potent. For, in this case, the other is the external colonial power, which has a strong unattainable set of identity markers that the indigenous population can strive for, but on the grounds of race alone will never achieve. Thus, a cosmopolitan outlook may work as a means of attaining and achieving a sense of sameness and belonging to a shared cause, in terms of equality amongst people of different cultures, and it may also provide a platform for a regional resistance and a sense of strength in numbers for that aim. Thus, forms of early ‘Nusantara cosmopolitanism’ may be seen as a strategy of survival in the face of rapid European expansion in the region (see Reid, 2005). Aceh was seen as a cosmopolitan place of people coming together in peace in a respectful and equitable manner. However, cosmopolitan in this context means no more than multicultural; namely that people of different backgrounds and traditions were tolerating each other in a specific place in space and time. There was no active negotiation of a cosmopolitan ethics and philosophy. The fact that people lived together in Aceh was a result of trade routes, the economic rationale of expansion through trade and the European and Chinese desire for exotic spices and materials. It seems as though people did not see each other as citizens of the world in an egalitarian way, nor did they aspire to do so.

Cosmopolitanism as a practice of interaction, a demotic, popular form of being-in-the-world is not so much self-reflexive as a necessary survival strategy among human beings. As we are grounded in a family, culture, larger kin group or other social system, we constantly shape and reshape our interaction with the others who surround us. This negotiation of relationships is an ongoing process of being-in-the-world, a contextualised presence of ourselves in a
material as well as non-material world around us. Therefore, social relations of self and other are at the very heart of an active identity-shaping process. It is also the locus of any form of language, *modus vivendi*, culture, in short any tool that allows us to live with others based on interaction. Similarly, the cosmopolitan practice is one such tool, born out of necessity of being, of our essence being social – thus the need for tools to facilitate these interactions. Kahn’s notion of Malayness inhabiting an interstitial space between identity categories and thus between people’s being, is another form of this space, this tool of facilitatory cosmopolitanism. It is at once the link that connects self and other, whilst it also is poised between them.

**Grounded cosmopolitanism**

Although some may continue to advocate a ‘civic’/disembedded cosmopolitanism grounded in universal human reason – with the notion of the ‘cosmopolitan’ as a rootless, identity-less ‘citizen of the world’ – of the kind favoured by Kant, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of other models of cosmopolitan practice. These are based on a rather different view of cosmopolitanism as fixed in circumstances that are unique and contingent, and cosmopolitans as inevitably embedded in particularistic cultural circumstances (Kahn, 2004: 3).

Here, the argument is that grounded cosmopolitanism is a space where someone can be open to the world and at the same time at home. Cosmopolitanism in this sense includes ‘patriotic cosmopolitan’ (Appiah, 1996), ‘cosmopolitan ethnicity’ (Werbner, 2002) and/or ‘national cosmopolitanism’ (Souchou, 2003a). All these conceptualisations have tried to give the rootless citizen of the world a home to be grounded in, a motherland, an ethnicity or a nation to belong to.

This notion of grounded cosmopolitanism remains grounded in terms of not getting anywhere, being unable to take off and develop its cosmopolitanism in a meaningful way. Often it lacks the required infrastructure, i.e. schooling, societal norms etc., to take off. Against this Kahn (2008) argues that cosmopolitanism in Malaysia can go two ways: secular or Islamic. Kahn (2006) has himself resurrected or unearthed a much-neglected third way: popular cosmopolitanism, an alternative narrative that has been shut out by the nationalist narrative. Be that as it may, there is little factual evidence of this third narrative having any space to develop again, nor that there are indeed any remains of
such a project. This is especially evident in the current Malay heartland of peninsular Malaysia, which is awash with rigid, bounded identity markers. However, de Certeau, speaking about the struggle of ordinary people against such organisational and normalising systems, does suggest that there remains a possibility or opportunity for it to be developed or employed as a tactic in people’s everyday life (De Certeau, 1984).

Jacobson and Kahn argue that it is precisely in the everyday interactions with others that a form of grounded cosmopolitanism exists, a variety of cosmopolitanism which neither depends on a fixed bounded homeland (or republic in Kantian terms) nor seeks perpetual peace. They frame this form of cosmopolitanism of the Chinese and Malays respectively as ‘Chineseness’ and ‘Malayness’ (Jacobson, 2007; Kahn, 2004; 2006). They further argue that this form of grounded cosmopolitanism expounds an ethics of trade and communication. Although flexibility and movement are still part and parcel of the ethnic Chinese mix of minorities across Southeast Asia, the Malays have been sedentarised at least in national terms. Malays in Indonesia have an Indonesian passport and Malays in Brunei a Bruneian one. The nation-state has done much to diminish cross-cultural and cross-regional communication by channelling it towards the respective centres of power rather than allowing regional interconnectedness. Sabah is closer to Kuala Lumpur administratively, of course, but also in terms of trade, news and focus than to the geographically bordering Kalimantan or even the geographically closer Vietnam. The ‘tyranny of distance’, to quote Geoffrey Blainey, thus becomes the tyranny of centralisation and state control.

I argue that the grounded cosmopolitanism Jacobson and Kahn postulate pre-dates the nation-state and is anathema to it, and is thus in many ways inconceivable today. It existed then as a feeling, a mutual understanding based on necessity. Trade was a necessity that required communication and connectedness. This form of cosmopolitanism was in effect a form of negative tolerance born of necessity.

Kant’s cosmopolitanism rests on the notion that everyone has a nation to belong to and can be classified as a ‘national’ (Kant, 1795). Thus, all must share bounded identities with which the cosmopolitan comes into contact. It is the allowance for peaceful relations between the republics (or nation-states) that allows the cosmopolitan to travel freely, sojourn freely and live amongst others as he or she would at home. This is important, for Kant envisages a home one may not return to, but a home in the sense of Heimat, to denote where one is from. Thus, the Kantian cosmopolitan, too, has a bounded entity
as identity marker he or she can look back on. Cosmopolitanism, based on a categorical imperative and a notion of belonging in this sense, must be fostered and nourished at home before it can take off. Modern cosmopolitan projects, based on multiculturalism and the need to live together within nation-states, aim at a positive tolerance of acceptance and integration of the ‘other’.

Cosmopolitanisms and the return of the multicultural

For this to happen a mindset that facilitates pragmatic interactions must be fostered. As such these modern cosmopolitan projects incorporate an ethical and a political project for an active engagement with the other. Cosmopolitanism remains a positive label but an indiscriminate handing out of the cosmopolitan label for such projects can diminish its usefulness as a concept, especially when things can be explained with simpler labels. Indeed, as Skrbis, Kendall and Woodward have argued:

Cosmopolitanism is in danger of becoming all things to all people, and so we make a ‘modernist’ call for a social science specification of cosmopolitanism; of course, there may be some who regard this as a crime against a ‘postmodern’ possibility. Second, cosmopolitanism is somewhat politically naive and it contains within itself a certain utopian drive to construct a new world of tolerant, world-sensitive sensibilities. Yet despite the emphasis on these new sensibilities, and indeed an emerging variety of cosmopolitanisms, it often overlooks the way that many contemporary cosmopolitan projects tend to fall between the cracks of an old tension between the relationship of the West and the Rest. If we take this argument to an extreme, cosmopolitanism is not yet free of the risk of being seen as colonialism under another banner (Skrbis et al., 2004: 132).

Some see cosmopolitanism as another way of encapsulating the increased interactions between people, a post-globalisation prism. However, giving all sorts of transnational, interregional, virtual and novel encounters the label of cosmopolitanism waters down its political potential and its empirical efficacy. What is cosmopolitanism if it can be located virtually everywhere? Also, it has attracted more than a hint of the return to academic revisionism on behalf of the subaltern. Many cosmopolitan spaces keep getting uncovered, which is not to say that they exist in a variety of places. However, with a fluid conceptualisation of what cosmopolitanism entails, we are bound to find it wherever we choose to look hard enough. Cosmopolitanism is at the time of
writing already moving out of the epicentre of research in spite of or maybe because of its exposure sparking so much research. Its usefulness has suffered and as a result cosmopolitanism has to wither from the research agendas in order to return revitalised as a definable and identifiable phenomenon.

Already cosmopolitanism has been demoted to ‘banal cosmopolitanism’ (Beck, 2002), which merely consumes diversity in food, leisure and the arts with no exchange and therefore is often a one-sided affair. Mundane or unreflexive cosmopolitans, consuming images and not much beyond that, mask what I am arguing for, a return to the political programme of cosmopolitanism. The *flaneur*, the man at home everywhere, the globe-trotting student, the food safari participant and the world music aficionado are the invoked symbols of cosmopolitanism. And it is these images and vignettes that most vividly and prominently portray cosmopolitanism. However, ‘food, tourism, music, literature and clothes are all easy faces of cosmopolitanism, but they are not hard tests for the relationship between local solidarity and international civil society’ (Calhoun, 2002: 105).

In Malaysia only the elite can and does participate in these externally identifiable characteristics and hobbies; it is only they who can partake in the global exchange of high art and its consumption. The cosmopolitanism many anthropologists invoke, however, is worlds away from this elevated form of cosmopolitanism on show. They want to uncover a latent cosmopolitanism, one that does not rely on conspicuous consumption and international travel (see for instance Werbner, 1999).

My argument is that elite cosmopolitanism exists and also does so in Malaysia. However, there is also a less visible form of political cosmopolitanism, but it would not be known as such to the people who espouse it. To them it is human kindness, *Gastfreundlichkeit* (literally friendliness towards guests; hospitality), or just common sense. Thus, we are faced with a situation where maybe the researcher has identified something that can be better explained and made sense of using another language and another prism to see it through.

As Werbner points out, ‘We need to recognise that cosmopolitanism is as much an openness to prior strangers next door, a willingness to forge new weak but significant ties, as it is a commitment to sustain prior strong global links’ (Werbner, 1999: 33). With the advent of the nation-state, the erasure of family histories of migrants and the informal social contract of 1957 within Malaysia meant that Malaysians were frozen in their ethnic identities. I have discussed the erasure of migrant histories in chapter 2. Some people were able to choose their racial identity without knowing what consequences this stroke of the
pen would have in the future. Indians became Malays, Bugis became Malays and Chinese became Malays. What then of the Malays? As such they present a plethora of divergent histories, traditions and heritage. These identities became subsumed in the post-merdeka (independence) period into one Malay identity that needed to be defined. Malay history then is cosmopolitan in essence. However, it is one that has betrayed its past and gone through the same process of essentialisation that all ethnic, cultural, religious and national identities go through in order to consolidate themselves.

It is feasible for Malaysians to live together without this latent and forgotten cosmopolitanism (Kahn, 2006) or even the deep engagement of political cosmopolitanism that I have outlined. However, what is required in its stead is a recognition and abrogation of the exclusivity of identity groups’ (be they ethnic, religious or cultural) claims to truth, identity and place. It is the competition of and between exclusive identities that causes ruptures and societal disintegration. In addition, an effort has to be made to engage the other and this can only be accomplished if all parties are knowledgeable about their respective selves and especially their own histories, as well as willing and capable of comprehending the other. A living together can be just that, a living side by side, devoid of superiorities and supremacies. Thus, politics, rather than being the answer, tends to stand in the way of resolutions to competing and exclusive claims.

The Malaysian state politically operates under a ‘divide and rule’ mentality. Only by eliminating the hybrid can the identity categories be of any worth in ordering and making legible the social and therefore ethnic terrain. Thus, hybrids are undesired by the state and its agencies. In her work on cultural performance arts in the small Portuguese settlement in Melaka, Sarkissian observed that:

> Just as bangsawan and zapin were transformed from popular cosmopolitan genres into ‘traditional Malay performing arts’ so, too, has the performing tradition of the Portuguese Settlement been transformed from hybrid Malaysian-Portuguese genres (branyo and mata kantiga) into an ethnically distinct ‘Portuguese’ genre (the cultural show) (Sarkissian, 2000: 159).

Thus, both cosmopolitan and intercultural projects can order ‘self’ and ‘other’ in distinct categories to make boundaries clear for both the ordering system, in this case the state, and the person being ordered into a category. Indeed, the strict ordering of people is necessary to be able to tolerate ‘otherness’.
Tolerance in Malaysia

This section returns to an earlier discussion on the social contract between Malays and non-Malays that forms the basis for Malaysian politics, an informal agreement that gave non-Malays citizenship on the eve of merdeka in 1957 and secured a special position for Malays in the new constitution. Thus, I am principally concerned with the relation of self and other here, between Malays and non-Malays, in particular Chinese and Indians.

Tolerance as a political project and necessity was born out of and at the same time as the modern nation-state, at the peace of Westphalia in 1648 (Lee, 1984: 91–92). The thirty-year war had just ravaged central Europe and tolerance became a key part of liberal political ideology in order to facilitate trade and end hostilities in a post-conflict Europe. Toleration of religious difference was instituted, if grudgingly and not without concessions. But Protestant and Catholic states became equals, and minorities of Calvinists, Lutherans and Catholics had to be tolerated (Gross, 1984: 5). It must be remembered at what human cost this agreement came about. From its bloody birth in the mid-seventeenth century, tolerance as a programme for modern nation-states continued its rise to become the integral catalogue of rights that citizens enjoy today in most liberal state systems. Such states usually guarantee tolerance officially in constitutional frameworks. This is a tradition that was handed onto the Malaysian state through the British prior to independence, thus creating an external state framework with provisions for religious freedom. Of course, as was shown in the uncovering of cosmopolitanisms, these forms of tolerance were not new to the Malay world, which had a long history of toleration and integration. What was different in this instance, though, was the imposition of tolerance onto a majority, the Malays in their own country by an outside force, the British.

In Singapore the state is structurally positioning itself outside, or rather above, the racially defined groups, as an arbiter between them and as their protector. To aid this, the outside ‘other’ is the West, forever encroaching on the nation as well as on the cultural groups themselves. Thus, the state can, through its Singaporean nation-state claim to legitimacy, mitigate and control the cultural groups, ultimately as their patron, which controls and buffers the encroaching Westernisation. Thus, the invention or classification of an outside threat allows the Singaporean state to adopt a role beyond the constituent cultural groups and maintain control over them all (Chua Beng Huat, 2003).
In Malaysia, too, a form of social control has been embedded in tolerance and multiculturalism. Marcuse termed this a repressive tolerance:

> When tolerance mainly serves the protection and preservation of a repressive society, when it serves to neutralize opposition and to render men immune against other and better forms of life, then tolerance has been perverted (Marcuse, 1965: 111).

Marcuse sees the masses duped by the system and as the masses tolerate the repressive state and its policies the state reinscribes itself and its repression onto the people. Thus, it is the state which maintains its repression by being tolerated by its subjects, much like Gramscian hegemony in which the masses tolerate their own subjugation. I do not subscribe to this scenario entirely. Clearly, not all Malaysians are duped by the state. However, there is a structural element in Malay society that I have outlined in the preceding chapters that allows authorities, be they cloaked in Malayness or Islamicity, to take the lead and implement far-reaching repressive controls with at least tacit support. Brown draws this concept into the contemporary multicultural liberal state setting, wherein tolerance ‘manages the demands of marginal groups in ways that incorporate them without disturbing the hegemony of the norms that marginalize them’ (Brown, 2006: 36). This form of tolerance, then, is ‘a mode of incorporating and regulating the presence of the threatening Other within’ (Brown, 2006: 27). Brown traces the shift tolerance has made ‘from the domain of belief to the domain of identity, and ( . . . ) its shift from an element in the arsenal of sovereign power to a mode of governmentality’ (Brown, 2006: 37).

Furthermore, the element of social control that is embedded in multiculturalism and tolerance is aligned with the spatial ordering of the self, as Hage shows in the Australian case. Hage has argued that racism can be better understood in terms of:

> . . . territorial and, more generally, spatial power inherent in racist violence that the categories deriving from the concept of ‘race’ cannot by themselves encompass. While such practices are ‘informed’ by racist modes of classification, I will maintain that they are better conceived as nationalist practices: practices which assume, first, an image of a national Race; secondly, an image of the nationalist himself or herself as master of this national space and, thirdly, an image of the ‘ethnic/racial other’ as a mere object within this space (Hage, 1998: 28).
For Hage, the seeming dichotomy operating in society between an ‘evil racism’ and ‘good tolerance’ succinctly mystifies the latent racism of the latter (Hage, 1998: 28). He further argues that:

A dominant culture in which tolerance is grounded in the necessity of ethnic caging cannot possibly produce a politics which counters a racism which sees, in all Third-World-looking migrants, undesirable people who ought not be accepted into the nation. For it is a culture which is merely producing, through its enacting of the White nation fantasy, the very conception of Third World-looking migrants proposed by the ‘racists’. The difference is that it argues that, despite this, they ought to be tolerated. When the tolerant says to the racist, ‘I know how you’re feeling but . . .’, they indeed do know how they are feeling (Hage, 1998: 116).

Tolerance, it seems to me, remains a potent force in Malaysia today, not least as a residue of historical archipelagic cosmopolitanism and its associated exchange and engagement with otherness. It is this forgotten and suppressed history of cosmopolitanism Kahn (2006) uncovers.

Chapter 3 has provided insights into how the state fashions and creates a new version of Malayness and in the process refashions history. As Foucault aptly points out: ‘One fictions history on the basis of a political reality’ (Foucault, 1980: 193). Thus, whilst there is a need to ‘explore the ways in which transethnic cultural politics has been erased from history in Malaysia’ (Mandal, 2004: 53) and to uncover these ‘transethnic solidarities’ (Kahn, 2006; Mandal, 2004), if not invigorate and breathe fresh life into them, the political climate is not ready and conducive for such moves at present. Although a variety of ‘other Malays’ exist and continue to create and maintain their presence and cultural as well as social space in which to express themselves, this rarely becomes mainstream.

In one of my interviews with Dr. Ali Tawfik Al-Attas, director-general of the Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia, he made the point that tolerance in Islam has always had a positive meaning and is about forgiveness, a line he has been repeating over various airwaves:

If you respect a person, forgive and respect, treat him with eminence and magnanimity and not like a third-class citizen who’s beneath you because he’s a non-Muslim, surely he will have the feeling that this is a very good religion. No one likes to be tolerated (Theophilus, 2006a).

The Islamic theological positions on tolerance are multiple and could take up a separate study. Basing acceptance and tolerance on a religious plane is
problematic, even if it provides an initial starting point of dialogue. Inter-faith discussions can be helpful in demystifying positions and in beginning to talk with rather than against each other. It is noteworthy that Ali Tawfik Al-Attas and IKIM have taken part in inter-faith discussions (Theophilus, 2006b). The main issue is that the inter-faith forums usually exclude some religious groups, as well as the atheist and agnostic camps, and therefore makes tolerance based on one or even more religious creeds tenuous. Moreover, what is striking once more is the problem of policy and practice in the Malaysian context. Badawi’s visions of Islam hadhari are interpreted and influenced by Ali Tawfik Al-Attas himself. The political will to truly implement this form of Islamic tolerance, forgiveness and equality is lacking. Just as with Islam hadhari, the words flow easily but there is little action.

Not moving beyond toleration means there is a danger that a mere negative tolerance can become ‘antagonistic’ (Hayden, 2002). Hayden showed that what some see as syncretic traditions in shrine sharing in parts of India is actually a form of ‘competitive sharing’ based on antagonistic tolerance of the ‘other’. As long as power relations are such that neither side would win outright, both sides are forced to share. As such both sides create and maintain separate identities of the saints at the shrine, but they will worship together and use places and spaces together (more out of necessity, see my discussion on archipelagic cosmopolitanism above). In order to be able to positively tolerate the other, one has to be sufficiently secure with one’s own sense of ‘self’, and that is the challenge, as many Malays still seem to be a ‘majority with minority mentality’ (cf. Wertheim, 1980b). Thus, in Malaysia the nation-state remains competitively shared between the major ethnic groups.

**Othering the self: revisiting racial riots and the politics of fear**

The Malaysian racial riots in 1969 that followed the elections (see chapter 1) unleashed real tensions between the Malays and Chinese. As a result of the violence and ultimately the fear of an internal break-up, various programmes were enacted to provide Malays with economic assistance, government jobs and other state patronage, whilst allowing a relatively free private business environment for the Chinese. Politicians since 1969 have always been aware of a potential simmering and dormant racial tension and continually employ the threat thereof as a means to close discussion on certain issues and make the
issue nonnegotiable, such as positive discrimination for Malays. Statements will include allusions to the relative harmony since 1969 and the need not to take this for granted. This constant underlying threat of violence in many ways depends on the continued uninstantiation of violence, for any outbreak of violence would precipitate a demise of state power as the case of violence in the former Yugoslavia showed (Bowman, 2004). Thus, the threat and talk of violence is more potent a weapon in maintaining control and order.

One evening I was sitting in the dining room watching television with my Kelantanese host family when the mode of creating others and the fear of others was played out right in front of me. We were watching a documentary on the government television station RTM filmed by a Malaysian crew and with presenters who were reporting on the Israeli raids on Lebanon in 2006. The report focused on the Lebanese and Palestinians and the hardship they were under. They showed pictures of bomb craters, crying children, wounded and dead bodies. Interviewees were mainly Hezbollah supporters and activists. Whilst there is nothing unusual about presenting one side of a conflict, especially from a government television station, the emotions the commentators evoked were utterly one-sided. The only time they came close to an Israeli standpoint, they were driving along the border and saw an Israeli guard post. The commentator became hysterical thinking that she was about to be killed whilst the crew filmed a lonely Israeli soldier on the hill. This was the enemy, far away, untouchable, powerful and menacing. We had seen the pictures of the victims, now we were shown the aggressors. There are no better bogeymen than the Israeli Jews for Malaysians, which is partly why Mahathir was so fond of expressing his negative views (see Kessler, 1999). First and foremost there are none in Malaysia, because Malaysian passports have a stamp in them forbidding their holders to travel to Israel and Israelis are not allowed to enter Malaysia (exceptions can be made on a minister’s request). The official reason for this is Malaysia’s sympathy for the Palestinian cause, and in extension any threat to Islam, in Palestine or wherever else in the world, can be read as a threat against Malays. Islam and Malayness are therefore presented as constantly under threat.

Hishamuddin Hussein, the UMNO Youth chief, unsheathed a keris (Malay dagger), kissed it and waved it around at the UMNO general assembly in 2005, and at the 2006 meeting had it sheathed with him on the podium. His speech in 2005 had created an air of anxiety as his rhetoric was propounding a sustained rally in support of ketuanan Melayu (Malay supremacy). At the 2006 general meeting he was more subdued, although one delegate from Perlis
called on the assembly to take the initiative. Hashim Suboh declared: ‘Datuk Hisham has unsheathed his keris, waved his keris, kissed his keris. We want to ask Datuk Hisham, when is he going to use it?’ There was a tense atmosphere following this statement. Shortly afterwards, then Deputy Prime Minister Najib gave a speech to the assembly in which he reiterated the consistent line of the government and conservative Islamic NGOs, that the position of Islam was under threat from within:

We have seen the rise in wrongful teachings, apostasy cases and we have seen groups protesting Constitutional provisions relating to Islam, namely article 11 and article 121(1A) of the Federal Constitution. All of these are assaults on the sanctity of Islam and attempts to shake the akidah of the ummah. We wish to warn those irresponsible parties to immediately extinguish these flames of incitement that can destroy the harmony of races and religions. Umno strongly opposes the formation of the so-called Interfaith Council that can threaten the harmony of this country. The question of religion is a sensitive issue and all must understand this. Therefore we must all be extremely cautious in dealing with such matters for the sake of unity. Umno will not waver from its position as defenders of Islam in this country (Najib Abdul Razak, 2006).

In a 2006 interview on the ABC programme ‘Foreign Correspondent’ Harussani Zakaria, the Mufti of Perak, warned that if Islam is ‘disturbed’ there could be ‘racial conflict’ as in 1969. Reverting to the economic rationale behind racial tensions, he added:

Because we cannot accept all this. Now, the rich . . . now, who’s having the rich economy in this country? The Indians and the Chinese. They bully the Malays. That we know ( . . .) that I know (ABC, 2006).

Mahathir, Badawi, and now Najib, have been and are engaged in maintaining peace (in its relative meaning of the absence of violence) by what I see as perpetuating a form of veiled violence. The moment of crisis in 1969 set the stage for a series of coping mechanisms, which it was envisaged would cool down all segments of society and allow for a peaceful co-existence. Because of the fragile power relations based on communal politics, whereby no clear ethnic majority exists, a form of coexistence had to be worked out. Structural violence and scapegoating (Girard, 1986) were not options, as that would have torn the nation apart completely. Scapegoating only works when the ‘others’ are a small enough group to lash out against without fear of reprisals. The main rivalry was between Chinese and Malay interests, with both being
majorities in some parts of the country. Thus, I argue that the predominant mode of exclusion is excluding Malays from access to sovereignty and power, whilst the most visible mode of exclusion remains othering non-Muslims vis-à-vis Muslims.

Defining Islam: demarcating otherness

Islam, like most religions, lends itself to be used as a mechanism for exercising control over people by appropriating the legitimacy to speak for and of the highest authority. Whoever controls the intra-religious discourse, controls how and what most of the adherents believe. The fight between UMNO and PAS for who speaks for Islam is a fight over control of that discourse.

What happens is a conflation of theology and practice – controlling theology is seen to control practice and here is where there is room for resistance. Syncretic Islam survives all over the peninsula in varying forms. However, the state has been exceptionally successful in controlling, disciplining and ordering public space, discourse and people. This can have two outcomes. One is about drawing the imaginary lines of inclusion and exclusion, the other about power within the in-group.

The former has become a simple tool for labelling people and groups as ‘anti-Islam’, which includes a charge of blasphemy as well as apostasy, considered by most ulama as one of the greatest crimes in Islam. If Islam is used as a smoke screen of and for power, any form of dissent can be cloaked in anti-Islamic rhetoric and thus easily neutralised.6 Examples of this sort of discourse have come from the government, the religious administration and civil society groups.

The most outspoken example is that of Harussani Zakaria, the Perak Mufti, who claimed that 100,000 Muslims had converted to Christianity and 100,000 more were ready to do so if stringent laws were to be relaxed and religious freedom were to be extended to Muslims (Ekmal Yusof, 2006). Statements of this sort by one of the leading religious scholars of Malaysia beg the question: what kind of religion is he talking about? Is it one that has to enslave its adherents into submission, which they can never escape? What does that say about Harussani’s interpretation of Islam and its inherent worth for mankind, and mankind’s agency in accepting and living it? These questions are not discussed, because the primary aim of his statements is to create a culture of fear amongst Malays. Muslims who apostasise are seen as traitors, not just to their religious brethren, but, in a country where Islam is
intrinsically linked to Malayness and thus to the demographic numbers game in terms of who is in the majority, also to their ethnic brethren.

**Modes of inclusion and exclusion**

The following three vignettes demonstrate places of exclusion, all couched in religious logic enacted, however, by everyday encounters with everyday interlocutors. In chapters 3 and 4 I talked about the ordering of spaces and how both the state and non-state actors are engaged in processes of creating Islamic spaces within the city. My example was the Islamic city of Kota Bharu. This section builds upon these discussions and shows various moments of inclusion and exclusion that people become entangled in. I offer these vignettes at this stage because they illustrate this chapter’s argument of how the union of Islam and Malayness are being used as an exclusionary device to delineate spaces and demarcate them.

**Mosques**

One very obvious way of exclusion is by closing off the space of religiosity, the mosque. Most mosques are open to visitors, as is Masjid Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah in Shah Alam, except for prayer times (see Figure 20). However, the main prayer hall is not accessible to non-Muslims at any time. I asked around why the main prayer hall was categorically closed to non-Muslims, but nobody could give me an answer, although some people were hinting that allowing non-Muslims into the prayer hall would offend the sanctity of Islam and reduce the inherent Islamicity of the space. As if non-Muslims could tread away the religiosity of the hall. Upon further questioning people usually recoiled and asked me to refer to an ever higher authority to clarify the issue. However, the Sultan, as defender of the faith in his state and the highest authority, could not see me. Indeed, several times people would say that the Sultan had ordered it, but could not tell me in any detail why.

Although most mosques I visited were welcoming and inviting, especially the imams and *orang tua*, older gentlemen who often ‘hung out’ at the mosque for a chat before and after prayers, sometimes I was put on the spot in terms of religiosity and the access I was deemed to have. I was refused entry on several occasions, for instance, at the Putra mosque in the new administrative centre.
of Putrajaya and at the Masjid Jamek in Kuala Lumpur city centre. Sometimes I was asked whether I was Muslim. Upon discerning that I was not, responses varied. On one occasion I was waiting outside Masjid Jamek for a Chinese Muslim convert to interview him (see Figure 21). Whilst waiting I ventured
into the courtyard of the mosque, where I was stopped by a mosque attendant and asked whether I was Muslim. I said ‘no’ and he immediately led me outside the gates, saying that this was a mosque and only for Muslims. Minutes later – I was still waiting outside the gates – a street vendor, selling prayer beads, invited me inside the mosque to have a look around and purchase some of his wares. With the attendant out of sight I followed the beckoning and, once more inside, had a look at the prayer beads and the architectural magnificence of the Moorish revivalism design coupled with Indian Mughal inspirations of the mosque. Designed by a British architect and completed in 1909, it embodies British imperial influence bridging three continents in its design and implementation. I was quickly awakened out of my daydreams of past imperial times by a man quickly approaching and waving his hands at me. ‘You Muslim, or not?!’ he shouted and, upon my denial, he pointed at the
marble floor of the main prayer hall, saying that this was off-limits for me; only Muslims were allowed to go there.\(^7\)

**Hari Raya Korban/Haji**

This is a major celebration in the Muslim calendar. The ritual commemorates the willingness of Abraham (Ibrahim) to sacrifice (which was halted by God) his only son Ismail on the command of God.\(^8\) The story is considered a test of faith and is enacted all over the Muslim world by slaughtering an animal and re-enacting the sacrifice Muslims are willing to make for God. Thus, the meat is of religious importance.

I attended the celebrations with the family I was staying with, Aziz and his first wife and their children, in Kota Bharu, in Malaysia’s northeast, considered the Malay heartland. The slaughtering of a buffalo took place in a nearby *kampung*, where some of my host’s workers lived. The buffalo was brought out and about seven men touched its reins muttering a short prayer. Then all the legs were tied and, with one clean cut of the throat, it was killed in the halal way (see Figure 22). The body jumped up and battled death, the

![Figure 22 Tying down the sacrificial beast](image-url)
gurgling went on for a long time, with all the blood squirting from the severed carcass, nerves still twitching – lifeless – yet the body kept soldiering on.

The buffalo was slaughtered according to Islamic rites and the meat was divided up to be shared with the community (see Figure 23). One third went to the patron, who paid for the animal, one third went to his family and friends and one third went to the needy. The sacrifice is supposed to bring the person who performs it, in this case the patron who paid for it, closer to God. As such, it has taken on a religious aura, a form of Islamicity, and customarily the meat cannot be consumed by non-Muslims. In theological terms there is some debate on this point. Indeed, in Singapore the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (Islamic Religious Council of Singapore) encourages one to share one’s own third with non-Muslim neighbours to celebrate the multi-religious character of Singapore. However, in Kelantan I was told I could not share the korban meat as that was reserved for Muslims only.

The slaughter and subsequent division of meat is the kampung’s affair; all the men from the kampung cut, prepared and sorted the meat. I was led away

**Figure 23** Divvying up of korban meat
after the killing with the women and children to a house in the kampung for a prepared meal. As the buffalo lay dead, several knives were hard at work, dismembering it. As I sat down on the veranda, looking at a range of dishes on offer, I was told that only Muslims could eat korban meat, so I had to make do with the sweets I was given. Everyone apologised profusely for this, and later Aziz remarked, ‘rules are rules’, whilst offering me a plethora of non-korban dishes his wife had hastily prepared.

Open houses

In Malaysia, it is an institution to have and attend open houses at various cultural and religious festivities, predominantly for Hari Raya Aidilfitri (Eid ul’fitr), literally day of celebration of fasting, Chinese New Year and Deepavali (Diwali or festival of lights). In cases where two festivities fall in similar time periods they become conjoined to Kongsi Raya or Deeparaya celebrations. People invite family and friends into each other’s houses to celebrate together. Politicians and business people often sponsor open houses for orphans, the poor and party members. So, this is a mainstream institution, a hallmark of Malaysian hospitality and a means of creating and maintaining bonds, connections and shared spaces, the very essence of Malaysia’s multicultural image. In 2006, Perak Mufti Harussani Zakaria, who heads the National Fatwa committee, issued a warning that his committee had decided that celebrating the festivals of the other religions would erode Muslims’ faith and could lead to blasphemy. He asked for the practice of open houses to be reviewed by the government. Prime Minister Badawi of the ruling UMNO party came out against such a notion and affirmed the joint celebrations, saying that this is what made ‘Malaysians one big, happy family’ (Hamidah Atan, 2006b). The opposition PAS

. . . deputy president Nasharuddin Mat Isa said it could be considered syirik (blasphemous) from an Islamic point of view to pair a Muslim celebration with a non-Muslim one. He said ‘the concern is that it could affect one’s aqidah (faith). Islam allows us to be friends with non-Muslims and respect people of other faiths. But we cannot compromise on our own faith,’ he said (The Star, 2006d).

Thus, the government is trying to move around such contentious issues, skirting the real issues and not entering into an Islamic discourse that is retained by the Islamic party and state authorities.
Putrajaya (administrative capital)

On one of my numerous visits to the Economic Planning Unit, the branch of government that deals with foreign researchers, to ascertain what had to be done next in regards to my visa and research permit, I signed in at the gate and was about to walk through, when a guard stopped me. He looked at me, looked down my body and exclaimed that I could not enter the department premises, for I was ‘not wearing Islamic dress’. I inspected myself and due to the incessant heat in Malaysia, on this particular day I was wearing not long pantaloons as usual, but baggy shorts. They were long enough to cover my knees, a part of the body that is considered awrah (supposed to be covered according to Islamic custom, because they could attract attention). According to a weak Hadith10 Muslim men are supposed to cover themselves from the navel to the knee. However, the guard who stopped me did not reference his denial of entry in theological terms; he simply said that I was not dressed Islamically. So I asked him what Islamic dress entailed and he responded that Muslims must wear long pants. His supervisor was of the same opinion. They were basing their judgement on what they perceived as a religious and cultural norm. Indeed, Malays rarely ever wear shorts in public in Malaysia. Their steadfast denial of access to a government department to a foreigner showed that they were sure about their position and their interpretation of events. However, when I asked them to demonstrate where in the Islamic scriptures it states that men have to dress in long pants, they blocked off the dialogue and shut the gate in front of me. This refusal to talk religion with me was not new; it was a common occurrence that my informants and friends would block off discussions or circumvent difficult theological questions by refusing point blank to answer or manoeuvring to avoid certain subjects. In this case the officers had no religious basis for their sentiments and statements, for what they considered ‘normal’ and self-evident was rarely questioned. My questioning of their position caused them to withdraw. I had to go to the shopping mall and buy a new pair of long trousers.

These short ethnographic vignettes demonstrate how space is othered, through general access, food, drink and dress. I want to take what sounds whimsical and trivial and bring it into political theory, where it quickly becomes a central issue and one of grave importance. For these vignettes point at a structural mode of inclusion and exclusion that goes beyond the length of my pants and wishing someone ‘Happy Christmas’ without losing faith.
Other examples are more spatially ordered, like the drinking den in Kelantan near the Thai border which has a sign outside in big letters telling Muslims they have to stay outside, on order of the Kelantanese authorities (see Figure 24). At the Genting Highlands Casino, there is also a sign, more discreet, but to the same effect. Muslims may not enter the gaming venue of the casino, on decree of the Pahang Sultan. Even on the Genting Casino website punters have to first click whether they are Muslim or not. Non-Muslims can gamble online, whilst Muslims are redirected to the entertainment section of the website. These exclusions are based on state religious doctrines and enforced by authorities.

Halal signs at restaurants act as a signifier that Muslims may, in fact should, enter the establishment, because the meat consumed here is certified by the Malaysian government to have been slaughtered in accordance with Islamic rites. Inclusion and exclusion on the basis of food habits may seem trivial, but is has real implications for the everyday lives of Malaysians. When lunch time beckons and office workers descend onto the streets and malls of Kuala Lumpur for a bite to eat, people often split up into discreet groups, more often

Figure 24 ‘Muslims may not enter’, a sign outside a bar in Kelantan
than not according to religion. I experienced this regularly and was often party to discussions as to where to go and eat, which would end up being a discussion on whether we could go for Chinese food or not. Most Muslims would want to go to halal eateries, whilst some Chinese were steadfast in their desire for char siew (barbecued pork) or other non-halal dishes. This meant that the groups would split, in some cases leaving the only Muslim to go off by himself or herself. This has implications for workplace relations, friendships and results in increasing withdrawal into one’s own religio-ethnic milieu.

Overall, the tension is between a state-sponsored as well as state-enacted notion of exclusion, or what I will call politicide following Kimmerling (2003), and the various forms of resistance and tactics (De Certeau, 1984) people use in their everyday lives. Indeed, it has been parts of the emerging civil society in Malaysia that have been at the forefront of manifesting and maintaining ethnic and religious boundaries as well as policing morals and closing spaces of interaction and intercultural co-operation.

**Politicide**

I am aware that the use of politicide outside of its intended Israeli political discourse is fraught with complications. I want to employ the concept only as a structural analytical tool in the Malaysian context. I wish to make no moral or political statements with it that would equate the treatment of Palestinians by the Israeli state with the treatment of Malays by the Malaysian state. Let’s begin with Kimmerling’s contentious definition. For him politicide is:

... a process that has, as its ultimate goal, the dissolution of the Palestinian people’s existence as a legitimate social, political, and economic entity. ... Politicide is a process that covers a wide range of social, political, and military activities whose goal is to destroy the political and national existence of a whole community of people and thus deny it the possibility of self-determination (Kimmerling, 2003: 3–4, my emphasis).

Of course, Malaysia is far removed from the daily violence and experience of trauma of the Middle East, in particular Israel and Palestine, in which context Kimmerling uses it. Politicide *sans* violence is akin to the active subsumption of otherness into state discourse I described in Malaysia. The process is clearly not as violent as in Palestine. However, the effects are similar. Kimmerling goes on to state that ‘politicide is a multilevel process’
This is important, because although a politicide is state led, it has many levels to its operations. ‘It is a general approach, with many of the decisions being made in the field, but whose cumulative effects are twofold’, which he describes as firstly the destruction of the Palestinian people and secondly the making of everyday life unbearable by destroying the private sphere (Kimmerling, 2003: 210–211). Kimmerling talks of the Israeli state creating a famine in the Gaza strip to make everyday life unbearable, with the ultimate goal of Palestinians leaving the strip. In Malaysia, I argue that politicide has as its goal the paternalism and ultimately silencing of the Malay majority by the political elite. I have described the ‘multilevel process’ of religious policing, the creation of exclusive spaces and the silence of the majority to these developments in the preceding chapters. The elite is able to evade these practices. Furthermore, Kimmerling points to ‘decisions made in the field’ which have cumulative effects. Many decisions made by the religious authorities are unchecked and are made unilaterally, due to a lack of knowledge and overzealousness on behalf of enforcement officers. The spectre of Malay supremacy is used to seemingly provide the Malay majority with economic privileges whilst their rights to sovereignty and political will are diminished.

The state is also engaged in another process to limit the sovereignty of the people by what Ong calls ‘graduated sovereignty . . . [which] refers to the differential treatment of populations – through schemes of biopolitical disciplining and pastoral care – that differently insert them into the processes of global capitalism’ (Ong, 2000b: 62). Ong uses the ‘model of graduated sovereignty to describe how certain states in South-East Asia have responded to global market forces with a particular mix of governing practices and military repression’ (Ong, 2000a: 57). She focuses on the way the global capitalist system integrates itself into and is accommodated by the state in Southeast Asia. Her arguments elucidate how the pastoral power of the state has been used to aid especially the middle class and elite Malays in securing their positions vis-à-vis the predominately low wage workforce, who are essential to the ongoing boom cycle.

Thus, according to Ong (2000a), sovereignty in Malaysia is graduated and further complicated by high-level impositions from global capital markets acting through the elite to curtail the rights of a predominately low wage workforce. My own argument extends from Ong’s analysis, focusing less on market rationalisation. I attempt to show how the state and its agents achieve their aims of subsuming and disciplining its people whilst maintaining peace.
and economic prosperity in Malaysia. Market forces are a key determinant of how states organise themselves and try to organise their citizenry. However, they are only one of a range of determinants of prevalent discourses. Indeed, it may be argued that it is a chicken and egg question as to what comes first in Malaysia: the Islamisation of the economy and thus the economic rationale, or the marketisation and commodification of Islam. Of course, this argument has to be nuanced in light of the various forms of resistance that exist throughout the system. These can take the form of ‘weapons of the weak’ as described by Scott (1985), spirit possessions (Ong, 1987) or what I termed the ‘evading of the divine light’ (see chapter 4).

The issue of sovereignty in Malaysia is complicated by the various tensions and overlapping constituencies of sovereignty. Thus, sovereignty has not just been graduated by economic forces acting from within and from outside the state purview; it is further fractured and contested on religious grounds, most notably in the field of Shariah laws contesting with secular legislation and the ethnically infused rhetoric of sovereignty. The focus in Malaysia has been on the obvious otherness that the racial politics of the colonial and postcolonial state have fostered in much the same manner and with the same outcomes (Kahn, 1995). Yet there is a hidden people being excluded, those the constitution and the former colonial masters were most anxious to protect: the Malays themselves.

Agamben has been instrumental in reintroducing Carl Schmitt’s ideas on sovereignty to the social sciences as an analytical as well as explanatory device. Agamben’s (1998) homo sacer, the embodiment of ‘bare life’, finds himself in a state of exception when he is expelled from the juridical realm by the sovereign. However, this banishment that predicates his new status becomes the foundation of political and in Malaysia also religious authority. Being able to exclude and banish is the source of sovereignty. Malays become homo sacer when they attempt to step outside of the clearly demarcated identity categories of Malay and Muslim. Their expulsion leads to the possibility of sovereign violence in a free-for-all ‘they had it coming’ setting. Thus, conceptualised apostates become homo sacer in the Malaysian context, because they are at once outside of the system (by their own choosing), yet cannot escape the punishment.

If one steps outside of God’s law, one must pay the consequences, which in a state of exception such as is practised in Malaysia can mean anything from social exclusion, lengthy imprisonment under the ISA, or even a death sentence. Terengganu and Kelantan have death sentences in their hudud
(Syariah prescribed penalties) laws for apostates. However, the federal government has not allowed these states to enact the laws. Terengganu, since coming under UMNO control in 2004, rescinded the law.

In Malaysia the state apparatus has created and fosters a largely obedient citizenry using interpellation (Althusser, 1971: 162–163). As Althusser explains, interpellation is the act of hailing someone on the street, and in Malaysia, racial identities are used to interpellate. People see themselves as Malay and thus respond to the hailing of Malays in public discourse (see chapter 1 and the example of Fadli). By invoking an exclusionary rhetoric between ‘them and us’ Malay groups such as FORKAD, TERAs or BADAI have gained a considerable momentum that can polarise people instantly and draw them out in support of Malay supremacy or against religious freedom. There is the possibility of a double exclusion in the way the state subsumes its people, for instance through ideological tools such as Islam hadhari, and manifests its own sovereignty through the intermingling of sacred and profane (Agamben, 1998: 83).

Furthermore, there is a legal side to the issue of sovereignty. In modern systems of governance the law is paramount and no one is above the law. The law is the ceiling of sovereignty. However, in Malaysia, there exist parallel systems of laws, each independent of the other and with varying degrees of sovereignty. For one, the secular laws of the state, there exists a highest court, the federal court, which is that law’s ceiling of sovereignty. For the system of Islamic courts, which deal mainly with family affairs and exclusively with Muslims, the problem of sovereignty is more complex. It too has at its highest level a court. However, above it all looms divinity and its untouchable status. Here, sovereignty lies with God. This mode of seemingly ‘outsourcing’ sovereignty and, thus, responsibility to God, and the highest authority, is problematic, but has hitherto paid off for the Malaysian elite and its agents. It is risky for the elite, mainly because Islam does not provide a static and coherent system of rules and regulations. As elaborated earlier (in chapter 2), Islam has been operating from the outset within contested spaces, as well as spawning a range of teachings, interpretations and subsequently groups and movements.

The underlying dynamic is much more complicated, of course, so hegemony and counter-hegemony are not entirely useful to conceptualise what has happened in Malaysia. For the elite is not alone in shaping the system. The shaping of a wider religious ‘common sense’ (Gramsci, 1971) is as much derived from within the state’s own bureaucracies, Islamic or not, as within the fast-expanding religious right within civil society.
Attempting to form religious norms has had a destabilising effect on society with various groups pushing and pulling society and its norms in different directions. However, the elite remain in power and thus retain the decision making power. In South Africa, apartheid, Mamdani explains, perpetuated colonial structures and the division of control into two systems, one that was based on a democracy of the white minority, the other based on ethnic authority over issues of customs. It is with this ‘dual institutional apparatus that power sought to enforce a dual political identity: a racial identity that united beneficiaries alongside an ethnic identity that fragmented victims’ (Mamdani, 1999: 127). He goes on to show that while:

... civic citizenship has been deracialised, indigenous citizens continue to be treated also as ethnic subjects, still under the grip of native authorities who continue to oversee the enforcement of an authoritarian version of native custom as ‘customary’ law (Mamdani, 1999: 127).

If customary law is replaced by Islamic law, the Malaysian situation is succinctly described. For, just as the deracialised citizen in South Africa cannot escape his colour and thus ethnicity, Malays cannot escape their religious identity, which is imprinted on their MyKad, the Malaysian citizen’s identification card. The important concept to think with here is Mamdani’s idea of ‘beneficiaries of privilege’, which is part of the settler–native power struggle. In Malaysia it operates at different levels. However, as I argue, it engenders similar results. The elite are the beneficiaries of the privileges they have helped create and maintain for the Malays as a whole.

The irony is that the majority of Malays are not the ‘beneficiaries of privilege’. In fact, as I have shown in chapter 3, they are the most heavily policed and politicided. Also, the perpetrators of exclusionary techniques, such as the officers in the religious enforcement agencies, are in fact far removed from the beneficiaries. Religious enforcement officers do not receive benefits from their enforcement work; they are mere dogs-bodies. I have argued that the main beneficiaries are the secular elite who act as arbiter of religious liberalism and orthodoxy. They are not subject to the exclusionary practices they create or condone, because they occupy privileged spaces where they can easily ‘evade the divine light’. The secular Malay elite therefore attain economic benefits accorded to them due to their ethnic status; they retain political power and can evade religious policing. They do not escape politicide; they are the source of it.
Hage’s concept of colonial necrophilia (2008), which involves the political killing of others, is the process of killing otherness – thus, one has to kill the other to love the other. For, as long as the other retains any political power, they can stage a revolt, a revolution and challenge the prevalent power relations, be they of a colonial nature or other forms of hegemony of class, race or religion. However, once the political will is taken away and the other becomes subsumed, politically speaking, the other can be embraced, recovered and even idolised. This concept clearly builds on Rosaldo’s notion of ‘imperialist nostalgia’, which similarly ‘revolves around a paradox: a person kills somebody and then mourns his or her victim’ (Rosaldo, 1989: 108). Only then is the other no threat any more and one’s sovereignty remains secure. This is, of course, also reminiscent of Hegel’s master–slave relationship, in which a fight to the death between self and other creates the precondition for recognition: submission. For, to live, the weaker one has to submit to the other (Hegel, 1977). Indeed, this stage of the life and death struggle is elementary within Hegel’s phenomenology to attaining self-consciousness and self-certainty. In a historical sense this process has been played out most notably and systematically in colonisation. This remains an ongoing process, subjecting people, taking their sovereignty and then, once the coloniser or other form of hegemon is safe in his place, a revival of the traditions of the subjugated can be promoted as they do not pose a threat any more.

Whereas most theorists apply these concepts within a postcolonial setting where there seemingly exists a diametric opposition between the West and the rest, white settler culture versus indigenous other or European centre and Oriental periphery. However, it seems to me that this process operates on a variety of levels between those who hold power and those who have previously held it, and it does so not necessarily in open violence, but in hidden, subliminal actions. In Malaysia the government’s efforts to ‘save’ Kelantanese arts as an imagined traditional Malay artistic expression can be read through this prism of imperialist nostalgia. Politically, it is a cause célèbre for the UMNO urban elite in opposition to a rural Islamist (PAS) regime in Kelantan. As I have shown, political Islam as proclaimed by the government programmes attempts to reconcile Islam and modernity. In this case the effort to save arts is an attempt to retain Malayness rooted in traditional arts and culture, which are quickly diminishing in the urban heartlands. The rural hinterland therefore is to be retained as a cultural cache for the nostalgic imagination of the urban new middle classes.
More violent encounters, as Bowman shows, culminate in the emergence of the nation-state because state violence reaches new heights in ordering the social and political landscape:

With the emergence of such formations [of hegemony] the process of discursively reconfiguring the ‘violence’ of authority so that it no longer appears as violence as such is in large part completed; henceforth ‘constructive’ violence comes to be seen as pedagogy and conformity while repressive state violence appears as the legitimate expression of the ‘will of the people’ which is rendered necessary by the state’s responsibility to protect the citizenry it represents from the illegitimate violence of the peoples’ enemies (external enemies of the state, criminals, revolutionaries, mad persons, etc.) (Bowman, 2001: 31).

Thus, the state acquires the legitimacy to use violence by protecting what it itself has created. After the state creates a vision of itself, disseminates this vision through its institutions and makes it the norm of and for society, it can justify the use of violence to protect that very image.

It is in this context that the concept of politicide can be brought to bear in so far as it points towards structurally recurrent phenomena. In the case of Islam, submission is a key element of belief. From the outset the power relations between believer and God are set in stone. The believer has submitted to an omnipotent God, who has the power and capacity at all times to politicide others – all others, his own flock as much as if not more than those who subscribe to other faiths. Having this capacity also means that he has the capacity to love them all, as only he is the proprietor of sovereignty.

At a conference on the ‘Role of Islamic States in a Globalised World’, a Malaysian academic, Professor Abdul Aziz Bari of the Department of Public Law, International Islamic University Malaysia, said that there was ‘no need to import the notion of what is right from the Western perspective into the Muslim society [because in an] Islamic state sovereignty belonged to God’ (Bernama, 2007d). Thus, considerable trust is placed in state institutions to safeguard the correct interpretation of Islam and its laws, which is in effect an abrogation of the Muslim citizenry’s responsibilities and results in an objectified religion. Muslims in this respect abrogate the control and substance of Islam along with their responsibility. This is allowed to happen not just in the light of, but because of, the quiescence of the people.

Under such circumstances, without a reflexive engagement with their own history and their own identity marker of Malay and Islam, there is little hope
for a political cosmopolitan project to take root any time soon. The Malay hybrid past may prove to be a future building block for such endeavours, but at present even tolerance is hard to come by. Any economic downturn will exacerbate intra- and inter-ethnic tensions and could bring the Malaysian multicultural model to breaking point.

Notes

1 Some political and social commentators have interpreted the March 2008 election results, in which the opposition coalition of PAS, DAP and PKR under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim won control over five states and diminished the ruling coalition’s 2/3 majority, as opening up a significant new political space. However, I am pessimistic in this instance and would caution to see how things develop, especially the relationship with PAS, who very early after taking control in the state of Perak proposed that alcohol be banned in the state, thus rather than opening space, curtailing it even more and in a more encompassing and totalizing way. Their proposals were subsequently quashed by other coalition members.

2 Sarawak enjoys a little more freedom, being in control of its own immigration affairs. Both Sabah and Sarawak have intricate and long-standing cross-border ties with Indonesian provinces across the border and much migration and trade continues, much of it uncontrolled and not policed due to the vast and complicated terrain. So, there remain spaces the state does not and often does not want to control or sees as not worthwhile and important to control. My point here is simply to show that regions at the periphery are brought into the orbit of the centre and controlled by the centre. When violence broke out in southern Thailand, Malaysia reacted by imposing travel restrictions and closing a hitherto relatively open border. When I travelled across the border in 2006, police checkpoints were in place on the Malaysian side even before entering the border area, to restrict cross-border movements.

3 Mandal sees tranethnic solidarities as ‘a variety of efforts whereby Malaysians actively participate in society without respect to ethnic background and by rejecting primordial notions of ethnicity’ (Mandal, 2004: 50).

4 See footnote 1.

5 Wertheim wrote about Indonesia, the largest Islamic country in the world, yet as he observed, ‘The attitudes of the Moslem community (the ummat Islam) in that country are typically of a minority group’ (Wertheim, 1980b: 1). Especially within the Indonesian Muslim community, divisions left the santri (devout Muslim) in a ‘majority with minority complex’ feeling, being disadvantaged in
national politics vis-à-vis the *abangan* (nominal Muslims) (Azyumardi Azra, 2006: 201).

6 A similar argument is made by Akbarzadeh about Central Asian countries like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and more explicitly Tajikistan. The elite has used Islam, and at the same time curtails any dissent or challenge to their authority (Akbarzadeh, 1997: 358).

7 Daniels points out that Muslim festivities that take place at mosques exclude non-Muslims, which means that Muslim festivals in general tend to be excluded from the otherwise inter-religious and communal festival cycle (Daniels, 2005: 167).

8 In the Bible it is Isaac who is to be sacrificed.

9 Daniels goes as far as to argue that ‘open-houses [are] models of and for (Geertz) Malaysia’s multicultural philosophy’ (Daniels, 2005: 174).

10 A Hadith is a saying attributed to Muhammad; the strength of a Hadith is measured according to the reliability of its chain of transmission. The main categories for a Hadiths are sound, weak and fabricated. Originally transmitted as oral traditions, Hadith were collected and collated around 200 years after Muhammad’s death.

11 Also see Baxstrom (2008), who has written an excellent account of life in Brickfields, a suburb of Kuala Lumpur, and describes a range of tactics and what he calls ‘ambivalent encounters’ between the state and people at the margins.

12 The graduated sovereignty concept is reminiscent of the millet system of graduated citizenship or subjecthood in the late Ottoman empire in Jerusalem (Margalit, 1991).

13 Saeed and Saeed confirm that ‘Muslims are prosecuted and persecuted more often than their non-Muslim counterparts because of beliefs they hold or decline to hold’ (2004: 127–128).
8. Conclusion

The rain has subsided and it is getting dark outside the little restaurant. Faris needs to leave; he’s meeting some friends in the city for drinks.

He recaps and says that, ‘What we need is for people to wake up and take a stand. I know that the economy is ok and everyone just wants to enjoy themselves now, not rock the boat. But as long as the silent majority is quiet, they are letting the extremists do the talking.’ He goes on to assure me that the situation is not as dire as he may have made it out to be. In his neighbourhood there is no problem between people, he has childhood friends who are Malay, Chinese and Indian and in the kampung he grew up in people live side by side, without problems. There is little in the way of conflict he has to report in the everyday lives of people.

The political debates and politicised antics of extremism, Malay and Islamic, threaten the social fabric in so far as they are gnawing away at everyday practices and interactions by creating and enforcing divisions where there are none or few. Seeing the groups of students at tables around us, huddled together in a Chinese group speaking Hokkien, three Malay groups speaking Malay, two Tamils speaking Tamil and one group made up of Chinese and Tamils conversing in English and Malay, brings into sharp focus the challenges posed by segregatory politics.

Malayness and Islam remain the primary identity markers for Muslim Malays in Malaysia. I have traced the role they play for identity formation and its articulation in contemporary Malaysia. Three main actors have emerged from the preceding chapters that are vying for control and influence over Islam and Malayness. They are (1) the state in all its guises, and (2) reactionary and (3) progressive civil society actors. Sometimes the actors work together or against each other in a complex series of tussles over the
future of Malaysia. I have identified the arts as one key battleground for these forces. Another is the Islamic space that is continually being renegotiated by those intent on making Malaysia more Islamic and by those aiming to maintain a secular constitutional space vis-à-vis an increasingly Islamised society and state. I have defined and employed Islamicity as both a form of discourse and an Islamic space that is occupied and represented by those who acquire Islamic prestige and avoided by those who occupy a liminal existence within and outside of this Islamic space. The previous chapter drew on earlier debates about Malayness and Islam to show how the universalising traditions of both have been silenced in favour of an exclusionary identity politics culminating in what I call the politicide of Malays.

Although identities are complicated, fractured and ambiguous, people often adhere to, perform and embody them as essentialised and absolute. The colonial legacy looms large over especially Malay Muslim identities and their codification in the constitutional and Islamic (Syariah) legal frameworks. The postcolonial Malaysian state has proliferated identity categories rather than loosening and undoing them. It is no surprise then that the state, when it does want to unwind some or create universalising ones (Islam hadhari, bangsa Malaysia), is incapable of doing so.

I have argued that cosmopolitanism was a necessity for early notions of Malayness and therefore cannot be unearthed now. There is no easy way back to the premodern past of fluid identities. However, this heritage is important to remember and it can be argued that some of it survives in an adaptive and innovative fashion, such as adat perpatih in Negeri Sembilan (Peletz, 1988). The Malaysian constitution guarantees Malayness an elevated status of supremacy. The Syariah courts have carved out a competing legal system for Muslims, to which mostly the poor and politically weak are subject. I have shown that Islam is being used as a smokescreen for political control in Malaysia. The process, which has sped up and intensified the Islamisation of society and its laws, is not just the work of the government apparatus and its attached bureaucracies. Elements of civil society have abetted, encouraged and in many cases initiated further pushes to Islamise. I have shown how some of these reactionary civil society groups operate and what drives them in chapter 4. Furthermore, Islam in Malaysia has been used to provide Malayness with an exclusionary identifier. These developments betray their own histories. Both have been closed off in Malaysia to protect Muslim Malay identity as an exclusionary identity. This is what retains the deep fault lines in the self–other identification and make new negotiations
on the social contract and an exchange in Maussian terms very difficult if not impossible.

The elite has a vested interest in not allowing this to happen, because it would weaken its hold on the economy, which is largely based on government monies. Thus, the elite, in all its forms, is using Malayness as a constitutional special position to make Malayness superior, whilst maintaining a (colonial) divide and rule mentality between ethnic factions. All the while this system is diminishing Malay popular sovereignty by policing Islam. With Malays confined in Islam, there is no escape for especially the urban poor who are the most heavily policed as I have shown. However, I have also pointed out that this system is not all consuming and sites of resistance and contestation remain as chapter 4 and 5 have shown. Even within the government progressive voices are making themselves heard who are occasionally questioning the racial-cum-religious identity straight jacket. I have shown that Muslims continue to celebrate and practise heterodoxy, even though I contend that this does not amount to reason for hope in terms of political and social change.

This is so because the mass media are controlled by the very parties whose raison d'être remains communal politics: the political elite. They thrive on racial division for their own, and by extension the nation's politics. The current impasse in Malaysia is based on the belief that Malayness and Islam are welded together and leaving one means leaving the other. This breeds suspicion and draws boundaries between people based on involuntary associations – those they cannot leave: their religious and racial identities. In Postethnic America Hollinger argues for a more flexible, cosmopolitan kind of identity:

A postethic perspective favors voluntary over involuntary affiliations, balances an appreciation for communities of descent with a determination to make room for new communities, and promotes solidarities of wide scope that incorporate people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds (Hollinger, 1995: 3).

Built on cosmopolitan ideals of voluntary affiliations and their flexible and changing nature, and on the individual, rather than racial/ethnic/religious communities, this view makes room for the individual and his or her rights as well as communities and their values and rules. The tension between these two forces is being debated in former settler colonies such as Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand.

However, Malaysia, with its failing attempts at multiculturalism, be they bangsa Malaysia, Islam hadhari, global Malays or cosmopolitan Melayu baru,
has a long way to go before it can tackle these topics in earnest. The first step must be an end to all forms of politicide against the majority and the minorities, in order to free the individual from the tyranny of racial-cum-religious politics and return agency to the individual. This includes allowing all individuals, especially Malays, to choose their religion. This is an explosive issue as I have shown throughout this book. However, it is also the key to move Malaysia beyond a debilitating identity crisis. With more individuals empowered to change, change may happen. Of course, one must be aware that this change can go in many different directions, which is why a new social contract has to be struck between the citizen and the state in order to provide mechanisms of recognition, toleration and, finally, negotiation for the future. For transethnic solidarity (Mandal, 2004) or intercultural exchange (Bharucha, 1993; 2000) to take root, develop and be fruitfully deployed, there has to be self-reflection, which hopefully will open spaces to negotiate equally. These prerequisite processes are dependent on a conducive environment and an active avant-garde to take the first steps. I have drawn attention to the arts, liberal segments of civil society and students as actors involved in this process and also to the limitations they face. At present these spaces are still contracting, even though there are moments of disorder and even revolt that can force open crevices. However, as the spaces contract they have a tendency to pull people, ideas and hope down with them into an exclusionary mindset. This process has to be reversed.
Appendices

Appendix 1: Article 11 of the Malaysian federal constitution

11.

(1) Every person has the right to profess and practise his religion and, subject to Clause (4), to propagate it.

(2) No person shall be compelled to pay any tax the proceeds of which are specially allocated in whole or in part for the purposes of a religion other than his own.

(3) Every religious group has the right—

(a) to manage its own religious affairs;

(b) to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes; and

(c) to acquire and own property and hold and administer it in accordance with law.

(4) State law and in respect of the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur, Labuan and Putrajaya, federal law may control or restrict the propagation of any religious doctrine or belief among persons professing the religion of Islam.

(5) This Article does not authorize any act contrary to any general law relating to public order, public health or morality (Malaysia, 2006 [1957]).
Appendix 2: FORKAD pamphlet

This pamphlet outlines the reasons why conservative Muslim civil society should confront the issue of apostasy in Malaysia and do so with vigour. FORKAD details its reading of the Lina Joy case and what it believes needs to be done in response:

**ISLAM DIHINA! UMMAT ISLAM DICABAR...!**

*Golongan Kuffar Sudah Berani Mengajak Anak-Anak Kita Meninggalkan Agidah Islam*

*Yang Mereka Pegang...*

*Syariat Islam Sudah Dinafikan & Golongan Kuffar Sudah Berani Mengajak Ummat Islam Cara Untuk Mengamalkan Islam Mengikut Kehendak & Cara Mereka...!!*

**APAT TINDAKAN KITA?**


Program selanjutnya untuk ularan & pelan tindakan akan didalakan pada:

1. Ahad 23-Julai 2006: 08.00pg di Mapax Wilayah Persidangan Kuala Lumpur

Himpunan Sejuta Umat Islam
Mempertahankan Agidah & Keislaman Islam

2. Aktiviti bermasyarakat akan dimulakan dari semua lembaga melalui email pada: Siti berlangganan dengan group "FRONT BERNIHAK ANTI MURAD" dengan menghantar email lehas kepada tema: subscribe@charmogroup.com

Kehadiran & keberadaan untuk ialah menjadi kepercayaan kepada seluruh ummat Islam. Siti laksukan usaha untuk terus menyemak maklumat yang anda dapat kepada sekurang-kurangnya, bermakna sejala serta seluruh ummat Islam di Malaysia memastikan agama Allah ini tetap terpelihara dan dilaksanakan oleh ummatnya. Kegiatan kita bertindak adalah kegagalan untuk kita menyelamatkan Agidah & Iman generasi kita yang meninggal.

**MUQADDIMAH**

Bara ulama berperasa mengatakan bahwa orang yang murad wajib dibunuh.

Firmans Allah: "Belangbapao yang murad di antara kausi daripada agama lain, lalu dia mati dalam kekalahan, maka mereka ilahah yang si-his amalaninya di dunia dan akhirah, dan mereka ilahah penghuni neraka, mereka kekal di dunia." (An-Noor, ayt 217)

Daripada Ibn Mas’ud’ dan ‘Aliyah, Nabi s.a.w. bersabda: Tidak halal darjah sesetengah muslim selain daripada tiga sebab berkenaan selepas menjadi mahaan, membunuh orang lain tanpa hak dan mengasingkan diri dari jemaah serta meninggalkan agama (murad).

(Riwayat al-Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Dawud di)

"Sesalia yang manakar agama lain (murad), maka hendaklah lanya dibunuh" (Riwayat al-Bukhari, dan Abu Dawud)

Dalam sejara lampau, kes Natsiah, seorang wanita Belanda yang memeluk Islam dan berkuantin dengan Mahkor Adail telah dipaksa oleh ibu bapanya keluar dari Islam (Murad) dan menggunakan mahkorah British di Singapore untuk dibawa ke Belanda.


*SAUDARI AZLINA JAILANI @ LINA JOY?*


menyatakan sebab pertukuran kepada agama Islam telah dilakukan, dengan kad Pengenalannya itu, dan terletak pada 2014.
3. Ayat bermamain Jilani bin Shoffd dan ibu bermamain Khatun bin Al Omari, keduaanya bekerja di Indonesia, dan menggambil hidayah sebagai Muslim.

FAKTA KES
1. Selesa berbebas dengan seorang Indra Kistin, beliau memohon untuk pendaftaran perwakilan, tetapi tidak dibenarkan sebab di dalam Kad Pengenalannya masih terdapat beragama Islam wilayah beliau berjaya memenangkan nama dalam kepentingan Uma Jo.
3. Pemohonan ditolak oleh JPN disebabkan tidak pernah dari Mohamad Syahid yang menyatakan beliau keluar Islam.
4. Mohamad Syahid mengatakan pada undang-undang Islam yang tidak memberlakukan (KENAIZAAKUN) aturan umum Muslim kekaran di Islam (Murid), dan "Jil Tiuk Agama" (Kurang) seperti yang dikecakai oleh JPN tidak diterima.
7. Kes diadakan oleh Ulama (2 Muslim & 1 non-Muslim). Haji Hamee Tun Fauz, Dato' Alouddin & Dato' Richard pada dasarnya berpendapat yang sama menyatakan tindakan kedua mahkamah terdahulu... HINGGAALAT Majlis Peguam yang dikeluarkan oleh Peguam Malaysia terus. Sawar dan beberapa orang lain, yang hanya menjadi bimbingan peguam pemerintah berasaskan lagi NGO yang menyokong Uma Jo meminta untuk menambah hujah & berjaya, dan DIKENAIKAN oleh mahkamah yang terbabat.
8. Itu adalah permulaan ini ini dibahasa yang mana tidak pernah dalam ejoroh perundangan negara pemeberi dibenarkan beliau dalam Mahkamah.
9. Hujah yang dibawa oleh bimbingan peguam pemerintah yang dikeluarkan oleh Majlis Peguam tersebut melalui itu sebenar ke berkenaan daripada penghujatan itu & kuasa Mohamad Syahid TETAP membawa hujah bahwa Uma Jo adalah benar untuk mempraktikkan kepercayaannya agama bahaya & dilindungi oleh perundangan sebagai nas individu seperti yang terkandung di dalam Artikel 11 Perlembagaan Persekutuan.
10. Ia Mohamad Syahid sangat penerima yang di putuskan oleh mahkamah terhutul sudah tidak relevan lagi pada hujah Majlis Peguam, dan itu yang kebebasan mati individual yang diperlukan oleh Kumpulan Artikel 11 & IJC diadakan itu utama kita di Mahkamah Persekutuan.
11. Itu yang diperlukan oleh kesebelas NGO non-Muslim atas kursus Kumpulan Artikel 11 & Inter-Racial Commission (IRC) adalah untuk menentukan perwakilan "person" (individu) yang terkandung dalam Artikel 11 tersebut untuk menunjuk kepada individu per se (secara peribadi), bukan lagi kumpulan atau agama secara umumnya.
12. Ini adalah kejadian dalam sejarah Malaysia attempt yang sebenarnya berbeza kue bianya yang diadakan untuk mengurangkan keterperangan antara Islam mengikut kefahaman peribadi, sesuatu yang perlu dilakukan ini, dan mengahak hak Islam sebagai agama untuk mengikutkan umatnya mempraktikkan amalan & syariat Islam seperti yang terkandung dalam undang-undang Islam.

IMPLIKASI DARI DEFINISI "INDIVIDU"
Nampak dengan terlalu kecil, tetapi implikasinya melimpah buah perikinan. Itu beyond migration...!
1. Perlu, orang Islam dianuruhkan meningkatkan Islam pada bila-bila masa tadih. dilakukan mengikut kefahaman individu sendiri tanpa ada undang-undang Islam yang boleh menganggapnya:
   - Orang Islam boleh keluar-makub Islam pada bila-bila masa, kebebasan mati (freedom of choice).
   - Islam boleh dianuruhkan mengikut kefahaman sendiri sesuatu orang (Individu Interpretation), tanpa terkait pada sebarang faham atau muatan.
   - Kesahalan syariah oleh seorang Muslim tidak boleh diambil tindakan disebabkan perundangan Syariah sudah tidak relevan, sebagai contoh:
      a. Salah boleh dilakukan mengikut nasihat mengikut rakan solah yang dihantar sendiri, iaitu dalam Radhaman boleh ditinggal apabila membuat deklarasi "bukan Islam" pada bukan itu tanpa boleh dimitr tindakan.
      b. Kesahalan zina, minum orang, khatad, mengina Islam, dan sebagainya semuanya tidak akan mengganggu keterperangan terbuka yang biasa tajak...!
      c. Semua badan-badan Islam tidak relevan lagi dalam perundangan semasa, sebaik semua individu bebas.
sepenuhnya di dalam perlembagaan.


4. Kemampu, kanak-kanak apabila masuk umur 18 tahun, ibu bapa akan terus hidup untuk menetapkan agama dan tawanan mereka, dan tindakan bencin diambil atas ibu bapa yang meraka anak mereka mengzaman islam.


6. Kes Lina Joy adalah attempt yang akan membayar perlawanan mereka yang ada dan dibentuk kepada "beyond our motivation" yang mana ia secara langsung mencabar undang-undang Syariah oleh Mahkamah Syariah di kabinet 121(A), yang akan mungkin dianggap oleh rakyat di bahkan pada Al Qur'an & Al Sunnah.


6. Kes Lina Joy adalah attempt yang akan membayar perlawanan mereka yang ada dan dibentuk kepada "beyond our motivation" yang mana ia secara langsung mencabar undang-undang Syariah oleh Mahkamah Syariah di kabinet 121(A), yang akan mungkin dianggap oleh rakyat di bahkan pada Al Qur'an & Al Sunnah.


11. Wala dalam perbuatan antarabangsa "Dahlan Beckett untuk Keberadaan Agama" yang bersengkalan di Amerika bercakap menyatakan penegakan & peraturan yang menghendaki kebalian 100% pada individu tanpa pansan, dan membentukkan poser & kes study yang panjang lebar sebelum persidangan tersebut kepada hakim-hakim terlatih tersebut untuk membela mereka pada tahap kekelah yang amat fering.

12. Datang utama pihak yang menembak Lina Joy adalah wakil Bar Council yang presiden Majlis Pemugutan (Majlis Pemugutan Sinaran) telah mengambil partisan stand untuk memberi hujah yang menycahog tindakan Lina Joy tersebut tanpa mendapat resu dari Bar Council members. Malek sendiri berpendapat agar seorang Muslim diberkan untuk menurut agama mereka kepada apa jau pilihan mereka...

13. Suatu yang amat menyedihkan kerana tidak ada wakil daripada perbuatan Islam yang bengkak banyak di Malaysia, kecuali kedua wakil NGO & Peratuan Peguam Muslim Malaysia sahaja yang bercakap menpantauan hujah. Juga ada kederaan oleh organisasi agama untuk datang dan bercakap pada hari tersebut mewakil Islam...

14. Suatu faktuk yang berani & menghina yang dipetikan oleh Peguambebas phair Lina Joy di dalam mengahadi kes itu menyebut... "It is time that we must knock into the heads of Malaysia that our country Malaysia is never been on Islamic country. Strong message must be thrown to Muslim to tell them that in Malaysia Islam is just a subordinate to constitution..."

TINDAKAN SEGERA

Kes Ini hanya mempunyai tempoh 3 minggu untuk dipetikkan di Mahkamah Persekutuan Putrajaya pada 22 Julai 2006 (Delhi poling awal) maka tindakan segera telah dipetikkan untuk ditangani oleh segerap loyalis masyarakat Islam:


   * Ini secara langsung menuntutkan Majlis Peguam...
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2. Suatu website diwujudkan segera untuk memperlihatkan kebijakan kepada kepolisian. (www.defenders Arbitrary.net), untuk memberi tahu rakyat tindakan kebijakan dan menyampaikan setiap keputusan perundangan yang baik dimulai.


5. Kes ini ada kes yang menjadi perhatian dunia, sedangkali di Malaysia ini disokong oleh pihak media tempatan atas alasan faktor kesekalan dan sebagainya, kecuali kenyataan yang terkandung di dalam bernama.com.my, dan beberapa media yang bukan berbahasa Melayu yang menyokong sokongan ke atas Lina Joy.

6. Umat islam di Malaysia dari atas juga kerahaman politik dan bangga perlu sedar & disadarkan tentang apa yang sedang berlaku dan untuk merahasiakan islam ummat islam dan perjuangan islam di Malaysia pada masa hadapan.


6. Edaran artikel & risalah akan diadakan kekelah negara untuk menyokong umat Islam tentang perubahan ini dalam bentuk tertulis, dalam bentuk yang mudah difahami kepada seluruh masyarakat Malaysia.


8. Umat juga akan diadakan untuk menyokong pemimpin- pemimpin negara serta Majlis Raja-Raja. Tindakan ini tidak diperlakukan di Siti Fadilah et al, serta meminta dengan kusus yang ada pada tangan mereka untuk berusaha menyokong ummat Islam dari berurusan.

9. Seluruh badan serta organisasi & individu mesti menggunakan setiap kekuatan yang ada untuk mempengaruhi serta menyokong masyarakat tentang isu ini, serta meminta masyarakat untuk mencuba sedaya mungkin mempengaruhi pihak yang terlibat untuk memastikan keputusan benar kepada masyarakat.

Bibliographical note: Malaysian Malay and Chinese names have been kept in their full order starting with their first name; European, Europeanised and Arabic names have been ordered according to last name.


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