

The Ethnography of failure: Middle-class Malays producing capitalism in an ‘Asian miracle’ economy

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Since NEP, the ethno-political measure of Malay progress has emphasised Malay capital ownership, leading social scientists who study the Malay middle class to focus almost exclusively on what this article calls the ‘two poles of consumption and dependency’. This ethnography suggests that certain middle-class Malays use a different calculus to mark out their place in contemporary Malay life. It argues that these Malays portray themselves not only in terms of material and entrepreneurial success, but through their frequent experiences of failure. To them, failure becomes, paradoxically, a virtue that can establish their moral and Islamic distance from the Malays they characterise as the ‘indolent’ poor and the ‘politicking’ rich.

At first glance, the subjects of ‘failure’ and ‘the Malay middle class’ would seem to have little in common, for Malaysia has come to be known as a classic case study in the successful engineering of a new middle class. Much journalistic and academic writing on Malaysia since the mid-1990s has addressed, in one way or another, the buoyant (and arguably protected) middle-class world that the Malay-only affirmative action programme known as the National Economic Policy (NEP)¹ and its champion, former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, had made. Common are the success stories of the urban, educated, *bumiputera*² new elite, the Malay men and women of peninsular Malaysia who became white-collar professionals, increasingly well-positioned and financially secure. We have learned of their lifestyles: venturing into entrepreneurial capitalism, buying up houses in the new housing developments in and around Kuala Lumpur, purchasing second cars or importing foreign ones, eating in western-style restaurants, tracking the test results of their college-bound children, and newly

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1 For a summary of the National Economic Policy and its ethnic and political background and implications, refer to James V. Jesudason, *Ethnicity and the economy: The State, Chinese business, and multinationals in Malaysia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989) and Ozay Mehmet, *Development in Malaysia: Poverty, wealth and trusteeship* (London: Croom Helm, 1986).

2 The term *bumiputera* means ‘sons of the soil’ and implies that the Malays are the ‘first people’ or indigenes of the nation. Refer to Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and cosmopolitanism in the modern Malay world* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006) for a cogent analysis of this complex and contentious term and a summary of the ideology and politics of ‘Malay-ness’.

networked via technology to the Malaysian multimedia super-corridor and the global vistas beyond it.³ We have learned, too, of their complex and various alignments, both religious and political.⁴

Malays, in what has been broadly referred to as ‘the middle class’, realised many of their own (and their government’s) dreams of *bumiputera* capital ownership as a consequence of NEP, but despite their alleged ethno-political protections and alliances, Malays regularly do fail. Or, they are failed by the things around them — the promises, relationships, and fitments that Malaysian modernity has produced. Like human beings everywhere, they fail to realise their dreams and visions; suffer from misfortune, the ill-will of others, and the vicissitudes of fate; and they are forced to realise that often the best-laid plans go awry. But *bumiputera* policy has been, since NEP began, predicated on quantifiable results; it is focused on Malay wealth and economic ownership: ‘a means of rectifying racial inequality, and of raising the Malays to the level of the Chinese’.⁵ In Malaysia, as Yao Souchou says, the Malays construct the ‘immigrant communities’ – mainly Chinese – as the ‘cause of Malay deprivations and more implicitly, as a model of cultural [and economic] emulation’.⁶ The question I am concerned with in this paper is, in an ethno-political economic setting as complex, contentious, calculated, and comparative as contemporary Malaysia’s – where *bumiputera* success is measured in *ringgits* of capital and *bumiputera* policy is defended by five-year accountings of *bumiputera* ownership⁷ – how do middle-class Malays deal with evidence showing that they have not succeeded? How do they explain that their world, from which they have come to expect much, may actually malfunction? Do they uniformly ‘blame the Chinese’? Do they blame the ‘west’, as Mahathir so famously and so frequently did?⁸ And, moreover, as Muslims with an increasingly higher religious profile whose response to capitalist ‘excess’ is sometimes ambivalent,⁹ do they measure success in terms of wealth and economic ownership alone?

3 For a period of approximately four years over three research trips made between 1993 and 1998, I conducted anthropological fieldwork in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. My research focused on the lifestyles, identities, careers, networks, ventures, and corporate culture of the Malay men and women who were the early beneficiaries of NEP’s educational policies and today live in the booming conurbation of Kuala Lumpur.

4 See, for example, Virginia Matheson Hooker, ‘Reconfiguring Malay and Islam in contemporary Malaysia’, in *Contesting Malayness: Malay identity across boundaries*, ed. Timothy P. Barnard (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), pp. 149–67; Oh Myung-Seok, ‘From *Dakwah* to New Malays: Islam, middle class, and ethnicity in contemporary Malaysia’, in *Religion, ethnicity and modernity in Southeast Asia*, ed. Oh Myung-Seok and Kim Hyung-Jun (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 1998), pp. 81–101 and Thomas A. Williamson, ‘Incorporating a Malaysian nation’, *Cultural anthropology*, 17, 3 (2002): 401–30.

5 Mahathir bin Mohamed, *The Malay dilemma* (Singapore: Times Books International), p. 75.

6 Yao Souchou, ‘After *The Malay dilemma*: The Modern Malay subject and cultural logics of “national cosmopolitanism” in Malaysia’, *Sojourn*, 18, 2 (2003): 201–29.

7 See, for example, the most recent Five Year Plan, *Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006–10* (Kuala Lumpur: Government Printer), which compares, as all prior plans do, the current statistics on *bumiputera* capital ownership to that of the two other main Malaysian ethnic groups, the Chinese and the Indians.

8 For a discussion, refer to Yao Souchou, ‘Modernity and Mahathir’s rage: Theorizing state discourse of mass media in Southeast Asia’, in *House of glass: Culture, modernity, and the state in Southeast Asia*, ed. Yao Souchou (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asia, 2001), pp. 46–69.

9 Refer to Kahn, *Other Malays*, ch. 3.

The middle class everywhere appears always to be defined by what it accumulates, both materially and immaterially.¹⁰ That may be a useful way to define middle-class boundaries. But unless we buy wholesale the argument that the Malay middle class lives in a ‘miracle’ of ethno-national well-being, looking at what its middle class has, tells us little about what regularly slips from its grasp and why. I suggest that an alternative perspective for understanding the Malay middle class can be constructed out of what it has failed to have and how it explains that loss. This paper argues that the Malay middle class often understands itself not only in terms of its own successes, but through its experiences of failure; it uses evidence of failure to explain who and what it is. In so doing, I argue, we can begin to broadly define the self-conceptions and shared understandings of at least one Malay group ‘in the middle’ among the various and diverse people Malaysianists have, with growing discomfort, too monolithically and convergently referred to as ‘*the middle class*’.¹¹

The Easy life: What the Malay middle class believes it does not have

The striving men and women of the urban Malay middle class that I knew did not feel life was particularly easy for them, either now or in the past. As beneficiaries of NEP scholarship funds in the 1970s and 1980s, they felt they had worked very hard to prove themselves capable of modernisation and achievement on behalf of what was perceived to be their ‘backward’ and ‘victimised’ ethnic group. Life since then had not become easier; indeed, to them, it felt harder. Malays were not just supposed to become well-paid professionals employed in capitalist industries; the measure of NEP success was *bumiputera* capital ownership. While the government may have understood that to mean shares held in the various *bumiputera* trusts on behalf of Malays,¹² many of the men and women from my research believed that full equality with the Chinese would be reached when Malays had become true capitalist owners and producers themselves. Many of them, in addition to holding down professional jobs in two-career families, had ambitious plans to prove that Malays were as business-minded as the Chinese, and were engaged in multiple entrepreneurial plans and projects. Indeed, even many of the Malay men and women in civil-service and other wage-paying positions I met, the ‘bureaucratic middle class’, the classic Weberian no-risk category of ‘the middle class’ in historians’ analyses of western classes, had some form of an entrepreneurial plan in process. So fulsome are entrepreneurial schemes in Malay life that it is not, I think, dreams of consumption that primarily define its middle-class modernity, as many have

10 See, for example, the ‘classics’ of class formation, E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English working class* (New York: Pantheon, 1964); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of goods* (New York: Basic Books, 1979); and the too-neglected study by Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the leisure class* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1899).

11 Refer to Joel S. Kahn, ‘The Middle class as an object of ethnological study’, in *Malaysian critical perspectives: Essays in honor of Syed Husin Ali*, ed. Muhammad Ikmal Said and Zahid Emby (Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Sains Social Malaysia, 1996), pp. 12–33, and Yao, ‘After *The Malay dilemma*’.

12 Programmes established under NEP such as Amanah Saham Nasional and Amanah Saham Bumiputera distribute shares of companies to *bumiputera*; for a discussion, refer to Mehmet, *Development in Malaysia*.

argued,¹³ but visions of production. Or, perhaps more accurately, as demonstrated by the events to which I now turn, mere consumption without a demonstration of entrepreneurial production is not, for many, a valid Malay identity.

The economic responsibilities and complexities of Kuala Lumpur middle-class life first became clear to me far away from the city, on a trip to the northernmost Malaysian state of Perlis. I was *en route* to the paternal home of one of my closest Kuala Lumpur contacts, Aisha, and her husband Rahim,¹⁴ who were together engaged in an ambitious new entrepreneurial venture, a textile factory. With it, they would strike a blow against what they believed was a Chinese stranglehold on clothing and bedding fabrication. Aisha had grown up on the Thai border, and we were *balik kampung* – returning to her parental village – for Hari Raya Adilfitri at the end of Ramadan, the fasting month. *Balik kampung* is a highly-charged term in the lives of modern, urban Malays, who return home to the small towns and villages of their childhoods, experiencing the return to a simpler life with a sense of both nostalgia and ambivalence.¹⁵ Visiting their parental homes with many of my Malay friends, for holidays, weddings, circumcision rituals, and often, to deliver gifts and luxury items to parents and relatives who were left behind, I began to learn the complex themes of distance and differentiation that had come to characterise their modern lives. The *kampung* is, as I have described it elsewhere, a site of romantic ritual, one which draws urban Malay professionals into a moral pull of material and traditional obligation to parents, place, and duty, then pushes them back to their city lives to fulfill their equally suasive obligation to NEP modernity and self-development.¹⁶ These heightened moments of inclusion and then exclusion from the *kampung* make up a kind of dualism which the Malays I knew described as part of their ‘real selves’ – that they were at once modern and traditional, tied to their roots but globally expansive in their vision.

Driving north through Kedah, Rahim took the back roads, intent to show me the remote countryside and what he called a ‘real’ *kampung* — meaning the tiny villages among the *padi* fields where Malays lived, they claimed, unchanged by time, meaning subsistence-based farming villages quite isolated (or apparently so) from modern development and its transformations.¹⁷ Noticing a sign nailed to a post that read

13 See, for example, Wendy A. Smith, ‘The Contribution of a Japanese firm to the cultural construction of the new rich in Malaysia’, in *Culture and privilege in capitalist Asia*, ed. Michael Pinches (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 111–36; Maila Stevens, ‘Gender and modernity in Malaysia’, in *Modernity and identity: Asian illustrations*, ed. Alberto Gomes (Victoria: La Trobe University Press, 1994), pp. 66–95 and Abdul Rahمان Embong, *State-led modernization and the new middle class in Malaysia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

14 The names of these and all other individuals described in this essay are pseudonyms. Some details of their biographies have been altered to prevent their identities from being revealed.

15 Refer to Eric C. Thompson, ‘Rural villages as socially urban spaces in Malaysia’, *Urban Studies*, 41, 12 (2004): 2357–76.

16 Patricia Sloane, *Islam, modernity and entrepreneurship among the Malays* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999).

17 Refer to Thompson, ‘Rural villages’, for a discussion of how most *kampung* in Malaysia are essentially ‘urbanised’ spaces with negligible subsistence activities and increasingly fractured social relations. Refer to Tim Bunnell, ‘*Kampung* rules: Landscape and the contested government of urban(e) Malayness’, *Urban Studies*, 39, 9 (2002): 1685–701, for a discussion of the contradictions and paradoxes of the concept of the ‘*kampung*’ in Malaysia.

'Baling', with dawning excitement, I realised they were taking me to a rural Kedah town made famous in 1974 as the site of peasant uprisings. As the peasants rioted, students at Malaysian universities congregated under a young student leader, Anwar Ibrahim, to protest the conditions of its poor farmers;¹⁸ this was a key moment in contemporary Malaysian history and the establishment of the government's draconian responses to voices of dissent.

The name 'Baling' resonated deeply in me; I assumed Rahim and Aisha shared the sense that this was a place of great historicity as well as political and social importance. As we drove past the *padi* fields and humble wooden houses, I asked them if the poor people were still suffering. They insisted no, they weren't, in fact, they said, 'those people are happier than we are'. The poor people have everything they want, they believed. What about food, I asked. 'Oh, it grows here, like it always has.' What about cars, I asked, noticing that I saw none. 'They don't need cars in the *kampung*.' What about fixing the house, I asked, pointing out a particularly fallen-down house. 'They've lived in the same wooden houses for a long time.' But I wanted to know, too, about their options and their destinies. 'Can their children get out if they want to?' 'Of course', Aisha said briskly, 'They go to the Malaysian schools and take the same programme and standardised tests that everyone does, and if they do well, they get to go to university.' I persisted: are the schools good? 'Oh, yes.' Do the students stay in school? 'They do if they have the right values.' I continued to press Rahim and Aisha on the plausibility of their explanation, and asked them to explain what the Baling riots in 1974 were about, if not suffering and inequality of opportunity. But they remained implacable — Baling was an easy and happy place, it had always been a happy place, and while it had been made into a symbol by a group of university students, the reality was that there was nothing wrong then or now with the lives of the rural peasantry. They said that it is much harder to know what you do not have — and have to strive for it and often even fail to reach it, like they felt they did. Rahim and Aisha had touched upon a classic colonial (and Mahathir-regenerated¹⁹) theme: the peasant is the happy native, innocent of the world beyond, whose needs and desires are easily met in his state of nature. The people of Baling consumed none of modernity's accoutrements because they engaged in none of modernity's industriousness. The couple had also touched upon a classic Weberian theme, that of the capitalist 'iron cage'. To them, as for Weber, immiseration was the fate of the middle class, endlessly caught up in both the material and immaterial demands of capitalist modernity. To them, being middle class meant engaging in the projects of capitalist work — as strivers, owners, and producers.

As we drove through Baling, while Rahim and Aisha projected a wistful longing into the layers of distance and difference between themselves and the disenfranchised, they, like many of the urban Malays I knew, did not really envy the 'easy life' of the poor and certainly did not sympathise with them. For most often they saw the poor among them as lazy and idle — impediments to national and ethnic progress. As such,

18 Students in Malaysia's universities were led by the young Anwar Ibrahim, then a student leader of ABIM (Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia – the Malaysian Islamic Youth Movement); 1,169 students were arrested; Anwar Ibrahim was to serve detention. Later he became deputy prime minister; much later he was accused of sodomy and jailed.

19 Refer to Mahathir, *The Malay dilemma*.

rather than wishing to include themselves among the people of Baling, hidden in their approach was also the means by which they could exclude them: the poor children of Baling both could and should aspire to the challenges of higher education and a middle-class lifestyle while their poor parents should set themselves to the tasks of capitalist production.²⁰ Surely, Rahim and Aisha implied when characterising the school system as ‘the same’ as the one available to all Malays, the opportunities in Baling were the ones that had been available in their own lives. If the children and adults of Baling didn’t improve themselves or ameliorate their circumstances, clearly, then, they did not have what Rahim and Aisha called ‘the right values’. The values they spoke of were the self-transformations and self-disciplines of the industrious, entrepreneurial new Malay urban middle class; this was the much harder life than the impoverished ones in Baling. One thing that the middle class does not have, Rahim and Aisha knew, is the easy life.

Friends in high places: What the Malay middle class believes it does not have

I have focused on Rahim and Aisha to characterise one couple’s understanding of what being middle class asks of modern men and women. Their self-representations – that capitalist lives are demanding and difficult, and that success rests on meritocratic achievements alone – reflected themes from the ideal type constructed by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed in the 1990s known as *Melayu Baru* (the ‘new Malay’).²¹ Mahathir was uncomfortable with frequent criticism in the national and international press of the lavish and supposedly politically sponsored lifestyles of rich and famous *bumiputera* capitalists. He denied the ‘subsidy mentality’ of Malays that NEP was said to have created, and disavowed the dependency relationship that was said to exist between Malay capitalists and the state. Pointing to the new generation of *bumiputera* business entrepreneurs, CEOs of top Malay-owned corporations, and global-savvy Malay industrialists not just equal to the Chinese but to capitalists everywhere, Mahathir insisted that success in contemporary Malaysia was wholly the result of self-generated free-market merit. Malays now stood on their own two feet: they were ‘new Malays’.²² He urged all Malays to take on this mantle of self-sufficiency and autonomy.

People like Rahim and Aisha wanted to see themselves as belonging to this group of independent, industrious, high-level corporate success stories. Their dreams and plans for their textile factory were predicated on the standards of excellence that full *bumiputera* capitalist equality required. Aware of the hardships in and high standards

20 Carla Freeman, in ‘Neo-liberalism, respectability, and the romance of flexibility in Barbados’, Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life, Working Paper no. 40 (2005): 1–29, points out that in capitalist development, the neo-liberal state places full responsibility for success on the individual and plays a minimal role in assisting that transformation. Deborah B. Gewertz and Frederick K. Errington call this the ‘modernist’ approach to development, in which the state portrays citizens as having a potentially equal opportunity to become rich, so that failure is ultimately always seen as the ‘natural’ consequence of personal inadequacies rather than social injustice. Refer to Deborah B. Gewertz and Frederick K. Errington, *Emerging class in Papua New Guinea: The Telling of difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 43.

21 Refer to Yao, ‘After *The Malay dilemma*’ for a comprehensive summary of Mahathir’s premise behind ‘the new Malay’.

22 See, for example, Shamsul A. B., ‘From *Orang kaya baru* to *Melayu baru*: Cultural construction of the Malay “new rich”’, in *Culture and privilege in capitalist Asia*, ed. M. Pinches (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 86–110.

for success in capitalist modernity, they could easily distance themselves from the failed people of Baling, the 'indolent' poor. But how easily could they identify with the success of the corporate leaders Mahathir had valorised as 'new Malays'?

I gained a sense of the obstacles to such identifications from observing people's reactions to a national crisis, when, in 1993, a high-rise condominium building in Kuala Lumpur suddenly slid off its foundation, falling like a child's tower of blocks and killing many of the residents inside. For days the television cameras and reporters stood at the scene, reporting live from the disaster. It was the first time the Malaysian news had the technology to present a round-the-clock live feed of news in the making: Malaysians were glued to their televisions for two days. People spoke of nothing else at work or in their homes. Rescue attempts were made; specially trained sniffer dogs were flown in with emergency teams from Australia, Germany, and Japan to search (ultimately fruitlessly) for survivors; big Malaysian retailers, hoteliers, and restaurant owners made great shows of giving food, shelter, and clothing to people made homeless by the collapse; and even American Express announced special terms for surviving cardholders who needed cash and credit. For one long day, long into the night, and well into the afternoon of the next day, I watched the television coverage at the Kuala Lumpur house of Rahim and Aisha, along with Rahim's brothers, their wives, and many children and neighbours who wandered in and out over the two days. Late the first evening, as less and less action was being captured by the live cameras, the assembled group in Rahim's house began to wonder and talk about what had happened and why.

The theme of punishment for excesses seemed to be very much on their minds. They talked about how the prices for condos in Highland Towers were very high — only the 'richest people' could afford to buy them. We had learned from the television news that the sole survivor, a baby, was the grandchild of a government minister. That clearly meant that only the 'top people' could live there, they agreed. When the children were asleep, Aisha told us that she had heard that many big politically-aligned Malay entrepreneurs and politicians kept their mistresses in Highland Towers. When the reporters said that it had been learned there had been irregularities in the construction of Highland Towers, the people assembled in Rahim's and Aisha's house immediately began to talk about how corrupt *bumiputera* officials getting pay-offs must have been involved. There was much talk about how the cement business — as well as the sourcing of steel for girders and foundation pilings — was rife with Malay / Chinese political and entrepreneurial deal-making. They began to focus their discussion on politically corrupt entrepreneurs and 'the greedy Malay rich', its business relationships to the Chinese, its sexual freedoms, and its lack of moral values. Rahim's brother picked up his briefcase and walked to the door, stating bluntly that Highland Towers housed Muslim people who had forgotten their debt to Allah and thought only about money. Crushed by a building, they had earned their way to Hell. Soon, the concatenation of ideas came full circle: Highland Towers fell, people believed, to remind rich, politically aligned Malays of the nature of morality. 'Allah saw what was happening in Malaysia', Aisha said, 'and he saw all the corruption. He said it was time for the rich to be reminded of the lives of the poor.'

On television we saw sobbing residents who arrived home from work to learn that their apartments and possessions were gone; to them, Aisha mouthed, bitterly, 'now

you'll know what it feels like to not have nice things'. Nonetheless, despite a dawning self-proletarianisation among the comfortably placed group of men and women watching television on the night of the Highland Towers disaster, no one but me gasped in shock when, interviewed on television on the evening of the collapse, one resident of the building expressed relief and thanks to Allah that no one in her family was missing or dead. 'Except the maid',²³ she said, dismissively. And although that interview was replayed over and over through that long night, no one at Rahim's that night could identify with the dead maid. They saw themselves more as the generalised victims of a crushing force: the capitalist illegitimacy of some *bumiputera* entrepreneurial heroes.

Obviously, the striving and entrepreneurial men and women of the Malay middle class knew that hard work alone did not account for success, just as they knew that 'new Malays' were not always the virtuous, self-sufficient, meritocratic heroes of economic advancement that Mahathir said they were. I have presented these two stories, about Baling and the Highland Towers, as stories of class belonging and non-belonging from the lives of one couple I knew well in Kuala Lumpur. At the same time that men and women like Rahim and Aisha were working out who they were in contemporary Malaysia, and what being middle class there meant, so, too, were social scientists. The assumptions made by Rahim and Aisha about the 'social classing' of lives in Baling and in Highland Towers can be contrasted, I think, with the two renditions of class made by social scientists who study Malaysia: that class is marked by consumption, and that it is a form of political clientage and dependency.

When anthropologists first began to think about the Malay middle class in the 1990s, coinciding with global awareness of the new middle class emerging in all of the 'Asian miracle' economies, they viewed consumption as one of the key cultural dynamics of class formation.²⁴ As Malay lives changed along with others in developing East and Southeast Asia, they were frequently described in terms of status-driven consumers engaged in feverish western-focused lifestyles, mindlessly obsessed with shopping, fashion, and dining, and much staggeringly self-evident Malay middle-class material and capital success.²⁵ Other researchers explored the image and self-understandings of the Malay and Malaysian middle classes within the government's hypertrophic, 'miracle' vision of urban and hi-tech 'modernity', the utopian geography of elite lives.²⁶ While Baling proved to Rahim and Aisha that being middle class was

23 It was reported on television that the maid was Indonesian, as most domestic workers in Malay homes are. Refer to Christine B. N. Chin's *In service and servitude: Foreign female domestic workers and the Malaysian 'modernity' project* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) for a discussion of Malaysian negative attitudes towards foreign maids. This may have contributed to a lack of empathy for her plight in the mind of the speaker and my respondents.

24 A discussion of the theoretical background to the heightened place of 'consumption' in contemporary anthropological studies is covered in Mark Liechty's excellent ethnography. Refer to Mark Liechty, *Suitably modern: Making middle-class culture in a new consumer society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

25 Refer to Abdul Rahman Embong's *State-led modernization* for a breakdown of the consumption patterns of people he refers to as middle-class Malays.

26 Refer to Beng-Lan Goh, *Modern dreams: An Inquiry into power, cultural production, and the cityscape in contemporary urban Malaysia* (Ithaca: Southeast Asian Program Publications, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 2002) and Tim Bunnell, *Malaysia, modernity and the Multimedia Super Corridor* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

about behaviours that should produce the rewards of prosperity, to the anthropologists who studied Asian and Malaysian consumptions, to know the middle class, you need only to look at its desires and how it constructs them.

But Joel S. Kahn cautioned, in his 1996 article on Malay middle classes, that class in Malaysia could likely not be studied without reference to the political culture within which it was fostered. Much evidence has been compiled that demonstrates how the Malay middle-class lifestyle is offered by patrons to clients as a material 'reward' in exchange for political and corporate loyalty.²⁷ To many observers, any discussion about the nature and shaping of class in Malaysia must include hypotheses about an insidious triad: corruption, consumption, and ethnic communalism. These, it is argued, work together to ensure that a select few reap the extreme material rewards of a coveted lifestyle, others are charmed by any chance to participate, and no one criticises because of the highly-charged nature of Malaysian ethnic politics.²⁸ Bridget Welsh sums up these positions by calling the Malay middle class a 'captured' community.²⁹

Indeed, many of the middle-class Malays in my research were highly dependent on the state and had long been so — having been educated on government funds, they were now working in government-sponsored or recently privatised industries, in 'favoured sectors' like information technology and other modern businesses, and had been the recipients of *bumiputera* specially allocated shares, housing loans, car loans, and business capital. Rahim and Aisha themselves had received a very substantial *bumiputera*-only loan from the Malaysian Development Bank's (Bank Pembangunan) 'New Entrepreneurs Fund' to jump-start their textile factory. But Rahim's and Aisha's perspective on the 'top people' who lived in Highland Towers made it clear that they did not see themselves as political puppets, proxies, allies with the Chinese, or dependents. To them, *bumiputera* 'advantages' in Malaysia exist in multiple forms, benign and not benign. While they may have been educated on NEP funds and may continue to receive certain benefits and preferences on the road to equality with the Chinese, entrepreneurs like Rahim and Aisha never assumed they could rely on friends in high places who could 'fix' a deal for them. They believed that real entrepreneurs depended on no one but themselves and their own abilities.

While varied and complex, anthropological perspectives on the middle class in Malaysian society at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century share two key features: first, they demonstrate an absolute concern with consumption and the lifestyles of successful 'modernity' as the 'medium' by which a Malay middle class is created (admittedly the same measure that the Malaysian government uses to quantify the emergence of the Malay middle class) and, second, they identify the Malay middle class by reference to its dependent relationships to the true power-holders (the state, political parties, the Chinese, and so on) in Malaysian society. Thus, the middle class remains wholly identified by what it buys, eats, displays, and desires, and, always, who it knows.

27 See, for example, Jesudason, *Ethnicity and the economy*.

28 Refer to Oh Myung-Seok, 'From *Dakwah* to New Malays' and Williamson, 'Incorporating a Malaysian nation'.

29 Bridget Welsh, 'Mahathir's legacy: A New society?' in *Reflections: The Mahathir years*, ed. Bridget Welsh (Washington, DC: Southeast Asia Studies Program, Johns Hopkins University, 2004), pp. 354–66.

But between two poles, between the poor of Baling and the rich of Highland Towers, Rahim and Aisha believed something else about their lives, shaping the cultural space of a middle-class Malay world we know less about. These Malay men and women believe they have responded to all the NEP asked of them but claim to not value consumption without its industrious corollary, production. Nor do they perceive themselves to be Malay capitalism's politically aligned corporate high achievers. Many of my own friends and respondents, people like Rahim and Aisha, thought of themselves as the '*middle* middle class'. In the imagined space between Baling and the Highland Towers are the self-described people 'in the middle' who believe they are more deserving of success than the indolent poor and the politically aligned indolent rich. It is here, I think, that the subject of middle-class failure must be addressed.

Explaining failure among the Malay middle class

As stated earlier, Malays in the middle class regularly fail in the very projects which they define as being key to a successful post-NEP middle-class identity, that is, not just living in modern capitalism, but living as capitalists via successful entrepreneurship or business ownership. But to them, the failures they experience are not merely a matter of not having worked hard enough (like the people of Baling) or not having the high-level political and economic connections (like the rich people of Highland Towers). These things may matter in affecting particular economic and social outcomes, but understanding and explaining capitalist failure and experiencing one's social class is a much more complicated cultural process. Anthropologists have provided the ethnography of Malay middle-class capitalist lifestyles and its various successes; I propose here an ethnography of capitalist failure to understand how the Malay middle class sees and understands itself. As an initial formulation, I suggest that there are five ever-shifting dimensions that can be elucidated by a Malay ethnography of capitalist failure. These five dimensions may be initially summarised as follows:

1. Capitalist failure and the malfeasance of the entrepreneurial Malay poor
2. Capitalist failure and the malfeasance of the entrepreneurial Malay middle class
3. Capitalist failure and the malfeasance of the entrepreneurial Malay rich
4. Capitalist failure and the monopolistic Chinese
5. Capitalist failure and the naïveté of the striving Malay middle class

I will explore these categories through a tale of capitalist failure that spun out among a group of middle-class Malay people I know very well. This tale of failure took place over the course of many months; it concerned an extended family of ambitious and entrepreneurial Malay people (self-described as the '*middle* middle class') and their widely flung networks of friends and contacts. It generated enormous debate and conversation among its protagonists and participants. Its events occurred mostly *in extremis* and concerned, literally, life and death issues, as well as danger, doubt, anxiety, and much recrimination and unhappiness. It is thus both an extraordinary and dramatic tale and an ordinary human one. Anthropologists favour these kinds of experiences because they tell a great deal about a great many things, and like 'key informants' described in traditional ethnographies, we have 'key events' as well. To me, these particular 'key events', as I came to understand them, reveal much of the complexity of modern Malay middle-class lives. They reflect, in a series of painful episodes, the knowledge of capitalist failure – and the shifting manifestations of it –

that characterise forms of self-understanding and self-representation among the Malay middle class. My field notes generally are full of staccato moments in which middle-class Malay men and women understood, explained, and diagnosed the various dimensions of middle-class capitalist failure in terms of the inadequacies of self or others enumerated in the list above. But in the remarkable experience I will describe and analyse, all the explanatory themes of failure appeared as variations, shifted in sequence with the chronology of events, and then converged, giving rise to a surprising conclusion: that for certain Malays, failure can be embraced as evidence of a Malay and Muslim middle-class capitalist virtue.

The Setting: Zul and the entrepreneurial zeal of middle-class Malays

Renditions of success and failure among the entrepreneurial Malay middle class emerged for me most vividly during a dramatic series of events that took place surrounding the death of the entrepreneurial brother-in-law of my closest friend (a 'key informant') in Kuala Lumpur. Rokiah was an ambitious, well-networked businesswoman, who was seeking to establish multiple spin-off ventures from her commercial real estate business in Kuala Lumpur. To advance her entrepreneurial interests, Rokiah believed she needed to engage with entrepreneurial others and she spread her net widely, engaging herself in various *bumiputera* business groups and entrepreneurial organisations. She introduced me to dozens of her contacts, many of them members of her family and her social world, providing me access to many equally ambitious entrepreneurially-minded Malays in Kuala Lumpur and the Klang Valley. Many of her economic ventures and engagements revolved around people in her kin group, most often around Zul, her brother-in-law. Zul, at the time I first met him, was a government official assisting low-level, local *bumiputera* economic development on the Malaysian island of Langkawi, far to the north, near Thailand. His death, and all its associated experiences which engaged the family I was tied most closely to in Malaysia, was a profound drama of explaining and negotiating with failure, which threw into sharp relief how failure can create meaning in Malay middle-class lives.

Zul had been living on the island of Langkawi for several years, and, over the course of several years, we had visited him there, or seen him in nearby Alor Setar, Rokiah's hometown, where his wife's (Rokiah's sister) parents lived. Langkawi had become the focus of much attention in the early 1990s; Mahathir was personally committed to its large-scale development, for it was part of the state of Kedah where he had been born. As such, a sleepy, picturesque little island had received massive injections of government funds to become what Mahathir touted as an all-encompassing symbol of Malaysia's progress: a world-class resort in a lush tropical setting, with excellent accommodation and luxurious pleasures.³⁰ The government channelled significant funds into its infrastructural and public facilities development: about 320 million *ringgit* (approximately US\$110 million) in public funds had been invested in Langkawi from 1990 to the end of the decade. By 1995, a total of 4 billion *ringgit* (US\$1 billion) in private capital had been spent in Langkawi as well, primarily in

30 Refer to Bella Bird, *Langkawi from Mahsuri to Mahathir: Tourism for whom?* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Insan, 1989).

building hotels and resort facilities.³¹ Visitor arrivals in Langkawi grew from around 200,000 in 1986 to over 2 million in 2006, aided by such events as the highly touted international maritime and aerospace event called LIMA.³² The Malaysian government was optimistic about the dramatic employment and entrepreneurial opportunities that development on Langkawi could produce, as were many of the business-minded Malay men and women in my research.³³ In 1987, Langkawi also had been declared by the federal government as a 'duty-free' port, which meant that visitors could shop free of excise duty or service taxes, and certain foreign-made goods could be imported into Langkawi free from custom duties. All of these complex socio-economic details were to have, as the events described below will demonstrate, crucial consequences in the lives of Rokiah, Zul, and their associates.

Salmah, Zul's wife, had once described Zul to me as 'one of the leaders for a new Langkawi'. He was a high-level civil servant, educated in America on NEP funds, and employed by the Langkawi Development Authority (LADA, or Lembaga Pembangunan Langkawi). Zul's job was to assist Langkawi locals in benefiting from the Kuala Lumpur-directed massive development schemes for the island, but when I first came to know him, he was thinking about his own entrepreneurial plans: he was planning soon to leave his government job to become a Langkawi venturer. He had frequent business conversations with Rokiah, his dynamic sister-in-law, and several of their cousins, kinsmen, and friends in Penang, Kedah, and Kuala Lumpur who shared their interests in Langkawi development. Zul had talked about opening what he described as 'upscale tourist boutiques', furnishing 'upscale landscaping design services' to the many hotels and resorts under construction on the island, and capitalising on Langkawi's tax-free status by exporting goods to and from nearby Thailand. He and Rokiah had already made small forays into some of these ventures.

But suddenly and shockingly, we learned one day in Kuala Lumpur, Zul was ill. His progression from well-being to illness had happened so dramatically that time seemed to have sped up. Salmah had brought him in a near-coma from Langkawi by ferry to the mainland, and then on to the town of Alor Setar, where, with one blood test, so swift and simple, a most horrifying diagnosis was reached: Zul had leukemia. The doctors urged Salmah to take Zul immediately to Kuala Lumpur, where treatment might be available. Rokiah was driving up to Kedah to help. The next day, she would return to Kuala Lumpur with Salmah, her parents, Zul's and Salmah's three young children, an aunt and several other family members, and Zul.

I saw Zul late that next day in Rokiah's house, sleeping on her sofa, frighteningly pale and fragile. He could, they said, neither eat nor walk; to me, he seemed barely alive. He was supposed to have been taken that day to University Malaya Medical Centre. But the family had decided to delay his admission to the hospital, and, leaving Zul and Salmah's three young children at Rokiah's house with an aunt to care for them,

31 K. Kayat, 'Power, social exchanges and tourism in Langkawi: Rethinking resident perceptions', *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 4 (2002): 171–91.

32 Langkawi Development Authority; www.lada.gov.my (last accessed on 13 Dec. 2007).

33 Patricia Sloane-White, 'Why Malays travel: Middle-class Malay tourism and the creation of social difference and global belonging', *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 18, 2 (2007): 5–28.

had instead driven farther south to Johor. There, Rokiah's mother had urged, was a *bomoh* (traditional Malay healer) who had successfully treated a member of the sultan of Brunei's family for skin cancer, and who might be able to help Zul. That night, now returned from Johor, as Zul lay under a blanket, and his and Salmah's children watched television in the corner with the sound turned down low, I learned from Rokiah and her sister what the *bomoh* had said.

He confirmed that Zul did indeed have leukemia – what the medical tests had indicated – but the disease had an unnatural, malevolent cause. Zul, the *bomoh* said, had been cursed. His inability to eat or breathe indicated that a terrible charm or object, brought about by a terrible and malign knowledge, what Malays call *ilmu*,³⁴ had lodged in his throat and chest. The *bomoh* stated that he could remove the spell, but needed three weeks to cure him. He further insisted that medical science could do nothing for Zul, and argued that only a holy man with great Islamic knowledge of curing could treat him.³⁵

The sisters and their parents were anxious about the complete rejection of scientific medical intervention. They told the *bomoh* that for Zul, a high-level government official, to completely dismiss hospital treatment would be improper for an important man. In this uncharted life-threatening territory, they desperately wanted to take the right path — but what was the right path? In discussions with the *bomoh*, they concurred that Zul could be taken to Kuala Lumpur for consultation with hospital doctors, but agreed with his most emphatic admonition: they must return. The *bomoh* performed some Arabic prayers over Zul's prone body, and with that, the family put Zul back in the car and drove north to Kuala Lumpur.

That night, in the house, they were terribly uneasy about their decision to keep Zul out of the hospital; indeed, his condition seemed to be worsening. In the morning, they took him to the hospital. The very next night he was dead.

Capitalist failure and the malfeasance of the entrepreneurial Malay poor

A few days later, Rokiah, Salmah, and some of their cousins made plans to return to Langkawi to pack up Zul's and Salmah's household things. The couple and their children had lived in a government-owned house; they now had to vacate it. They invited me to join them — I could promise an extra set of hands. As we made the trip back to Kedah, there was a rising sense of danger about the return to Langkawi. If a curse had been put on Zul, clearly it had happened there, perhaps in his office, or perhaps in his house. If the curse was in the form of a charm or magical object which

34 *Ilmu* is a Malay word with Arabic derivation which means 'knowledge' or 'wisdom', but in the context of Malay traditional medicine and belief, it means mystical knowledge and implies both good (curing) or evil (sorcery). Malays I knew, often used the term 'black magic' interchangeably with '*ilmu*'. 35 For a discussion of how Islamisation in Malaysia has forced many Malays to examine the extent to which rituals that attempt to control and use supernatural forces are 'pre-Islamic' and go against the teachings of a 'purer' Islam, refer to Mohd. Taib Osman, *Malay folk beliefs* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 1989). Many ritual experts, such as the *bomoh* described here, emphasise that they are Islamic curers and harness only the power of ritual words from the Quran as their guide. Refer to John Richard Bowen, *Muslims through discourse: Religion and ritual in Gayo society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) for a discussion of the tension between Islamic modernists and traditional healers in Indonesia.

had been placed among his things,³⁶ it was reasoned that we, too, might be vulnerable. So, in Kedah that night, with our trip by ferry to Langkawi arranged for the next morning, it was planned that all of us – the immediate family, Salmah's young children, cousins, and curious neighbours, and me (a total of 13 people)³⁷ – would go to another *bomoh*. We trooped from Rokiah's parents' house to the neighbouring house of her mother's brother, where a *bomoh* had been scheduled to meet us. When we arrived, the *bomoh* was sitting cross-legged on the floor. He took from a sack a bowl which he then filled with water mixed with rice flour, a stack of sirih or betel leaves, a lime, a candle, and a plate of rice sprinkled with turmeric.³⁸ He asked Rokiah's aunt for an egg, one that had been freshly laid by her own chicken. Now he picked up these objects, whispering inaudibly and chanting. He asked for the names of the people who were travelling to Langkawi the next day, and pointed to each one of us, repeating our names. He asked Salmah to come to him, and he examined the palms of her hands.

Next, the *bomoh* picked up the egg that had been sitting in front of him. He began to chant over it in Arabic, examining it over and over. He rubbed it on Salmah's arms, rolling it slowly over her skin. Then, he took it into one hand and crushed it. Inside, was a piece of broken glass and a needle.³⁹ Everyone gasped. He looked carefully at these objects and then swept them behind him. He took a different needle from his pocket, held it momentarily, and then gave it to Salmah. He told her she must carry it any time she went to Langkawi. He said with the needle in her possession, it was safe for her to go to Langkawi and to her house, but cautioned that she must not urinate in the house, because the curse on Zul was meant for Salmah too, and if she did, there would be great danger for her as well. A caged bird in the corner of the room squawked, and everyone jumped in fear.⁴⁰ One of the children began to cry.

Then he prepared small packets of betel nut and *sirih* leaves for us to ingest just before disembarking on Langkawi; these were intended to protect us. He spoke one last time. He said that Zul had been cursed and that within one week we would know who

36 Michael Peletz has written extensively on sorcery, healing, and the social logic of curses in contemporary Malaysia; Michael Peletz, 'Personal misfortune in a Malay context', in *Understanding witchcraft and sorcery in Southeast Asia*, ed. C. W. Watson and Roy Ellen (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1993), pp. 149–78, and Michael Peletz, 'Poisoning, sorcery, and healing rituals in Negeri Sembilan', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde*, 144, 1 (1988): 132–64.

37 Ronald Provencher notes the way in which often the entire group – the patient and his extended family – participate in healing rituals in Malay life; Ronald Provencher, 'Orality as a pattern of symbolism in Malay psychiatry', in *The Imagination of reality*, ed. A. L. Yengoyan and Aram Becker (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1979), pp. 43–53.

38 This set of objects match those described in Kirk Endicott's analysis of Skeat's colonial-era writings on Malay magic; Kirk Endicott, *An Analysis of Malay magic* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 36.

39 See a similar description of broken eggs revealing sharp objects in ritual magic in Peletz, 'Personal misfortune', p. 155; Robert Wessing, in 'Rumours of sorcery at an Indonesian university', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 27, 2 (1996): 261–79; Wessing describes the use of sharp objects and eggs in contemporary Indonesian sorcery.

40 Later, Rokiah's cousin said that this was a very significant and portentous moment. Endicott reports that in Malay life, birds are thought to be able to hear or see spirits; Endicott, *An Analysis of Malay magic*, p. 139.

the perpetrator was. The person will appear to you, he said. And with that, he began to gather up his things.

Late that night, in the Alor Setar house, after the evil spirits had been summoned and dissipated, Salmah told me her version of the events that led to Zul's death. Zul's life and death on Mahathir's favourite development site, the paradise island of Langkawi, I was to learn, was a story about failed capitalism and failed entrepreneurs.

Salmah's story

Five years ago, Mahathir decided to develop Langkawi as a pet project, symbolising the development of all of Malaysia. He made it into a tax-free port, so that goods could be traded without taxation. He wanted development here to be quick, and we all thought Langkawi would be like Penang and Phuket combined – a place for business and tourists – where everything could happen. We came then and so did a lot of outsiders, people like us, with educations and ideas. Zul was one of the leaders for a new Langkawi; he was a high-level civil servant, educated in America, and employed by LADA. We came to live on Langkawi then, in a government house. Zul's job was to provide Langkawi people with small loans and training. It was their chance to share in the island's development. The people here were offered every chance to take part. But they are very primitive, very backward; and rather than try to participate in the changes on Langkawi, they simply resented the new people. Zul knew that the people here were lazy and stupid. He had little hope for them. In his office, however, he did everything he could for them. They'd come to LADA and ask for a loan – to start a food stall or buy a vendor wagon – and he always said yes to them. But sometimes they just came for the money and he knew they never intended to use it well. So then he'd say no. The government was trying to help them. Zul was trying to help them. Mahathir was trying to help them. So much good could happen here on Langkawi – but really nothing changed. The place is good, but the people here are terrible, bad, and evil.⁴¹

As she finished her story, Salmah was silent for a long time. 'They did it to him', she finally said. 'They did it. Someone here, in this place ... one of the backward ones, one of the jealous ones, someone Zul said "no" to.'

In Salmah's story and in Zul's death are multiple demonstrations of Malay tradition in confrontation with middle-class modernity, as well as Malay understandings and explanations at once profound and familiar for misfortune and tragedy. There are also many parallels between Salmah's culpable poor and those in Alan Macfarlane's study of witchcraft accusations in rural sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, leading us to assume that this is a familiar story of class exclusion, where the poor who demand personal assistance from the rich are seen as malevolent, and easily accused of witchcraft by people who had previously been obligated to respond to their needs.⁴² Salmah's story also has obvious parallels to classic descriptions of Malay sorcery in *kampung* settings, where often people lay blame for

41 This excerpt also appears in Sloane-White, 'Why Malays travel'.

42 Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and comparative study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970).

illness on envious, injurious others.⁴³ But the perpetrators of sorcery in her rendition were not just bad because they were grasping, demanding, and jealous. They were bad because they had had the same developmental opportunities that Zul and Salmah themselves had accessed, but they misused and squandered them. Like the people of Baling derided by Rahim and Aisha, for the Langkawi people, everything needed for capitalist self-development had been theirs for the taking. Unlike the people of Baling, however, the indigenous entrepreneurs of Langkawi actually took what was on offer. But they were not truly industrious; they still wanted a free ride. As such, the people of Langkawi were not just bad people; they were also immoral entrepreneurs. Salmah was sure that it was one of these bad capitalists, a free-rider entrepreneur, who was at the source of Zul's illness and death. Zul's promising life and ambitious plans were reduced to failure by the malfeasance of a spiteful, poor Langkawi capitalist who shared none of Zul's self-developmental qualities. But the attribution of 'immorality' began to shift over the next few days.

Capitalist failure and the malfeasance of the entrepreneurial Malay middle class

The next morning, six of us left the mainland for Langkawi: Salmah, Rokiah, three male cousins, and me. Just before we arrived at the Langkawi jetty, Salmah wordlessly handed us our betel nut packages, and we chewed them. We went to Zul's government-owned house on the main road to the beach on Langkawi. A panel truck and its Indian driver were to arrive in just a few hours' time; and we had to pack up all of Zul and Salmah's things, their accumulation of four years on Langkawi. Without any thought or organisation, we stuffed everything into boxes or wrapped them up in bed sheets.

In a storeroom at the back of the house, there were perhaps a dozen very large bales of white t-shirts, with beautiful batik images of coral reefs and palm trees, boats, and fish, silk-screened on their fronts. Rokiah told us there were thousands of them, part of an entrepreneurial joint venture that she, Zul, and Rahim and Aisha, the textile-manufacturing couple mentioned earlier, were engaged in. They were planning to establish luxury tourist boutiques in some of Langkawi's new hotels; this was going to be Zul's way out of LADA and into private entrepreneurship. Rokiah and the team of Rahim and Aisha would provide both capital and products. But, she said, with Zul's death, the four-partner business clearly was not going to take off, at least for now. Rokiah told her cousins to simply place the bales on the truck when it arrived. Later, when the panel truck was loaded, literally to the top, with boxes chaotically packed with clothes, bedding and mattresses, children's bikes, kitchen equipment that ranged from dishes to a refrigerator, and the enormous bales of t-shirts, we watched it drive to the port. There, the driver, on Rokiah's instructions, was to fill out paperwork to get it through customs. Then we, too, drove as quickly to the ferry as we could. No one wanted to stay the night. It was clear to my companions that Langkawi, at least for the present time, was a dangerous, cursed place. As the ferry left the port that night, Rokiah, Salmah, and their relatives vowed never to return. Rokiah, Salmah, and their cousins admitted that several times during the day they had felt strange pains in their

43 Refer to Peletz, 'Poisoning, sorcery, and healing rituals' and Carol Laderman, *Taming the wind of desire: Psychology, medicine, and aesthetics in Malay shamanistic performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

bodies; they were glad they had eaten the betel nut packages. They felt they had been protected. But the next day, we learned that it was not only magical dangers that could harm us, but also legal ones.

We learned in the morning, by telephone, that the truck carrying Zul's and Salmah's possessions (and the truck itself) had been impounded at the customs office in Kuala Kedah by the anti-smuggling unit of the Customs Police. Criminal charges of smuggling were being made against all of us and the Indian truck driver as well. Rokiah's and Salmah's male cousins were no longer around, so the three of us got into Rokiah's car and drove, with our hearts in our throats, to the customs office. Criminal charges? Smuggling? What could they possibly mean, Salmah kept asking Rokiah.

At the customs office, an official and a team of officers confronted us. 'These t-shirts', he said, waving one of the batik-imprinted t-shirts I recognised from the bales we had placed on the truck, 'What are these t-shirts? You are in very serious trouble', he said. 'Why hadn't the t-shirts been declared as "saleable goods" in transit from Langkawi? Why had everything been listed by the truck driver on the customs form as "household goods"? Wasn't this a lie?', he asked menacingly. Then he went on. 'Where were these items manufactured? There is no factory making t-shirts on Langkawi', he said. 'So, brought into Langkawi from elsewhere, had sales tax been paid on them upon manufacture?'⁴⁴ 'You smuggled them out', he said, 'and I believe you smuggled them in.'

The customs official told us to come in to his office one at a time, saying he needed to get our statements. His men followed with clipboards and pens. Rokiah charged in angrily. I sat in the waiting room with Salmah, who kept saying quietly over and again, 'This is a sign of more trouble, more bad luck.' When Rokiah came out, Salmah went in. Rokiah sat next to me and whispered, 'Someone was watching us the whole time in Langkawi — and *informed* on us.' She said the customs official told her his inspectors were not even going to bother looking in a ramshackle truck filled with mattresses and a refrigerator, but they had received a phone call from someone who said we were smugglers. Moreover, when they looked beneath the mattresses — they found bales and bales of t-shirts. The Indian truck driver had been distraught — his truck, the sole means of his livelihood, was impounded. He had insisted that Rokiah had told him to declare the goods as 'household goods'.

When Salmah came out, she said, to my great relief, that I did not need to go in to make a statement — clearly I was just an 'outsider' who knew nothing.⁴⁵ But the customs official told Salmah that he believed the family was using the tragedy of Zul's death as a 'cover' to get the t-shirts out. Otherwise, he said, you would have declared them and paid any duty you owed on them. Whatever the case, he reiterated, the charges were extremely serious and would not be overlooked despite her personal

44 The Malaysian Sales Tax Act 1972 states that sales tax will be paid by the manufacturer at the final stage of the manufacturing process. This implies that the manufacturer of the t-shirts was obligated by law to have paid a sales tax of 10 per cent prior to bringing them to Langkawi. Furthermore, goods taken from Langkawi are considered as exported from Malaysia; the truckload of goods should have been described as household goods and items for export, and the latter was required to be examined and cleared by customs. For a discussion, see www.lawyerment.com.my (last accessed on 13 Dec. 2007).

45 I was deeply concerned for my friends, but admittedly also concerned for myself, imagining I would lose my research permit and be ousted from Malaysia.

tragedy. No one was supposed to leave Kedah until the case was resolved. Salmah was pale and trembling.

On the road back to her parents' house, Rokiah sputtered in anger at how rudely they had been treated, insisting she absolutely had not intended to hide the shirts in the shipment of 'household goods'. The day on Langkawi was so rushed, so painful, and so entangled with fear of sorcery, that she said she had thought about nothing except getting everything out as fast as possible. She hadn't, she said, even considered the duty or customs status of the t-shirts.

Back at the house that night, the sisters and members of their extended family talked about what had happened. As far as they could understand – although they understood little of the tax and export law – the problem was about the provenance of the t-shirts. 'Where were they manufactured?' the customs official kept asking Rokiah, who said they had been made in Kuala Lumpur. 'Had you or the manufacturer paid sales tax when the t-shirts were purchased?' he asked. Rokiah had insisted yes. 'But you have no proof of that', he had shouted at her. Angry words went back and forth — Rokiah insisting that it was the fault of the shipping company that first brought the t-shirts into Langkawi earlier that year, or the fault of the Indian truck driver himself who yesterday had taken them out.

But what everyone in her parents' house really wanted to know was: who was the informer? Who would be so low, so hateful in the face of their family's tragedy?

Rokiah's cousin told us that informers swarm over Langkawi, watching every move that people make, for they can get easy money, he said — 40 per cent of the taxes and fines which are levied on smugglers. Like vultures, they wait and watch, then swoop down, he uttered. But who could this informer have been? Someone greedy, who wanted to harm us, Rokiah said. And, Salmah added, it had to be someone who knew about the t-shirt business. To the participants, it soon made sense — it was someone Zul knew, who knew Zul was planning various business ventures. Salmah began to speculate — it was not just a lowly, lazy Langkawi entrepreneur whom she imagined the night before had cursed him. It had to be someone, she said, like Zul – someone ambitious and smart – who had ended both Zul's life and the plans for the business. As the customs office vowed to get to the 'bottom of this case', so, too, did the participants. Who was doing all of these terrible things to the family?

By the next day, Salmah had a vision in her mind of whom it might be. She said that she recalled seeing a man she knew vaguely, at the jetty, when we first arrived; he was driving a shiny imported car, talking on his mobile phone. She had not given him a second thought then, but now it was beginning to dawn on her that he was the source of their pain and problems. This man, she said, used to come to LADA for advice and ideas. He was, she said, 'nobody special', but he liked to make people think he was. He was planning a chain of tourist shops in key locations on the island. Somehow he had always known just where the next big hotel was planned — and bought land in that location before anyone else could. Clearly, he saw Zul as his competitor and Zul's entrepreneurial knowledge as a threat. She recalled that the *bomoh* said the man who had harmed Zul would reveal himself within one week — indeed, she felt, that 'revelation' occurred when she saw him in his fancy foreign car. 'Zul drove only a

Proton',⁴⁶ she said softly, asserting that Zul's claims to entrepreneurial capacity could not be measured by something as superficial as an automobile. It was this man's capitalist intentions that brought Zul's future to a stop. Like Zul, he was smart and ambitious, yet 'nobody special', a middle-class entrepreneur with big plans. It was clear to Salmah that he planted the curse and was the immoral Malay informer who wanted to ensure that no one could succeed as a tourist retailer on Langkawi except for him. But the concept of whose 'immorality' should be implicated was to shift yet again.

Capitalist failure and the malfeasance of the entrepreneurial Malay rich

Several more days passed. Salmah spent most of her time lying down. Finally, the customs office allowed her to take some personal things off the truck — the children's toys and bicycles and some clothes. The truck driver kept calling to speak to Salmah or Rokiah, becoming more and more panicky about his impounded truck; he demanded money from them to cover his losses, which they refused to pay. The customs investigation was still ongoing; but we learned soon that Rokiah was free to leave Kedah, and, nearly a week after we had arrived, we started the drive back to Kuala Lumpur.

On the drive back, Rokiah began to show her anger. It had been a terrible unfurling of fraught days and nights. She was exhausted and unhappy, clearly worried that with the t-shirts, she had added conflict into Salmah's personal tragedy. 'Criminal charges', she scoffed, 'I'll tell you what's *criminal* in Malaysia.' Her eyes bright with fury, Rokiah returned to details about the death of Zul. I learned now about the family's experiences at the Kuala Lumpur hospital. She said to me that Zul had been placed in a 'third-class ward', full of other people, where the beds were only a foot and a half apart. She said there were 'Chinese people right next to him, crying and wailing'⁴⁷ and even eating what appeared to Rokiah's family to be pork. She was disgusted by the dirt and the attitude of the attendants, who could only grumble and shrug when hearing the family's complaints. Rokiah insisted that as a high-level civil servant, Zul was entitled to be in a 'first-class ward', with better nurses and more privacy.⁴⁸ She added that his boss had called from LADA and told the family that 'Zul would get only the best' — but that the hospital insisted there was no room for him in the better wards. Nor, she said, could her family afford to pay for Zul to be hospitalised in a fancy private hospital like Subang Jaya Medical Centre, where all 'the rich Chinese and rich Malays go'. Rokiah practically shook with anger as she told me that while she sat next to Zul's bed, she had read an article in the daily newspaper about how the prime minister was calling for a new national airline. She continued, 'They can build more

46 The Proton is the Malaysian national car. Import duty on foreign cars is extremely high in Malaysia and, as Smith notes, foreign car ownership in Malaysia is often understood to be a marker of status, Smith, 'The Contribution of a Japanese firm'.

47 Many of my Malay respondents were often critical of the emotions that characterised Chinese grief, and told me that to shed tears over the sick or dead was unseemly, because it showed Allah that his choices were being questioned by humans. See the discussion below on Islamic notions of fate.

48 Malaysian government hospitals have different *kelas* or 'classes' of wards: in the hospital Zul was admitted to, University Malaya Medical Centre, one saw signs for *Kelas 1*, *Kelas 2*, and *Kelas 3*. It is understood by Malaysians that people in the various levels of government service will be put in the ward that befits the status of their position.

golf courses, and tall buildings, and a new Proton car and even a new Proton boat ... and the lower classes and the middle classes are dying without anyone caring in the hospital, treated no better than meat.' Zul had plans, she said, for helping Malaysia do more than just 'show off'. She told me of other abuses: that morning, Zul had been wheeled from one hospital building to another in the pouring rain — no covered walkway had ever been built to transport the sick across the parking lot. That afternoon Zul slipped into the coma from which he was never to awaken.

As I listened to Rokiah, tears fell down both of our cheeks. Never before, in the months and months of our friendship, in the discussions and debates we had about entrepreneurship and enterprise, 'new Malays', NEP, and the Malaysian government, had I ever heard her criticise the direction of national development. Rokiah was proud of the lofty national projects like the Petronas Towers, Cyberjaya, and the Proton automobile that to her, as Mahathir had frequently reminded citizens through the decade of the 1990s, demonstrated that Malaysia had caught up with and would perhaps soon even overtake the west.⁴⁹ Normally she was, like many of the entrepreneurial Malay people I knew were, eager to participate in Malaysia's national aspirations, but now, in this tragic, deeply painful moment, she saw Zul, her family, and herself as part of a disenfranchised group: 'the poor' and 'the middle class', abandoned by development, tricked by both its sleights of hand and its superficiality. Rokiah felt fury at the priorities of the political elites who built the world's tallest skyscrapers and claimed global superiority but neglected to fulfill their obligations to industrious people like her brother-in-law, Zul. When Zul was denied the elite privileges of a 'first-class ward', and further mistreated like any lowly common 'piece of meat', Rokiah had a sudden awareness that something had failed the middle class — western medicine, the promises of modernity, and as painfully, the powers of the government itself to look out for all its citizens and value the contributions of its industrious middle class.

Like Rahim and Aisha's explanation for the fall of Highland Towers, Rokiah's experience of Zul's death provides glimpses into Malay middle-class consciousness *vis-à-vis* the more privileged and well-connected Malay upper classes. They were both stories about Malay 'proletarianisation' — in which members of the middle class momentarily felt solidarity with the poor (but, as demonstrated by Rokiah's disgust at the proximity of the pork-eating Chinese in the hospital and the reactions of Rahim and Aisha to the Indonesian maid who died in Highland Towers, the *Malay* poor alone). Both stories made a moral statement: the Malay rich have no knowledge of the lives of the Malay poor and take no responsibility for them. Beyond that, the Malay rich engage less with their ethnic group than they do with the Chinese rich, both in their business dealings and in elite places, like Highland Towers and the superior Subang Jaya hospital which Zul's family could never afford. While Rahim and Aisha were aware of why buildings like Highland Towers collapse contained a smug realisation that the rich will pay for their sins, Rokiah's story contained the more painful and personal perception that Zul

49 Refer to Goh, *Modern dreams* and Bunnell, *Malaysia, modernity and the multimedia super corridor* for a discussion of Mahathir's ambitious national projects.

and the Malay middle class had been abandoned by Malay elites and their elite political and economic agenda.

As we drove on the long highway onward to Kuala Lumpur, she began to talk ruefully about the foolishness of her plans with Zul regarding entrepreneurship in Langkawi — for clearly weren't all the business opportunities there already in the hands of rich and well-connected Malays? Langkawi was 'Mahathir's pet project', she said, reiterating a statement Salmah had made earlier, 'so weren't his "top people" already there? What room would there ever be for good people like me and Zul?', she wondered.

Capitalist failure and the monopolistic Chinese

Back in Kuala Lumpur, Rokiah now set herself the task of finding the supplier who had manufactured and sold the t-shirts to the four business partners – Zul, Rokiah, Rahim, and Aisha – in the first place. The customs police had demanded proof that t-shirts had been taxed in accordance to law prior to delivery to Langkawi. Getting the supplier's telephone number from Aisha, Rokiah called him. But he got angry when he heard there were customs problems, insisted these had nothing to do with him, and hung up the phone. 'A typical "China-man" businessman', she pronounced of his fear of officialdom and legality, regretful that they had done business with him in the first place. But she said their hands had been tied; for 'the best prices' for merchandise like cotton t-shirts could ultimately be obtained only from Chinese suppliers. Rokiah's attitude towards doing business with the Chinese was that it was a necessary evil — you went to them when you had to, but always with the goal of eventually avoiding them completely, when Malay entrepreneurs had captured all of their ventures for themselves.⁵⁰

So, when he hung up the phone, she steeled herself and decided to go to see him in person, asking me to go along. We drove to a factory warehouse in Overseas Union Garden, a Chinese commercial and residential area outside of Kuala Lumpur. After an angry confrontation, in which he said he would say nothing, he finally admitted to Rokiah that the requisite manufacturing tax on the t-shirts had never been paid. He had shipped them untaxed to Langkawi, he said, on the advice of Aisha. Now Rokiah was furious at her entrepreneurial partners. But back in her office, she learned from Rahim and Aisha that it was the Chinese man himself who had advised them. They said that he had boasted that he knew all the 'ins and outs' of getting around the rules on Langkawi. Rahim and Aisha had trusted him, because, as they said, 'the Chinese always know the ropes'.

Rokiah knew that the moral choices of Rahim and Aisha could not be explained away but it was perhaps understandable, for it was consistent with something many of her entrepreneurial friends felt: that Chinese claims to superiority tended to generate a Malay economic inferiority. The following month, at a meeting of an entrepreneurial

50 The complexity of the ideas expressed by Rokiah in this passage reflects both the deep ambivalence and grudging admiration Malays and other Southeast Asian groups have for what they mythologise as superior 'Chinese business acumen'. For a discussion, refer to K. S. Jomo, 'Chinese capitalism in Southeast Asia', in *Ethnic business: Chinese capitalism in Southeast Asia*, ed. K. S. Jomo and Brian Folk (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), pp. 10–25.

Malay business organisation to which she belonged, the discussion turned to the problem of trying to compete with Chinese knowledge and Chinese networking. Now Rokiah told the story of the t-shirts this way:

Rokiah's story

Again and again, I've tried to break through the monopoly of the Chinese, but they keep stopping us. I just tried to start a business on Langkawi with some partners and my brother-in-law. We had to rely on a Chinese man to supply us with the t-shirts. I went to his three-storey warehouse — where he had millions of t-shirts that he had probably gotten dirt-cheap from China. How can we (Malays) compete with that kind of business — when they (the Chinese) have all the connections tied up and make products for pennies? They have a monopoly on all levels of the business. Malays have to figure out how to start from scratch, and that's turning out to be impossible. We tried to get him to help us, but why should he? He's got all the powerhouse connections; he wants all the profits. How will Malays ever succeed when we can't even get our foot in the door?

She described how the Chinese thwarted Malay capitalists, by manipulating Malays into the trap of business failure. She described a 'Malay weakness'⁵¹ — they did not know enough about business and trusted Chinese claims. She said she believed the Chinese supplier had given her partners ill-founded advice because he knew that it would cause them trouble. To the rapt attention of her entrepreneurial audience, Rokiah described how the t-shirts were impounded by customs. In contrast to Salmah's understanding about who the 'informer' was (a Malay competitor), Rokiah said she believed it was, in all likelihood, a Chinese businessman on Langkawi who had turned them in — to ensure that all retail business on Langkawi remained in Chinese hands.

Capitalist failure and the naïveté of the striving Malay middle class

Rokiah contacted the customs officials in Kedah, admitting that the t-shirts, unbeknown to her, had arrived in Langkawi without having been properly taxed. The truck that had been impounded, and all of its contents, were now released after five weeks in the hands of the Kuala Kedah customs police. The truck driver tried again to get some kind of compensation from Salmah and Rokiah, but again they refused him, chastising him for sitting around and waiting for them to take account, doing nothing when he could have been pleading his own case with customs. 'Typical Indian', Rokiah said.⁵²

Another four weeks passed. A customs official contacted Rokiah and asked her to come to the main customs office in Kuala Lumpur. Again I was invited along. And then, after over two months of doubt, danger, debate, worry, and recriminations, the story ended simply. Rokiah was fined 500 *ringgit*. This, in the words of the customs

51 Yao, 'After *The Malay dilemma*'. The author discusses what he sees as the destructive psychological implications of the Malay awareness of the Malay 'weakness'.

52 It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss Malay perceptions of Indian economic behaviour; Rokiah's comment merely serves to demonstrate that no story of Malaysian capitalist modernity is complete without some reference to the spectre of the 'Indian other' who is most notable for his absence, both in this story and others.

officer, would ‘close the case’. There would be no need for a court appearance, he said. Rokiah described the cunning of the Chinese businessman, who had convinced her partners to cut corners. The customs officer asked for his name, which Rokiah supplied, along with his telephone number. He thanked Rokiah for bringing such an offender to their notice, and said the focus of any further investigation would now turn to grander-scale manoeuvres like tax evasion. He consoled Rokiah about the ill-fated results of their business venture. Your crime, he said, was small, whereas the ‘China-man’s was large’ for it was knowingly committed.

Much to my surprise, he advised Rokiah how to legally bring the t-shirts back to Langkawi, skirting the Chinese retailers on the island; perhaps, he said, she could resume the business venture. Soon after that discussion, she attended the Malay entrepreneurs’ meeting (described earlier), and told the story of the t-shirts as a tale of Malay gullibility and vulnerability in the face of Chinese domination.

The Malay entrepreneurs at the meeting could relate to Rokiah’s story. One man described a venture of his own, in which he had hoped to supply *halal* (Islamically slaughtered) meat to Muslim street vendors – a business that Malays should dominate – in which he was stymied by Chinese suppliers who could offer meat on credit to retailers or, he said, at prices that were ‘one-half what we needed just to break even’. Using terms that were familiar to me from similar discussions about the Chinese monopolists, the attendees spoke with frustration about the secret agreements and networks of the Chinese.

That night, the members of Rokiah’s group – which had up till then simply been a loose association of like-minded entrepreneurial Malays – vowed that it would formalise itself as a business. With excitement, the attendees committed to incorporating into a *Sendiran Berhad* (private limited) company.⁵³ The members would become shareholders. They would elect their most successful and high-profile entrepreneurial members as co-directors. ‘But what *will* our business be?’ another man asked. Rokiah began to speak again, with passion in her voice. ‘We must identify what modern people really want to buy and do on places like Langkawi and Labuan’,⁵⁴ she implored, ‘and become a powerhouse trading company that can bust the Chinese monopolies in these growth spots.’ She elaborated: ‘You can’t go it alone, like I just tried to do. That’s not how to do business in the real world. No one succeeds being innocent and small.’ Beyond this, if the group were big enough, they could get help from the government. ‘We have contacts who know Daim and Anwar’, one of the group asserted, mentioning the names of the then-finance minister Tun Daim Zainuddin and Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Rokiah added that she had contacts with LADA, the Langkawi Development Agency where Zul had worked. By the time the meeting had ended, the attendees had all concurred — Malays could no longer be naïve in their business dealings. This group of like-minded Malay entrepreneurs would become a kind of mega-entrepreneur. They would beat the Chinese at their own game. Langkawi could be theirs. As we drove from the meeting, Rokiah’s excitement

53 A *Sendiran Berhad* or Sdn. Bhd. company is a private limited company in Malaysia that is incorporated and registered with the Malaysian Registrar of Companies.

54 Labuan was another island undergoing rapid development in the 1990s. Refer to Sloane-White, ‘Why Malays travel’.

turned to sadness. 'If only Zul could have been here tonight', she said. 'These were the kinds of plans and contacts we needed.'

Muslim understandings and Muslim lessons

As the ethnography thus far demonstrates, explaining and understanding failure is a shifting cultural process. The shifts, in this case, were rapid and constantly adapting to new circumstances and new information. Over time, however, the drama and the sense of injustice that had adhered to all of the explanations for Zul's death and the failure of his shared venture with Rokiah, Aisha, and Rahim began to diminish. For its various participants, it became a story that did not focus on the unbearable costs paid in the course of an entrepreneurial life and death, but on something much simpler. The story ultimately became one of fate or *takdir* – that which is willed by the divine decree of Allah – and the moral duties of Allah's believers.

Malays I knew, spoke often about the meaning and shades of *takdir*. My landlady, who was strict in her conviction that the talk of 'charms and curses' that surrounded Zul's death was retrogressive and anti-Islamic, believed that the death of someone young, like Zul, could be understood simply by reasoning that 'Allah loved and needed him more' or, that Allah knew that if Zul remained alive, perhaps he would have committed a sin. 'We must never question the purpose of a death', she insisted when I described to her the events I had witnessed. Rokiah's and Salmah's father, himself a very pious and learned student of the Quran, throughout the painful days that preceded and followed Zul's death, grew uncomfortable with the visits to *bomohs* and the discussion of dangerous *ilmu*. To him, while Zul may have been cursed, to constantly seek an answer for why it happened was un-Islamic, because it was as if Allah's choice for Zul was being questioned. In the background during the *bomoh* visits which his daughters and other kin made, he stood, thin-lipped and disapproving. Death, he said finally, was death. To grieve or rail against it was wrong, for Allah is always wise. Over time, Salmah understood and accepted Zul's and her *takdir*.

Rokiah eventually came to a similar conclusion. Nearly a year later, she said she now understood that Zul's death, and all of the terrible things that were associated with it, like the smuggling charges, spoke to the incredible 'wisdom of Allah'. Fate was acting on behalf of Salmah when Allah handed her a series of events that would, in Rokiah's words, 'take her away from her unhappiness for over a month', and occupy her with more immediate problems like getting her household goods back. For Rokiah herself, Allah decreed that there should be profound business lessons learned and knowledge gained. Now she knew to 'ask the right questions'. She knew to never rely on Chinese connections or poor information again. And those lessons had spread further: the entrepreneurial networking group she participated in now understood, too. Rahim and Aisha did as well. The story began to be told, in its various permutations, in an Islamic idiom with moral implications.⁵⁵

Obviously, it is impossible to characterise the complexities of different shades of Islamic belief and understanding among people who, as the people in this paper did,

55 For a recent analysis of the ever expanding role of Islamic interpretation and reinterpretation in contemporary urban, middle-class Malay life, refer to Kahn, *Other Malays*, ch. 3.

describe themselves as the ‘*middle middle class*’. While many of these people share certain entrepreneurial ideals, there is no absolute uniformity in their understanding of Islam. The foregoing discussion of the debate between Malay tradition (*ilmu, bomoh*) and a ‘purer’ Islamic practice indicates that even within a single family little agreement exists in Malay life among the faithful. Malays do concur that fate in Allah’s hands is ultimately the final accounting that can be made in understanding life’s outcomes, but, for some of those involved in the story of Zul’s entrepreneurial life and death, the dual obligations of self-improvement and self-understanding figure importantly as well. For many of the entrepreneurial middle-class Malay people I knew, these are moral obligations of a modern Muslim life; it is here, I think, that failure can be understood and embraced as a source of middle-class virtue.

When I asked Malays about the meaning of *takdir*, they explained to me that Allah determines when and where a human being will live and die, but beyond that, it is their own free will or *ikhtiar* that determines what happens in life. In their minds, it is *ikhtiar* – the choice to work hard, to rise above idleness and corruption – that distinguished people like Rahim, Aisha, Zul, and Rokiah from maleficent Malays. Sitting passively next to the *padi* fields or earning money without effort were similar sins in Allah’s eyes. All of the men and women I have described in this paper believed that all Malays had to work hard to honour Allah’s worldly gifts, which included the benefits provided to them during NEP as well as Allah’s gift of life itself. But they understood, too, that merely working hard would not guarantee wealth. Material rewards, they believed, are only one of the possible rewards of serving Allah; they cannot be expected, nor can they be the sole *niat* (intention) of one’s work and effort. While most of the striving Malays I knew wanted to drive fancy imported cars and not Protons like Zul, they were uncomfortable with the notion that consumption or lifestyle alone symbolised one’s worth. Indeed, they said, to be a virtuous Muslim, one must think more about serving Allah than the self. Only then, they felt, you might be rewarded with material well-being. But materiality alone would not ever demonstrate virtue, and those who do not strive for immaterial things are the fallen — it is they who have failed in the eyes of Allah.

There are many spectres of failure in the story of the death of Zul and the entrepreneurial venture. The crafty ‘China-man’ haunted them and the activities of many of the striving Malays I knew,⁵⁶ representing a deep conviction behind the social fractionalisation described by Gregory Bateson as the process of ‘schismogenesis’.⁵⁷ NEP was supposed to close the schism of Malay / Chinese difference; it has also produced a set of complex and varied middle-class abreactions which range from what Yao Souchou describes as ‘anxiety’⁵⁸ to what others have called an intensification of ethnic communalism.⁵⁹ Certainly, the suspicion with which ‘the Chinese’ are regarded

56 Yao would concur that Malays are ‘haunted’ by their mythologies of ‘The Chinese’; in ‘After *The Malay dilemma*’, he states that the complexity of Malay response goes ‘far beyond the “reality” of Chinese economic domination’ to become ‘lodged in the psychic realm of Malay subjectivity’; Yao, ‘After *The Malay dilemma*’, p. 206.

57 Gregory Bateson, *Naven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936).

58 Yao, ‘After *The Malay dilemma*’, p. 206.

59 See, for example, Judith Nagata, ‘Perceptions of social inequality in Malaysia’, *Contributions to Asian studies*, 7 (1975): 113–66 and R. S. Milne, *Politics in ethnically bipolar states* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1981).

has not diminished among certain entrepreneurial strivers. Indeed, it is precisely this overwhelming anti-Chinese spirit that academics have argued obliterates intra-class awareness among Malays and numbs them to its evidence.⁶⁰

But as Yao Souchou states, the ‘ethnic binary’ no longer explains all Malay experiences in capitalist modernity.⁶¹ In the drama of Zul’s death, it becomes clear that it is not only the Chinese who may be blamed for Malay failure, but also other, less virtuous Malays variously placed throughout capitalist society. Thus, it is not only the ‘Chinese other’ that evokes a Malay reaction: crucial tales of Malay class vulnerability *vis-à-vis* a discursive ‘Malay other’ snake in and out of the explanations and understandings of capitalist failure in the story about Zul. The ‘Malay other’ first took the guise of the poor on Langkawi, then of its middle class. Both could cause Malay failure. Sometimes, in other cases, the ‘Malay other’ is the Malay elite, the politicians, and the ‘top people’ with friends in high places. These Malays are often in illegitimate alliances with the ‘Chinese other’. Thus, elite ‘Malay and Chinese’ ties were rumoured by Rahim and Aisha to have been struck between the Malay officials and entrepreneurs who sourced from the Chinese the faulty cement and steel used in the construction of the Highland Towers. Elite Malay and Chinese ties appeared, too, in the construction of ill-gained wealth of the Malay political and entrepreneurial elite who lived in the Highland Towers. The ‘Chinese other’ was also partnered with Malay elites who could afford, as Zul’s family could not, medical treatment at a private hospital like Subang Jaya Medical Centre. Later, the elite political ‘Malay other’ – people like Daim Zainuddin and Anwar Ibrahim – were described as accessible contacts for a mega-entrepreneurial venture to beat the Chinese at their own game. As Bateson reminded us, schisms and the groups they generate are ever shifting, and so, too, I argue, are the identities, self-understandings, and affiliations of people who have been referred to as the Malay middle class. But what does not shift for the people in this story is the need to measure their moral worth and that of others in capitalism.

Conclusion: Embracing failure among the ‘middle middle class’

In the story of the death of Zul and the entrepreneurial venture, explanations for what and who had failed and why were never truly fixed; in the family that was most involved, they still are not. Over the months, when we spoke about it in the company of Rokiah’s family and with others, explanations for the events that caused and surrounded Zul’s death were ever mutable and schismogenetic. The story was sometimes eschatological and sometimes entrepreneurial and sometimes both, providing evidence of the greatness and wisdom of Allah in life and death situations and economic ones. But among the possible causes presented, one is striking for its absence — ‘the west’. Despite the ongoing public discourse of Mahathir, who endlessly railed against western post-colonial domination and western conspirators as the *bête noire* of Malaysian and Islamic success,⁶² this global spectre did not appear in the story of Zul or in any of the many other discussions of causes of Malay entrepreneurial

60 Nagata, ‘Perceptions of social inequality’ and J. J. Puthucheary, *Ownership and control in the Malayan economy* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Cooperative Bookshop, 1979), p. 174.

61 Yao, ‘After *The Malay dilemma*’.

62 Yao, ‘Modernity and Mahathir’s rage’.

failure that I encountered over the course of my research. That Mahathir's choice spectre does not emerge in explanations of Malay failure is significant; it tells us, I think, that his 'usual suspects' were not the same as those of his Malay audience. Mahathir had his own brand of schismogenetic fractionalisation; critical of Malays in his *The Malay dilemma* and of any continuing evidence of their indolence,⁶³ ultimately he believed Malays should look far afield for the sources of failure.⁶⁴ But clearly, the men and women in the story of Zul's death and the failure of their venture were not so sure. They looked closer to home, at real experiences and real people in their social and economic world, and they looked within themselves, their faith, and their moral intentions to understand why things went awry.

Since NEP, the overwhelmingly ethno-political calculus of Malay progress has focused on the spectre of Malay capital ownership. This has given primacy to Malay materiality, which has led anthropological analysts down the same path as NEP's policy-makers — that, above all, we must attend to Malay accumulation to understand the dimensions of Malay success. As such, in trying to analyse and describe the Malay middle class, anthropologists have primarily focused on the space marked out by what I have called the two poles of consumption and dependency. But my ethnography suggests that Malays who describe themselves in a material world as the '*middle middle class*' use a different calculus than policy-makers and anthropologists to mark out their place in contemporary Malay life. To them, the materiality of 'success' is not a necessary definition of the Malay middle class. My analysis suggests that an alternative definition of the Malay middle class can emerge by looking not at what a middle class accumulates, but what it has failed to acquire.

The spectre of Malay failure for the entrepreneurial men and women in my research did not, as Yao Souchou argues *bumiputera* policy did in general, produce an overwhelming Malay anxiety and sense of shame.⁶⁵ Instead, failure provided, paradoxically, a key to a Malay sense of achievement. This was the achievement of the moral Muslim self — of an immaterial striving to better one's knowledge and one's service to Allah in the material world. To have not succeeded can be evidence of a route to self-knowledge and well being. To have not succeeded is different from being poor. This is what the industrious '*middle middle class*' can claim for itself — distance and difference from the indolent Malay poor in Baling or Langkawi. To have not succeeded also differentiates the '*middle middle class*' from the rich: the freeloader Malay strivers and the politicking Malays in the pockets of the Chinese. The '*middle middle class*' is differentiated from the 'Malay others' by virtue of its morality and industriousness. Hard-working, the '*middle middle class*' is above all, entrepreneurial. It can claim to not merely be participating in the materiality of capitalist society — one of NEP's stated goals — but to be producing capitalism. They would produce their capitalism

63 For a discussion of ways in which Mahathir reprimanded the *bumiputera* 'hand-out mentality' in the NEP era, refer to Yao, 'After *The Malay dilemma*' and Sloane, *Islam, modernity and entrepreneurship*.

64 Blaming the outsider has a long history in social analysis: anthropologists such as Evans-Pritchard and social theorists such as Simmel described this process; more recently, James Siegel has explored how 'naming the witch' becomes a political process of identifying and casting out 'the other' in episodes of social violence in contemporary Indonesia; refer to James Siegel, *Naming the witch* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

65 Yao, 'After *The Malay dilemma*'.

knowledgeably and legitimately and without the Chinese, in contrast to the much-vaunted Malay entrepreneurial heroes whose success, they suspected, was dependent on friends in high places.

What differentiated the participants in the story of Zul's death and the failed entrepreneurial venture from spectres of 'the other' was, finally, their sense of Islamic virtue. What the striving entrepreneurial Malay participants in this ethnography understood most of all was that they are in Allah's hands, and that the final accounting of success is Allah's to make. What they valued most among themselves was what they believed distinguished them from others: the conviction that material success should never be an end in itself, and that virtue in a capitalist world means that Islamic self-development matters most of all. Because it leads to self-examination and deeper understanding, failure among the Islamically right-minded entrepreneurial strivers becomes, paradoxically, a badge of valour.