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Malaysian diaspora strategies in a globalized Muslim market



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Malaysia's efforts to develop and dominate a global market in halal (literally, 'lawful or 'permitted') commodities as a diaspora strategy and how Malaysian state institutions, entrepreneurs, restaurants and middle-class groups in London respond to and are affected by this effort. The empirical focus is on London because this city not only holds a special position in the Malaysian state's halal vision but also historical linkages that evoke diaspora strategies. I argue that Malaysian diaspora strategies should be explored in the interfaces between Islam, state and market. Among the political elite, and, thus, the Malaysian state, there exists a fascination with discovering or even inventing a cosmopolitan 'Malay diaspora' and current diaspora strategies try to address this challenge. An important question explored is how the Malaysian diaspora in London understand and practise Malaysian diaspora strategies in the globalized market for halal products and services. This paper is based on ethnographic material from fieldwork among state institutions, entrepreneurs, restaurants and middle-class groups in Kuala Lumpur and London, namely participant observation and interviewing.

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Introduction

On 16 August 2004, Malaysia's Prime Minister, Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi, officially launched the first Malaysia International Halal Showcase (MIHAS) in Malaysia's capital city, Kuala Lumpur. The title of the Prime Minister's speech was *Window to the Global Halal Network* (Prime Ministers Office, 2004). 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. Britain in particular was presented as being a highly lucrative market for halal. Badawi stressed that the vast majority of the population in Malaysia consumes halal on a daily basis. The self-assuredness of this statement can be ascribed to the fact that the state in Malaysia has systematically regulated halal production, trade, and consumption since the early 1980s. Malaysian state bodies such as Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia or the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia (in English) (JAKIM) regulate halal in the interfaces between Islamic revivalism, the state, and consumer culture.

I first met Jeti at MIHAS 2006 that was held at the massive Malaysian International Exhibition & Convention Centre located outside Kuala Lumpur. She is a young Malay Muslim woman who is currently involved in promoting halal commodities and services such as certification in Malaysia and the UK for the Malaysian

state through her private consultancy company. Jeti holds degrees in accounting and business studies from the UK. She is an example of a Malay middle-class entrepreneur with a global orientation, and represents a modern type of Malay diasporic group privileged by the Malaysian state, that is, she is both part of and actively practising a particular form of Malaysian diaspora strategy in which Badawi's halal vision is central.

Jeti represents the ways in which the state and New Malay (modern, educated, mobile and networking) middle-class entrepreneurs see the emerging halal trade as formative of new markets on a global scale as well as cosmopolitan diasporas in world cities such as London – especially vis-à-vis powerful Chinese trade networks. Of the Malaysian population of around 28 million in 2010, about 67% are indigenous Malays (virtually all Muslims) and tribal groups that together are labelled *bumiputera* (literally, sons of the soil), 25% are Chinese, and 7% are Indians (<http://www.statistics.gov.my>). When discussing Chinese and Chinese trade networks these refer to Malaysian Chinese as an ethnic group. Among many Malays it is generally held that the Chinese are skilled and cunning networkers. As part of the state discourse on halal, Malays have a moral obligation to support Muslim businesses. Thus, as we shall see, halal trade, consumption and regulation evoke national and patriotic sentiments as well as ways in which Malay ethnicity is tied to the Malaysian state. An ethnography of the interfaces between diaspora strategies and halal understanding and practice is one way of exploring modern forms of diasporic Malayness and its contestation.

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I also had the opportunity to meet Jeti at the Halal Exhibition at the World Food Market (WFM) held in London in November 2006. Of particular interest to Jeti was the promising UK market, which she knew from her studies in London and which figures so prominently in the Malaysian state's vision to become the world leader in halal commodities. Since we first met at such halal events, the globalization of the market for halal products and services has intensified. MIHAS and WFM are significant examples of such halal events, that is, major public events or 'stages' where the corporate sector and entrepreneurs, academia, NGOs, Islamic organizations, halal certifiers and governments from around the world come together to promote and spread the sale of halal commodities globally.

The central research question here concerns the Malaysian state's efforts to develop and dominate a global market in halal commodities as part of diaspora strategies and how Malay(sian) state institutions, entrepreneurs, restaurants and middle-class groups in London respond to and are affected by this effort.

The fieldwork for this study has produced a multisited ethnography involving Kuala Lumpur and London. Participant observation and interviewing were carried out among producers, traders, Islamic organizations, companies, food and Islamic authorities, restaurant owners, *imams* (Muslim men who lead the prayers in a mosque) and Malay Muslim middle-class entrepreneurs in particular. My empirical material explores how global halal production, trade, regulation and consumption are taking place in the interfaces between Malaysian state bodies such as JAKIM, Malay entrepreneurs, restaurants and middle-class groups. This article forms part of a larger research project on halal (Fischer, 2011). A large part of my fieldwork took place in Malaysian halal restaurants in London. The fieldwork also focused on how diaspora strategies were practised at an ever-increasing number of halal events.

This paper is divided into 11 sections. Following this introduction, I will highlight how this paper contributes to the diaspora strategies literature. Then I discuss characteristics of the globalized halal market before moving onto the way in which Malaysia plays an essential role in this market. The next section explores the powerful linkages between Malaysia and the UK as a backdrop for the London ethnography that consists of sections on halal events, the work of state institutions, entrepreneurs, restaurants and how Malay middle-class Muslims understand and practice everyday halal consumption. The conclusion ties the findings of the article together and reflects on how diaspora strategies are given new expression in the interfaces between Islam, state and market.

Diaspora strategies revisited

I am inspired by an understanding of diaspora strategies that involves state and development agency efforts to generate and intensify the transfer of the capital, knowledge, technical skills and network connections (Larner, 2007). Today, diaspora strategies are integral parts of state imaginaries in which entrepreneurial, educated and globally networked migrants create new possibilities for economic growth and a knowledge-based economy (Larner, 2007, p. 334). Diaspora strategies between states and middle-class migrants for example can be considered integral to the development of market-friendly social, economic and political institutions to minimize market failure in liberalizing economies (Ong, 2007).

Diaspora strategies have been explored as specific types of politics in the context of governmentality and neoliberalism states employ to increase global competitiveness (Gamlen, 2013; Larner, 2007; Ragazzi, 2009). However, the effects of such diaspora strategies have not been explored in much ethnographic detail. Thus, I explore how Malays in London understand and practise Malaysian diaspora strategies in the global market for halal products and services in which Malaysia plays a leading role. This approach

entails empirical explorations of migrants' agency and experiences (Leitner and Ehrkamp, 2006). My analysis provides ethnographic insight into everyday diasporic experiences with respect to Islam, state and halal consumption as well as the strong historical and economic linkages between Malaysia and Britain.

Economic strategies involving states and religious diaspora groups represent important new sources and forces in international finance and commerce. This domain is characterized by a sense of collectivism on a worldwide scale that provides a key to the success of religious diaspora groups in the new global economy. This success is often based on mutual pooling of resources, transfer of credit, investment of capital and provision of services among family, extended kin, or co-ethnic members (Vertovec, 1997).

To sum up, I explore how Malaysian diaspora strategies work as powerful linkages between intellectual creativity, diasporic quotidian culture, subjective consciousness and political action (Werbner, 2000, p. 5) on the one hand as well as the relation between aesthetic production, economic links, and political agendas on the other (Werbner, 2000, p. 17).

Globalized halal markets

The global halal trade annually amounts to \$632 billion and it is rapidly growing (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2011). The Koran and the Sunna (the life, actions and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad) exhort Muslims to eat the good and lawful that God has provided for them, but there are a number of conditions and prohibitions. Muslims are expressly forbidden to consume carrion, spurting blood, pork, or foods that have been consecrated to any being other than God himself. These substances are haram and thus forbidden. Ritual slaughtering entails that the animal be killed in God's name by making a fatal incision across the throat. Another significant Islamic prohibition relates to wine and any other intoxicating drink or substance (Denny, 2006, p. 279).

In the modern food industry, a number of requirements have been made in relation to halal food, for example to avoid any substances that may be contaminated with porcine residues or alcohol such as gelatine, glycerine, emulsifiers, enzymes, flavors, and flavourings (Riaz and Chaudry, 2004, pp. 22–25). Moreover, aspects of context and handling are involved in determining the halalness of a product. The interpretation of these questionable 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, p. 12).

For some Muslims halal sensibilities necessitate that halal commodities are produced by Muslims only, and that this type of production is kept strictly separate from non-halal production. In Malaysia it is a legal requirement that foreign companies set up a Muslim Committee in order to handle halal properly. For example, Jeti does consultancy work for foreign companies in Malaysia on how to setup the Muslim Committee.

Halal commodities and markets are no longer expressions of esoteric forms of production, trade, regulation and consumption but part of a huge and expanding globalized market. Muslim dietary rules assumed new significance in the twentieth century, as some Muslims began striving to demonstrate how such rules conform to modern reason and the findings of scientific research. Another common theme in the revival and renewal of these dietary rules seems to be the search for alternatives to what are seen to be Western values, ideologies, and lifestyles.

Halal between Islam, state and markets in Malaysia

Since Malaysia gained independence from Britain in 1957, Malays have constitutionally only been Malays if they are Muslims,

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