In this chapter I explore how the hegemonic governmental discourse on Malay entrepreneurship in Malaysia is embedded and articulated on an everyday discursive level. This discourse has developed as a result of a general invitation to engage in national economic growth. The Malaysian government party UMNO, with former Prime Minister Mahathir in the lead, has had a strong focus on entrepreneurship, and has tried by different means to stimulate Malays in particular into entrepreneurial practice. The focus has not only been on economic success, but also that the Malays should become religiously and morally superior entrepreneurs. This ideal appears contrary to more general capitalistic discourses, in particular the views propounded by neo-liberal discourse (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000), where the main focus is on economic success without reference to religion or ethnicity.

Although “the successful Malay entrepreneur” is a core figure in state discourse (Sloane 1999), I argue that the government has not been able to achieve a total consensus on Malay entrepreneurship. If we shift our focus from political ideals to the practices of real market situations, we rather find various forms of ambivalence with respect to entrepreneurial roles, and these dilemmas and their solutions are, to a large extent, rooted in the social and cultural embedding of economic actors.

This ambivalence is particularly evident among young Malay females who migrate to urban areas to find themselves jobs or with the intention of starting an enterprise and I will discuss two such cases here. I will investigate how the two young women approach the political ideal

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1 This study is based on six months of fieldwork in the suburban community of Petaling Jaya in Selangor, Malaysia during 2003.
2 United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) has been the governmental party in Malaysia since final independence in 1957.
3 For an overview of state-led industrialization in Malaysia, see Abdullah and Muhammad 2008.
of entrepreneurship, and how they fashion their market roles in articulation with moralities of age, gender and religion. I do so against the backdrop of a tradition of anthropological studies of the Malay social world, and in particular studies of Malay peasant societies that provide excellent analyses of how the gendered division of labour is practised (Rosemary Firth 1966; Raymond Firth 1966; Strange 1981; Carsten 1989, 1997; Rudie 1994b). Labour among the Malays has been segregated into female and male tasks, and females are often presented as independent actors with great freedom of action; they are the ones who organize the household economy and handle the family’s income (Rosemary Firth 1966; Strange 1981; Carsten 1989).

Traditionally, there were, however, only a few economic opportunities open for women in the market sphere; females were typically found in the informal sector where they made or sold snacks, vegetables or other types of food and produced clothes or nets (Rosemary Firth 1966:30). Malay females were regarded as the ‘guardians’ of the money, but were not expected to be part of the more commercial market spheres (Carsten 1989:138; Rosemary Firth 1966:27). According to Rosemary Firth (1966:32) it was mostly widows, old women, divorced wives or secondary wives who took part in trading. Young Malay females were not expected to fashion market roles at all, but were rather part of the subsistence sphere (Carsten 1989).

A few studies have investigated how the rapid economic development in Malaysia during the last few decades has affected the economic roles of Malay females. Among them are Aihwa Ong (1987), who has studied female factory workers, and Patricia Sloane (1999), who has carried out research on corporate Malay entrepreneurs. Both these studies corroborate the view that it is difficult for Malay females to attain commercial market roles. Females who fashion such roles frequently become victims of gossip and are often accused of immorality (Ong 1987:179; Sloane 1999:162).

As mentioned, the state discourse presents an ideal Malay entrepreneur. The content of this articulated figure is mainly that he or she should be economically successful and act according to Malay Muslim morals and guidelines. The figure does not appear as gendered in government discourse; moral imperatives apply equally to males and females. Sloane points out that this is a paradox because gender issues seem to be problematic among her informants (1999:197). She argues that the model of entrepreneurship presented by the Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir, where all Malay entrepreneurs are portrayed as alike, is not reflected in the actual practices of entrepreneurship (Sloane 1999:168).