Market Cultures, the Middle Classes and Islam: Consuming the Market?

Loong Wong
School of E-Business and management
University of Newcastle
email: loong.wong@newcastle.edu.au

Abstract:
Robert Hefner (1998) in his book, *Market Cultures* has argued that while market and capitalist consumption appeared to have been triumphant over everything else in the west, in Asia, its success is more muted. According to him, the push of market rationality generates not a singular vision but multiple market-oriented visions. These competing visions have spawned new and competing Asian capitalisms and also generated contradictory ‘resistance’ forces. Indeed, a close examination of the dynamics of market and society reveals that there is an array of institutional forces, e.g. the family, religion amongst others, at work. These forces, as Peter Hall and others have suggested, permeates and also shapes the economic and political trajectories in ‘western capitalist democracies’.

In the context of Southeast Asia, new and competing Asian capitalisms are not in short supply. There is the version of the ‘comprador capitalist mob’, the ‘cronyistic capitalist’ ala Suharto and his coterie, the diasporic capitalist (as evident especially in the overseas Chinese communities) and a modernist Islamic version, epitomised by Dr. Mahathir and his regime. This paper mindful of these variants, focuses on the modernist capitalist road in Malaysia. It argues, following Turner (1994) that there are two general tendencies pertaining to Islam, Firstly, a global Islamic system has come into being and secondly, that Islamic ‘fundamentalism’ is a reactive against the West, particularly ‘western values’ and its consumerist culture. The paradox is that while this global communication modernises and intensifies its contact with the global capitalist economy, they also confront Islam with cultures of consumption and a pluralisation of social life forms.

In discussions of Islam and identity formation in the modern world, there is a tendency to focus exclusively on either religious or consumption conceptions and practices. In Islamic societies, consumer culture is often portrayed as harmful to religion in terms of hedonism, pleasure and expressive lifestyle. To counter the influences of the market and ‘deislamisation’, Islamic fundamentalists and revivalists have posited Islam as an innoculative pill against decadent western values. Analyses of this kind dominate most understandings of Islam and modernity but they do not add very much to our knowledge of contemporary modernist Islamic societies undergoing rapid social and economic transformation, particularly via their work and in their households and families. Because there is so little research available which enables analysts to transcend this simple binary dichotomy of good Islam versus bad western consumption, this paper is an attempt to mark out and investigate the relationship and the inherent tensions between these two conflicting worldviews. It does so by looking at the case of a moderately economically successful Islamic state, Malaysia.
In examining the case of Malaysia, I hope to be able to shed some light on how the various interpretations of Islam impacts on modern Malaysian Muslims. I will argue that these varying Islamic discourses provide different understandings of identity formation and as individuals and families actively participate in social lives, tensions invariably arise. The distinction between the sacred and the profane are increasingly blurred e.g. via the television, mass media and cyberspace, Malaysian Muslims find the allure of modern consumption practices seductive and yet, aspects of Islam stigmatises such practices as spiritual pollution and ‘westoxication’. Prompted by a national vision of high-modernist development, growing affluence and a new middle class, there is invariably an intensification of consumption practices. This in turn affects the processes of Islamisation, the ‘forming’ of Muslim identities and calls forth new interpretations which take into account how Islamic practices and consumption can be seen as supportive of and challenging for existing power structures and discourses. More specifically, the paper seeks to shed light on how various interpretations in Islam enable different understandings of consumption and its implications in contemporary modernist Islamic societies. In the case of Malaysia, they filter down to form the basis of different identity strategies in micro-social processes, impacting particularly on the Malay middle class families in the urban environment. Classes, identities, entrepreneurship, the nature of capitalism, civil society and dissent are consequently all affected.

The paper starts with an examination of the central concept of Islam as a discursive tradition (Asad, 1986). Historically, Islam has played crucial historical, cultural and political roles in the Malay archipelago. It has functioned as an ethnic marker, been an emblem of royal mystical power and more recently, been the sine qua non for institutionalised Malay political dominance (Ackerman & Lee, 1997). There is also renewed interest in Islam as reflected in the increased participation in Islamic movements and in the cultural sphere and politically, Islam is at the forefront of Malaysian political life. Part Islam (PAS), traditionally a rural-based party, has more recently, won significant urban support, particularly amongst young urban Malays and amongst Malay university students. This is attributed to PAS’s appeal to the spiritual needs of the people in a rapidly globalising world (Hassan, 1999, Turner, 1994; Shamsul, 1994). Culturally and politically, the Malays are split, particularly amongst the urban Malay middle classes as these classes are both sympathetic to the Islamic revivalist tradition and are active consumers of middle-class lifestyle.

In the Malaysian economic trajectory, the New Economic Policy was critical in creating a Malay middle class. Via capitalist expansion of the market and judicious use of state levers, the economic and social situation of Malays improved considerably. Via quotas and other measures, a Malay middle class was sponsored and maintained. This middle class is significant in two respects: they form the basis of the Islamisation drive and represent the vanguard in the rapid transformation of consumer culture.

Consumption is traditionally associated with an intensification of the money economy, urban-based, harmful to religion in terms of hedonism, pleasure and expressive lifestyle. In a way, most descriptions of Islam conform to this analysis: Islam provides believers
with resisting spiritual values. Undoubtedly, this is true for many Muslims and other religious fundamentalists but the analysis proffered is largely macro and mainly discussed an urban, visible and public phenomenon. They fail to transcend the sphere of the public into intimate sites of cultural reproduction such as the household and the family, which arguably, could provide a more substantive knowledge of how consumer culture is being appropriated. Similarly, it enables one to open up and critically interrogate the shifting web of signs, images and symbols embedded in consumer culture (Miller, 1998; Featherstone, 1998), particularly, the tension between individualism and collectivism and how this manifests itself among urban Malay middle classes. Food, dress, economic activities, credit use all become critical sites of conflicts as ethnicity and class now arouses hostility towards other peoples’ ways of consuming and/or the acquisition of positional goods. As such, consumption rather than just the vehicle for the transmission of hedonism and a destroyer of morality and values, can also be desirable and provides cultural capital for social struggle (ala Bourdieu, 1984). Material goods, its is argued, provide the marker for economic development, modernity and status (Jackson, 1979, Talib, 2001). Islam, thus unwittingly, resembles the carriage of a new ‘protestant ethic’ for urban Malay middle classes in Malaysia as they stake out their claims within the social and political economy of the nation. This is most evident in discussions surrounding economic development and the family, particularly those impacting on women and the aged (Ong, 1995). The household inevitably becomes a site of tension as economic wealth and consumption increases. It remains to be seen how these tensions will be worked out in the future but one-dimensional accounts of Islamisation as purely inimical to increased globalisation and economic development is clearly not sufficient. The linkages between the public and visible manifestations of Islamisation and consumption practices and how these manifestations with micro-social processes need to be further developed, and may possibly offer richer and greater analytical specificity in respect to the process of consumption within the Malay middle classes and the various identity strategies forged.

Selected Bibliography