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Book Reviews

Proper Islamic consumption: Shopping among the Malays in modern Malaysia. By Johan Fischer. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) Press, 2008, pp. 258. ISBN: 978-87-7694-031-7 (Hardcover); 978-87-7694-032-4 (Paperback)

Reviewer: Omar Altalib, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email: omar_altalib@hotmail.com

The book under review is Johan Fischer's study of fourteen adults from ten Malay families living in the Taman Tun Dr. Ismail neighbourhood of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Fischer mainly argues the following points: consumption is not simply a matter of individual choice, but involves government interference; Islamic discourse can end up being contradictory and disputed when implemented in daily life; and that Islam is used to promote capitalism in Malaysia.

The book fills a void in the literature when it comes to linking consumption and religion. Fischer has written a convincing piece that shows how Islam shapes consumption behaviour of the middle-class Malays. The *ḥalālisation* process he refers to encompasses such things as eating properly slaughtered meat, buying modest clothing, and living a lifestyle of thrift, moderation, and piety. The book details how the Malaysian government has encouraged Muslims to shop. The government has created a variety of Islamic institutions such as JAKIM (the Islamic Development Department) that certifies certain food as *ḥalāl* which then leads Malay/Muslims to buy government-certified food. Fischer also highlights the efforts of the Malaysian government to sell "patriotic" items: Proton cars (that are made in Malaysia), middle-class houses, and products found in shopping malls that are produced in Malaysia.

The book also points to differences in the Malaysian Muslim community regarding what is Islamic behaviour and what is not. Fischer labels some Muslims as purists: those who will only buy *ḥalāl* food from a Muslim shopkeeper who obtains his supplies from Muslim owned businesses. Others he labels as pragmatists: those Muslims who have interest bearing checking accounts rather than accounts in Islamic banks, those who buy their clothes from non-Muslims, and those who do not wear the traditional Malay women's dress (*baju kurung*) and head-scarves *(tudung)*.

The arguments that Fischer uses start to become muddy when discussing matters other than *ḥalāl* food, traditional clothes, and Islamic banking. He points out that some Malays purchase Malaysian-made cars, and others purchase Mercedes-Benzes and BMWs. It is not clear how this relates to proper Islamic consumption. He does, however, point out that avoiding extravagance is an Islamic value, but there does not seem to be a convincing explanation of how buying a foreign car is necessarily more excessive and materialistic than buying a locally made car.

There have been discussions of Islamization in Malaysia and the rest of the Muslim world. Fischer chooses to use the term *ḥalālisation*, without explaining clearly why it is more useful than the term Islamization. Furthermore, he gives the impression that using the term *ḥalālisation* is a problem for two reasons: One, it is an opportunistic ploy by the government to control people's consumption. Second, middle-class Malays are ambivalent about it, and thus it is not truly reflected in people's behaviour. In fact, he gives the impression that it is the more extremist Muslims who take *ḥalālisation* seriously, while the Muslim majority is just as likely to ignore Islamic consumption as it is to endorse it. Fischer makes statements like the following that are not substantiated: "Thus, while these Malays articulate or stage a fascination with and a modeling of the pious lifestyle of the Prophet as described in the *ḥadīth*, the embodiment of the Islamic way of life is unattainable and almost impossible to put into practice" (p.209).

Fischer does a good job of pointing out a number of social problems in Malaysia. One is the issue of "loitering youth" (*budaya lepak*), who are essentially teenage shopping mall-goers that waste

their time hanging out in shopping centres. Another issue is the influence of foreign music on Malaysian teens, showing up in the form of a "Black Metal Cult" of youth who allegedly engaged in drinking blood and taking illegal drugs. Another is the corrupting influence of television on children, and the tendency of many magazines targeted towards females that promote immodest clothing and indecent behaviour (such as flirting and boyfriend/girlfriend relationships).

These social problems notwithstanding, it is still not clear whether these social problems are a sign that Islamic consumption is not working, or that Islamic consumption will increase in response to these problems. The impression is that the government is in a bind: it wants Malaysians to behave properly (i.e., avoid drugs and become productive) while at the same time it wants Malaysians to buy more products and behave like the consumption-oriented middle classes of Europe and America. Fischer seems to imply that these contradictions are not sustainable, and thus Malaysia will eventually become less Islamic and more 'Western' especially in terms of the practices of the middle class.

The sections dealing with globalization highlight how Malaysia is being affected by the world economy. Malaysia is experiencing too much consumerism, Malay culture is dying out, Malays are spending more than saving, and the Malaysian government is increasing its control over people. Fischer gives the impression that although some Muslims are trying to resist some of these trends, globalization will win and Islam will lose. In other words, according to the informants this book relied upon, Islam is either irrelevant (it has nothing to say about globalization) or it is trying to solve the problems (by *ḥalālisation*) but it is not succeeding. *Ḥalālisation*, in their view, boils down to rejecting products made by Indian and Chinese Malaysians.

This book picks up on an important phenomenon occurring throughout the Muslim world, namely, a return to Islamic values and practices. Malaysia has been a leading nation when it comes to establishing Islamic banks, creating a market for clean and healthy food, and promoting a lifestyle that is both tolerant, on the one hand, and faithful to Islam, on the other. Fischer has succeeded in describing

the challenges facing the Malay middle class, including the challenge of being traditional and modern at the same time. He points out, for example, that Muslim women choose to wear veils (a traditional practice) but the veils are fashionable and trendy (a modern disposition). Malays are helpful and kind towards their non-Muslim neighbours, but they also make sure to pray in the neighbourhood mosque, and participate with non-Muslims in Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu festivities. A Malay Muslim middle-class condemns terrorism, and also condemns wastefulness. At the same time, he refuses to eat pork and watches movies that avoid sex and filthy language.

After reading the book, one gets the impression that it is mostly description and not so much analysis. It gets bogged down in seemingly tangential discussions about crime, Malay migration from village to city, ethnic differences between Malays and Chinese and Indians, and parenting issues. Nevertheless, it correctly points out the hazards of the 'nationalization' of Islam. In other words, when the government becomes the spokesperson, representative, and controller of what is Islamic, it does so to the eventual detriment of Islam. If Islam is associated with what the Malaysian government says or does, then it is perceived as merely a tool that can be used and abused. Disabusing Islam from the politics of the Malaysian government leads to a healthier and more successful process of *halālisation*.

Furthermore, as Fischer correctly points out, if *ḥalālness* is equated with "Malayness" then it is perceived as a narrow, self-serving, ethnocentric effort. If, however, *ḥalālisation* is part of the larger movement toward organic food, better treatment of animals, environmental consciousness, and the striving for honesty in labelling and transparency in corporate practices, then it benefits all.