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Islam, Modernity and Entrepreneurship among the Malays

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Book Presentation
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Islam, Modernity and Entrepreneurship among the Malays is the result of nearly four years of research conducted between January of 1993 and January of 1998, on entrepreneurship, networking, and corporate culture among the middle- and upper-middle-class Malay population of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The book is an analysis of an initial period of fieldwork (from 1993 to 1995). It is the first in-depth anthropological study of Malay Muslim enterprise and entrepreneurial culture since the inception of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in Malaysia in 1970, a systematic programme intended to develop the economic skills of Malays in an ethnically diverse nation after the ethnic riots in 1969.

Certain ethnographic studies have discussed the economic situation of Malaysians – Malays, Chinese, and Indians – who have been *disadvantaged* by the dramatic changes brought about by the NEP. This study, however, discusses the lives and enterprises of the Malay men and women who have been *advantaged* the most by Malay-only government policy. Many economists and political scientists have argued over the consequences of NEP for the Malaysian nation as a whole and the economic and social consequences of Malaysia's ethnicized politics, but there have been few ethnographic studies of the social group most directly involved in and affected by NEP – the new Malay middle and upper-middle class. Although there is recent literature focusing on the spectacular culture of consumption and choices of the new rich of Asia (one publisher even has a series dedicated to that subject), the analysis in *Islam, Modernity and Entrepreneurship among the Malays* provides insight into the culture of business – the economic decisions, the investments, and the capital and social networks – that have resulted in Malay wealth. There is also very recent literature on the spectacular economic downturn among the Asian 'Little Dragon' economies in late 1997; I venture to suggest that the book offers retrospective insight into why that crisis occurred in one Little Dragon, and perhaps even offers prognosticative insight into the nature of Malaysia's recent, but exaggerated, economic recovery, which also silenced the voices of political dissent in 1999.

Research among Malay entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurship is, in Malaysia, what NEP intended it to be: a middle-class, even elite, phenomenon. It earns grand-scale public attention in the Malay community; the government honours individuals who are deemed successful entrepreneurs, bestowing titles and honorifics upon them, while magazines and the media report endlessly on the lifestyles and management secrets of Malay entrepreneurs. Hundreds of Malay entrepreneurial people, who were participating in the modern economy in Kuala Lumpur or attempting to cast a wider net to economic and social niches in the rest of Malaysia, Southeast Asia, and the world, offered insight through our conversations. I interviewed people in their houses and their offices, factories, and country clubs. Male and female entrepreneurs – both participated with equal fervour in the modern economy – were contacted. Also interviewed were parents and children, students, and teenagers (every one of them wanting to be an entrepreneur one day); recent university graduates (all wanting to be entrepreneurs); professors and professionals in big corporate businesses who were planning to go out 'on their own' or were already doing so on the side. Furthermore, groups were met with or spoken to, such as women's and men's en-

trepreneurial societies, college alumni cohorts, and executives' networking organizations established to capture greater entrepreneurial opportunities. I attended workshops (accompanied by informants) on Malay entrepreneurship, Malay entrepreneurs' clubs, entrepreneurship talks, entrepreneurial development societies, entrepreneurial award ceremonies, and huge conferences and trade shows sponsored by government ministries and agencies to develop local, regional, and global Malay entrepreneurial networks.

Malay entrepreneurship and the changes it implies affected other, less visible aspects of life, especially in relationships between men and women, children and parents, brothers and sisters, individuals and cohorts, even human beings and Allah. As such, I spent a great deal of time in Malay homes, discussing marriage, family, modern women's roles, and the consequences of rapid social change. It was found generally everywhere that Malay men and women actively seek to understand the role of Islam in contexts of social and economic change, and follow or react to *dakwah*, the intensification of Islamic practice in Malaysia since the 1980s.

Later on in the first period of fieldwork, increasing focus was placed on several particular ventures which seemed characteristic of the various kinds of entrepreneurship in which my informants were engaged. These were established businesses, a year or so old, well beyond the drawing-board stage in the sense that they had already been capitalized, registered with the government, and so on. The enterprises focused upon had been formed with the injection of government or private capital, and consisted of several large manufacturing concerns, as well as enterprises which represented the non-industrial sector into which much Malay private capital is flowing: real estate, insurance, tourism, advertising, publishing, communication, and consultancies.

Good works – Malay entrepreneurship and Islamic values

The first part of the book, presented under the rubric of 'Good Works', argues that among the Malay middle class, entrepreneurship has become the main vector of ethnic, religious, and moral worth, and a test of virtue and modernity among the beneficiaries of the NEP. The complex themes of Islamic duty and financial obligation, which enframe Malay life in relationships with parents, spouses, cohorts, and the communal group, are explored. Also explored are the crucial, self-consciously 'modern' redefinitions of Islamic economic beliefs and meanings which have shaped the Malay understanding of entrepreneurship and human agency. Focusing upon several individual stories of eschatological and economic self-development, I examined the ways in which a Muslim world-view establishes balanced definitions of self-inter-

est and group interest and clarifies the culture of social and moral entailments in which the informants operate. Also examined was the belief informants had that they were preserving – through entrepreneurship – egalitarian and communal traditions and values from the Malay past, when in fact, entrepreneurship has resulted in greater social distinctions and the formation of a new elite. I argue that entrepreneurship implies, to the informants concerned, an Islamic development process which could reveal key, group-oriented moral and traditional behaviours – the material demonstration of 'good works' – until Malay entrepreneurs see themselves acting not just for themselves, but for all Malays, Muslims, and the very fate of the nation and Malaysian society.

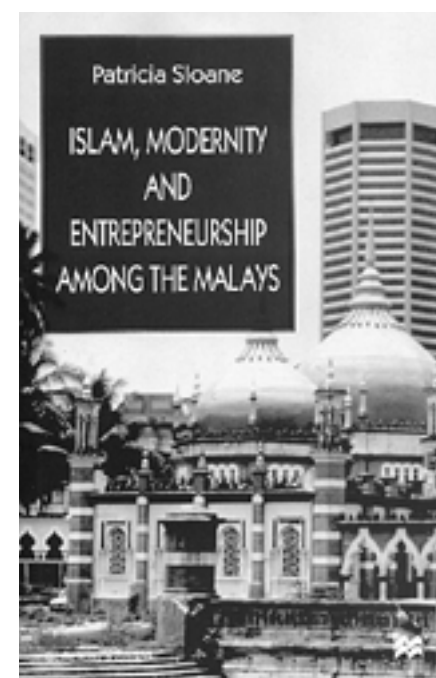
Networks – Malay entrepreneurship in action

The second part of the book, presented under the rubric of 'Networks', is an attempt to elucidate how the informants enact their understanding of Malay economic modernity and entrepreneurship; that is, how they infuse their altruistic image of 'good works' into economic and social action. A description is given of the way in which networks and relationships form in Kuala Lumpur society and the ways in which social life can be manipulated in pursuit of economic gain. Case studies of entrepreneurial networking and the entrepreneurial objectives of three of the enterprises concerned are given. The first case study illustrates how alliances form among Malay entrepreneurs, often as a consequence of the way in which the government represents modern economic opportunity and enterprise to Malays. The expectations informants had of each other and of their ventures in pursuing such opportunities, and the often disappointing returns that their swiftly formed alliances brought are dealt with.

The second case study examines the consequences of achieving a high profile for one female entrepreneur in Kuala Lumpur. The positive effects of networking used for building alliances are described along with the negative effects of networking – when gossip and rumours of sorcery are used by network participants to diminish the identity of an entrepreneur who is thought to be dangerously self-interested, and even un-Islamic. It is suggested that these consequences are often experienced by autonomous women in Malay entrepreneurial society, who induce a certain cultural ambivalence about the true source of their powers.

An entrepreneurial venture that harnessed its very existence to the role of Malay networks to the point at which networking became the primary purpose – indeed, the product – of the enterprise itself, is examined. These networks are then related to other forms of Malay action which explicitly use social relations for economic ends, and it is shown how this strategy has become increasingly concatenated to the Malay theory of 'good works'.

Finally, the crucial role of entrepreneurship in establishing and legitimizing Malay identity and representing Malay ideals of morality, egalitarianism, harmony, and tradition in the contexts of rapid social and economic change is discussed. It is demonstrated that through its seemingly endless incorporativeness, through the enmeshing of material and affective ties in networks, Malay entrepreneurship, to its actors, symbolizes diminished eliteness and Malay classlessness, and implies openness, shared power, and free access to opportunity. What was learned from the informants can be described as a Malay theory of entrepreneurship, one which locates Malay entrepreneurs in their local culture, validates the pro-Malay policies of NEP, and connects Malay development to a global culture of capitalism. Then a theory of Malay entrepreneurship is elucidated. A description is given of the way in which entrepreneurship tends to confirm, determine the gender of, and politicize Malay eliteness, while simultaneously closing out many of the entrepreneurs aspiring to wealth and power who are met in the pages of the book. Moreover, it is argued that the theory of Malay entrepreneurship conceals the crucial role of the state in creating and supporting high-level, politically-connected Malay entrepreneurs – precisely the group that I then went on to study in later periods of research in Malaysia. ♦



Patricia Sloane, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology and JASO, Oxford University, earned a PhD in Social Anthropology from Oxford University in 1996. She was appointed as a research fellow at the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies at the National University of Malaysia, where she researched middle-class culture, and later conducted an in-depth study of corporate culture in a major Malay-owned conglomerate. An editor for JASO, The Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford, she is currently preparing an article on sexual harassment in the Malay workplace.