



# DIIS WORKING PAPER

Markets for Peace?

## **'CAST THE NET WIDER'**

HOW A VISION OF GLOBAL HALAL MARKETS IS  
OVERCOMING NETWORK ENVY

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The aim of the interdisciplinary research network was to gain a better understanding of the role and significance of informal economic networks on political processes. The research network explored the dynamics of such networks; national, regional and international attempts to regulate them; and the ways in which informal economic network activities are or are not converted into political influence. The network received funding from the Danish Social Science Research Council (FSE) for three workshops during 2007-2008 with an additional PhD workshop partly funded by the Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS).

The first workshop dealt with theoretical and methodological aspects of network/chain-analysis. The second workshop looked into the ways in which informal processes have been ignored, controlled and regulated by states and other public authorities'. The third workshop, which was a combined network workshop and PhD seminar, explored conceptualisations of the relationship between informal economic processes/networks and fields of politics.

Presently a two volume book is under preparation, in which the working papers published in this series will all feature with some changes anticipated, edited by Lars Buur, Dennis Rodgers, Finn Stepputat and Christian Højbjerg.

**List of available papers:**

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## Abstract

This paper explores Malaysia's bid to become the world leader in rapidly expanding *halal* (lawful or permitted) markets on a global scale. Over the last three decades, a powerful state nationalism has emerged, represented by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the dominant political party in Malaysia. The state has effectively certified, standardised and bureaucratised Malaysian halal production, trade and consumption. Now, the vision is to export this model, and for that purpose the network as a strategic metaphor is being evoked to signify connectedness and prescriptions of organisation *vis-à-vis* more deep-rooted networks. Building on empirical material from research in Malaysia and Britain, I shall show how networks are understood and practised in a metaphorical sense.

## Introduction

On 16 August 2004, Malaysia's Prime Minister, Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi, officially launched the first Malaysia International Halal Showcase (MIHAS) in the capital, Kuala Lumpur. The title of the Prime Minister's speech was Window to the Global Halal Network ([www.pmo.gov.my](http://www.pmo.gov.my)). He argued that establishing Malaysia as a 'global halal hub' was a major priority for the government, and that MIHAS was the largest halal trade fair to be held anywhere in the world. Badawi asserted that halal products are increasingly being recognised by Muslims as well as non-Muslims globally as clean and safe in an era of disease and 'health disasters' due to 'unhealthy practices'. The UK in particular was presented as being a highly lucrative market for halal.

Badawi stressed that the vast majority of the population in Muslim Malaysia consumes halal food on a daily basis. The self-confidence of this statement can be ascribed to the fact that the state in Malaysia has systematically certified, standardised and bureaucratised halal production, trade and consumption since the early 1980s. In fact, Badawi declared that most current estimates of the potential of the global market for halal food, as well as other Islamic products and services, 'considerably underestimated' the situation.<sup>1</sup> MIHAS was not only a showcase of Malaysia's halal food sector, but also for sectors such as Islamic insurance, travel, fashion, publishing, information technology and multimedia. In the eyes of the Prime Minister, all this testified to Malaysia's ability to demonstrate its edge in exploring fresh and bold new areas for the Muslim *ummah* (community of Muslims). Finally, Badawi expressed hope that MIHAS would develop into a full-fledged market with the potential to herald a new era in Islamic trade – an era not seen since the great days when Islamic trade routes used to stretch across the world from East to West. In any case, MIHAS has become a recurrent network event, and in a subsequent section I discuss participant observation carried out at MIHAS 2006 that was themed as Networking, Consolidating and Energising. Globally, halal network events such as MIHAS have multiplied within the last few years.

Network is a keyword (Williams 1976) in Malaysia's halal fantasy. However, network seems to retain a ubiquitous, but implicit presence in this fantasy. In a way, such a fantasy can be seen to constitute our desire and to provide its coordinates (Zizek 1997: 7). In essence, this is a fantasy about working out how modern halal understandings and practices can help Malaysia reclaim its

<sup>1</sup> A Canadian government study has shown that the global halal trade annually amounts to \$150 billion, and that it is growing among the world's approximately 1.3 billion Muslims ([http://ats-sea.agr.gc.ca/asean/4282\\_e.htm](http://ats-sea.agr.gc.ca/asean/4282_e.htm) accessed 3.2.08).

rightful position in a world where cultural and economic success is measured according to a nation's performance of and in networks.

Indeed, all the coordinates seem to be there in the Prime Minister's halal fantasy: the desires of Badawi, who took office after the charismatic and outspoken Mahathir Mohamad in 2003, to promote halal as part of what I shall call state nationalism in Malaysia represented by UMNO; to proliferate halal globally as a healthy, pure, ethical, religious and modern alternative in an era of food scares; the strategic targeting of the UK, Malaysia's former coloniser, and the European market – home to a large, expanding and relatively wealthy Muslim population; Malaysia as a country where halal has become a legitimate taste and a kind of national cuisine or model standardised by the state; halal benefits for the *ummah* reconceptualised as ethical Muslim producers, traders and consumers; and the revival of the golden past of Islamic trade networks.

All these halal issues actually create the possibility of networks; they are designs for a Network form (Riles 2000: 170). Infused with Castells's ideas about network society and hubs,<sup>2</sup> the powerful state nationalist discourse imagines Malaysia as a key player in the future of halal. In the broader perspective, network society and ICT (Information and Communication Technology) have effected significant shifts in Malaysia's political and economic positioning from the 1990s onwards, most notably in setting up a zone stretching southwards from Kuala Lumpur for "high tech" development to turn the nation's main metropolitan area into a "node" or "hub" in transnational social and economic networks (Bunnell 2004: 144).

In the Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010, *Together Towards Excellence, Glory and Distinction* (Economic Planning Unit 2006), which outlines the country's development strategy, use of the terms network and networking is ubiquitous. Strategically, these terms are employed to modify a wide range of priority areas of the UMNO-led government, such as communications, research, the global, infrastructure, logistics, education, institutions, bioinformatics, competition, roads, utilities, highways, care, hospitals and ICT, as well as internationalisation.

In 1991, Mahathir unveiled Vision 2020, imagining Malaysia as a fully developed nation. The network as strategic metaphor is used to promote halal as a flagship of this sort of modern state

<sup>2</sup> The importance of hubs is to produce the strategic functions of the network, i.e. 'Some places are exchangers, communication hubs playing a role of coordination for the smooth interaction of all the elements integrated into the network (Castells 2000: 443).

nationalist discourse. In this way, the existence of networks is good in itself. Riles (2000: 174) writes that ‘No one, it would seem, could possibly be against networks...for the Network is simply a technical device for doing what one is already doing, only in a more efficient, principled, and sophisticated way.’

In this paper, I shall address the following research question: *how does the Malaysian state use the network as a strategic metaphor to promote a halal vision on a global scale?* While the central focus is on network as performance in this halal vision, I shall also consider how this discourse is understood and practised among Malays living in London. In other words, I will address how these Malays, who are time and again targeted by the state’s nationalism as patriotic entrepreneurs, networkers or an idealised diaspora, are responding to the halal network vision.

The quotation that forms part of the heading of this paper comes from Badawi’s opening speech held at MIHAS in 2006. Badawi asserted that in 2006 MIHAS has ‘cast the net wider’, as a long list of companies and countries were represented at MIHAS. This statement coincided with UMNO’s 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, and to ‘cast the net wider’ signified the fusion of state nationalism, halal and networking as a strategic metaphor.

## A note on methodology

The fieldwork for this study can be said to be a multi-sited ethnography involving Kuala Lumpur and London, as these figure prominently as hubs in state nationalist network fantasies.<sup>3</sup> I conducted fieldwork for one month in Kuala Lumpur in connection with MIHAS 2006. Starting in 2005, I visited London on several occasions, e.g. in connection with The Halal Exhibition at the World Food Market held in November 2005. The extended period of fieldwork in London took place from July to December 2006, with one shorter visit in the spring of 2007.

My methodology rests first of all on an intention to follow the people (Marcus 1995: 106), i.e. descriptions of Malays who migrated from Kuala Lumpur to London and their migration narra-

<sup>3</sup> In Saskia Sassen’s book *Global Networks, Linked Cities*, the city-network nexus is explained as follows: a growing number of cities today play an increasingly important role in directly linking their national economies with global circuits. As cross-border transactions of all kinds grow, so do the networks binding particular configurations of cities (Sassen 2002: 2).

tives with special emphasis on understandings and practices of halal in networks and networking in these two locations. Of the Malaysian population of around 23 million, 65.1 per cent are indigenous Malays (virtually all Muslims) and tribal groups, also labelled *bumiputera* (literally, sons of the soil), 26 per cent are Chinese, and 7.7 per cent are Indians ([www.statistics.gov.my](http://www.statistics.gov.my)). According to the Malaysian High Commission in London (personal communication, 21 August 2006) there are about 55,000 Malaysian citizens in the UK.

The main motive for focusing on Malays in multiethnic London is that the state nationalist discourse on halal networks specifically identifies London as a hub. London is also home to a substantial number of Malays and Malaysian organisations such as UMNO, the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE) and the Malaysian Business Forum, as well as the Overseas Malaysian Executive Club. What is more, London is emerging as a global halal hub of production, trade and consumption.

Secondly, I endeavoured to ‘follow the thing’ by ‘tracing the circulation through different contexts of a manifestly material object of study’ (Marcus 1995: 106). During fieldwork in London, a great deal of time was spent in Malaysian halal restaurants, in shops selling halal products, and going shopping with Malay consumers.

Lastly, I made an effort to ‘follow the metaphor’ (Marcus 1995: 108). Consequently, tracing the circulation of network as a strategic metaphor in the state nationalist discourse and modes of thought guided the design of the research.

The initial stage of the research in London was quantitative in outlook. Informants were selected on the basis of a survey that covered about a hundred mainly Malay Muslim respondents. The design of the survey primarily served to specify migration trajectories, halal consumption patterns and knowledge about Malaysian state certification of halal and the vision of promoting halal globally. On the basis of the survey, fifteen Malay informants were selected for interviewing and participant observation. Moreover, participant observation and background interviews were carried out with halal producers and traders, Islamic organisations and food authorities. Lastly, magazines, pamphlets, newspapers, websites and e-mails provided me with valuable insights into the modern forms of networking involved in halal.



## Network as strategic metaphor

I explore how the Malaysian proliferation of halal gives rise to aspirations of Malay Muslim networks to signify the connectedness and prescriptions of organisations *vis-à-vis* more deep-rooted networks such as historical Islamic trade networks or Chinese networks. Castells (2000: 469) sets out to show how the new information technology paradigm provides the material basis for the expansion of the networking form in the entire social structure. Undoubtedly, networks such as business or production networks are more pervasive today in terms of advertising, production and consumption than ever before in history. Most of all, perhaps, the network metaphor has become a social imperative or strategic model of identification and emulation. Castells's and other similar theoretisations have become standard state and corporate reading in Malaysia and elsewhere.

The emergence of trade networks is dependent on consumer demand. Consequently, the focus on Malays in London is required in order to explore to what extent modern discourses of halal are filtering down to be translated into actual consumer practices. As part of a broader trend, the state nationalist discourse in Malaysia competes with a whole range of institutional and commercial discourses that all try to promote halal. Multinational companies such as McDonald's, Nestlé and Tesco are now targeting halal as a major market. In the eyes of the Malaysian state, these companies are already performing strategic networking on a global scale.

In the halal fantasy, network is brought into play as a metaphor through which technical systems (hubs/nodes/ICT) and bodily processes (health /purity/disciplining) are imagined and made to stand for each other (Otis 2001). This halal discourse works as a kind of tie of the state accompanied by a set of stories and associated discursive signals held in play (Mische and Harrison 1998: 703).

Inspired by Annelise Riles' ethnographic study of the participation of Fijian women in the United Nations' fourth global forum, I take the network to be a broader class of phenomena. While Riles discusses 'network' in terms of its idealised ability to generate knowledge and information, 'network' as a strategic metaphor in the state's nationalist halal vision is about generating income in a growing global Islamic market. I understand network to be 'a set of institutions, knowledge practices, and artefacts thereof that internally generate the effects of their own reality by reflecting on themselves' (Riles 2000: 3).

In ethnographic studies, the position of networks tends to have shifted from being a specific tool of methodology to become a ‘metaphorical device’ that identifies shifting contexts of social research (Knox et al. 2006: 125). Like this present study, these types of study regard the network as a cultural form in and through itself, and they focus on the art, aesthetics and performance of networking (Knox et al. 2006: 128). Malaysia’s network vision was first fully articulated in the new millennium. Forms of activities, discourses, stories and performances in certain times and places ‘become institutionalized, so that, rather than discourse arising from network structures, more enduring and institutional ties coalesce from storied networks’ (Knox et al. 2006: 129-130).

## Why halal networks?

Halal literally means ‘lawful’ or ‘permitted’. The Koran and the Sunna<sup>4</sup> exhort Muslims to eat the good and lawful that God has provided for them, but a number of conditions and prohibitions are in existence. Muslims are expressly forbidden from consuming carrion, spurting blood, pork, or foods that have been consecrated to any being other than God himself. These substances are *haram* and thus forbidden.

The lawfulness of meat depends on how it is obtained. Ritual slaughtering entails that the animal be killed in God’s name by making a fatal incision across the throat. In this process, blood should be drained as fully as possible. Another significant Islamic prohibition relates to wine and any other intoxicating drink or substance that is haram in any quantity or substance (Denny 2006: 279).

In the modern food industry, a number of requirements have taken effect, e.g. to avoid any substances that may be contaminated with porcine residues or alcohol such as gelatine, glycerine, emulsifiers, enzymes, flavours, and flavourings (Riaz and Chaudry 2004: 22-25). An example of this is the headline of an article in *The Guardian* (26 October 2006), *Something Fishy in Your Pasta?* The article demonstrated that in some cases gelatine, among other things, is ‘sneaked’ into a variety of foods. The problem in certifying food and other products with regard to these substances is that they are extremely difficult to discover. Trust in the modern halal market is es-

<sup>4</sup> The life, actions and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

sential, and networks in this market imply that ethnic and religious groups share proper understandings of how halal should be produced, traded and handled.

To determine whether a particular foodstuff is halal or haram ‘depends on its nature, how it is processed, and how it is obtained.’ (Riaz and Chaudry 2004: 14). Besides these relatively clear requirements regarding food, there are far more abstract, individual and fuzzy aspects of context and handling involved in determining the halalness of a product. The interpretation of these *mashbooh* areas is left open to Islamic specialists and state institutions such as JAKIM. In the end, however, the underlying principle behind the prohibitions remains ‘divine order’ (Riaz and Chaudry 2004: 12). The state nationalist discourse in Malaysia reactualises Islamic prescriptions concerning dietary rules to evoke connectedness in the *ummah*, which is likened to a global network of followers that can be disciplined through proper halal practice.

Building on ten months of anthropological fieldwork in suburban Malaysia, I have argued that the more cultures of consumption assert themselves, the more controversies over what Islam is, or ought to be, intensify. As new consumer practices emerge, they give rise to new discursive fields within which the meanings of Islam and Islamic practice are debated. One key effect of these transformations is the deepening and widening concern for halal commodities among Malay Muslims that I labelled *halalisation*. Halalisation signifies a major preoccupation with the proliferation of the concept of halal in a multitude of commodified forms. This proliferation of halalisation has incited a range of elaborate ideas of the boundaries and authenticity of halal purity versus haram impurity (Fischer 2007, 2008).

In the Malaysian state’s visions, there seems to be an inherent quest to reverse the historically material and spiritual dominance of Islamic centres in the Middle East, Pakistan or South Asia, e.g. in the shape of modern and global halal networks that have as their material base halal as a kind of ‘thingness’.

A growing number of Muslim consumers are concerned not only with traditional halal food requirements, but also contamination from haram sources in products such as toiletries and medication. Moreover, for some Muslims halal sensibilities necessitate that halal products are produced by Muslims only, and that this type of production is kept strictly separate from non-halal production. Thus, in modern halal, the network as a metaphor signals shared codes of conduct and ethics in a highly fragmented market.

## Networks as state effects

In this section, I show how the rise of revivalist Islam in Malaysia from the 1970s has had a bearing on the emergence of the certification, standardisation and bureaucratisation of Malaysian halal. Paradoxically, the outcome was a powerful UMNO-driven ethnic state nationalism. This type of state nationalist political culture, which is constantly challenged by competing Islamic discourses, tries to promote halal as a logo, brand or model of the state that is now ready for export. At the same time, the Malaysian state has forged a new class of Malay entrepreneurs, the New Malays, who consciously use network as a strategic metaphor to build, maintain and expand state and commercial ties. According to Mahathir (1995: 1), the New Malay embodies an aggressive, entrepreneurial and global we can mentality.

Economically, Malaysia has sustained rapid development within the past three decades, and the meaning of Islam has become ever more contested in that period. In the 1970s, a number of divergent *dakwah* (lit. salvation) groups in the wider resurgence of Islam emerged in Malaysia.<sup>5</sup> *Dakwah* is also supported by Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) or the Islamic Party of Malaysia. *Dakwah* is both an ethnic and political phenomenon, which has transformed Malaysia for both Muslims and non-Muslims. In order to preempt these confrontations, the state aggressively engages in an amalgamation of Malay ethnicity, modernity and Islam. In other words, the state has embarked on a wide range of measures symbolising its dedication to Islamic values. The economy has thus become fused with a politics of ethnicity that in itself was defined in terms of religion (Shamsul 1999: 43). After coming to power in 1981, in 1982 Mahathir set off a wave of institutionalising and regulating halal, thus actively nationalizing the proliferation of halal and concentrating its certification in the realm of the state, where it has remained.

In the 1970s, the state launched the NEP to improve the economic and social situation of the Malays vis-à-vis the Chinese in particular. The NEP entailed a number of benefits for the Malays and other indigenous groups, such as increased ownership of production and preferential quotas in the educational system. The number and proportion of Malays engaged in the modern sector of the economy rose significantly as a product of these policies. Ideologically, the overall objective was to produce an educated, entrepreneurial and shareholding Malay middle class, which the state elite views as a necessary prerequisite for economic, national and social cohesion.

<sup>5</sup> For broader perspectives on *dakwah* in Malaysia see for example Nagata 1984.

The modern state can be conceptualised as materialising out of ‘the powerful, apparently, meta-physical effect of practices’ (Mitchell 1999: 89). An example of such a state effect in Malaysia is the channelling of privileges and funds through Malay ethnic party corporatism that has been systematically institutionalised. UMNO dominance of the state has enabled some Malays effectively to curb what is seen as the excessive economic influence of foreign and Chinese capital (Gomez 1994: 21).

These groups of Malay entrepreneurs in Kuala Lumpur are actively engaged in strategic ‘brainstorming’ sessions about ‘who they could access in their multiplex networks for support, how they could advance and pursue its multiple spin-off business ventures’ (Sloane 1999: 22). ‘Old-boy networks’ in Malaysia are traditionally formed around prestigious British colonial educational institutions, and these wealthy entrepreneurs imagine that their own particular ambitions represent the interests of all Malays (Sloane 1999: 47) – not unlike the way in which the state nationalist halal vision is presented as a common national cause.

Informants in Sloane’s study were involved in networking organisations for the express purpose of ‘establishing social relationships with other Malays to whom they wished to be bound, expecting to benefit significantly and richly from such contacts’ (Sloane 1999: 47). These entrepreneurs used the English words for network and networking found in scholarly studies of Asian capitalism, on the Internet and in popular business magazines that are in abundance in urban Malaysia. In the mother tongue of the Malays, *Bahasa Malaysia*, ‘network’ is translated into *rangkaian* (literally a ‘cluster’). Government ministers use this term to establish a Malay language for business and also to encourage Malays to create Chinese-like business societies (Sloane 1999: 21). In MIHAS 2006, state effects, entrepreneurs and the network as a strategic metaphor came together.

## Networking, consolidating and energising: MIHAS 2006

Since its start in 2004, MIHAS has developed into an annual network event. 2006 saw halal expos in Los Angeles, Jakarta, Paris, Brunei, Dubai and Melbourne, among other places. In the eyes of the Malaysian state, halal producers and traders, and a plethora of Islamic organisations, the increase in ‘network events’ indicates the emergence of a global halal network or community. MIHAS 2006, ‘themed’ as Networking, Consolidating and Energising, was held at the massive Malaysian International Exhibition & Convention Centre (‘the Jewel at the Southern Metropol-

itan Hub', as this convention centre is dubbed on its website, [www.miecc.mines.com.my](http://www.miecc.mines.com.my)) outside Kuala Lumpur.

MIHAS consisted of three main activities, first, seminars held by companies such as Tesco and Malaysian state organisations, e.g. MATRADE and JAKIM. Participation in these seminars provided me with an insight into the halal vision in the interfaces or grey zones between the state, business and religious revivalism. It struck me that this was the first time I witnessed such a determined, smooth and direct commercialisation of halal and Islam in Malaysia. Time and again, reference was made to JAKIM's halal logo as a pure and trustworthy gold standard state certification or brand to be exported in an era of food scares and mistrust. We learned that Malaysia should be alert to competition from skilled networking nations such as Brunei, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia. Consequently, the government has established 32 offices worldwide, an 'overseas network', including an office in London, which I shall come back to below.

Secondly, MIHAS included 'trade-matching programmes' and 'networking sessions' in which producers, traders and buyers could come together. The day before MIHAS started, Badawi declared that the *Halal market can be used to rally Muslims* (*The Star*,<sup>6</sup> 11 May 2006), and that governments and companies should use MIHAS to help establish Malaysia as a halal hub. During MIHAS, the Deputy Minister for Entrepreneurial and Cooperative Development was quoted as stating that Malay entrepreneurs at MIHAS especially should 'grab this opportunity to enhance their business networking at the international level' (*New Straits Times*, 13 May 2006). After MIHAS another article (*The Star*, 18 May 2006) concluded that MIHAS was a 'huge success' and that it had proved to be 'the most cost effective platform for halal world players to promote their products, as well as to widen their business networking and trade activities globally.'

Thirdly, MIHAS included a large number of product demonstrations and samples. These product demonstrations testified to the fact that, in Malaysia, halal has also proliferated into a wide range of non-food products. The global trend in recent years is to see that a thriving business in Islamic goods has emerged. Everything from stickers, rugs, holiday cards and plaques with Islamic calligraphy to special types of holidays aimed at Muslim audiences, watches displaying prayer (*salat*) times and other features, logos and ring tones on mobile phones, clothes etc. touch upon and 'Islamicize' virtually every aspect of life (D'Alisera 2001: 97).

<sup>6</sup> *The Star* and the *New Straits Times* are Malaysia's leading newspapers in English and enjoy widespread popularity.

As one would expect, MIHAS was an essential arena for the performance of networking, in particular with respect to exchanging business cards, and I was soon to receive e-mails advertising new products and announcing new halal trade fairs around the world. Among the entrepreneurs I met at MIHAS, a Malay woman, Altaf, in many respects reflected the ways in which networking is involved in Malaysian halal. She held degrees in accounting and business studies from the UK and was currently involved in promoting halal for the Malaysian state by organising trade promotions, as well as with her private company. She acknowledged that, in order to develop halal, consumer needs must be mapped out in great detail. Therefore, Altaf recognised the necessity of participating in network events such as MIHAS in order to establish an international network of people working in the fields of halal research and business. Of particular interest to Altaf was the promising UK market, which she knew from her studies here and which figures so prominently in the Malaysian state's halal vision. I also had the opportunity to meet with Altaf at the Halal Exhibition at the World Food Market held in London in November 2006, which had developed into a significant network event in which a MATRADE delegation also participated.

At the Halal Exhibition, Altaf envisaged halal as giving Malaysia an edge and a 'niche trade network', whereas Europe and the US otherwise dominate global trade. The news that Nestlé had entered into a halal business deal with Malaysia was proof to Altaf that it was only in cooperating with multinationals and using their existing trade networks that a country such as Malaysia could succeed.

Altaf was confident that the emerging halal trade was forging new Malay 'community networks' on a global scale. Unlike the Chinese and the Indians, Malays were traditionally 'confined' to Malaysia. Now there was the political will to promote Malaysia in terms of halal internationally, and this was indicative of a major shift towards a more global attitude. In essence, these last points reflect the materialisation of an entrepreneurial New Malay mentality that to a large extent is a product of the NEP as a sort of an ethnic network policy of the Malaysian state.

In his opening speech at MIHAS 2006, Badawi stated that this year MIHAS had 'cast the net wider' with the inclusion of seminars and talks by a long list of countries and companies. Network society and ICT have effected significant shifts in Malaysia's political and economic positioning from the 1990s onwards. These technologies are seen to hold the potential for social change, e.g. the transition from imagined community to imagined network. In the halal fantasy there is an endemic 'imperative to connect', but imagined communities and imagined networks are two different forms of political place-making (Green, Harvey and Knox 2005: 805). New imagined networks always involve some form of location and are thus both political and moral constructions of space and place so that networks cannot be free from the ties that imagined

them (Green, Harvey and Knox 2005: 807). MIHAS had become a global network event that celebrated Malaysian political business, nationalism, and modern forms of Islamic consumer culture.

## From nation to network

At MIHAS 2004, Badawi proudly announced that ‘Today we will mark the unveiling of a new standard for Malaysia – a Muslim standard for the world.’ The Prime Minister was referring to the launch by the Malaysian Institute of Industrial Research and Standards (SIRIM) of a *Malaysian Standard MS 1500, General Guidelines on the Production, Preparation, Handling and Storage of Halal Foods*. Ideally, this new standard should further strengthen Malaysian state halal certification in its efforts to cooperate with multinational companies ([www.pmo.gov.my](http://www.pmo.gov.my)).

On SIRIM’s website ([www.sirim.my](http://www.sirim.my)), ‘our networking’ is illustrated as a grouping or cluster of Malaysian state institutions: the Malaysian Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation, the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme and JAKIM. In the figure, this ‘networking’ also involves the World Association of Industrial and Technological Research Organizations (WAI-RO), the Global Research Alliance (GRA) and International Standards Worldwide (ASTM). Most of all, this ‘networking’ assumes the form of an arbitrarily shaped cluster.

Conversely, the ‘network’ among Fijian women in the United Nations fourth global forum is a circular form (Riles 2000: 19) literally speaking about itself: ‘In the sense of a figure that, seen twice, appears to turn inside out and thus generate a sense of reality or dimensionality, each serves as the inside or outside of the other’ (Riles 2000: 69). In this circular form, there was ‘no outside space in which to expand’ (Riles 2000: 137). Most importantly, perhaps, the ‘network’ is an example of ‘institutionalized utopianism’ (Riles 2000: 3).

It appears that the model or illustration of networking on SIRIM’s website suffers from two types of incompleteness. First, this networking does not generate any kind of dimensionality, i.e. the specific institutions are not visually linked or connected, which creates a ‘cluster’ structure rather than generating a sense of dimensionality as network effect. While there is plenty of outside space in which this network could expand, the commercial linkages are lacking. In other words, this is exclusively ‘institutional networking’ rather than ‘trade networking’.



However, halal is now being recognised by multinational companies, and it is this fact that is also fuelling global trade network imaginations. KasehDia is a Malaysian publishing company that, besides publishing handbooks such as *Halal Food: A Guide to Good Eating – London* (Azmi 2003), has introduced *The Halal Journal: Business, Lifestyle, Trends*. The Director of KasehDia in the journal asserts that finally the Malaysian state's focus on halal is being recognised by 'industry giants', thus 'confirming their positions in the Halal market, with Nestlé, Tesco and McDonald's all playing leading roles' (2006: 25).

*The Halal Journal* (2006: 25) reported that in June 2006, Tesco, one of the world's leading international retailers, announced that it would be sourcing 1 billion Ringgit (on 9 April 2007, one Malaysian Ringgit or RM was worth US\$ 0.29) of certified halal products over the next five years to service selected UK stores. Besides publishing, KasehDia is also the organiser of the World Halal Forum, a gathering of Islamic, political and commercial notables in Kuala Lumpur in conjunction with MIHAS. The aim of the World Halal Forum is described in the following way: 'Global industry leaders and world class speakers highlighting developments in market, business trends, policy and regulations, makes for valuable experience to understand and network in this fast developing market' ([www.worldhalalforum.org](http://www.worldhalalforum.org)).

Moreover, on this website Badawi stated that, at the World Halal Forum, 'All parties should take advantage of this platform and make inroads in networking and making profitable working collaborations amongst the world's industry leaders' ([www.worldhalalforum.org](http://www.worldhalalforum.org)). Thus, the halal vision strives to place Malaysia in networks that observe state standards and certification in combination with global capital.

In May 2006, I met the Director of KasehDia at the luxurious Palace of the Golden Horses outside Kuala Lumpur, where he was giving a talk on the activities of KasehDia. He explained that halal in Malaysia was not only about state certification, but also that halal was now understood as a 'business' and had become 'Value-Added Marketing' on products. Now, producers suddenly saw themselves as an industry or network in its own right that could realise the global potential of halal. The thing that set Malaysia apart, as the Director explained, was the 'political goodwill' behind the promotion of Malaysia's 'tradition' of halal on a global scale, i.e. a type of network in which the state and companies came together.

While the bureaucratisation, standardisation and certification of halal to a large extent lie within the realm of the Malaysian state, the forging of trade networks is much more global in scope. Consequently, the article *The Halal Way to Free Trade* (*New Straits Times*, 11 May 2006) asserted that the halal market has expanded from a 'tributary concern of the devout to the mainstream of the

multitudes.’ It is this tendency that the World Halal Forum and MIHAS should profit from. The recipe is outlined as follows: ‘the halal sector has first to agree on a uniform regulatory regime and then go on to create as free a market as possible for the production and consumption of its goods.’ Badawi’s ‘vision of the halal trade’ was not only about ‘monetary value’, but also about Islam’s ability to instruct ‘businessmen to profit from the highest ethical practices, stipulating a concept of free trade that is gaining adherents in the West.’ While Malaysia is pushing for global standardisation and certification, the multinationals are seen as offering their global trade networks.

## Overcoming network envy

In this section, I shall show how the idealisations of the ‘network’ and ‘diaspora’ within Malaysian state nationalism are integral to the halal vision. A central theme in this discussion is how the network as a strategic metaphor can help identify and overcome networks of the other, e.g. deep-rooted and competing networks. In order to overcome network envy, these networks are closely monitored to uncover networking as strategy, craft or performance.

The lives of Malay seafarers in Liverpool are examples of transnational connections in existence before the global era. This group of Malays were part of extensive maritime networks shaped by the movements of ships and commodities that brought these seafarers to Liverpool. Moreover, from the 1970s Malay students were sent on scholarships to study in the UK. These groups have become central to state conceptions of national identity in Malaysia, i.e. this sort of ‘diaspora’ is idealised in journalism, the movement called the ‘Malay World’, as well as in academic research, with varying degrees of political patronage. A significant theme relates to the possibility of retaining key traits of Malay culture and identity outside Malaysia while at the same time maintaining links with the homeland. One example of such cultural and religious continuities is newspaper reports about the necessity of the availability of halal meat used in the preparation of Malay food (Bunnell 2007).

Among the political elite in Malaysia, there exists a powerful desire to discover or invent a ‘Malay diaspora’. The particularity of this ‘diaspora-envy’ signifies modern Malay aspirations towards cosmopolitanism and global reach (Kessler 1999: 23). In all of this, there is a strong echo of national recollections of a classic Malay golden age of the fifteenth-century Malacca sultanate and

trade centre of global reach, and the real and imagined *alam Melayu* (Malay World), evoking ideas of Malay cosmopolitanism on the world stage (Kessler 1999: 31).

Kessler (1999: 34-35) relates an anecdote about a leading Malay publicist visiting London's Chinatown. The publicist asked: 'This is Chinatown, but where is Malaytown? Why are there no similar Malay communities here in London and elsewhere throughout the world that have the same relation to the *alam Melayu* that the world's Chinatowns have to the modern civilization of the old Middle Kingdom?' There is an almost mythical texture to Chinatown as an embodiment of Chinese trade networks. Accumulated money and mechanisms of trust within transnational trading networks give shape to such diaspora communities (Kessler 1999: 35).

It is a generally held idea among many Malays that the Chinese are skilled and cunning networkers. Once these business or social networks of Chinese entrepreneurs have been conceptualised, such networks become real and only bear benefits for those inside them (Yao 2002: 143). As part of the state discourse on halal, Malays have a moral obligation to support Muslim businesses, as the Chinese have always supported their own ethnic group through complex networks of loyalty, questionable moral business standards and a concealed system of credit given only to Chinese.

Even today, Chinatown in London is a place where several Malay informants would go shopping for spices and vegetables that were not easily found elsewhere. Even though I found Malaysian JAKIM-certified halal products such as chilli sauce in e.g. the Chinese Loon Fung market in Chinatown, these Malaysian products were not in abundance, whereas more Malaysian products were available in the supermarket Wing Yip outside London. Part of the halal vision is to see Malaysian shops in places like London selling all the necessary products for cooking 'traditional' Malaysian food. So far this is just a vision, but one an entrepreneur like Altaf discussed above was addressing.

In London there are a large number of Chinese restaurants, takeaways etc., many of which display some form of halal sign or logo on their door. Among Malay informants, these restaurants are generally not considered halal. First, some informants believe that Chinese restaurants simply cannot be halal. When I discussed this issue with a Malay imam in London, he argued that what he considered Malay fastidiousness about halal stemmed from the fact that Malays in Malaysia live with a large 'non-Muslim', i.e. Chinese, presence, and this requires constant alertness on behalf of Malays. This imam explained that several Chinese had told him that the Chinese are compelled to eat pork everyday, 'even in vegetarian food.'

From previous research in Malaysia, I learned that it is often rumoured among Malays that, in spite of Malay requirements and sensitivity, the Chinese use lard in food production and cooking. The owner of a Malaysian restaurant in London, who was extremely alert to halal requirements and only employed Malays, complained about one of the other Malaysian restaurants in London owned by a Chinese. Even though the restaurant displayed a halal sign, alcohol was available in the restaurant's bar. Moreover, no Malays were employed there, but mostly Chinese, and, most importantly, on several occasions Malaysian Ministers, even the Prime Minister, were said to have frequented this establishment on their visits to London. As a consequence, the immoral practices of the political elite are seen as undermining the state discourse on halal. Moreover, employing Chinese and not Malays is unpatriotic and unsupportive of the vision to create a Malay diaspora or halal network.

A second sort of network challenge comes from the dominance of Thai ethnic cuisine. Thailand successfully set up a Halal Science Center in 2003 at the country's largest university, Chulalongkorn University, and has created its own national procedure for halal certification ([www.halalscience.org](http://www.halalscience.org)). Compared to Malaysia, Thailand has made a major advance in the halal market, as Thailand is a globally recognised ethnic cuisine and tourist destination, and ingredients for Thai cooking are widely available. Among Malays in London, it is a widely held notion that the Thai government has covertly subsidised restaurants around the world. The Trade Commissioner with MATRADE's London office confided that this subsidising and 'financial assistance' has taken place 'subtly' and 'not openly'. In the eyes of the Trade Commissioner, it was unfair that Thai food that mainly consists of a few popular dishes like Tom Yam and Green Curry should put Malaysian food in the shade, especially considering that Malaysian food was far more diverse, due to the multiethnic composition of the Malaysian population.

In fact, on 4 November 2006, the BBC ([www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)), under the heading *Malaysia has announced that it is hoping to find a short cut to the world's heart through its stomach*, announced that the Malaysian government is trying to 'raise the country's international profile' and offer businessmen cash incentives to open 'thousands' of Malaysian restaurants worldwide:

According to the Malaysian government, which clearly keeps a close eye on such things, there are just 376 Malaysian restaurants to feed the six billion people who live outside the country. So its government has set a target of raising that number to 8,000 by 2015.

Ideally, Malaysia's name 'will be more renowned globally.' This ideal is inseparable from the wider halal vision, as halal has become a form of national cuisine for Muslims as well as non-Muslims in Malaysia, but it does not seem to be realised immediately. The Trade Commissioner was sorry to report that so far no assistance had been given to overseas restaurants. Currently, the 'dispensing of funds is not really in place', and no Ministry was ready to allocate funds. Not even MATRADE was involved in this vision.

Current idealisations of network and diaspora within popular and political culture in Malaysia coincide with the intensification of transnational connections. Halal is becoming an integral part of overcoming network envy, and the Malaysian state, at least rhetorically, is working hard to revitalise historical trade networks. More broadly, the 'national cuisine' of multiethnic Malaysia is seen as a potential flagship in promoting the country on a global scale.

## **'Doubled in size for 2006' The halal hype in London**

The question I address in this section is how Malays generally understood and practised this proliferation of halal in everyday life in London. In other words, I shall discuss in some detail to what extent the state nationalist discourse on halal, diaspora and network filters down to be understood, practised or contested.

The quotation in this heading refers to a claim made in a pamphlet promoting the World Food Market held in 2006 in London. According to the organisers, this is the only ethnic and speciality food industry event in the UK, which, compared with 2005, had 'Doubled in Size for 2006'. At the same time, this event includes a major Halal Exhibition, which the organisers at MIHAS regarded as an obvious networking event in the global halal food market. Even though MATRADE may not have a particular strategy for the promotion of halal food, the organisation was represented at the Halal Exhibition for the first time in 2006. In the highly fragmented and diverse UK halal market, in its advertising pamphlet, the MATRADE booth promoted Malaysia as the 'premier hub for the production and supply of quality halal products and services. The Malaysian halal logo is globally accepted and internationally recognized.'

This exhibition may have doubled in size, but this statement also reflects a wider halal hype in London. A wide range of companies and Islamic organisations were represented at the Halal

Exhibition, each with a particular understanding of what can be considered proper halal consumption. As we saw at MIHAS, companies at the Halal Exhibition also presented a whole range of new products, such as chocolate and toothpaste, which can be subjected to divergent forms of standardisation and certification.

It is implicit in the state nationalist discourse that Malay Muslims are fastidious about halal. At the same time, halal trade networks can only emerge if Muslim consumers more generally are concerned about rising halal requirements. In the case of the younger generation of Malays in London, who in most cases are students and have recently left Malaysia, there is no question that they have been exposed to a massive halal discourse for most of their lives. Moreover, almost all the Malays I met in London had migrated from Kuala Lumpur, where halal discourse and consumption are at their most intense. As could be expected, some informants were more concerned about halal than others.

Among informants, three narratives seemed to explain Malay halal sentiments. First, Malay concern about halal can be ascribed to the relatively strict Shafi'i school of jurisprudence within the Sunni division of Islam, which is dominant in Malaysia. Secondly, as we saw in the case of the imam, living with the Chinese may sharpen Malay alertness to pollution from non-halal sources. Thirdly, there is the forceful impact from schooling, and thus the state, involving information about halal as part of education throughout the school system in Malaysia. Interestingly, most informants explained that such basic and extended knowledge of halal was part of their school experience in Malaysia.

In spite of the fact that Malays in London are outside the direct gaze of the Malaysian state, Malay groups seemed to some extent to be united or linked through forms of UMNO organisation in London. The Malaysian High Commission arranged a Malaysia Day Carnival in August 2006, and UMNO branches from all over the UK gathered at a Malaysian research centre outside London. Each UMNO branch was in charge of a food stall selling halal food to the large number of guests. Consequently, food, 'political business' and networking seemed to go hand in hand. In his opening speech, the High Commissioner of Malaysia to the United Kingdom declared that, in order to achieve Vision 2020, exchanges between the UK and Malaysia were essential. In the foreword to the Programme Book of this event, the High Commissioner argued that:

Over the years, the Malaysia Day Carnival has been recognised as an event that strengthens the bond of friendship and networking among Malaysians in the United Kingdom [providing] an opportunity for the High Commission, Malaysian private sector and various organisations here in the UK to promote Malaysia.

This network event also involved the Malaysian Business Forum, as well as the Overseas Malaysian Executive Club and several producers of Malaysian halal products. Consequently, networking ‘appears to take the form of highly purposeful and innovative cultivation of actual and implied friendship ties, a micro-strategy along the micro-structures of the corporate and political’ (Sloane 1999: 123).

My study shows that the sharing of (halal) food in London restaurants is a primary networking practice. Similar to Sloane’s experience, in my discussions with informants in these restaurants, networks worked to uncover potentially lucrative business niches, contacts, information and, most importantly, ‘the multiple details of immediate-venture opportunities ripe for picking and possibilities for entrepreneurial alliance-making which circulated within social contexts’ (Sloane 1999: 122).

I will end with a quote from a young Malay man, who was also involved with UMNO work in London. He was not aware of MIHAS, and the state nationalist halal vision seemed to be relatively insignificant and distant in his everyday life with his wife and children in London. He explained to me that, ‘When you live outside Malaysia and can’t really get what you need, you just have to shut one eye.’ Most informants indicate that in many cases everyday pragmatism becomes the order of the day when one is living abroad and without the imagined safety of JAKIM-certified products. Moreover, this informant pinpoints a feeling present with most informants – confusion involved in everyday halal consumption:

I actually find it a bit confusing when I see halal products such as biscuits and sardines. I am sure that there are different interpretations in our religion, but the way that I have been taught at school is that halal only applies to meat. So these new products are confusing.

Most importantly, perhaps, the informant recognises that the Malaysian state discourse on halal is overwhelmingly about business and profit, not Islamic devotion: ‘There is a lot of profit to be made on halal. Personally, I’m more liberal about eating non-halal, but the market is still very untapped. Even if I’m not very strict, I would support halal as business.’ As one of the few informants, he indirectly critiques the massive commercialisation of Islam that figures so prominently in the state nationalist discourse, as well as the halal hype in London. As a consequence, the financial support of Malaysia through halal consumption becomes the driving force behind the practice, rather than halal as an expression of personal religious devotion. However, this type of patriotic consumption will only be found with some Malays.

In conclusion, the demand for halal among these Malays did not seem to match the way in which halal is being promoted. Global halal trade networks with Malaysia as their hub mainly exist in the realm of network visions and fantasies. However, network events such as MIHAS and the Halal Exhibition are attracting the attention of a wide range of Islamic groups and companies, which are all trying to promote their understanding of halal. The state in Malaysia is working hard to instil halal as authoritative understanding and practice in Malay consumers. In fact, most Malay informants in London would prefer JAKIM-certified products if these were available. JAKIM certification was seen as the most familiar and trustworthy form of certification by far. However, the current lack of availability necessitated a pragmatic approach to the consumption of halal in everyday life in London.

## Concluding Remarks

The Comaroffs, in their article *Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on A Second Coming* (2000), discuss how this recent variant of capitalism both feeds into and is fed by new religious ideas. Malaysia is an obvious example of the emergence of such a complex and often highly ambiguous millennial capitalism, which is seen as paving the way for halal networks and diasporas. In all this, there is unseen power and an ‘invisible hand’ at play (Comaroffs 2000: 297). This invisible hand is ubiquitous in the expansion of halal capitalism through networks and networking. The Malaysian state is very much present in the everyday lives of Malay Muslims in Malaysia. In London, Malays live on the margins of the Malaysian state, i.e. in a space between bodies, law, and discipline (Das and Poole 2004: 10), in which powerful discourses condition everyday life.

‘Network’ has become a cultural form in and through itself. For New Malay entrepreneurs as well as state nationalism in Malaysia, networking signifies an imperative to connect, nationally as well as globally. From being a national strategy for entrepreneurs involved in political business in Malaysia, networking is now seen as an aesthetic form to be mastered in an era of intensified transnational connections. In other words, network as strategic metaphor has filtered into everyday life, as well as political discourses and institutions. Hence, in personal relations, institutional settings and corporate cultures, hard work is put into identifying and assessing the networking skills of the other. Malaysia’s network vision was promoted as ‘the halal way to free trade.’ MIHAS is a clear example of a strategic network event, but at the same time it seems to suggest that Islam and capitalist modernity are fully compatible. At least rhetorically, the Malaysian state’s dedication to its financial as well as political backing of the halal vision is unquestionable.



Translating this grand scheme into actual practice is quite another matter, as seen from the empirical material. On the one hand, there does not seem to exist a clear institutional halal strategy for promoting halal. On the other hand, my study shows that Malay consumers are unsure about to what extent the halal vision should be seen as a religious, commercial or patriotic imperative. Paradoxically, the more Malay consumers are exposed to halal visions or discourses, the more they are confronted with the problem of how to translate halal into actual practice. In spite of this confusion among informants, the Malaysian vision to promote halal on a global scale was recognised as an ingenious national strategy that fuses business and religion.



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