The Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

An Ethnographic Study of Jewish Businesses Across Borders
Vrije Universiteit

The Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits
An Ethnographic Study of Jewish Businesses Across Borders

Academisch proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad Doctor aan
de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam,
op gezag van de rector magnificus
prof.dr. L.M. Bouter,
in het openbaar te verdedigen
ten overstaan van de promotiecommissie
van de faculteit der Sociale Wetenschappen
op woensdag 28 april 2010 om 15.45 uur
in de aula van de universiteit,
De Boelelaan 1105

door

Mattheus Joseph Kamsma

geboren te Nijmegen
promotor: prof.dr. H. Dahles

copromotoren: dr. J.B.M. Koning
prof.dr. A. Reid
Ithaca

Your mind should ever be on Ithaca.
Your reaching there is your prime goal.
But do not rush your journey anywise.
Better that it should last for many years,
And that, now old, you moor at Ithaca at last,
A man enriched by all you gained upon the way,
And not expecting Ithaca to give you further wealth.

For Ithaca has given you the lovely trip.
Without her you would not have set your course.
There is no more that she can give.

If Ithaca seems then too lean, you have not been deceived.
As wise as you are now become, of such experience,
you will have understood what Ithaca stands for.

Constantine P. Cavafy (1911)
Contents

Foreword ................................................................. xi

1. Introducing the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits ......................... 13
   1.1 Academic Relevance ...................................................... 13
   1.2 The Straits ................................................................. 19
   1.3 The First Line of Investigation; Allegories ............................. 21
   1.4 The Second Line of Investigation; Networks and Complexity .... 23
   1.5 The Research Questions and Chapter Outline of the Thesis ...... 25

2. Theorising the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits .......................... 29
   2.1 Theorising Diaspora .......................................................... 29
   2.2 The Straits Jewish Diasporascape ....................................... 30
   2.3 When a 'Terra Incognita' Becomes a No©Go Area .................. 34
   2.4 The Complexity Turn: Movement-Driven Social Science ....... 41
   2.5 The Spatial Topologies of Region, Networks and Fluids ......... 46
   2.6 The Topology of Fire and Matters of Absenced Otherness ....... 49
   2.7 ‘History Matters’ and Path Dependence ............................. 51
   2.8 Researching the Straits Jewish Diasporascape as a Complex System . 53

3. Researching the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits ...................... 57
   3.1 Making up for Wasted Time .............................................. 57
   3.2 Access: Hello, my Name is Theo and I am not Jewish ............. 59
   3.3 Tool Maintenance ............................................................. 63
   3.4 Multiple Identity and 'Method Assemblage' ............................ 65
   3.5 Start-up of the Project ..................................................... 69
   3.6 Multi-sited Research without Multi-sited Research Permits ....... 72
   3.7 Data Processing and Key Informers .................................... 75
   3.8 The Research Process: Historizing and Mixing Methods .......... 78
   3.9 Methods: Where the Reflexive and Complexity Turn Meet ....... 82

4. Depicting the Hinterland of the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits .... 87
   4.1 Introduction ................................................................. 87
   4.2 Jewish Presence in between Myth and Reality ....................... 88
      4.2.1 Early Tracks and Traces ............................................. 88
      4.2.2 Jews in the Early Colonial Times ............................... 92
      4.2.3 Marranos ............................................................... 94
      4.2.4 Jews of Islam and Jews of Christianity ....................... 95
   4.3 Central Node Singapore .................................................. 98
      4.3.1 The Baghdadi Jewish Trade Diaspora .......................... 98
      4.3.2 Opium ................................................................. 99
      4.3.3 A New influx: Ashkenazic Jews .................................. 101
      4.3.4 Another New influx: Jews from the Homeland Israel ....... 103
      4.3.5 Modern time Jewish Singapore .................................. 105
   4.4 Oscillations between Messianic and Orthodox Judaism in Minahasa . 107
      4.4.1 Christian Minahasa and Jewish Progenitor Abraham Fontein . 107
      4.4.2 The Businesses of Abraham Fontein ............................ 108
      4.4.3 Abraham Fontein’s Offspring ..................................... 110
      4.4.4 The Manadonese Jewish Community ............................ 114
      4.4.5 Israeli Jewish Presence in Manado .............................. 117
## 5. Enacting the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits: Diamond Trader Networks ....... 127

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Introduction</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 The family Firm as Organisational Mode of Ordering</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Diamonds Connecting South Africa and Asia</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Connecting with the Rest of the World: The Diamond Exchange of Singapore</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 Connecting with Other Ethnicities: A Sindhi as President of the DES</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6 How to Keep the Network Stable</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7 Assessing the Value of the Diamond</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8 How to Expand the Network: the Credit System</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.9 How to Cross Borders using Submarines</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.10 Alternative Modes of Ordering: Jewish Ethno-Religiosity and Business Ethics</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.11 Another Alternative Mode of Ordering: the Fifth C of ‘Conflict Free Diamonds’</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.12 New Nodes and Israeli Diamond Dealers in Singapore</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.13 Two Generations of Diamond Dealers and Future Scenarios</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 6. Enacting the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits: FJ Benjamin, Brand behind the Brands ........... 157

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1 Introduction</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2 From Garment Trade to Branding</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3 The Family Firm</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4 The J-factor in Crossing Borders Strategies</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5 Anchorage in Singapore</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.6 Jewish Communal Support and Business Ethics</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7 Strategies for Expansion: an IPO (Initial Public Offering)</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.8 Business Complexities: the Asian Crisis and Doing Business with Israel</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.9 Strategies to Keep Control and Avoiding a Take-Over</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.10 Anchored in Singapore: the Benjamins are Here to Stay</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 7. Enacting the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits: The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf (CBTL) ............. 185

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.1 Introducing CBTL</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2 Coffee as Actant</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3 The Sassoons</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.4 Jewish Dietary Laws</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.5 How to Gain Control? Franchisee becomes Franchisor</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.6 How to Finance Expansion</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.7 Cross-Border Strategies and the J-factor</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.8 Coffee-Chains in Israel</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.9 Anchorage in Singapore</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 8. Assessing the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits: Jewish Business Networks........ 205

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8.1 Introduction</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2 The Actant</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3 Keeping Control over the Family Business</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4 Network Immutability and Mobility</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8.5 Non-place Singapore and Straits Mobilities .................................................................217
8.6 The Homeland of Israel ..............................................................................................222

9. Concluding Remarks ....................................................................................................227
  9.1 The Straits Jewish Diasporascape as a Dissipative System .........................................227
  9.2 Modules, Rifts and Rims ...........................................................................................229
  9.3 The J-factor .............................................................................................................232

Annexure I: List of interviews..........................................................................................235
Annexure II: Summary in Dutch ......................................................................................238
Annexure III: Indonesian Muslim ‘Yahudi’ References ..................................................242
Annexure IV: Family Tree Fontein ..................................................................................243
References .....................................................................................................................244
Foreword

This book is a relational materiality. This end-product has come into being through the involvement of numerous persons, techniques, organisations and materialities. A foreword is meant to concentrate on and say thanks to the indispensable human support which I have received during my research and which has made my research a purifying, fascinating and unforgettable experience.

It has been purifying, because working for so many years in a splendid isolation leads you to what matters most, - which is love. I wish to thank fate that made my son Guo’s life path intersect with mine. He is the best possible companion ever. And I wish to thank my wife Karin for her love and for providing the beacons of light, companionship and anchorages on this long journey to Ithaca. It is to them that I dedicate this work.

This journey has been fascinating, because, stripped to the bone, science is potentially, what I had already imagined, the purest form of human endeavour. I am grateful that I could take part in an exercise which has challenged my intellectual capabilities to the fullest. That would not have been possible without the confidence, patience and support of my promoter, Prof. Heidi Dahles and my co-promotor, Dr. Juliette Koning at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam (VUA), and in Singapore my co-promotor at the Asian Research Institute of the National University of Singapore, Prof. Anthony Reid. I have to thank the financial sponsors of my research: the faculty of social sciences of the VUA, the Menasseh ben Israel Institute and the Levi Lassen foundation. Special thanks go to Professor Daniel Meijers (VUA), Dr. Geoffrey Benjamin (Nanyang University Singapore) and Dr. Ibu Alef Theria Wasim (Islamic State University (UIN) in Yogyakarta), who have provided me with the essential institutional back-up and support in the start-up phase of the research. I thank Ellie van Ooi for the lay out, Win Castermans for his comments, Steve Nestorovski and Alan Brimer for the correction and editing of the English, and Steve Nestorovski and Matthijs Koppen for the design.

I wish to thank my parents, my extended family and close friends for their unconditional support and confidence. Thanks to my my room mates and colleagues, especially Henk van den Heuvel, Kees Boersma and Sytze Kingma at the COM-wing, for showing their genuine interest. I am grateful to all those ‘in the field’ who have consented to give interviews and participate in my research. They are listed in the annexure. I wish to mention Batia Horsky, Rachel Safman, rabbi Abergel, Didi Kwartenada, Eli, Mbak Ini, Ibu Diana Tantri Sudiono and Pak John and family for their support, hospitality and friendship. All of them have helped to make my research not only an unforgettable, but also a heart-warming experience.
1. Introducing the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

1.1 Academic Relevance

The current interest in transnationalism and globalisation, in terms of entrepreneurship and business ventures, has directed attention to ethno-religious diaspora groups. These groups are said to be increasingly successful in establishing, maintaining and expanding significant relations that transcend the boundaries of nation states. In Europe and the Americas Jewish Diaspora communities have been extensively studied. In East Asia it is chiefly Chinese and Indian Jews that have drawn scientific attention. These studies mostly concern issues of ethno-religious identity. The same applies to the relatively few studies on Jewish communities in Southeast Asia.

For instance, the close commercial links that Sephardic Jewish communities in the West, the Levantine and in North Africa forged are said to have extended as far as the Philippines and Indonesia. In the colonial period these Jewish trading networks were influential in shipping colonial products to the empires in the West. They seem to have played a key role in the by the Dutch controlled spice trade. Sephardic Jews participated in companies like the Dutch East

---


2 Diaspora will be written with a capital letter when Diaspora refers to the dispersion of the Jewish people (The Jewish Diaspora). When it plainly means dispersion, diaspora will be written without a capital letter.


CHAPTER 1

India Company (Verenigde Oostindische Company = the VOC) or in national colonial trading networks. But their participation seems to have been at a distance from Amsterdam, as ‘stock-exchange Jews’, only. Their presence in and their links with Southeast Asia have largely remained invisible. It is claimed that the general invisibility of trade diasporas is the result of its neglect in scholarship. The business activities of these trade diasporas, contrary to the general belief that they tended to disappear as a result of the Westernisation of commerce, have never stopped. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and also in the present time they are said to still follow the same business/trading methods as in the early modern period. This invisibility seems to apply to Ashkenazic Jews as well. They are said not to have been part of the Dutch colonial enterprise because of the managerial impracticality of respecting Jewish religious laws during the VOC’s voyages.

The business domain is becoming increasingly seen as interdependent with the domains of family life and broader social networks. In business practices an extensive number and wide range of ‘weak ties’ provide a bridge to a world that goes beyond the strict boundaries that have been drawn in studying businesses. In classical economics the family firm has been considered as a dying out phenomenon. Opposed to that, in the discussion on, Overseas Chinese guanxi capitalism, for instance, family-related businesses have proven to be decisive in generating sustainable economic development and growth. They proved to be able to combine the tightly knit clumps of strong ties of family and friends with extensive weak ties.

Jews in their businesses have applied their business ‘potentialities’ and competitive advantages to create networks that generate resources for their businesses. In the dominant discourse of social studies, which argues that shared culture is the foundation of trust and cooperation, their business success is explained as relating to their ethnic-religious affiliations (in this thesis labelled as the Jewish factor, the J-factor). Businesses make use of resources that are drawn from ethnoreligious ties, or work together in business groups that are based on these ties. Success in business entails mobilising these resources and enacting a local network that imposes itself as obligatory, profitable, and appealing, and that connects with and disseminates in more regionally and globally enacted networks. In Southeast Asia their entrepreneurial spirit, supported by their involvement in financing, their boundedness by religious affiliation, and their endogamous disposition, has been particularly successfully applied in the colonial economy with their

---

12 Guanxi is best described as personalised networks of influence.
13 This term is used throughout the dissertation to point towards Jewish ethno-religious institutions that most notably in ‘culturalist’ studies are identified in business as important.
16 Reid labels this type of commercial diaspora type A, as opposed to type B; porous hybridized traders. Type B diaspora identity is associated with languages much more than with descent. Both type A and B have the orientation
Introducing the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

propensity to profit from alliances with the colonial state\textsuperscript{17}. In the colonies they exploited the advantage of understanding the ruling authority and its habits\textsuperscript{18}. Sheffer places his concept of diaspora within specific behavioural patterns organised into three nodes; that of the diaspora group, and that of its host- and homeland\textsuperscript{19}. For Sheffer the Jewish Diaspora is a state-linked ethno-national diaspora\textsuperscript{20} that is interested in cooperation with host societies and governments. A diaspora always has the potential to serve as a bridge between friendly segments in and between societies. Diasporas hold the promise of connectivity. A diaspora according to Sheffer\textsuperscript{21} is created ‘as a result of voluntary or imposed migration; that after settling in host countries and wherever political conditions permitted they faced the dilemma of whether to assimilate and fully integrate or to maintain their ethno-national identity; that core members were capable of maintaining their ethnic identity, which is the basis for continued solidarity; that based on that solidarity and the wish to maintain their links to their brethren, they establish intricate organisations in their host countries as well as their international networks; and that they maintain continuous contacts with their homelands and other segments of the same nation\textsuperscript{22}’.

Sheffer’s basic ‘diaspora triangle’ has been widely used in diaspora studies. The link between Jews and entrepreneurial networks had been historically paramount. Diasporic connections were emblematic for pre-modern Jewish entrepreneurial networks. In diaspora studies a focus on the economic parameters in these networks remained, strangely enough, largely absent\textsuperscript{23}. The application of the diaspora concept has been mostly in issues of identity politics. The focus in diaspora studies became grounded in national mentalities, with a non-historical culturalist focus on issues of identity, community and belonging. This was obviously triggered by contemporary issues of mass migrant labor\textsuperscript{24}. The potentials of forging a living that is based on a regular contact across national borders remain under-examined. It appears difficult to overcome national


18 Reid mentions as an example the prominence of Jews and Armenians in the hotel sector. Also in this study that prominence is repeatedly confirmed. Reid, A. (2005: 357).


20 That is opposed to the other type of diasporas that Sheffer distinguishes; diasporas that have been unable to establish their own independent state; the ‘stateless diasporas’.

21 Sheffer (2005) gives a more complex definition than the basic ‘diaspora triangle’ he gave in Sheffer, G. (1986).


mentaliabilities and to challenge and dismantle the modernist state-centric discourse. Business systems analysis mostly uses the same state-centric kind of model of society. Nation states are still said to provide for many of the institutional structures that businesses respond to. Inter- or intra-diasporic connectivities within Jewish Diaspora spatialities might (still) be emblematic for Jewish post-modern entrepreneurship. Following these links and assessing theses connections in one of the Jewish ‘culture areas’ might provide an insight into what it would mean to operate with different (Jewish Diasporic) dispositions and mentalities in a world that (still) follows and obeys modernist (state-centric) laws, schemes and borders. The idea is that Jews throughout the centuries, within their own ‘culture area’, as individuals and as an ethno-religious group, have adapted, improvised and thrived. But they have also failed, disappeared, or re-grouped in dealing with new possibilities that emerged, or restrictions that were placed upon them. Their ability to improvise fluently is central. Following Appadurai, this thesis tries to answer Cohen and Vertovec’s call to theoretically overcome the actor-structure dilemma in the study of diaspora. New insights from network research must provide the answer to this call. In these insights the overly economistic and dominant rational choice model popular in business studies, with knowledgeable agents acting rationally, is surpassed. The in the social sciences popular concept of habitus, with which Bourdieu, as a so-called structurationist, has approached agency, celebrates new mixtures, syncretism and hybridisations. However, in these new mixtures there still seems to be a lack of room for improvisations. These improvisations need to be ‘snatched out of the glacial undertow of habitus’. The claim is investigated that the complexities and the fluency of movements that characterise diasporic mobilities is better served with new theoretical insights that come from developments in network research and complexity thinking.

As a social phenomenon with economic implications, diaspora has gained the attention of those engaged in business studies, particularly through the debate on business networks, most notably the debate on the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. The historical links of the Overseas Chinese with the emerging superpower, their ‘homeland’ China, were investigated. This ‘homeland’ connection held the promise that the ‘first mover’ would have an advantage in establishing new (economic) links with China. A vast body of knowledge has been produced regarding these Overseas Chinese. A culturalist perspective that especially recognizes family, close friends and the involvement of ethno-religious ties in businesses networks (the J-factor) became dominant. But this ‘norm’, that of researching ethno-religious entrepreneurship with a culturalist’ eye, was not undisputed. Critique came from traditional and newer (multi- or trans-) disciplinary approaches. Gomez and Hsiao distinguish for instance, next to the culturalist approach, a capitalist, an economic historical and a soft-capitalist or institutionalist approach. A (renewed)
focus on diaspora did not bring the theoretical discussions of the characteristics of business practices in ethno-religious trading communities onto a higher level. The discussion did not go beyond a reproduction of previous insights and ended in a deadlock in which the above approaches used their (reductionist) explanatory schemes to repeat themselves. In the case of the institutionalist approach, there is a call for the acknowledgement of a greater (including a political) embeddedness, to do justice to the complexities of relations investigated. There is an open eye for the ‘discovery’ of new embeddings (institutions)\(^{32}\). However, a ‘total embeddedness’ which is a contradiction in terms, will never be reached. Embeddedness points to a structural or structurational level to which actors refer in their actions. Without such a level, actors’ individual actions might be perceived as directionless and meaningless, which would not be a helpful outcome of modernist scientific analysis. Advancements in Complexity Studies/Theory have delivered a post-structuralist account of ‘total embeddedness’\(^{33}\). How can one perceive this theoretical position, and what are the paradigmatical and epistemological implications when one takes such a position?

The complexity perspective is inextricably linked with network research in which mobilities, as a global phenomenon, are said to restructure the social\(^{34}\). That has brought new, more nomadic societies into scientific focus, because they are thought to be better equipped to deal with the demands and complexities of globalisation. A globally dispersed and locally enacted (in different parts in the world) Jewish Diaspora community is such a society. The direction that this thesis takes is to argue that a complex relational phenomenon, like ethno-religious entrepreneurship, four centuries old but still actual, can be better understood when studied within networks\(^{35}\). Within this new paradigm diaspora seems to have lost its force as a meaningful concept. Its capacity to mark a difference seems to have been exhausted. Network became the buzzword, but as a concept it clearly needed refinement. Has network as a concept surely but slowly gained upon diaspora, and have networks and diaspora become inconceivable? The best course of action seems to be to go back to the archetype of a diaspora, the Jewish Diaspora, and relate Jewish ethno-religious entrepreneurial activities to the advancements in network research. Because the Jewish Diaspora is considered as the archetypical Diaspora there might be added value. Potentially what might be concluded in a study of the Jewish Diaspora might be relevant to the study of other, new\(^{36}\), Diaspora groups as well.

Historically, the Jewish presence is considered to have been minimal in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the actual fact is that Sephardic Jewish trading communities were established centuries ago at strategic positions along the busy sea route from Mesopotamia via India and Malaysia to the Indies and China. These communities were small yet together with other trading communities, like for instance the Parsees and Armenians, they had their part to play in

---

\(^{32}\) For an extensive bibliography on these matters see the study of: Yeung, Henry Wai-chung (2002) *Entrepreneurship and the internationalisation of Asian Firms. An Institutional perspective*. Edward Elgar Cheltenham UK & Northampton USA.


Southeast Asian trade. Jewish merchants, both Ashkenazim and Sephardim, followed in the wake of the EIC and VOC, or were connected to colonial governments in Southeast Asia. In time, the Jewish presence changed in size and composition. In this thesis new and old sources will be put forward to give substance to the idea that Jews too have a history in Southeast Asia.

Despite their minimal physical presence in Southeast Asia, the Jews there, as an easily identified Other throughout the world, are presented in outlandish anti-Zionist, anti-Semitic and anti-Israel rhetoric and propaganda. In this rhetoric, they are paradoxically presented as more than present; even as omnipresent. Jews are therefore not seen as a neutral, minority trading group like the Parsees or Armenians. In scientific discourse this rhetoric has been described as ‘anti-Semitism without Jews’. Middle-class Muslims supposedly needed a valve to vent their problems in dealing with the dilemmas of modernity. In an allegorisation of their situation, Jews became their absenced Other. The minimal Jewish presence was an excuse for not having to show a concern that these expressions of hatred might affect a real Jewish presence and Jewish entrepreneurial activities. The consequence was that Jews were ‘allegorised away’. This ambivalent position points to the peculiar situation of the Jewish community in the region of the Straits, which is the region demarcated for study in this thesis. The situation could be characterised as a complex oscillation between presence and absence. They challenge existing (network research) schemes of classification in Diaspora Studies, and demand alternative ways of empirical exploration.

Complexity Theory is best defined as the theory of complex human systems. Advancements in Complexity Studies have delivered a more intricate spatial topology to study networks. The Center for Mobilities Research (CeMoRe) at Lancaster University in the UK, with proponents like John Law, John Urry and Andrew Sayer, claims to have made important advancements in developing a mobilities paradigm in a movement-driven social science. In turn, CeMoRe’s ideas draw on insights that have been developed in Actor Network Theory (ANT), with proponents like Bruno Latour, Michael Callon, Annemarie Mol and – again – John Law, and on theoretical insights put forward by a network theorist like Albert-László Barabási. These advancements in Complexity theory have merged and provide an interesting theoretical perspective for this study. What does this perspective entail, and how is it applicable to the study of Jewish businesses in what is described here as the Straits Jewish Diasporascape?

---


1.2 The Straits

Why have the Straits been chosen as the domain to be studied here? The Straits as a meaningful spatial delineation have occasionally featured in historical studies which deal with maritime empires. Hussin, for example, situates the Straits of Melaka within the Straits maritime trade network. He states that the Straits Settlements, together with the port cities in Sumatra, have been pivotal to the development of the trading world of Asia. The Straits waterways link East and West Asia and their strategically located ports were then important hubs that regulated the exchange of goods between the Indian Ocean and the South Chinese Sea. Traders settled in these ports or had their representatives who handled their trading interests.

As the term is used in this thesis, the Straits signifies the water-ways area that provides transoceanic access between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, and the adjacent port cities in the Malay World. Entrepots in this Straits region are Melaka, Penang and Singapore, and on the Indonesian side, the port cities of Jakarta and Surabaya. The Straits in pre-modern times were a junction of maritime commercial interchange and provided ‘the direct transoceanic route into and from the South China Sea’ thus providing the easiest navigational access to China. Its straits, entrepots and portages have always been a cosmopolitan space of interactions and pluralities. It is argued that the Straits as a research space best suits the purposes of this study of a Diaspora group such as the Jews. The natural, old Straits borders are excellent demarcations against which to assess the range and scope of Jewish mobilities in this thesis.

As still the central locus and main transit point in the Straits, Singapore is central to (trans-) regional flows of goods, peoples and services. As a spatial delineation, the Straits conforms generally to the definition of a ‘culture area’. In broad strokes, a culture area is characterised by its having similar ethnic and linguistic features, the boundaries of which have been drawn politically. Living in the diaspora, Jews have their own, more mobile ‘culture areas’. They partly overlap the locally drawn borders of nation states. The Straits as a region would be more or less congruent with a Jewish culture area. Here Jews have been operating in their own ‘diasporic culture area’ which intersects and coalesces with guestlands, the homeland, and other diasporic groups and coincides with the area where their dispersed brethren are to be found.

---

42 In the English speaking world ‘the Straits’ meant the Straits Settlements (Penang, Melaka, Singapore) which ceased to be a clear geographical delineation in the post-colonial era. At present the Straits is still used as a signifier by the popular newspapers in the region. (The Singapore Straits Times. The Malaysia New Straits Times). Sometimes the Strait of Melacca (the waterway) was included in the usage.


46 For different kinds of temporalities -including glacial time, see chapter 5 in: Urry, J. (2000A).


48 When looking at the culture areas of Jews amongst Muslims Deshen and Zenner describe Morocco as one area, and Egypt, Syria and Iraq as a second area. Turkish and Balkan Jewry is a third group, the Northern Tier (Kurdistan and Azerbaijan) a fourth area, and the Yemenites a fifth group. See: Deshen, S. & W. P. Zenner (1996: 7-9).
CHAPTER 1

suggestion here is that the Straits, as a regional time/space metaphor, is an appropriate descriptor to delineate the complex processes of the Jewish mobilities that have taken place over many centuries, which transgressed and still transgress many borders and the boundaries of other culture areas/colonial and nation states.

The relationship in the Straits between Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore is characterised by multiple (also problematic) interdependencies. These interdependencies became manifest during Singapore’s struggle for nationhood. Israel played an important role in that struggle. From the time of its separation from Malaysia in 1965, Singapore has turned to Israeli advisors to help overcome its acute geo-political vulnerability. Singapore became the home of a number of overlapping Diaspora worlds. The Jewish Diaspora in the Straits seems to have found its gravitational node in Singapore. Singapore had become the fulcrum of the general expansion of trade and shipping in Southeast Asia during the 19th century. From that position Singapore developed its present hub-function in the Straits. In the 1980s, the economies in Southeast Asia expanded to what became known as the new generation of Newly Industrializing Economies (NIE) or Asian Tigers. Singapore benefited in particular from this economic growth and manifested itself as an intermediary regional force in international and intra-regional flows of commercial, industrial and financial services. As a global city Singapore has become part of a world in which it is in a competition with other global cities to provide a relevant ‘stillness’ where transnational, diasporic identities and communities find their haven, and from where they are able to develop their potential. With such a success story, it is obvious that on the part of their direct neighbours Indonesia and Malaysia, in addition to admiration and pride there is also envy, aggression and fear. The position of the Jewish Diaspora will be studied within these multiple interdependencies and animosities.

This research will therefore adopt a multi-local, cross-border perspective that will at least include, in addition to the centrally located nation-state Singapore (parts of) the ‘old’ nation-states Indonesia and Malaysia. The Straits in fact occupies such a multi-local cross-border area. The cross-border idea for research has been suggested as an interesting and promising way to do research on diasporas. It is in such multi-sited interconnections that the concept of diaspora would be able to show its scientific surplus value. This surplus value, however, has never been fully paid off. Even in multi-sited research it has appeared to be difficult to transcend Euclidian points of departure and translate movement and mobility, which were seen as essential characteristics of diaspora groups, into a satisfying paradigm. The theoretical developments in Complexity and Actor Network Theory (ANT) described above suggest a new way of proceeding. The idea of a Jewish culture area would be translated into a more complex Jewish ‘culture space’. Drawing on the terminology of Appadurai, that culture space is described as the Straits Jewish Diasporascape in this thesis.

51 It might be for practical and financial reasons that such research has scarcely been conducted. An example of a multi-sited study is: Gold, S.J. (2002) The Israeli Diaspora. London & New York: Routledge.
1.3 The First Line of Investigation; Allegories

The line of investigation that is taken in this thesis is twofold. The first line is to find out historically to what extent Jews were ‘absent’ from the Straits. Synagogues, Jewish cemeteries, and other traces of Jewish presence suggest that there were or still are Jewish communities in the Straits. There is a thriving Jewish community in Singapore with a rabbi, Jewish education, two synagogues and different Jewish denominations. The second line aims to investigate the businesses of this Jewish community in Singapore. To start with the first line: the Jewish presence has never been something clearly expressible in numbers. It is more than likely that, when numbers are the issue, the Jewish presence will be overlooked. Judaism is not an inclusive, apostolic religion. From a Jewish perspective, size is less important. When the numbers of Jewish community members are counted, the small size of the community might be considered as insignificant in the bigger picture that is wanted in a calculation. It might even be impossible to count them because Jews are not identifiable as such. The different Jewish ethnic-religious denominations, with the Ashkenazim and Sephardim as the most important ones, might cause classificatory confusion. And of course there might be a reluctance to pronounce a Jewish identity. Jewish history, in which persecution is a dominant theme, might have left its mark on some in this way.

When numbers fail to convince or counting is difficult, there is still another option. That option would be to direct the attention to the mechanisms that absented the actual physical (corporeal) Jew from the Straits. That option is chosen for this thesis. The tool that is used is that of the allegory. Allegorising is developed as a mode of discovery here. The oscillations between Jewish absence and presence will be made visible via the detour of allegory. ‘Allegory is the art of meaning something other and more than what is being said.’ By way of allegory the supposedly absent Jewish subject in the Straits will re-appear and become central. This centrality will be made even more convincing, when the once Jewish presence in the Straits is buttressed with historical sources. By putting the oscillations between Jewish presence and absence in the Straits in a time frame, it will become clear that Jewish absence does not imply there never was a Jewish presence. Traces that mark a previous Jewish presence can be re-connected again. Besides that, a physical Jewish presence is not a prerequisite for the presence’s being felt at other places at the same time. This time dimension enables us to connect the spaces of Jewish presence with other spaces that are thought of not to bear any Jewish presence (any more) and/or a presence that is enacted from a distance.

The Diasporascape gains color by putting a number of allegorical tales together. At the same time the combination of these allegorical tales represents the complexity of that scape (the multidimensional picture), both in space and in time (transforming from the past through the present to the future). This alternative ‘new’ reality that is forged will make Jews re-appear in the Straits. The combination of these allegories that makes them present also crafts what it is discovering. With this new crafted ‘reality’ the existing, dominant, scientific reality that deems Jewish presence as insignificant is undermined. The scientific world tries very hard to make a systematic, well calculated, controllable and reproducible effort to grasp reality. In a complexity approach realities are not taken for granted. The crafted representations of reality in the social

---

54 Ibid.; 92.
CHAPTER 1

sciences can be seen as allegories as well. At best (or worst) all of these allegories fit together into one coherent representation. In the process of crafting those realities, choices are made about what to present and what to leave out. Wished for or not, things get lost along the way. What appears to be a reality is in fact no more than the effect of an ‘artful deletion’. Although depicted as a direct singular representation, and as a result of a systematic effort to grasp reality, in the end, the representation of reality cannot come close to what reality ‘really’ is. What we consider as direct representations of reality is still built-in allegory. Realities are nothing more and nothing less than allegories being depicted as reality. Although constructed, made manifest and presented in a straightforward way, the ‘direct’ representations that will be put forward in this thesis therefore cannot be anything other than distortions of reality. The word distortion is used because it points to what has been ‘illegitimately’ made absent, to what has got lost along the way.

Methodology is not innocent in this. Scientific methods make a system of interference and work together with science towards making particular forms real while eroding others. ‘Methodology is helpful in concealing the sciences’ performativity from itself’ by making realities look simply constructed. As brothers in arms, methods buoy up reality. As presumed systematic, transparent and reproducible efforts, methods are guilty of making reality seem to be its direct representation. In Complexity methods buoy up the enactments of new distortions of reality (hopefully) into clarity. That reality might be more just, more reliable and clearer, and would still be enacted in a more or less systematic way. In that enacted reality, Jews will re-appear on the scene. Their artful deletion will be rectified. The representation might even become a convincing ‘true reality’. But that is for the readers to decide after they have finished reading this thesis. The ultimate litmus test for a ‘true reality’ is when it is successful in denying its character as allegory and when the systematically sustained metaphorical language is accepted as true.

In this thesis, Caspar the Jew, the Jewish cemetery in Penang, and the Manadonese Jews for Christ are like the animals in George Orwell’s Animal Farm. They metaphorically point to practices in the real world. Combined and systematically sustained in allegory, their stumbled-upon and seemingly random presence is used as a resource to mess about with what is absent and to make manifest what otherwise would have stayed invisible. By crafting this new reality the field of visibility is extended, because what is enacted as reality does not always do justice to the implication that there are multiple worlds. An enacted reality sometimes is too strong and convincing in its trueness. As a mode of discovery allegory allows for ambivalence and ambiguity and helps to produce multiple worlds as enactments of diverse and contested social and material relations.

Produced in social inquiry, this thesis has to be seen as a relational materiality that takes part and sides in the enactment of the social, and that marks a shift from an epistemological to an ontological level. The choice for a research question no longer depends only on our theoretical perspectives that in a ‘detached’ fashion prescribe what we want to know. It rather draws on an understanding or sense of what there is in the world that is important to know about. As this

---

55 Ibid.; 88.
57 ‘Heidegger maintains that all entities, (...) have their being as movement into appearance. They may come from complete unknownness into knownness, or from distortion into clarity, or from forgottenness into remembrance’. See at: http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/sheenan_heidys_philo_of_mind.htm last visited 14-5-2009.
22
Introducing the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

might be a matter of conviction, taste, power relations or fashion, the implication is that, in creating new realities, there is no such thing as a singular world. Instead of being caught up in one universe, as scientists, ‘we are caught up in and help to produce a “pluriverse”’. And this brings us to the second line of investigation.

1.4 The Second Line of Investigation; Networks and Complexity

The aim in this second line is to investigate the businesses of a small Jewish community in Singapore with a triad of more or less ‘hard-core’ ethnographic empirical case-studies. The device for conceptualising complexity is the network. Network analysis urges us to think in interconnections. Caught up in old (reductionist) scientific categories network research has remained predominantly Euclidian. It has been confined to a ‘flat’ use of the spatial topologies of region and network. The sciences still largely fail to understand many of the complex patterns and laws of connectivity in networks. Complexity theory inevitably stands on the shoulders of network theory. Twenty-century scientific reductionism has brought us extensive and indispensable knowledge of ‘parochialised’, separate parts, but it seems difficult to put these separate parts back together again and make sense of a ‘whole’. But such a sense of a whole seems to be increasingly indispensable as unforeseen effects and unknown laws of self-organisation (exerted by the whole) have outrun the capacity of the separate parts to determine clear cause and effect relations. At the Center for Mobilities Research (CeMoRe) it is claimed that in order to progress theoretically in network research a ‘complexity turn’ towards a movement-driven social science seems not only to be a prerequisite, but also an inevitability. It is argued in this thesis that a wider range of topologies is needed to investigate a complex human system like the Straits Jewish Diasporascape and that only in a movement-driven social science is it possible to design a topology suitable to the study of the complex social and material enactments in such a scape.

The discovery of hubs and power laws in the working of networks meant a change in network thinking. It appeared that a small number of nodes tend to dominate a network. That dominance seemed to grow stronger at the cost of the less connected. Most networks proved to be shaped by the same universal law and shared this same hub-dominated structure. Further advances in network research showed that networks not only had this *scale free* architecture, but they were also *hierarchical* and *modular* at the same time. There is a clearly distinguishable hierarchy of many small nodes that is held together by a few large hubs, while within a system, at the same time, there also is a modularisation, a compartmentalisation, which allows for a hierarchical clustering. This modularity allows for parts of a system to evolve and process relatively separately. Each module is characterised by a high density of links, interconnections and hubs. The constraint on a

---

60 Ibid.; 399.
64 The credit crisis (the big effect), the unforeseen cause of which is to be found in the distant provision of bad mortgages in the US is the most prominent and recent example. Weather systems and traffic congestion are other examples.
system is that it can get ‘overheated’. A system might collapse, and give rise to a bifurcation or to the emergence of new systems.

Networks in a ‘movement-driven social science’ are said to consist of three elements: nodes, links and mesh. The idea of orderings that is developed in Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT) seems appropriate as a tool to look for patterns of emergence, transformation and change that affect networks in terms of links and nodes. In ANT these orderings are understood spatially by the topologies of Region and Network; but what about the mesh? What would be the simple and basic categories that would be identifiable as influencing mesh in the Jewish Diaspora business networks? For looking at this mesh, the theoretical attention is directed to Law and Mol, and Urry, who introduce the spatial topology of (Global) Fluids. Is it the fluid of ethno-religiosity (the J-factor), as ‘culturalists’ have claimed, that makes Jewish business networks ‘tick’? Or is there another topology that interferes in the enactment of Jewish business networks?

Where Jewish involvement in businesses is concerned there is yet another spatial topology that gets special attention in this thesis. Next to the spatial topology of networks, region, and fluids, the spatial topology of Fire is put forward. Jews and their businesses are depicted in already globally disseminated phantasms. Even in the Straits the Jewish presence in business is surrounded by prejudices, sensitivities and seccreties that seem to come from nowhere and everywhere. To refute these myths and expose these prejudices would give this thesis a valid moral dimension, but there is more to it than this social relevance. Within the enactment of a Jewish Diasporascape, with the reification of a networked ‘reality’ (an ordering with nodes), an overall concept of the ‘Self’ emerges and becomes visible. That ‘Self’ is a brought-to-presence networked ‘reality’. Boundaries are drawn in this networked reality that mark inclusion and exclusion. It is in this processing space of oscillations between what is brought to presence and what is made absent that the topology of fire should be sought for. In the enactment of (even a scientific) reality in the Straits, Jewish corporeal presence is considered as insignificant. Nevertheless, and this thesis is a ‘living’ proof of that, that act of absencing (or the art of deleting) leaves traces that are hard to cover up entirely. They may re-appear again (for instance as a thesis) ‘out of the blue’ in flare-ups of ‘Fire’. Sometimes these flare-ups might ignite or open up new possibilities and chances and give room for re-orderings. At other times these traces seem better off when concealed because they may relate to feelings and experiences of guilt, trauma or loss that one is not ready to deal with yet. Or they may even be ‘unmasked’ as truly insignificant or irrelevant.

The reification of nodes in networks runs synchronically with the emergence of a notion of the ‘Self’. As the ‘Self’ changes in relation to the ‘Other’, these nodes are bound to change as well. It is not likely that these nodes will stay the same for long. The integrity of the nodes does not lie in its composition. The integrity of the nodes lies in a constant redefining of ‘Self’ and its connections through an intensive exchange and management of information. The primary motive of

---

67 It is like the computer’s dependence on its single processing unit. When too many programs are put to work and use that unit, the computer slows down. That computer system needs adaptation to regain its speed. Barabási, Albert-László (2003: 237).
Introducing the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

The network would not be self-preservation, but transformation. A movement-driven social science redirects the attention in network research to these transformations, and automatically to the topologies of Fluid and Fire. The acknowledgement of the importance of these spatial topologies would imply a re-directing of the mode of questioning in network research. Instead of a flat (small-world phenomenon) who knows of whom, or a more complex power conscious addition with the question who is doing what with whom, there would be an extension with the question who or what is left out and why is it left out? The research questions for the research in this thesis on -what has been described as the Straits Jewish Diasporascape will be formulated in the next section.

The combining of these two lines of investigation leads to important methodological considerations. If we want to understand a complex system such as the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits, new and less-than-obvious lines of inquiry have to be taken. What does complexity offer ethnography in terms of methods? This question is answered in the methodological chapter. In that chapter there is an account of the methods that were used to conduct the research. But the most urgent issue is to make plausible that an important part of this research is a social inquiry into something elusive, or that is, at the most, only marginally present. What do you do as an ethnographer when in your ‘allegory’ research the traditional ethnographic methodological tools seem inapplicable? The impression might be given that, possessing no method at all, the researcher has no option other than to wander aimlessly around in his demarcated research space desperately looking for clues. There have been recent efforts to develop ‘on the move methods’ to capture mobilities. But we do not know yet of methods that are suitable for catching the elusive. So the answer is partly affirmative. Yes, as will be shown, even desperation and an aimless wandering around are inherent in a methodology that wants to capture and delineate the elusive. At least, it has been a sine qua non for this research. The ‘reflexive turn’ in ethnography already points to the researcher as the most important tool to do ethnographic research. The argument is that the combination of the ‘complexity turn’ and the ‘reflexive turn’ opens up a sensitivity to investigate both the complex and the elusive. It is in this combination that one finds the necessary sensibilities appropriate to find ways of knowing the slipperiness of “units that are not” as they move in and beyond old categories.

Fortunately there were some ‘old categories’, and anchorages as well, where these ‘units that are not’ could be traced. Singapore’s Jewish community provided that ‘relief’. As a safety valve in the ‘system’ of the research, Singapore’s Jewish community provided the grip of an ‘old fashioned’ research population that ‘even’ by complexity inspired researchers need in order to be able to conduct network research.

1.5 The Research Questions and Chapter Outline of the Thesis

The central aim of this thesis is to find out first, how the Straits Jewish Diaspora operates as a business community across national borders in the Straits; and second, how the J(ewish) factor - Jewish ethnic and religious affiliations and processes of ethnic and religious identification - in their businesses, facilitates or hampers their entrepreneurial activities.

The idea is that only with new theoretical insights from the Complexity Sciences can the Jewish Diaspora in Southeast Asia be studied with new vigour. They are expected to offer assistance in the attempts to deal with the peculiar oscillating patterns of presence and absence of the Jewish Business Networks in the Straits region, and will also pave the way to answering the central

---

CHAPTER 1

research question in a satisfactory way. Complexity and ‘Theorising Diaspora’ will therefore meet in Chapter Two, the theoretical chapter, in order to find out what complexity has to offer to diaspora studies. What new insights does complexity theory provide for ‘Theorising Diaspora’?

Critical realism in anthropology has resulted in a genre of reflexive anthropology in which methodological concerns of legitimation and representation have become central issues. It seems possible to push the ‘reflexive turn’ in ethnography further with insights derived from complexity. In complexity theory it is claimed that methods co-create (scientific) realities, including the one in which Jewish presence is deemed insignificant or irrelevant. This would also imply that methods might be helpful to create a ‘new reality’ in which Jews do belong in the Straits. That is counter-intuitive, even disturbing, to the perception of the role methods have in the sciences. How should one grasp the idea that methods participate in making the Jew present in the Straits? Chapter Three investigates what the result would be when the ‘complexity turn’ and the ‘reflexive turn’ meet, and what insights might be derived from this ‘meeting’ for the application of ethnographic methods in this research?

In Chapter Four the idea of the post-structuralist ‘hinterland’ has to be given shape. Complexity –like ANT, denies an actor-structure dichotomy. It denies that with structure there is an independent and definite form -a reality out-there, which waits to be discovered. A hinterland in research, in the words of Law, ‘also defines an overall geography – a topography of reality-possibilities’ that might extend far beyond the limits that we usually imagine it to have. A well-depicted hinterland contains the possibilities that it endlessly and forever ramify outwards, that small left-out causes can have big effects, that it has porous boundaries and extends outwards in every direction, that it is a ‘total complexity’, multiple and fractional. This task of depiction is impossible, but nevertheless we cannot do without an effort. This hinterland is sought for and assembled with the argument that even before the colonial powers came to the Straits region, Jews had been operating in their own ‘culture space’ which reached as far as the Far East. Lapsing through time (synchronically and diachronically), with the help of a number of allegorical tales, which inevitably and necessarily will carry the features of research in progress this chapter connects the past with the present. The idea is that only by depicting a more ‘complex’ hinterland the oscillations between what is made present and absent (processes that expel multiplicity into invisibility/or produce singularities) is it possible to compose and to enact the Straits Jewish Diasporascape.

If the research question were to be answered Euclidianly, this would probably have demanded the use of a network analysis that limits itself to a plain and conventional use of the spatial topologies of region and network. That probably would have been acceptable. Given the options, the circumstances and the timeframe in which the research has been completed it was possible to reject that scenario. The frame of mind that has given rise to this research has to do with looking beyond a straightforward answer of the central research question, and is exemplified by the exploration of theoretical principles of complexity thinking. The result of this exercise resonates in the framing of the research question. To answer the first and second parts of the central

77 Law, J. (2004: 34)
78 Law, J. (2004: 40-41)
question a Jewish Self in the Straits (a networked reality) is enacted by means of a thick description of Jewish business practices in which the ‘social is kept as flat as possible’. Detailed business network studies are presented in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. These three chapters further depict the Diasporascape. Chapter Five concerns a Singapore ‘diamond house’ in the Jewish-dominated international diamond business. Chapter Six will deal with a company - Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf - that is prominent in the world of gourmet coffee. Chapter Seven concerns the FJ Benjamin company. FJ Benjamin is a fashion house and active in the garment business in which, traditionally, Jews are strongly represented. In Chapter Eight these three cases are reflected upon and the central research question - how ethno-religious interferences coincide with the entrepreneurial practices under investigation – is answered. Finally, some more general conclusions are drawn in Chapter Nine.

2. Theorising the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

2.1 Theorising Diaspora

The aim in this chapter is to contribute to ‘Theorising Diaspora’⁴ and to design a theoretical and analytical framework that is equipped to deal with the empirical findings that have been gathered during fieldwork studying the Jewish Diaspora and their businesses in the Straits.

Alongside globalisation, diaspora was considered a promising theoretical concept to understand the importance and range of transnational communities, but the initially positive appreciation seems to have faded away. Theoretical analysis in diaspora studies seems to have lost the sharpness that it promised to have². This theoretical incertitude may be due to the lack of validity of the concept of diaspora, or to wider impasses in the social sciences, that are reflected in the rethinking of this concept. Networks are increasingly seen as the key to investigating the new social morphologies of the complex dimensions of social systems that the world is made of², but thinking in networks puts traditional paradigms and the theoretical concept of diaspora under pressure. This pressure is disclosed around general theoretical dilemmas of actor-structure, subject-object and the demarcations between the disciplines in the sciences that study the social⁴.

The social sciences seem to have reached a point where their object of research needs a thorough redefining. Social theory may have come to a ‘tipping point’. By a ‘tipping point’ I refer to what Urry calls the ‘complexity turn’⁵. It marks a general paradigmatic shift to a ‘movement driven social science’ which situates movement, mobility and change (rather than stasis and equilibrium), as central in the development of theoretical frameworks with which the complex nature of the social world becomes identifiable.

What does it mean if a theorising of diaspora is contextualized within this paradigm built on principles of complexity? This chapter investigates how complexity relates to diaspora theory, and more particularly what that means for the development of a theoretical framework with which the businesses of the Jewish Diaspora in the Straits will be examined. The idea of the Jewish diasporascape is introduced in the next section. In the third section it will become clear that the social sciences have been reluctant to enact a Jewish dimension in the discussion of business networks in general and in the Straits in particular. This is illustrated with an analogue discussion on Chinese guanxi⁶ networks. The ‘complexity turn’ is discussed in the fourth section. This section will show what performing a movement-driven social science entails in terms of concepts and perception of configurations of cultural forms. It is argued that new spatial

---

⁶ Guanxi is best described as personalized networks of influence.
topologies are needed to ‘read’ today’s social morphologies. The fifth section reflects the impulse
to design a more diversified spatial topology. The already extensively applied notion of fluids is
situated in a wider topology together with more common topologies of region and networks. In
the sixth section yet another topology is introduced, that of ‘fire’. This topology deals with ‘the
dependence of that which cannot be made present – that which is absent - on that which is indeed present’.
It will be argued that this topology is especially applicable for the discussion of Jewish business
networks because it deals with the wide proliferation of a ‘fantastic’ simulacrum that imagines
‘the Jew’ and his businesses. The opinion that has taken root in the Straits that this simulacrum
has no direct links with a Jewish presence in the Straits will be refuted. In the seventh section the
idea that ‘history matters’ will be elaborated upon with the concept of ‘path dependence’. In the
Jewish diasporascape, seen as a system, allocation processes are path dependent when the history
of a process has a lasting effect on new allocations within that system. With this and other
‘movement-driven’ conceptualisations that draw on ideas from Complexity, it is possible better
to trace Jewish business connections and mobilities. The wish to trace these connections and
mobilities is central to the empirical inquiry of the Straits Jewish businesses. It is also the key to
re-thinking the validity of diaspora as a theoretical concept.

2.2 The Straits Jewish Diasporascape

Diaspora theory acknowledges that the Jewish tradition is at the heart of any diasporic reflection.
Jews form the archetypical diaspora. Modernist social scientists who took the territorial nation-states
as the natural unit of study found it difficult to fit Jews within their studies. That changed
when de-territorialising postmodern ideas got a foothold. Diasporas became popular as a part of
the ‘postmodern project that resists the hegemonic, culturally homogenising and therefore discriminatory nation state’.
For Jews this meant that they were no longer considered an anomaly, but they almost became
the norm. This norm became the ‘recognition of hybridity, having multiple identities and affiliations with
people, causes and traditions outside the nation-state of residence’. In combination with their presumed
economic potentialities, diasporas became promising international socio-cultural phenomena that
needed to be fostered.

The long history of the dispersion and persecution of Jews was no longer merely a sorrowful
exilic experience. An exclusive Jewish ethno-religious identity with strong communal traditions
that harbour economic and socio-religious institutions was identified as a breeding ground of new
potentialities to deal with the new demands of (post)modernity. A powerful ethos of self-preservation
and group self-help proved adaptive to its surroundings. Jewish successes, their
smartness and their clear over-representation in the diverse layers of society were explained out
of a ‘nurturing of a sense of insularity combined with openness to the outside world that created a conservative but

Space. 19 pp. 609-621. p. 616.
History, University of Munich. p.1.
9 This choice of words refers to the title of: Latour, B. (2005) Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-
Theory. Oxford University Press.
Theorising the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

at the same time innovative set of attitudes toward themselves and the world. Suitable skills were language fluency, abilities at record-keeping, abstractive faculties and the mobility and flexibility required to move around and to deal with a variety of parties who often did not want to deal with one another. Given the existence of interrelated Jewish communities worldwide these abilities are said to have facilitated a maze of economic networks that helped to achieve Jewish goals and took care of their interests. This culturalist notion of diaspora became politically and scientifically meaningful. Slumbering ideas about almost forgotten ethnic ties that transcended existing nation-state borders were reinvigorated. All of a sudden every nation-state fostered its own diaspora. Within the discourse on multiculturalism, diasporas were celebrated and represented as potential ‘sites of hope and new beginnings’.

This positive appreciation of diversity led to a different way of conceptualizing the dilemma of the ‘integration’ of a diasporic group, in which either assimilation or clinging to an ethnic identity seemed to be the only options available. But this appreciation did not last long. With diaspora, political leaders were also given a tool to question loyalty and to make a distinction between those who were welcome and those who were not.

The diaspora concept came as a blessing for the social sciences too. At last elusive intangible phenomena like transnationalism or globalisation were ‘humanised’ and made researchable. The ‘triadic’ relational form used to identify the actors involved when dealing with diasporas is still popular. This form has kept its validity, although the ‘triadic’ design was meant only as a classification of the relationships that are involved when dealing with diasporas. Given these minimal standards, diaspora as a concept has the potential to outline or adapt to new theoretical insights and/or paradigm shifts. Vertovec identifies a set of useful features for diasporas as a more general social ‘triadic’ form. According to Vertovec diasporas are the result of voluntary or forced migration from one home location to at least two other countries. The diasporic communities maintain a collective (ethnic) identity and ties with the homeland, develop institutionalised transnational networks of exchange and communication, and develop a sense of solidarity with co-ethnic members. Generally the relationship with the ‘host society’ is problematic. As the archetype of diaspora, the Jewish Diaspora includes all these features. Networks in a diasporic space are inextricably linked to the ‘unique selling point’ of diasporas; the ‘homeland’. Next to the guestland and the diaspora group itself, the homeland is believed to be the third important and essential node in the ‘triadic relation’ that defines interaction and that sets diaspora as a theoretical concept apart from other concepts like migration and transnationalism.

In diaspora research much of the emphasis is laid on the relationship with a homeland - Israel in the case of the Jewish Diaspora. This has led to a discourse generated in guestlands where an

14 Ibid.; 18.
18 The diaspora group, the host society and the homeland. See: Sheffer, G. (1986).
CHAPTER 2

ethnic group is easily judged as clinging to its roots and ethnic identity, and therefore as failing to assimilate. Clifford’s ideal that the outcome of transnationalism and diaspora discourse would be that the minority would not have to face a hostile majority seems distant. Especially given the inability to establish the threshold that would prevent an ethnic or minority group from being identified as the Other. Which ethnic group would pass and which would fail the test? It seems that the achievement of the ideal depends on the fulfillment of the desire for an alternative ‘imagined community’ different from the nation state. The focus on identification with a homeland was too strong. Diaspora as a concept with its concentration on the homeland has on the one hand led to an emphasis on the fluidity of constructed (life) styles and identities. Identity was seen as constructed with the recognition of heterogeneity, diversity and hybridity. Through transformation and difference, identity was considered to be in a constant mode of producing and reproducing. In anthropological discourse this anti-essentialist, people-oriented, constructivist approach to identity and ethnicity has become rather common. On the other hand this diaspora approach also gave identity studies a dubious boost. With the help of diaspora as a concept, the uneasy sense of the Other (that resides in the Self) was territorialised away. The stranger was given a place outside of the Self. Occasionally this appeared more comforting than acknowledging that the Other really resides in the Self. A more reflexive position seems hard to sustain and seems to depend on socio-political considerations. Such a position would expose the societal mechanism that makes the co-presence of the ‘Other’ seem to be a threat, and would not accept the idea that this ‘Othering’ is part of the condition of our lives. This ‘Othering’ could well be the result of diaspora envy, of the wish to set – politically - disloyal groups apart, or - not unimportantly - the result of the scientific urge to score with the concept of diaspora.

Hesitations about the validity of diaspora as a theoretical concept did not apply to the Jews. For the Jewish Diaspora there would be no threshold for diaspora identification. This is the ‘luck’ of being archetypical. Jews - either positively or negatively - identify with their homeland. The homeland Israel in the Jewish Diaspora is irrefutable, but strangely enough it has also remained rather ‘numb’. Matters of the ‘homeland’ in the Jewish Diaspora triangle have been dominated by Zionist ‘return to the homeland’ ideology. Again, this focus on origins, nostalgia and return has not done justice to the potentialities of diasporas. The homeland Israel as a central node in a Jewish Diasporascape has become visible through the problematic relation Jews have with their guestlands. It is mostly ‘forgotten’ that a homeland can act as well. Gold has made it clear that there is also an Israeli diaspora and that in the Israeli diaspora there are counter or reversed mobilities that seem contrary to the mobilities that Zionist ideology has been generating. It is an illusion to think that these mobilities do not converge or interfere with Jewish Diaspora


32
Theorising the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

‘homebound’ mobilities. It is due to the prominence of guestland related identity issues that these reversed mobilities are understudied in diaspora studies.

In relation to globalisation diasporas were seen as centers of intersecting transnational flows that link together geographically remote locations. Diasporas link together different societies and in doing so produce and reproduce meaningful transnational connections. It is suggested that there is a direct and natural relationship between diasporas and the proliferation of global networks and flows. As such, diasporas are considered to be in the vanguard of the forces that deepen and intensify globalisation. The notion of scape introduced by Appadurai is useful for thinking in terms of diasporas. Basically Appadurai defines a scape as a collective of people and things. People move between nations in what Appadurai calls ethnoscapes. But for Appadurai this would not be complete without the understanding of the four other world-scapes, that he describes as technoscapes, financescapes, mediascapes and ideoscapes. For Appadurai a diaspora moves through networks in a clustering of these scapes. It is in and through these scapes that current global flows occur, according to Appadurai. These scapes function as socio-technical infrastructures and over time they create their own context for action. As such they are in part self-organising and self-creating, and they maintain their own boundaries. As primarily a ‘people’s thing’, the Jewish diaspora should be studied as an ethnoscape.

The idea that a diaspora is primarily a ‘people’s thing’ is abandoned by Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This approach, developed by Callon and Latour, which has its roots in technology discourse, has abandoned the idea that the social can be studied in isolation from the material world. To make its case ANT has developed the notion of actant or relational materialities. The idea of actants presumes the symmetry of human entities and non-human entities who/that exchange properties. The focus in the notion of actant is on the material dimensions of social life. Agency is in ANT terminology no longer the domain of human agents only. Material objects can ‘act’ too. The actant is a hybrid, and societies are made up of hybrids, mergers of the social and the material. The intention in this thesis is to combine diaspora studies with this notion of ANT. This means abandoning the idea that diasporas should be seen as only a ‘movement of people’. It would be reductionist to concentrate on people only. Across different regions diasporas connect together systems of peoples, technologies, materialities and organisations, in collectives ‘of materially heterogeneous bits and pieces’.

The Jewish diasporascape now needs to be introduced into this ANT notion of relational materialities. As a collective of people and things, a scape makes the vaguely (but often) used distinction between transnationalism and diaspora lose its relevance. In this distinction diaspora

---

32 Giddens gives a suitable definition of globalisation, labelling it as ‘the intensification (and complexity) of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa’. Anthony Giddens cited in: Urry, J. (2003: 39).
38 Ibid.
CHAPTER 2

was about people and transnationalism was about the flows of goods, services and other ‘things’\(^40\). What would now, with the help of this ANT notion, be the characteristics of the Jewish Diasporascape, and where should the focus be directed? Basically the nodes that are present in the Jewish diasporascape are concentrated around Sheffer’s diasporic triangle\(^41\). That triangle still is - when stripped to the bone - a valid and useful theoretical notion. Actors in the Jewish diasporascape define one another in and through the ‘bits and pieces’ that are put into circulation. In the Jewish diasporascape these intermediaries could be ethno-religious, like religious services, ethno-religious items like Torah-scrolls, kosher foodstuff, religious dress-items, synagogues and community centers, cemeteries, a Jewish school, a rabbi, periodicals like the bi-monthly cultural magazine Shalom Singapore, the weekly updates of the community newsletter, etc. They can be anything that passes between and connects actors and defines their positions and relationships\(^42\).

In the next section the scientific debate of the Jewish-Chinese diaspora analogy is discussed. In Southeast Asia the Chinese as entrepreneurial minorities are studied as ‘essential outsiders’\(^43\). There is a striking difference between the ways the international scientific community has been dealing with ‘culturalist’ explanations for Chinese and for Jews in relation to the study of business networks, which has led, as will be argued, to a postponement in studying Jewish business networks.

2.3 When a ‘Terra Incognita’ Becomes a No-Go Area

Jewish successes in business have motivated scholars to formulate non-economic parameters to explain why it was possible for Jews to take the lead in important domains of economic life. Max Weber’s writing on ‘The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Capitalism’ is an example. The debate on the relationship between religion, values and modern economic development was at its height in the beginning of the twentieth century, when scientists from the Historical Schools in Germany and England began to write about the work ethic and other similar cultural or non-economical factors involved in development.

Werner Sombart, a contemporary and intellectual rival of Weber, wrote on the same issues as Weber. Both of them wrote on the causes and nature of capitalism. They agreed on the role of religion in the development of the spirit of Capitalism, but they pointed to different timing and religions\(^44\). Whereas Weber pointed to the role of Calvinism, Sombart saw an important role for Jews. Capitalism would flourish if Jews were given the greatest economic freedom\(^45\). It is Weber’s work that has made a lasting impression. The work of Sombart fell into oblivion. His main work could not stand up against Weber’s writings and was criticised as not scientifically sound. After the war, his conspicuous dealings with the Nazi regime did not add to the popularity of his

---


\(^{41}\) Sheffer (1986).

\(^{42}\) In the case-studies in Chapter Five, Six and Seven there will be a discussion of how this applies to diamonds, coffee and fashion.


Theorising the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

intellectual legacy. However, his book, ‘the Jews and Modern Capitalism’\textsuperscript{46}, cannot be regarded as anti-Semitic; it is, instead philo-Semitic. It is an example of how essentially philo-Semitic notions can be reinterpreted and politically misused. Although there is no intention to renew the Weber-Sombart debate here, it is important to observe that those who are inspired by the writings of Max Weber should bear in mind that Weber’s thinking was sharpened and stimulated in an intellectual climate where it seemed to be obvious that both Protestantism and Judaism had to be appraised for their role in the rise of modern capitalism. Sombart saw a more positive appreciation of the accumulation of wealth in the Torah than in the Christian New Testament\textsuperscript{47}. In his Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion, Weber wrote a study on Judaism, \textit{Ancient Judaism}, in which he states that in the outlook of Puritanism the inheritance of the ‘old testament morality’ and the ‘perfectly unemotional wisdom of the Hebrews’ were of importance\textsuperscript{48}.

After the Second World War a ‘serious’ scientific discussion on a ‘culturalist’ perspective to explain Jewish successes in business fell silent. To claim that special cultural, ethno-religious features in Jewish business practices have led to Jewish success in business is a sensitive issue. To suggest in scholarly debate the existence of Jewish-based business networks in the Diaspora has almost become impossible. Western educated scholars think twice before they enter a scientific debate that deals with these matters, avoiding the risk of being accused of being overly philo-Semitic, or, on the contrary, of fuels anti-Semitic sentiments. After all, a core theme in national-socialist anti-Jewish propaganda condemning Jewish world hegemony was the need to expose Jewish ethno-religious-based networks. These ideas about Jewish conspiracies keep appealing to the imagination and these blatant forms of anti-Semitism have never ceased to pop up, even in seemingly completely unrelated settings such as in Southeast Asia. Schwetschinski’s argument, that even Jewish scholars do not choose this topic of research because they see Jewish interrelations in businesses as too obvious, is not convincing\textsuperscript{49}. Presumably there are also guilt- and shame-related dynamics giving rise to self-censorship in Jewish studies too, which have deflected or caused a discontinuity in the study of Jewish ethno-religious-based business interrelations. There is a thin line between what is accepted as serious and scientific and what is considered to be unscientific and not serious. It is hard to find studies in this area that ‘pass the test’\textsuperscript{50}. The awareness of this thin line between the scientific and non-scientific is illustrated by Schwetschinski’s statement that when Jewish business networks are studied, these should be studied seriously and dispassionately\textsuperscript{51}. The use of the label ‘serious’ draws borders and allows for processes of inclusion and exclusion in a scientific community. ‘Dispassionately’ is a suggestive label as well. It suggests that the study of Jewish business networks is surrounded by sensitivities that cannot be ignored.

\textsuperscript{47} Reid, A. (1997: 37).
\textsuperscript{51} Schwetschinski, D.M. (2000).
The overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia are regarded as the ‘Jews of the East’. A reason why social scientists were motivated to look for ‘culturalist’ explanations for the business success of the overseas Chinese was the rise of the Asian tiger economies in the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, with the emergence of China as a new global player in the world market, the Chinese way of doing business needed scientific clarification. It is therefore not remarkable that in Southeast Asia the overseas Chinese - the Chinese diaspora - have been extensively studied. An extensive body of knowledge has been created concerning their dominance in business practices. Although their presence in this region has been contested and has even led to violent outbursts of anti-Sinicism, this has not led to a scientific reluctance to deal with the ‘culturalist’ ethno-religious dimensions of their business dealings. On the contrary, overseas Chinese businesses have been seriously and dispassionately studied, important theoretical insights have been developed, and extensive empirical studies have been conducted. One might argue that if Jews were to be studied likewise – as ‘essential outsiders’ – the theoretical stances that would be formulated in such a debate would have many congruencies with generated through studying the overseas Chinese. The comparison is obvious but, as Chirot has already stated, inflammatory. Even among dispassionate scholars the comparison is (still) controversial. It is nevertheless worthwhile to examine the debate on the overseas Chinese. The structure of this debate might be considered as a blueprint for what could have been a debate on Jewish business networks. It would fit into the tradition that Weber and Sombart initiated in the 1920s, but since World War II for the Jewish part of it has never been fully developed, and it has even come to a dead stop.

It was impossible to explain the business success of the overseas Chinese from a capitalist approach based on individual economic rational choices alone. An ‘Asian values debate’ followed, which is an Asian variation on the Weber-Sombart debate. An Asian form of modernisation was thought possible, that kept out Western influences selectively while retaining traditional Asian elements. In this culturalist perspective Chinese economic success and business dominance in the Southeast Asian region is explained out of ethnic-religious (overseas) Chinese (Confucianist) values. Confucianist values had generated economic development comparable with what Weber had found in Protestant ethics or Sombart in Jewish religious laws. Chinese network capitalism based on guanxi principles was said to play a major role in determining how business decisions were made and how enterprises were developed. Even a Chinese diaspora emerged, because of the presumably strong links of the overseas Chinese with their ‘homeland’, China. In relation to the rise of the ‘awakening dragon’, China, a competitive advantage was assumed for the overseas

55 See for example the cautious and careful way Chirot and Reid have introduced their study. They have contributed to a historical and comparative perspective. Chirot, D. & A. Reid (Eds.) (1997).
Theorising the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

Chinese in a Chinese diaspora. The common grounds among the overseas and local Chinese would guarantee trustworthy business relationships. This advantage would make the Overseas Chinese better equipped to deal with homeland Chinese business practices. This was not only thought to be a characteristic of the relation between the overseas Chinese and the Chinese homeland, but was thought to exist in the worldwide web of overseas Chinese populations also.

This culturalist approach provoked reaction and discussion. A body of knowledge was created in which there was also room for alternative approaches, such as the institutionalist perspective. This approach criticises the culturalist approach for being ‘over socialised’. In business studies the dominant capitalist approach was nuanced by Granovetter's notions of ‘embeddedness’ and the ‘business group’. Opportunistically these more loosely organised bonds between firms in business groups were seen as an alternative to the integrated, multidivisional organised firm. Of course, in reality this loosely organised alternative has always been present. Its initial absence from business studies shows the impotence and reluctance to incorporate models other than ‘harsh’ capitalist economic parameters in studying businesses. These loose organisational forms of business groups became a viable option because these business groups showed the capacity to reduce transaction costs, which reduction would facilitate the reaping of a benefit. These costs proved not only to be diminishable by internalising market transactions within the boundaries of a bureaucratically organised firm, but also by managing external relations in co-operation within other businesses in a business group network. These three perspectives - the culturalist, the capitalist and the institutionalist - illuminate the role of cultural values, the market and social ties respectively in shaping business structures. A fourth perspective, a politico-economic perspective, stresses the importance of state patronage relations that use co-ethnic co-operation as a strategy in economic rational behavior. It has become clear that in Southeast Asian countries the role of economic and industrial state policies and patronage networks has been influential in shaping not only the organisation of business systems, but also the management models of firms. Accordingly, the role of the state became central in analysis from this fourth perspective.

The proponents of these different perspectives have contributed to a lively debate to explain the business successes and efficiencies of the overseas Chinese. Each of these groups made their points and their positions seem cut-and-dried; maybe too cut-and-dried. In circular argumentation all perspectives are right in their own way. The pitfall seems to be a form of synecdoche, the objectification of single parts of social phenomena as if they were wholes - a compartmentalisation and a subsequent reasoning that starts from these objectifications. The question arises if it would make sense to start from one of these different perspectives when studying peculiar Jewish efficiencies in their business initiatives. Presumably this would just result in a validation of the viewpoints of one of these four perspectives. That would lead us into a dead-end. Is there not an alternative route that can be taken? The route this thesis proposes goes via a trivialised and veiled Jewish business presence in the Straits, and the appliance of insights


CHAPTER 2

that are developed in complexity theory in a movement-driven social science. The Straits Jewish Diasporascape will be investigated as a complex system. A complex system is irreducible; ‘the whole is more than the sum of its parts’ and ‘the interactions between the system and its environment are of such a nature that the system as a whole cannot be fully understood simply by analysing its components’:

In the Southeast Asian region the study of Jewish business networks is surrounded by sensitivities that hinder a clear understanding of its scope. Unreliable figures published in anti-Zionist pamphlets and reports of opaque agreements with and initiatives of ‘Mexican nationals’ in the area want to make us believe that these initiatives are substantial. Singapore seems to play a contentious intermediate role in these business agreements. In larger parts of the Southeast Asian region, Israel's interest seems veiled and is said to be mainly in new sectors of the economy, like information technology and telecommunications. But Jewish and Israeli merchants are said to be active in the diamond trade also. In the 1980s Israel was said to provide about 40% of Singapore's total diamond supply. In the Straits, the presumed Jewish (veiled) interest produced fantastic ‘culturalist’ and network stories about the Jewish business presence. These stories are not based on empirical findings and reliable sources. They are labeled as unscientific and/or anti-Semitic. There have also been some serious scientific attempts to map the historical Jewish presence in the region and to investigate matters of Jewish identity. Attempts to bring these two debates together have never materialised. At the most they have led to a comparison between Jews in Europe and the Chinese in Asia as ‘essential outsiders’ in different regions in the world.

The popularity in the 1980s of Foucauldian and Lyotardian ideas about the Self and the Other, and the tendency in that project to allegorise ‘the Jew’ as an easy and globally applicable ‘Other’, has influenced the system of knowledge studying Jews. Peculiarly it has led to a denial of Jewish presence in the Straits by presenting the virulent anti-Semitism as veiled anti-Sinicism, and the introduction of the notion of anti-Semitism without Jews. In the urge to mirror the Self, Jews


64 There is a wide range of anti-Semitic publications dealing with Israel and Zionism. For those interested see the annexure.
69 Chirot, D. & A. Reid (Eds.) (1997).
Theorising the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

became discursive Jews, or ‘non-Jewish Jews’ \(^{70}\). In learning how to imagine oneself, the challenge became to embody particular differences in a fetish with the name of ‘the Jew’. In this imaginary dialogue with the Other the reality of those Jews ‘who would think the phrase “non-Jewish Jew” to be nonsense’ \(^{71}\) was ignored. In that scientific allegorising ‘niche’ the tendency was ‘to allegorise away’ ‘real’ Jews. In describing a virulent anti-Semitism in the Straits as ‘anti-Semitism without Jews’, and directing it against the overseas Chinese, there was no attempt to establish how those who themselves are (corpo) real Jews could respond to it.

To let Jews re-appear again in the Straits is not just to exploit a new niche in research – not, that is, when a niche is defined in the way a positivist social science would define it, as a ‘terra incognita’ yet to be explored. It is more complicated than that. This has to do with the sensitivities that surround this ‘niche’. Within a system of knowledge the idea of studying Jewish ethno-religious business networks seems to be a taboo. There is great sensitivity to any ‘culturalist’ notion stating that Jews have a different way of doing business, different from that of any other ethnic group. There is the fear that possible differences or details will be exaggerated and used in anti-Semitic propaganda. Accordingly scientists, whether Jewish or not, have to maintain high standards in engaging in such studies \(^{72}\).

The establishment of a Jewish nation-state has been a major break-through in the history of the Jewish people, but the way in which the Jewish political subject has given shape to ‘Eretz Israel’ - the Promised Land - is regularly questioned. Even in Israel the fundamentals of Zionist ideology are increasingly questioned and its inconsistencies are revealed \(^{73}\). Emergent contradictions in ideology are potentially dangerous for a sense of a national Self. Israel’s national Self is not congruent with a diasporic Self. Not all Israeli are Jews and not all Jews are Zionists and/or Israeli. A diasporic Self would go beyond the strict demarcation lines of nationalism and therefore of Zionism. Boyarin and Boyarin, for instance, put forward that Zionism ‘in fundamental ways merely reproduces the exclusivist syndromes of European nationalism’ \(^{74}\). Like any nationalism, Zionism too has been compelling \(^{75}\). When national ideologies are compelling, even academics apply self-censorship. This is true of all times and of all places. But it would be too actor-centric to state that social scientists individually feel ideological constraints in their work in Jewish studies. A (knowledge) system reality is more complex. Security issues become of importance here. For the sake of ideology, inconsistencies should be denied and displeasing histories should be forgotten or have to remain untold for the time being. Exposed nerves have to be protected from being touched.

In the ‘vain art’ of scientific allegorising, scientists neglect their responsibility to ‘non-Jewish Jews’, using them as mirrors of the Self. They fail to realise that as a trope the allegory itself might


\(^{72}\) In studying Jews, it is an advantage to be Jewish. Critics will automatically see when a text is written by a Jewish insider or by a ‘goy’ who is studying from the ‘outside’. As will be shown in the remaining chapters relevant sources remained closed and there is a high threshold to cross in accessing empirical material.

\(^{73}\) See for instance the recent discussion on the official history of the establishment of the state of Israel and the reports about the position at that time of Palestinian villages, or the reports that state that at the moment there are more Jews leaving Israel than settling in Israel. See: Gold, S.J. (2002).


\(^{75}\) See: Gold, S.J. (2002).
have transformational power. Closed, taboo, locked-in realities in systems of knowledge have transformed some parts of the Jewish scientific terra-incognita into no-go areas. That includes the notion that the Straits exemplifies; ‘anti-Semitism without Jews’. A ‘tribe of scientists’ produces knowledge. ‘Scientists have a culture. They have beliefs. They have practices’. By forgetting, denying or deleting sensitivities, science has been generating its own locked-in realities. That locked-in reality has produced a discontinuity in the study of Jewish (business) presence in the Straits. Callon has shown that in practice science produces its realities as well as describing them. This makes these realities no less real. But where does that leave social science? It makes social science the expression of a continuing elaboration and enactment of social life. The way in which Jews have been ‘absenced’ from the Straits directs our attention to a more profound issue which goes to the heart of social inquiry and its methods. To say that social inquiry is productive, or in this case, that the allegorising away of ‘real Jews’ has proven to be un-productive, is to say the same thing twice. It is the gut feeling of the researcher, or - alternatively said - a ‘structure of feeling’ that derives from his perception of a series of processes within a system of knowledge in which he senses a tipping point, that justifies his taking up the niche of making the ‘non-Jewish Jew’ Jewish again.

The idea followed in this thesis is that the allegory of the Straits Jewish Diasporascape could be applied for a more balanced appreciation of the political and moral challenges that Jews are facing in their diasporas. The sensivities that surround Jewish enactments in the Straits are not there by accident. They serve a purpose or goal. Some of these purposes are not meant to be exposed. But acknowledging that there are sensitivities is something different from denying, forgetting or deleting these sensitivities, even to the point where a locked-in reality seems to be a ‘real reality’. Accepting this ‘real reality’ would hinder the enactment of a reality which would possibly be more just, human, fitting or promising. Discontinuities and concealments are not just coincidentally ‘revealed’. One has deliberately to explore the ‘terra incognita’ to find them, in response to an inescapable structure of feeling. Through this emergent ‘structure of feeling’ a ‘tipping point’ is reached in a system, which blows or opens the system and makes new connections possible, makes concealed connections visible, and reinvigorates slumbering connections. That is a profoundly different view of the matter than that of positivist social sciences.

This position argues for acknowledging the existence of a special space that gives room to (also scientific) sensitivities to get a clear view, in this case, of the oscillations between Jewish absence and presence. It argues for a new distortion into a clarity that is more accurate and fruitful than the one that the social sciences now participate in, reflect upon and have been enacting, one that allows the Jew to appear in a region (the Straits) that is supposed to have lost the majority of its historic Jewish diaspora groups. The study of Jewish business practices in the Straits, of this aspect of the Jewish Diasporascape, can therefore not be free from passion and emotion, which is a far cry from Schwetschinski’s prescription of a dispassionate way of dealing with Jewish

---

77 Callon points to the theories of markets in economics that have helped to produce a market reality that (according to Callon) nowadays dictates our lives. Law, J. & J. Urry (2004) Enacting the social. Economy and Society. 33 (3) pp. 390-410. p. 394.
81 On the other hand it might also be possible that it would prevent reality from being disruptive, cruel and too confrontational.
Theorising the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

business networks\(^{82}\). On the contrary, these qualities are necessary if one is to be sensitive and receptive to forgotten stories, fading memories, feelings of trauma, loss, pain, anger, guilt, jealousy, etc., and if one is to develop a repertoire that enables the enactment of a Straits Jewish Diasporascape. This enactment is sought for in combination with the paradigmatic shift that complexity theory proposes. Exploring this combination in a ‘complexity turn’ will produce the setting in time and space of this Straits Jewish Diasporascape.

2.4 The Complexity Turn: Movement-Driven Social Science

Thinking in terms of scapes, networks and fluids provokes the idea that there are no stable systems or structures in today’s world. Social configurations are fundamentally complex, multiple, fractal\(^{83}\) and dynamic. Adopting this principle however has not yet resulted in the production of a corresponding and comprehensive theoretical framework. Theorists like Giddens, Urry, Castells, Appudarai and Beck have adopted principles of complexity. These are mostly variations of the insights of chaos theory in the natural sciences. These insights have their value in the investigation of the complex nature of social orderings\(^{84}\). At the same time they point to a crisis in regular science. The life cycle of existing paradigms is limited. A paradigm enters a crisis when too many puzzles remain unsolved within the paradigm. When observations first considered to be anomalies become too persistent, this may well lead to the development of ‘revolutionary’ new combinations or radical reconceptualisations\(^{85}\) even to the point - a tipping point - where a ‘complex structure of feeling’ - ‘marketed’ by complexity thinkers - heralds a complexity turn\(^{86}\).

New paradigms have been developed out of the notions to be found in complexity thinking, for instance Urry’s ‘mobilities paradigm’, which reflects Urry’s desire to establish a movement-driven social science\(^{87}\).

In his ‘mobilities paradigm’ Urry is moving away from a static societal bound sociology, which according to Urry is no longer able to identify the forces that are redesigning the contemporary world. For Urry, mobilities that move in complex, non-linear and uneven ways are the major forces that reconstitute social life into systems of ‘global complexities’. In twentieth century sociology the focus was on the metaphor of the nation-state. In twenty-first century sociology

---


\(^{85}\) Sterman, J.D. & J. Wittenberg (1999) Path dependence, competition, and succession in the dynamics of scientific revolution. Organisation Science. 10 (3) pp. 332-341. p. 324. The life cycle of a paradigm is one of the core concepts of Kuhn, T.S. (1970), in the theory developed in his ‘The Structure of Scientific Revolution’. Sterman and Wittenberg saw that new theories with great explanatory power frequently fail to attract a critical mass of adherents, while weaker ones often triumph. They see the eclipse of the strong by the weak not as a pathological outcome, but as a normal outcome of scientific practice in the way that they have modelled it. The intrinsic capability of paradigms has a weak effect on their survival. Survival seems to depend almost entirely on the environmental conditions that surround their birth. Ibid. p. 338-339.

\(^{86}\) That in turn might be backed up by authoritative bodies like the US-based Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences which was chaired by Immanuel Wallerstein and included Ilya Prigogine. The Commission recommended the insights developed in complexity sciences as essential for re-thinking the social. See: Urry, J. (2005A: 236).

this focus is changing as ‘most societies are not nations, let alone nation states’. In systems of ‘global complexities’ there are many different ‘islands of order’. Urry considers these islands of order as societal metaphors. They include national societies, diasporas, supra-national states, global religions or civilisations, international organisations, international meetings, NGOs and cross-border regions. In its search for a new interpretative framework, complexity moves beyond the traditional divisions or dichotomies in social sciences, like subject and object, micro and macro, the social and the natural, and especially agency and structure. The idea of a structure has been persistent in the social sciences. A structure was explained, then individuals would act according to these structural patterns. Millions of iterative actions are encapsulated in the concept of structure. Sociology adopted the concept of structure to solve this problem of iteration and the concept of agency to leave room for the possibility of change in a social system. But of course, agency occasionally behaves differently from what is expected and, disturbingly, now and then social systems seem able to change although agents’ endlessly repeating the same action over and over again, and not doing anything different from what they have always been doing. These changes are unexpected and unpredicted and different from what individual human agents in their recurrent actions were trying to establish. Change apparently does not necessarily require (human) agency, and what is seen as structure happens to change endogenously.

In complexity analyses there is no clear division between separate agents, implying the existence of free will and a structure that determines behaviour. Complexity assumes a kind of inbetween-ness – the collective properties of all sorts of phenomena - known as ‘emergence or regularities of behaviour that somehow seem to transcend their own ingredients’. Of course this sounds like nothing new if one looks at other scholarly pronouncements. Giddens’ ‘duality of structure’ or Bourdieu’s ‘habitus’ also tried to overcome the actor-structure dilemma by adopting a structurationist position that attempts to treat the influences of actor and structure equally, and by assuming an ‘intermediate’ recursive level. But the inbetween-ness Urry is referring to is not at an intermediate level, but more a fluid at an interface level that is activated through imbalances that lead to interactions and disturbances. Social change needs to be understood through iteration rather than through recurrence. Iteration means that the tiniest of ‘local’ change can generate, over many repeated actions, unexpected, unpredictable and chaotic outcomes, sometimes the opposite of what agents thought they were intending. Action through processes of numerous iterations generates fluids that are unpredictable and non-linear. There is no clear direction. Consequently, - with no goal or end purpose, there are no normatively identifiable unintended consequences any longer. A system is what it is. System failures do not exist any more. They become system features. The non-linear properties in systems often move unpredictably but irreversibly away from points of

89 Ibid., 108.
Theorising the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

equilibrium\textsuperscript{98}. Multiple connections and trajectories ensure that events at one location do have significant time-space effects elsewhere, but non-linearity makes it difficult to isolate what is cause and what effect\textsuperscript{99}. Complexity investigates systems and adopts the insights of chaos theory derived from the non-linear scientist Ilya Prigogine. Both non-linearity and complexity do not acknowledge 'the dichotomy of stasis and change, nor that of determinism and chance\textsuperscript{100}'. In Urry's conceptual framework the consequence is that, following Prigogine, there is the 'end of certainty'.

This end of certainty forces theory to move away from actor-oriented perspectives on social change. These perspectives are not able to deal with the idea that there is no necessary proportionality between the causes and effects of events or phenomena, nor are they able to predict social change that develops in non-linear directions. System effects are not the result of just adding together individual components. There is no necessary equivalence between the individual and system levels of analysis. This inadequacy in the traditional social sciences became paramount in dealing with the dynamics of the modern phenomenon of globalisation, which has 'outrun the capacity of the social sciences to investigate\textsuperscript{101}'. Everything seemed connected. In this present state of affairs it seemed impossible 'to determine the precise ingredients that are entering into the composition of the social domain\textsuperscript{102}'. To deliver a 'social explanation' at this stage of development of the social sciences seems to have become an impossible task.

Complexity opts for the adaptation of other disciplines into sociology and transcends the old divisions of nature and society, and consequently between the physical and social sciences. The idea (derived from ANT) that human and physical worlds cannot be analyzed separately from each other is important in Complexity. Social reality is never a unique outcome of human acting. Societies (such as Jewish Diasporascape) are made up of hybrids -actants-, mergers of the social and the material. It is difficult to visualise these hybrids as being capable of 'acting'. It is more as if they relay messages or 'act' as intermediaries. Interactions can be stabilised and extended through time and space through the use of material resources\textsuperscript{103}. These materialities posses multiple context-bounded practical capacities but can be of expressive value too. Their material effects are more durable, or more easily transported, than human bodies or their voices alone. 'Human action and words alone, when left to their own devices, do not spread very far at all\textsuperscript{104}'. Complexity is 'postdisciplinary'. The post-disciplinary emerges when scholars are following ideas or connections beyond the borders of their disciplines. The identification is with learning rather than with the strict borders that divide disciplines\textsuperscript{105}. Classical sociology has rejected theoretical implications derived from the natural sciences because they would purportedly not be applicable to human beings\textsuperscript{106}. An example of interdisciplinarity is Callon and Latour’s ANT project that tries to redefine the social by going back to its origins, in order to be able to trace the connections again\textsuperscript{107}. At the same time there is the awareness in complexity thinking that there is still a long

\textsuperscript{98} Urry, J. (2003: 18).
\textsuperscript{100} Prigogine quoted in Urry, J. (2005A: 238).
\textsuperscript{101} Urry, J. (2003: 38).
\textsuperscript{102} Latour, B. (2005: 1).
\textsuperscript{107} Latour, B. (2005: 1).
way to go (if going all the way is at all possible) to create a unified ‘theory of complexity’, not least because a methodology for complexity research, a method for the application of the already sophisticated theoretical concepts, is lagging behind\footnote{When you look at the development of methodology in Latour’s ANT and in Urry’s ‘mobilities paradigm’, you see that the issue of a relevant methodology is being addressed relatively slowly, if at all.}. In addition there are still hardly any large-scale empirical studies within the social sciences that deploy complexity notions to serve as examples\footnote{Urry, J. (2005B) The Complexity Turn. Theory, Culture & Society. 22 (1) pp. 1-14. p. 12.}.

There are still many questions left. For instance, how does complexity deal with power? In his trilogy on the network society Castells, as a pre-complexity thinker, places his discussion on power and inequality in the dichotomy of the ‘space of place’ versus the ‘space of flows’\footnote{Castells, M. (1996).}. Power and inequality are no longer related to the ownership of (different sorts of) capital alone. He locates the powerless, who are dominated by an ‘informational’ world-order that controls the key economical and information flows, in the ‘space of place’. Access to flows, rather than ownership, has become the distinguishing factor for recognising the better-offs as different from the marginalised. Power becomes a relational effect. \textit{The exercise of power depends on the actions of others; power is translated (...)}. People (...) possess power only in so far as they are relationally constituted as doing so\footnote{Clegg, S. cited in: Duim, van der R. (2005: 126).}.

Urry’s notion of power is detached from human beings. He places power within the context of chaos theory and the notions of iteration, attractors and self-reference. Within a system, the characterising and patterning of the social results from what is called the mathematics of ‘attractors’\footnote{This is a Chaos Theory notion derived from the work of Prigogine. See: Urry, J. (2000A: 198); Urry, J. (2003: 26); Urry, J. (2005A: 239).}. These ‘attractors’ are the main forces that pattern systems and cause change in the way fluids move through the different scapes. How to view this notion of ‘attractor’? The attractor should not be seen as something that is in the system. It nevertheless regulates trajectories in and around that system and limits the possible states a system may reach\footnote{Mackenzie, A. (2005) The Problem of the Attractor: A Singular Generality between Sciences and Social Theory. Theory, Culture & Society. 22 (5) pp. 45-65. p. 53.}. Together with feedback mechanisms, attractors are the forces that re-order systems. They create compartmentalised restricted parts in a dynamic system. The trajectories of these dynamic systems are drawn to these ‘attractors’ in a way that resembles gravitation\footnote{Urry, J. (2005A: 249).}. A local/global scalar logic, with an ‘imagery of terrains’ that Castells still uses to spatially fix geographical containers for social processes, is refuted here. This must be understood in the way Einstein conceptualised an object that gravitationally twists or shifts its surrounding space\footnote{Urry, J. (2003: 83).}. The attractor of centripedry is such an attractor. Centering processes are highly internationalized nowadays. A specific form, as an outcome of the power of the centripedry attractor, is that of a new attractor; that of glocalization. Trajectories of social systems are drawn into the attractor of glocalization in which the dichotomy of the global and the local ceases to exist as they are ‘inextricably and irreversibly bound together through a dynamic relationship, with huge flows of ‘resources’ moving backwards and forwards between the two’\footnote{Ibid.; 84.}.
The trajectories of dynamic complex systems are potentially unstable. They are not fixed. A pattern of actions may occur when the turning or tipping points are reached. These may occur through two kinds of feedback mechanisms. Negative feedback mechanisms have the effect of restoring the equilibrium in a system. Positive feedback mechanisms are viewed as exacerbating initial stresses in a system. As a result of these feedback mechanisms switches occur in a system. It is difficult, or almost impossible, to predict when a turning or tipping point is reached and where it comes from. Most likely they come from a set of technologies, or from firms or governments that exacerbate power and that were not in the centre at that time. These tipping points constitute the promise that a major turning point may occur with a small switch and that small causes can have big effects. So changes may happen not gradually in a linear way, but dramatically at the moment when the system switches.

ANT is a theory of change. Using ANT in complexity means that change is not narrowed down to a few structural, cultural, social or technological variables. The attention is on the interaction of all of these variables within broad heterogeneous flows. The mobilities paradigm that Urry proposes attempts to account for a modernity that is quickening liquidity. For Urry there is no stasis; there are only processes of creation and transformation. ‘There is nothing before movement; movement expresses how things are’. However, there would be no increase in fluidity without extensive systems of immobility. In a liquid modernity, next to this increase of fluidity there are also zones of connection. When there are mobilities or routes, there are also moorings and roots.

In classical network theory networks are still defined with a societal orientation that situates the nation-state or other clearly and strictly bounded regions centrally. Classical network theory adheres to regions and networks as immutable. The components in a network are characterised by a relational constancy. In research on networks the tendency was to look for predictable, demonstrable, measurable and countable connections in order to validate the claim that a component is part of a network. But being able to count something does not guarantee that everything that counts is accounted for. It is this question of how to make sure that most of what counts in research is taken into account that is tackled here.

The Straits Jewish Diasporascape is an ordering accomplishment. The scape is held together by an active set of relations. Ordering in Urry’s idiom is what in ANT theory would be called an act of translation, but what is not translated, what is still fluid, what has been diverted or detoured, may be more important than what is translated. When there is connectivity, there are also disconnections. When there is continuity, there are also discontinuities. When there is inclusion, there will also be exclusions. When there is remembering, there is also neglecting and forgetting.

118 Ibid.; 27.
119 Ibid.; 33.
121 Ibid.; 36.
CHAPTER 2

When there is access, there is also inaccessibility and rejection. And when there is evidence of empowerment there will be incapacity and inaudibility in other cases\textsuperscript{126}. But, how does one deal with these orderings and non-orderings (or translations and non-translations) with these more complex forms of connectivity? The argument that is made in this chapter is that they can be served only by a more complex vision of spatiality, that more complex vision that is widely adopted in the Complexity paradigm formulated by Law and Mol\textsuperscript{127}. It is a more differentiated spatial topology with which the mobilities, moorings, connections, disconnections, continuities and discontinuities in what has been called the Straits Jewish Diasporascape can be read. This spatial topology will be investigated further in the next section.

2.5 The Spatial Topologies of Region, Networks and Fluids

Topology is a branch of mathematics that deals with spatial types. It extends the possibilities of mathematics beyond its Euclidian, standard X,Y,Z axis restrictions. Brought into the realm of the social, it articulates spaces in which different social processes take place\textsuperscript{128}. Law and Mol, for instance, using actor network theory (ANT), distinguish four spatial topologies, those of the network, fluids, the region and ‘fire’. The first three topologies - regions, networks and fluids - will be elaborated upon below. The characteristics of the fourth topology, ‘fire’, will be explained in the next section.

The social sciences are most familiar with the region and network spatiality. Region is a secured kind of space. Network as a spatiality has been ‘discovered’ for its ability to cross borders and boundaries. In the first pattern, the \textit{immutable and immobile}\textsuperscript{129} region, objects are clustered together. In general each society can be considered as a region with clear and distinct boundaries\textsuperscript{130}. The second pattern, networks, stretches across diverse regions. A network is a series of elements with well-defined relations among them\textsuperscript{131}. There is the need to have a relational constancy within a network. There are complex, enduring and predictable connections among peoples, objects, and technologies that stretch across multiple and distant spaces and times\textsuperscript{132}. A network is an \textit{immutable mobile}.

In network analysis that starts from a classical economic, capitalistic perspective, networks are caught up in an ‘efficiency imperative perspective’. This is a static approach in which networks are seen to be created from a rational choice with notions of profit sharing, benefit/cost calculations and rational trading. Accordingly, businesses involved in a network will see their profit being maximised and their continuance better guaranteed through cooperation via these networks. This relational constancy in networks, its immutability, holding itself stable wherever it goes, is seen from the perspective of the immutable and immobile regional topology. The interplay between these two topologies, region and networks, is expressed in a rather static

\textsuperscript{127} Law, J. & A. Mol (2001).
\textsuperscript{129} The characterisation of regions as an immobile and immutable, networks as mobile and immutable and fluids as mutable and mobile is derived from the work of ANT proponent Bruno Latour.
\textsuperscript{130} Urry, J. (2003: 41).
\textsuperscript{132} Urry, J. (2003: 57).
classical network theory as an inter-topological effect in which the immutable network ‘folds’ regional surfaces, bringing together sites and locations that lie apart from each other.\(^{133}\)

The invariance of networks has been the focus in Diaspora theory. The network is considered as the Diaspora’s medium, connecting the three sites of the ‘Diaspora triangle’. In the capitalist, ‘culturalist’ or institutionalist perspectives referred to earlier, the networks in businesses of the overseas Chinese are not ‘mobilised’. The network metaphor, most generally put in a wider context than that of the nation-state’s ‘regionality’, is folded to a location other than that in which the diasporic community ‘resides’. Largely in accordance with how the global has come to be understood as a network that transports invariant shapes, diaspora theory falls into the same ‘territorial trap’.\(^{134}\) In diaspora theory networks are described and laid down in abstract, invariant global (diasporic) connections only. Even when new technologies are said to make the interrelations within a diaspora dynamic ‘with increasing speed and efficiency’, these network interrelations are seen as invariables that are occasionally made dynamic for instance by these new technologies. The starting point remains stasis.

This is where Mol and Law’s other spatial topologies enter the scene. Spatial variability is central to complexity sciences.\(^{136}\) It is not the region with its borders or the network relations only that mark difference in place. That is why it is important to look at a third, mutable and mobile fluid spatial pattern of relationships. In this fluid-fluid topology there are neither boundaries nor relations that mark the difference between one place and another. Instead, boundaries come and go, while relations in these fluids do not transform themselves abruptly, but rather move slowly and fluidly within and across space.\(^{137}\) Fluids indicate movement. Not hampered by boundaries, fluids go from one variation into another in a continuous transformation. It is in and through the interferences of these fluids that the more stable networked orderings are assembled. This fluid spatial topology is of importance, as it opens up the possibility to consider the Jewish Diasporascape as a spatiality that is not clearly delineated by boundaries. Fluids indicate liquid, unstable and borderless social and material configurations. Objects generated in fluid space are not well defined. They have no clear bounds. Because of their ability to mix and to incorporate, to move, circumvent and infiltrate, they are not easily eradicated.\(^{138}\) As they move they change in character and shape.

Dealing with this topology of fluid is important to revitalising the discussion on diasporas and business networks. It draws further on the idea that there is a more fluid ‘zone’, a ‘comfort zone’ as some would call it in and between business networks in a diaspora community.\(^{139}\) It is a zone that harbours fluids like kinship ties, ethnic affiliations, religious beliefs, historical legacies, local brands and logos but also more ‘modern’ more rapid fluids with global reach like educational and

---


alumni bonds, the internet, digitised information, digital and health hazards, social movements, international brands and logo's, etc. - fluids that over time, in a self-organising way, meaningfully create their own context for action, and that may or may not result in the assemblage of more or less stable diasporic business networks.

This fluid topology is helpful in making the complex and multiple character of the relationships within the Straits Jewish Diasporascape more visible. It opens up the possibility of taking into account the various considerations and rationales that influence why and how interconnectivity is established, how it is kept operational and how it has been activated. It opens up the possibility of looking at the interconnections in the diasporic triangle, but also among the different communities within a diaspora. In diaspora research, although it can occasionally be 'multi-sited', this is still understudied. Multi-sited studies are not necessarily able to surpass the 'territorial trap' in which networks and the notion of region within network studies have become entangled. This is when fluids are treated as the ‘Other’ of regions and networks, as if they embody all that should not exist and represent the deviances that need to be suppressed for a ‘clear’ networked regional ordering. It is through their interaction with other spatial topologies that orderings emerge. These orderings, however, could have materialised only because of the logic in and of other topologies.

The argument that has been made in this thesis is that the complexity and multiplicity of the interactions and relationships in Jewish business networks cannot be fully understood using conventional (flat) Euclidean business network analysis. There is a ‘presence’ beyond the grasp of the Euclidean region-network imagination. This ‘hidden’ presence is instrumental, as will be shown in the following chapters, to establish new links. These links are partly built on historically established links and, almost forgotten, might re-appear to build on new technologies or organisational novelties. But they can also emerge because of prejudices and hostility and become, although on first sight absent, more present and enduring than is generally imagined or wished for. A complexity approach uses a spatial topology that harbours this disorderly and at random character of ties also, including the time-space ruptures, disjunctions and discontinuities that characterise a complex system, in this case the Straits Jewish Diasporascape. Law and Mol introduced another topology that is adopted in and adapted to this thesis. They call this fourth spatial topology ‘fire’. The importance of this spatial topology is paramount, especially for the Jewish Diasporascape when the fluid ‘comfort zone’ becomes a zone of ‘discomfort’. I am referring here to the widespread negative imagination of Jewish omnipresence in the Straits region that inconveniently crops up and that has developed into a meaningful but disruptive

---

142 This might be due to the high transportation costs when dealing scientifically with more Diaspora sites. In that respect the author is grateful for the sponsoring of the research costs by the faculty of social sciences of the Vrije Universiteit. For an example of multi-sited research see Gold, S.J. (2002).
ordering force and as will be made clear, has influenced business efforts in the Straits Jewish Diasporascape. This fourth topology will be explained in the next section.

2.6 The Topology of Fire and Matters of Absenced Otherness

Organisational innovations and new technologies make a co-presence to activate networks less and less necessary. What is absent and yet present is brought into new spatial configurations. TV and computer screens reflect and make present an absent world lying beyond the home and workplace. New kinds of interactions create new imaginary worlds in which presence depends on what is absent and what is present. This new reality is captured by Mol and Law in the spatial topology of ‘fire’. This fourth spatial metaphor for thinking business networks might be of interest especially for the Jewish Diaspora in the Straits, because this spatial topology of ‘fire’ provides for an ordering of the Jewish Diasporascape in which the voices of the absenced, ‘allegorised-away Jew’ might be heard. Law and Mol typify this topology as dealing with the way in which the authority of presence depends on what they call the ‘alterity of Otherness’, or, differently put, ‘the dependence of that which cannot be made present - that which is absent - on that which is indeed present’.

The social sciences traditionally think in continuities. The way people perceive the world is reflected in the categories that people have been schooled into using as they read the world, including those from the sciences. The sciences produce and describe their realities. Realities, the statements about these realities, and the inscription devices that produce these realities are simultaneously produced. Reality itself, its objects and materials and the statements about their relationships are all relationally produced. They do not exist in and of themselves. In adopting a critical (anti-)realist stance, Complexity strongly connects presence with absence. Reality is built by the enactment of an ‘in here presence’ while at the same time there is the enactment of an ‘out there absence’. This ‘out there-ness’ comes in two forms: as an absence that is manifest (manifest absence) and a more problematic ‘hinterland of indefinite, necessary, but hidden Otherness’ (Othered absence). Manifest absence goes with presence. Even more than that, manifest absence is inseparable from presence. To make present is also to make absent. They correlate since presence is incomplete and depends on absence. The dividing lines between ‘in here presences’ and ‘out there absences’ are not clear cut. Most of the world’s realities are vague, indefinite, and full of discontinuities. That is how much of the world is enacted. Consequently, it might be a good idea to be alert and think of reasons other than scientific only - for instance, political reasons - why a certain reality has become productive.

150 Ibid.; 615.
152 Law, J. (2004; 31).
153 Ibid.; 83.
155 This is the terminology Law uses to describe these layers in ‘enacting the social’. This terminology will be used in this thesis.
Absenced Otherness is necessary to presence, but it is not nor cannot be made manifest. Othering is a necessary and indispensable characteristic in the enactment of reality. There is always Othering. This absenced Otherness harbours the processes necessary to in-here presence and manifest absence. As a space it is indispensable to produce realities, but it is silenced, shut off, or has been made to disappear. The appearance of direct representation (reality) is the effect of an ‘artful deletion’. Realities grow out of distinctions between patterns of similarity and difference. That which has been brought to presence, or manifest absence, is always limited, and therefore always potentially contestable. This invites classifications of right and wrong, just or unjust, dominant and the oppressed. Dominant realities are those realities constituted from the point of view of the ‘victors’. This does not necessarily have to be a ‘brutal’ act. The silenced ‘Other’ might also be an innocent category because of its repetitive but indispensable routine, that just slips the attention of being there and draws attention to itself only when it is not there anymore. More precarious, that silencing might also be the product of an assumed irrelevance. In the urge to become explanatory, and the need for singular, simple answers in the sciences and adjacent practices, it is tempting to take short-cuts. Consultants and other practitioners might favour singular and simple answers to the questions they investigate. Multiplicity might be unproductive, threatening and disturbing, and best repressed or seen as irrelevant or impractical.

Prejudice is as part of the human condition, an effect of absenced Otherness that never ceases to cast its shadow on the enactment of realities. Prejudice and alterity are not the same thing, but go hand in hand. When a semblance of social order is created, alterity is the first step in creating prejudices. When this semblance becomes institutionalised in laws and customs, it becomes a filter with which we distort or ignore emerging ‘strange’ realities that lie outside our categories and assumptions. A group on which disownments, rejections, and fears are projected might qualify as the Other. The topology of fire opens up the space where alterity and prejudice, projected in and on a Straits Jewish Diasporascape might be taken into account. It allows one to look for an anti- as well as a philo-Semitic imagination, and to consider whether or not anti-Semitism without Jews indeed has no connection with Jewish ‘presence’. Is anti-Semitism without Jews, as different scholars have argued, merely a smokescreen that diverts attention from other ‘realities’ that have no-connection whatsoever with Jewish presence in the Straits? Or are other powers at play here? Would it not be (morally) better to presume that if you look at anti-Semitism, even without Jews, it always needs to be researched as a phenomenon that is linked with Jews (as well)? This is a paradox and will remain a paradox when one adheres to a ‘simple’ spatial topology. In combination with the other spatial topologies, the spatial topology of ‘fire’ is the spatial dimension that potentially harbours the solution of this paradox.

In complexity thinking it is acknowledged that social life increasingly depends upon peculiar combinations of presence and absence. Modern communication technology and electronic media facilitate the compression of time and space and bring about new possibilities of being, in

---

Theorising the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

particular new possibilities of being in a number of places at once\textsuperscript{160}. The imagination of Jews as the ultimate Other and archetypical example of an ethnic group whose presence is being felt at more than one place at a time (‘Jewish omnipresence’) might well be better served with a spatial topology - the topology of fire - that takes into account this striking dependence of presence upon what happens to be absent. Thinking in terms of a topology of fire is thinking in effect of vague, indefinite, discontinuous flickering oscillations between presence and absence. These shapes are created ‘in patterns of relations of conjoined alterity’\textsuperscript{161}, between a single present and multiple absences. In this ‘fire’ topology there are recognisable constant shapes. This constancy can be found in the enactment of abrupt and discontinuous movements. Continuity becomes an effect of multiple discontinuities. Within the Straits region, the spatial topology of ‘fire’ interferes as an immobile and mutable topology ‘alongside’ the network and fluid space.

How can one do research on something that is seemingly absent? That is for the methodological section of this dissertation. Diaspora research has already been innovative with its multiple-site approach, trying to grasp the essence of diasporic life through ‘diasporic triangle’ interconnectivity research. In Complexity, interconnectivity is still the main issue, but the more sophisticated spatial topology also serves new sites which might be methodologically innovative and push the idea of ‘Theorising Diaspora’ beyond its current limits. There has been extensive spatial analysis in the preceding models. But Complexity science is concerned with the simultaneous spatial and temporal analysis of systems\textsuperscript{162}. So, what about the temporal? Complexity draws on Einstein’s legacy in considering the temporal, with the awareness that time is multiple. Time, like space, is not fixed or absolute, and should be seen as an internal feature of any system\textsuperscript{163}. This temporal dimension will be discussed in the next section. It will be made clear how the temporal concept of path dependence is applied in the study on Jewish business networks in the Straits.

2.7 ‘History Matters’ and Path Dependence

Although it is a theme popular in the movie industry, in films like Back to the Future, and Groundhog Day, it is not possible to make things un-happen. The quality of time is that it proceeds, it lets things happen that are irreversible. That irreversibility creates order. ‘The great thing about time is that it goes on, (...) while the irreversibility (of time) is the mechanism that brings order out of chaos’\textsuperscript{164}. Looking at time this way means that when the present is studied it should not be seen as an instant but as having duration. It would mean that the present is ‘present’ only in the context of a continuous recreation of the past, and that past events are in part retained within that present and then carried forward into the future. Differently said, but to the same effect, the past is incorporated in the present and embodies expectations of the future\textsuperscript{165}. This means that ‘history matters’ in any system. In Complexity, how ‘history matters’ is dealt with through the process model of ‘path-dependence’ in combination with the idea that in addition to multiple spaces there are thought to be multiple temporal rhythms. The social sciences have to date assumed the existence of a

\textsuperscript{161} In italics as in: Law, J. & A. Mol (2001: 616).
\textsuperscript{162} O’ Sullivan, D., M. Manson, a.o. (2006: 614).
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid.; 120.
Newtonian Cartesian, man-made, almost non-temporal idea of (social) time. Relatively recently a notion, already widespread in the natural sciences, that there is no fixed or absolute time, has been gaining ground. Time, like space, is in a system. It has to be considered as an internal feature of the system and is not independent of this system. There is no absolute time, only a divergent range of timescales. This divergent range of timescales in a system helps to sustain the system and has the inherent power to transform the system\(^{166}\).

Path dependence refers to system processes that irreversibly develop through ‘lock-ins’. This idea of locking in challenges classical economic assumptions of linear economic development and the idea of equilibrium\(^ {167} \). What in classical economics would be labelled as a state of disequilibrium has a different connotation in complexity. In complex systems there might be multiple equilibrium points rather than a singular one. In classical economics this state of affairs would be considered as market failure. That is also why in classical economics path dependency and market failure are always bracketed together. There is market failure when, for instance, there is a supposed lack of information or when there are ‘externalities’ such as ethno-religious or political influential institutions that prevent rational economic behaviour from directing an allocation process towards its unique and optimal outcome. Classical economists would argue that the paths to multiple equilibriums are sub-optimal\(^ {168} \), and that there always will be a movement to the optimal equilibrium. They do not consider themselves as antipathetic to the idea of multiple trajectories in a system. They argue that multiple trajectories emerge out of the possibility of inefficiency rather than out of path dependence processes\(^ {169} \), but this is just a phase. In the end, mechanisms of economic markets dominate over ‘irrational’ individual choices or inefficient influences from social-cultural, ethno-religious and political institutions\(^ {170} \). Driven by an (organisational) efficiency imperative, and given the constraints of foresight and transaction costs, forward-looking profit-seeking agents steer allocation processes to the best outcomes possible.

‘Apart from the unfortunate hysteresis of “intellectual sunk costs”\(^ {171} \)’, there is no reason why economic analysis should remain ‘black boxed’, ‘locked-in’ or compellingly ordered as a science that has to work with an a-historical conceptual framework. The same applies to the ‘demarcation line’ that has been drawn between anthropological and sociological analysis on the one hand and history on the other. The swift death of emergent new fields of study like historical sociology and historical anthropology in the 1980s is exemplary of a caustic relationship. The concept of path dependence breaks with the assumption of mainstream historical sciences that there is such a thing as ‘general linear reality’. It is possible to argue that insights deriving from the social sciences into the processes of social change are perfectly applicable to studying the past. But this would mean casting doubt on the conviction of many historians that singular individual events in the past made a difference to how the world is shaped today\(^ {172} \). The discussions of these demarcations in the sciences are not free from what Sayer would call ‘disciplinary parochialism and

---


\(^{169}\) Puffert, D.J. (1999: 2).

\(^{170}\) See also: Walby, S. (2003: 13).


\(^{172}\) Puffert, D.J. (1999: 6).
Theorising the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

For Sayer, these parochial discussions are diverting the attention from what is relevant and important to the understanding of social phenomena. The attention is instead directed to attempts to raise the cultural capital of a discipline. He identifies false argumentation concerning the presumed inadequacy of the social sciences to allocate the right tools and equipment to do ‘proper’ historical research. However, there has more recently been a call for inter- or even post-disciplinarity. There seems to be a rising awareness that the act of looking beyond one’s own disciplinary boundaries might produce enlightening epistemological developments.

2.8 Researching the Straits Jewish Diasporascape as a Complex System

It is one thing to acknowledge that in studying Jewish Diaspora businesses in the Straits there is a need for a framework with diversified time-spatial topological dimensions, such as that derived from Complexity thinking. It is another thing to put this into practice. But before attempting to do so it might be wise (for the sake of intelligability) to go through some important points (at the risk of repetition) once more. Here, then, is a summary of the generally accepted scientific characteristics of complexity and of the consequences that have to be drawn when Complexity points of view are applied to the research in this thesis.

1. Complexity is an inclusive approach that encourages developing new combinations of ideas through a post-disciplinary approach. It is therefore subversive; it questions the Newtonian and Cartesian rationalities that have buoyed up the traditional sciences.
2. The Straits Jewish Diasporascape is an open system. It is in interaction with other systems, both with a wider (global) Jewish Diasporascape, as well as with other (locally enacted) systems.
3. The Straits Jewish Diasporascape has to be seen in terms of movement (a process) where there is a lack of equilibrium.
4. A large number of elements is involved in the Straits Jewish Diasporascape. They are human and non-human (relational materialities or actants). And actants can act.
5. Nodes in the Straits Jewish Diasporascape are clusters of interconnections which encode information and generate meaning through constant interaction.
6. The interaction in the Straits Jewish Diasporascape is rich and extends through the increasing interconnectedness of post-modern society.
7. There are divergent timescales in the Jewish Diasporascape. The scape has a ‘memory’ and consequently has histories. History is important to any complex system. It is not useful to think in the present and neglect the past. History is a collection of traces distributed over the system and is never objective. It is open to multiple interpretations.
8. Four distinct spatial patterns (topologies) are formulated for studying the Straits Jewish Diasporascape: Region, Networks, Fluids and ‘Fire’. Together they make a framework.

---

174 Ibid.; 1.
175 The WRR (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid), the Dutch scientific council for national policies, is looking for members and employees that are able to develop visions derived from cutting across the compartmentalisation in the sciences. See also: NWO (2008).
CHAPTER 2

9. In this thesis the Straits is the Euclidean designated (immutable, immobile) Region in which humans and actants of the Jewish Diasporascape are clustered together.

10. Immutable, mobile networks in the Straits stretch across regions. There is a relational constancy among their components.

11. The fluids are the mutable, mobile topology that allows consideration of the global-local nexus in ways that ignored by the topologies of networks and region. This topology points to ‘variation without boundaries and transformation without discontinuity’ and to the necessity in ‘a movement-driven social science’ to capture the fluid representations that go beyond existing and ‘known’ societal (networked) collectives - in this thesis, the collective of assembled (Jewish) business networks.

12. ‘Fire’ is the mutable, immobile topology that promotes thinking in a more complex way about notions of absence and presence and points to the way in which networked shapes can be influenced by abrupt and discontinuous movements (absences), thereby suggesting that small and distant causes can produce large, nearby effects. The dependence of presence upon what happens to be absent points to the problematic, oscillating patterns of (Straits’ Jewish) presence and absence.

13. The interactions in these topologies are non-linear and asymmetrical and are characterised by power and competition in a situation in which power is never evenly distributed.

14. Only a limited number of characteristics of the scape can be taken into account in a description of the Straits Jewish Diasporascape. Any description is a reduction of complexity. There is no such thing as a complete knowledge of the system, and we therefore have to be modest about our analytical claims. However, that does not mean that Complexity ‘truth’ claims might not be strong. These claims can be made only in terms of the framework. That framework enables knowledge, but the knowledge is always provisional and contingent. Choices have to be made and the difficulties of making these choices are reflected in the (depiction of) the allegorical tales that are produced (in the thesis). As tiniest causes can have big effects, each issue represented as a tale is potentially able to change the view of the whole.

15. Making choices means that there is no way to escape from the normative and ethical domain. To combat exploitation, iniquity, discrimination or prejudices, you have to enter the ‘agonistics of the network’. By way of this thesis, as an actant, a ‘new society’ (the Straits Jewish Diasporascape) is created. The relevance of this activity is determined by the effectiveness with which the agonistics of the networks are approached. This scientific exercise (the thesis) holds the promise of providing an insight into how the rules of ‘the game’ must be read, and how the game must be played.

The problem of reflexivity is central in this last point. This directs the attention to methods. What does Complexity have to offer in the way of methods? John Law argues ‘that methods’ practices not only describe but also help to produce the reality that they understand’. Another claim is made by Paul

---

182 Cilliers, P. (1998: 120). ‘Instead of being self-sufficient and isolated, discourses are in constant interaction, battling with each other for territory, the provisional boundaries between them being the very stake of the game. This is what Lyotard calls the “agonistic aspects of society”.
183 Ibid.; 121.
Cilliers; ‘When dealing with complex phenomena, no single method will yield the whole truth’. These claims are counterintuitive to mainstream methodological procedures. The next chapter will deal with the methodological opportunities and constraints that complexity insights present for the exploration of the Straits Jewish Diasporascape and its businesses. The ‘Complexity turn’ and the ‘Reflexive turn’ will come together here. The chapter will reflect an investigation into what Complexity has to offer in terms of methods for use in this ethnographic study of the Jewish Diasporascape. The Chapter will also describe the methodological steps that have been taken and the decisions made in the period of data gathering and processing.

---

3. Researching the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

3.1 Making up for Wasted Time

How does one research a Jewish community of which it is hard to find a trace? This question came up after two early visits to the Straits area, before the extended fieldwork period started. Initially the focus of the research was on the Jewish presence in Indonesia. The sponsor of my first preliminary visit, the Menasseh ben Israel Institute, was interested in designating an actual Jewish presence in Indonesia and supporting a study of the part played by Jews in Dutch East Indies colonial history. I too favored a focus on Indonesia, but it seemed impossible to get a clear picture of whether there was a substantial Jewish presence in Indonesia or not. It was hard to find out if there were enough Jews in Indonesia to justify the research. It was also hard to find historical data on what had once been a Jewish presence. I was puzzled. It seemed unlikely that Jews played no part in Dutch East Indies colonial history, and equally unlikely that there was scarcely any Jew left in Indonesia. I had the idea that I must be overlooking something. I had to try harder.

When I came back again for my first period of extensive fieldwork I put some extra effort in trying to make contact with a presumed Jewish community in Surabaya. Again I visited the president of the Indonesian Jewish association in Jakarta, who finally gave me a few names and addresses of relatives in Surabaya. Half of these addresses, however, turned out to be old. I ran into a Jewish American girl who had been writing an article on the Surabaya Jewish community. She told me that she had been invited to celebrate a Jewish function in Jakarta. That added to my confusion. In my work as a journalist, there had been no community that I had been unable to gain access to. GAM-rebels in Atjeh, transvestites and street prostitutes in Yogyakarta, ‘chicken farms’ in Batam. I succeeded in obtaining access to all of them and to interview members of them. What was happening here? Was I failing somewhere?

The turning point came when, after repeated visits to the family of the caretaker of the synagogue in Surabaya, trying to gain their trust, I was invited to celebrate Pesach with them in Surabaya. On Pesach night, all dressed up, I arrived at the synagogue. Together with the caretaker and a messianic Christian girl from Kyrgyz, I spent hours waiting for other guests to show up. Nobody came. My conviction began to grow that the Jewish presence had to be dealt with in a way other than the one I was following. But this understanding did not come overnight. My first conclusion was that I had been wasting my time. Common sense urged me to go to Singapore as soon as possible. In my first exploratory visits I had learned that there would at least be a clear and present corporeal, embodied Jewish community in Singapore.

My intuition told me that I should be more persistent and that I was doing myself an injustice when I thought that the first period of my research had been for nothing. After all, I had followed several leads in that period. I had been actively tracing and tracking expressions of the Jewish past or presence. I had talked with dozens of people, Jews, crypto-Jews and non-Jews. I

---

3 Gerekan Aceh Merdeka: The Aceh freedom movement.
4 In science and methods intuition involves the spatial topology of fire. You might say that such a ‘fire’ topology also works on the level of the individual mind.
CHAPTER 3

explored archives, the national library, and university libraries. I had studied newspapers going years back, visited cemeteries, attended services at messianic Christian temples in Manado, Jakarta and Yogyakarta. I had explored everything that could shed light on past or present expressions of Jewish presence. That could not have been just a waste of time. It would have been easy to say that the way I had been dealing with my research so far had turned out to be a cul-de-sac. In order to get up to speed in the second period of my research in Singapore I found it important to make up for lost time and not to regret too much the time that had been wasted. But it did not feel right. I found it hard to accept that I had spent four months of my research time chasing shadows. If dust had been thrown in my eyes it should be worthwhile to find out how that had been possible.

It turned out not to be wasted time. But this understanding could not have emerged without an extensive, time-consuming and fascinating journey through the fringes of social science theory, crossing borders of scientific disciplines in which, theoretically, I had to find a way to make sense of my research. The theoretical exploration in Chapter Two is the reproduction of that journey. It deals with insights from complexity theory, critical realism, post-structuralism and actor-network theory. In this third chapter that journey is pursued methodologically. The basic assumption is that when the world changes, not only social inquiry changes, but also the methods for inquiry have to change. My initial idea in trying to trace and track the movements of Jewish entrepreneurs in the Straits was to align myself with what had been said in reflexive ethnography on multi-sited methods. Multi-sited and reflexive ethnography try to examine the circulations of cultural meanings, objects and identities in diffuse time-space topologies. That is also what complexity theory attempts to do. Nevertheless, like complexity theory ‘the reflexive turn’ has remained on the fringes of social sciences. It is associated with a subversive and destructive ‘the end of science’ scenario. Opponents of this scenario feel that all forms of rationality are discarded and the very foundations of science itself are denied. This ‘mental obstacle’ seems hard to overcome, but not in this thesis, where it is in fact overcome. What would be the added methodological value if reflexive anthropology were to be connected with the theoretical insights that Complexity offers - when the ‘reflexive turn’ met ‘the Complexity turn’? This is the direction taken in this chapter.

Complexity re-directs inquiries to embeddeness and integral multi-sited objects. In these kinds of inquiries ‘truth is no longer the only arbiter and reality is no longer destiny’. Most of what is, stays unknown, or remains hidden, but not from the researcher: He can make present what he considers of importance to be made present. That means an orientation shift from epistemology

---

5 A meeting with a shop owner and his wife was exemplary. There was as sign on the counter with the inscription ‘Hari Sabtu tutup’. (Closed on Saturday) Immediately curious, I started a conversation. They appeared to be members of the Pinkstergemeente (Pentecostal church). For some branches, as with the Jews, Saturday appeared to be their Sabbath day.


7 See also: Marcus, G.E. (1995) Ethnography in/of the world system; The emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. Annual Reviews in Anthropology. 24 pp. 95-117. pp. 96-97. As has been shown in the preceding chapters, thinking in more diffuse time-space topologies emerges from the inter- (post- or anti-) disciplinary thinking that can be found in complexity theory, actor-network theory (ANT), Science Technology & Society studies (STS) and from the magazine Theory, Culture & Society (TCS), which has proven to be an important mouthpiece for this interdisciplinary thinking.


(what is there to be known), to ontology (what is). What is, is open for discussion. More enactments of reality are possible. Explanatory force lies in showing how things work and how a reality is enacted. The tool to use to do that is allegories. That, in fact, has never been different, but it was difficult to accept that the realities we construct are made up out of allegories. Where realities have been made present, have become condensed and particular, representations of these realities have become allegories that deny their character as allegory. In a way the best science has been where representations have successfully denied being allegories. Ethnographies are made up out of allegories as well. And that is true not only of ethnographies. We trade in allegories in all kind of professions. The power of the allegorical representation is that it interprets itself. In this context, as Clifford suggested, ethnography is ‘performance emplotted by powerful stories’ and performative methods are part of the plot. With performance comes morality. Ethnography and its methods are to some measure involved in the creation of the real, of what we consider as reality. That means that as ethnographers we are involved in ontological politics, and that is what allegory is pointing to. Allegory urges us to say ‘of any cultural description not “this represents, or symbolises, that” but rather, “this is a (morally charged) story”.’ That would include the achievements and methods of any researcher, detecting and amplifying his account of a story (of reality), including the one that is drawn in this thesis.

Some methodological implications in this line of thinking are explored in the next sections, and I also will reveal some of the implications it had for the way in which I conducted my research. One point to make is that although the researcher is considered the most important methodological tool in ethnography, surprisingly little attention is paid to the maintenance of that tool. Another issue is that an act of research has an ‘organisational context’. This context often ‘disappears’. ‘The actor’s own achievements’ (in the plural) in the enactments of producing a thesis tend to get lost. It is not the intention to produce an ‘ego-document’ in which I will pay much attention to these aspects. That would have been a different thesis, and for sure it would have been written in a totally different form. But in accordance with a complexity multi-sited (multi-nodal would be more accurate) approach, at least the attention has to be directed to other sites, to things that otherwise would get lost along the way in condensing a new distortion into clarity. I will focus on some matters that struck me most strongly during the process of data gathering, starting with access.

3.2 Access: Hello, my Name is Theo and I am not Jewish

Although many would say that it is of no importance to them, being Jewish or not, it does influence the possibility of making connections as a researcher in a Jewish community. What I found to be an important obstacle in conducting this research was not having a Jewish identity myself. For me there was no easy way in, which Jews seemingly have when they arrive at a new place and join a Jewish social circuit. In talks with Jewish professionals they revealed that when they arrived in Singapore alone, at least in the beginning, the thing they did was to attend Jewish social and religious functions via the synagogue or the embassy. The synagogue was an important

---

12 Ibid.: 89.
15 Clifford, J. (1986: 100)
CHAPTER 3

and logical focal point. When I arrived in Singapore, or in Surabaya, although not Jewish, I did the same. I went to the synagogue for help.

When Jewish identity issues popped up during conversations I kept my identity muted. The idea that Jewish identity mattered became important to me. It was probably of more concern to me than were my surroundings. Sometimes I would be ‘protected’ by a friend who, when the issue surfaced in a social situation, would jokingly state that I was more Jewish than anyone else present. At that time and in that place it was a more convenient answer than declaring a non-Jewish identity. It felt that I had become something that I was not. I was a non-Jew. That non-Jewish identity changed when, in between the two periods of fieldwork, I made a remarkable discovery. I read a publication about Dutch Jewish entrepreneurs in the early 20th century in Oss, a small town in the province of Noord-Brabant. Oss is the home ground of multinational corporations like Unilever, Akzo, Organon and Bergoss. It seems that a few members of a Jewish family that had worked as managers in these firms were all from a Jewish family that had the same (rather uncommon) family name as my mother’s family. I went to the municipal archives of Oss and tried to find out if my mother’s family line at some point had intersected with this Jewish family, an intersection I considered as more than likely. I also contacted researchers of the Jewish Historical Museum who have access to databanks that investigate Jewish family trees. There was no clear answer either from my own research or from these databanks. I did not have the time to investigate this matter thoroughly, but that discovery made it easier for me to claim that I (might) have Jewish blood. That re-discovery of identity at some point even transcended to spiritual levels when, thinking emotionally about my pre-occupation with ‘the chosen people’, I agreed, in a clear example of over-identification, with the opinion of a friend that it was not I who had chosen the topic of my research, but that, to facilitate a return to my roots, it was the topic that had chosen me.

In the following I will describe a situation in which as a researcher I was entangled in a inextricable multiplicity of identities, or an identity flux, which for a moment made me feel as if I were losing track of what was left of my ‘real’ (unified) self. The Western idea of a unified personality, the autonomous ego which in research is translated into methodological distance, was coming under too much pressure. My own situation as a person intruded into the situation, with its attendant emotions and ‘irrationalities’. In line with Complexity theory, of course the thing to do would be not to exclude them, but to acknowledge them and to find ways to deal with them, not only emotionally but also intellectually.

Back in June 2005 the Alliance Française (the French cultural institute) in Singapore was the location for the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and Germany. The two embassies and Singapore’s Goethe Institute were the

---

16 In interviews where there were clear one-to-one situations I was straightforward when the issue popped up. The reaction mostly then was one of disbelief. Why I was interested in doing research when not Jewish?
17 The archives did not go back further than the late 18th century. There were a few Jewish families that had the same family name as my mother’s family. Jewish families at that time adopted Christian family names to register. It is possible that these Jewish families adopted my mother’s family name. At the end of the 18th century, in Oss my mother’s family line still was Catholic. In the family there were however stories that point to a horse-traders background with roots in Poland or Russia. The Jewish families in Oss mostly were horse and cattle traders as well. It is plausible as well that at some point in the past a part of the Jewish family converted to the catholic faith.
18 Excerpt from the media release from the Embassy of Israel in Singapore: ‘Israeli-German relations have a unique character influenced both by the Holocaust but also by the experiences gained shaping a common present and future despite that terrible crime and disaster’.
Researching the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

hosts. Surrounded by the usual security measures, the guests trickled in. There was an art exhibition in the lobby, and that gave me the opportunity to roam the premises a bit and greet some familiar faces. Together with the ambassador and his wife, my companion and I took the elevator upstairs to the hall where a film was to be screened. My companion and the ambassador’s wife were friends. They were talking in Hebrew. For some time I had been trying to get an appointment with the ambassador. Now was the time to close the deal. In the elevator, the ambassador agreed on a meeting the next week. My companion warned him that I was Goy\(^19\). The ambassador jokingly replied that nobody is perfect. Both the German ambassador and the Israeli ambassador made speeches. There was some discontent from the Israeli side at the fact that the German ambassador had dared in his speech to refer to the suffering of the Palestinian people, but the movie was a success. It was grotesque in its ambition to depict characters, frankly exposing their most serious traumas, but it was well played and in line with its intention of visualising a common Israeli-German present and future.

During the film I had felt mentally exhausted. It was my last week in Singapore. I had been there for half a year and I had been socially very active in getting close to relevant sources. It was not easy to get access to members of the close-knit Jewish community. It is hard work to drop the right names, to anticipate the other person’s possible interests in trying to find common ground, and to present oneself as an interesting conversation partner. Academics found my relationship with the National University of Singapore and the Asian Research Institute appealing. Embassy personnel were impressed by the name of the director of the Jewish Historical Museum, who had been the chief curator of the Beth Hatefutsoth in Tel Aviv. To get access to the Baghdadi community I turned for assistance to the rabbi. I had written twice, asking for permission to look into documents that were accessible only through the Jewish Welfare Board, for instance their minutes of board meetings, but I had not received any reply. According to the rabbi, writing a letter was not the way to do it. He thought it would be better to link up with influential members of the community. When I tried to get an appointment for an interview with a CEO of a Jewish firm it was helpful that the wife of the former Jewish chief minister of Singapore had contacted him first to announce me. Trying to get ‘in’ was a strenuous affair because of my personal sensitivity on matters of inclusion or exclusion. There were some successes that made me feel victorious. From time to time I felt desperate, when an appointment was again cancelled or forgotten\(^20\). It is not so strange that one feels it necessary to guard one’s mental borders in that setting. This feeling became particularly acute to me during the screening of the film.

The film that was screened is entitled *Walk on water*\(^21\). The subtitle of the film is ‘He was trained to hate until he met with the enemy’. A Mossad\(^22\) agent (Eyal) encounters some existential problems after his wife committed suicide. The film starts with the assassination of a Palestinian leader in one of the harbours in Istanbul. Eyal’s next assignment is to infiltrate a family that is believed to know the whereabouts of a disappeared grandfather and Nazi officer. The Mossad has received information that he is to come over from Latin America to Germany to celebrate his birthday. Eyal becomes the guide of the homosexual German grandson Axel, who is visiting his

\(^{19}\) Goy or Goyim (plural) means not-Jewish

\(^{20}\) Many of these appointments were not official. The use of mobile phones facilitated this. When an appointment was not direct of importance there was a tendency not to commit fully to that appointment. The usual practice then was that I had to call half an hour before an appointment to see if the appointment would fit in the flow of activities.


\(^{22}\) The Israeli secret service.
sister in Israel, who works in a kibbutz. During the trip he is to find out whether or not the grandfather will be visiting his family in Germany. Eyal has to obtain the information without causing suspicion. Eyal has mixed feelings about this assignment. He has family members who did not survive the Holocaust in Germany, and he is homophobic. Although a friendship starts to develop with Axel, Eyal is explicit in his refusal ever to set foot on German soil. But when they are in Eyal’s company, Axel and his sister never talk about their grandfather and his forthcoming visit. Obviously they are not aware that they still have a grandfather. It is a family secret not known to them. After Axel returns to Germany the Mossad receives information that the grandfather has arrived in Germany. Eyal packs his bags and goes straight to Berlin. He waits for Axel at the school where he teaches. I found the conversation that followed in the film confrontational and it made me feel very uncomfortable. It was like I was watching myself on the widescreen.

-Axel: What are you doing here?
-Eyal: I wanted to surprise you.
-Axel: Well, you did.

Silence. They stop at a stall. Axel points to Eyal.

-Eyal: Thank you, I really like hot dogs.
-Axel: This is not a hot dog, this is currywurst.
-Eyal: Currywurst?
-Axel: Very nice here in Berlin
-Axel: What did you expect?
-Eyal: I don’t know

Silence

-Eyal: The truth is…I was…Eh…I was afraid you would not be happy to see me.

Silence

-Eyal: No, you don't understand. I…Eh...I can explain to you.
-Eyal: I was in a very delicate situation when you came to Israel.
-Axel: Delicate?
-Eyal: Do you remember I told you about Iris?
-Axel: Your girlfriend?
-Eyal: Well, the truth is she was my wife.
-Eyal: We were married for a few years and one month. And when you come to Israel,… she (hesitation)...left.
-Eyal: You don’t have tourists now; there is not much work...
-Eyal: You see, after you left. I really felt that…
-Eyal: I didn’t want you to think…
-Eyal: Because…
-Eyal: You know...
-Eyal: So I bought the ticket and…
-Axel: It's Okay. Eat your currywurst before it gets cold.

Eyal was using the same method to get ‘in’ as I did. He used the same blank and platitudinous responses to keep his true identity flat and unpronounced. I felt that it would only be a matter of time before my ‘real’ identity would be revealed. Everybody was about to stand up from their seats, point at me and unmask me as an infiltrator. It was indeed time to return home. The idea that one needs to keep one’s identity as a researcher as flat as possible is commendable, but difficult to accomplish. To keep oneself ‘flat’ is strenuous, especially when it is over an extended period of time. There is a chance that one may become detached from one’s roots (one’s moorings) and one’s moral and ethical concerns formed in one’s past. When I speak for myself I am triggered to (re-)act socially and emotionally when I see what are for me important realities squeezed out of existence. I relate my sensitivity and my sympathy for the oppressed to my own childhood. I grew up in a working-class, poor neighbourhood in a mid-sized town in the south of
Researching the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

the Netherlands. Paul Willis’ study on ‘How working class kids get working class jobs’ applies thoroughly to that neighbourhood. As an ‘ethnic’ outsider in that community, I developed ambivalent feelings. As a young boy I wanted to relate to the gangs of youths that dominated the neighbourhood’s streets. I wanted to be proud of where I came from, although I was repeatedly physically and verbally assured that I did not belong there. At the same time I should have felt blessed with the cognitive capacities I had. These capacities were a means to escape my social environment. But I did not feel blessed. I felt guilty about them because they made me even more different. Why had I been given these capacities while the others had not? That is an emotional burden you carry when you come ‘from the wrong side of the tracks’ and enter new social strata where neo-liberal rhetoric urges you to grasp your chances, and where the common adage is you can get whatever you want as long as you try hard enough. This was very different from the saying common in my neighborhood, that if you are born poor you will remain poor all your life. It was emotionally confusing to see these situations of inclusion and exclusion plainly reproduced again in my adult life as I tried to gain access to the Straits Jewish community, and it goes without saying that it was a filter that influenced (on a very practical day-to-day base) my observation and analysis of the reality of the Straits Jewish Diasporascape. This has to do with feeling welcome in a community, and therefore being able to take the chances and opportunities to connect with people and open up the field of your research. The ‘cheap way out’ here is to say that this filter does not have its effect as much in what has been presented as in what has not been presented.

3.3 Tool Maintenance

In the ‘reflexive turn’ the ethnographic researcher is considered to be an important methodological tool or resource for investigation. The importance of the maintenance of that tool or resource is, however, largely ignored. New insights that would be applicable to investigating that maintenance come from the transgression of the disciplinary borders of sociology, anthropology and psychology, most notably from sociologist/philosophers and/or psychoanalysts like Lacan, Žižek, LaCapra and Jonathan Boyarin. In their works they focus on the way traumas turn into feelings of loss, on the difference between absence and loss, and on the way these emotions do or do not find a place in the mapping of memory. Pathologies like neuroses, perversions and psychoses colour perception. Lacan: ‘When I suffer obsessional neurosis, this illness colours my entire relationship to reality and defines the global structure of my personality’. For obvious reasons this idea is scarcely ever applied to the ethnographic researcher, who does research, gathers his data and creates his version of reality. Erratic individuals would never have had the opportunity to become ethnographers, would they? The ethnographer seems to be shielded from (a history of) trauma during his research or when producing his thesis. The ‘wellness’ of the researcher is hardly subject to questioning. That seems to be a black box. Methods do not take into account the fairies that enchant or the demons that torture the researcher’s mind. The


24 There was a strong division between locals –Mestrechenteers, and imports –Holländers. Imports were mostly well-to-do and lived in the more well-to-do areas of the town.


26 Ibid.: 4.
chance is that without a critical self-reflexivity, these fairies or demons will be reproduced unfiltered in one's findings. That might be a disturbing idea.

One could hope optimistically seen, that these fairies and demons might be known to the researcher. But what if the researcher displays a remarkable absence of self-reflexivity? The researcher might be so self-absorbed, self-centered or (to make it pathological) even narcissistic, that one might conclude that his research is not about the people he is investigating, but about his own ‘fat ego’. There are many reasons why a researcher (with or without knowing it) may lose his ‘grip’. A sudden change of location may cause ‘untraceable’ feelings of culture shock. The researcher may feel too dependent when he has to ask for access. Or he may have problems committing himself when the ‘natives’ come too close. The researcher may get socially and emotionally paralysed, and this may seriously colour, influence or obstruct his research.

An over-identification with the research subjects is another emotional pitfall. Hannerz already wrote that ethnographers study what they like, and like what they study, but the researcher might start to like it too much. He might get so involved that his Self (his identity) dissolves in the field. Psychoanalysts go for psychoanalysis before they practice. The goal of psychoanalysis is not, as Lacan puts it, the patient’s well-being, but ‘to bring the patient to confront with the elementary coordinates and deadlocks of his or her desire’. Would that be advisable for tool maintenance for ethnographers as well? Should method also include the level where ‘private vices’ are tamed in order to let knowledge become truly beneficial for the public? Or is this neglect of ‘private vices’ in methods not without a reason? Are we afraid of what they may cause or disrupt? That fear seems to be reproduced in methods. The researcher is allowed to hide behind a wall of mechanical methodological detachment. Methods offer the ethnographer a hide-out. For some reason these matters have not been touched upon. They are the absenced Other in methodology. This absenced Other would otherwise point to multiplicities, ambiguities, vagueness and indefiniteness. These qualities would obstruct a method in its deliverables which include the provision of guarantees and securities. This issue is intriguing but not new. The confessions of renowned fieldworkers have already unmasked the researcher as being ‘human’ and having private vices, as a person who could abhor his having to associate with the ‘natives’. The confessions of Malinowski reveal a discrepancy between how the anthropologist is thought to have lived his life (his study) among ‘the natives’, and the apparent interaction (according to his autobiography) he has within ‘his village’. Seemingly aware of that discrepancy and of the impossibility of separating these two spheres, Geertz states that ‘all ethnography is part philosophy, and a good deal of the rest is confession’. Confessions belong to ‘raw’, chaotic, maybe pathologically coloured material that would shed a different light on (might cause damage to) the ethnographer’s professional (public) and personnel (private) reputation.

29 In ‘de Verdieping’ in the Dutch Reformed newspaper *Trouw*, 1-10-2008 at p. 8 the columnist Breedveld is referring to the Dutch physician-philosopher: Mandeville, P. (2008) ‘*Fabel van de bijen*’. Rotterdam: Lemniscaat in which Mandeville makes a division between private vices and public benefits. Private vices would be vanity, desire and ambition.
30 See: Philips, L. (2008) *Writing Identity into Space: Ethnography, Autobiography, and Space in Bronislaw Malinowski’s ‘A Diary in the strict Sense of the Term’ and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s ‘Tristes Tropiques’*. For this excellent essay, which has seemingly only been published only on internet, see: [http://reconstruction.eserver.org/023/philips.htm](http://reconstruction.eserver.org/023/philips.htm) last visited 3-11-2008.
Researching the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

The ways in which we look at the world and the interpretation of the ethnographer’s role in it have changed. The objects that ethnographers study have become less isolated, more connected, and more complex. In the ‘reflexive turn’ the focus is directed on ethnography’s unusual and unique ontological capacity to translate personal experiences (and, intentionally or unwittingly, convictions) into epistemological facts. Pushing the ‘reflexive turn’ to its limits would be too radical. Insatiably allowing autobiography in research would be pushing things too far. But the confessions that autobiography offers should be considered as more than contaminating subjectivity. Whichever way one turns, in the end the Self is expressed and dispersed into text. There is reciprocity between the observer and what he is observing. Autobiographical elements, published either apart in ‘confessions’ or indirectly in ethnographic texts, reflect the difficulty the researcher has in keeping grip on a coherent and consistent unified Self. The nature of ethnographic research includes elements that put the ethnographer in situations in which identity unavoidably becomes multiple, diffuse, vague and elusive. In his position as ethnographer, his unified Self is under pressure. Otherness, as psychologists would claim, works on the level of the human mind too. This Otherness, although often thought to be only fractional, has a destabilising impact on the networked reality of the unified Self. For the individual researcher this multiplicity may from time to time be difficult to deal with, but to acknowledge it as integral with one’s methods, is to give it a different status. This would be a benefit of combining Complexity and the reflexive turn. The possible diffusions and multiplicities which might be the result of allowing the ‘Other’ into one’s methods could no longer be ‘expelled to invisibility’ or reluctantly made public in obscure publications. The ethnographer would overtly acknowledge the private fairies and demons that live in the garden of his writings. To face that fact might be of greater benefit to the public than to ignore or repress it.

3.4 Multiple Identity and ‘Method Assemblage’

To be is to link up. This identity statement fits complexity thinking. This also applies to the ethnographer: I have been trying to relate. When there is only limited time available, linking up is under constraint. Research subjects do not automatically want to offer their time-consuming cooperation. Many questions and doubts arise in trying to get related. The research subjects may wonder who I am and how I got to them. They might consider my position and their own position in a network. Would it be wise to connect with me? What does that mean for their own positions? Who might be of interest to me? What if I turn out to be unreliable? While I was trying to get ‘in’, many of my social and emotional capabilities and qualities were fully stretched. In that period I was emotionally balancing between hope and fear, between moments of euphoria and moments of disappointment. I was as on an emotional roller coaster. When on track I happily let myself go with the flow of events. And when the ride slowed down, it was necessary to keep alert and not to follow unnecessary detours.

In this situation I created a story of myself that is congruent with my self-image, honest and straightforward. But, that story could be adjusted pragmatically, within limits, to the situation I was in, and to the person or group that I wanted to relate to. I manoeuvered myself into a fluid position, and took up a relatively fluid identity in which different roles and positions coalesced.

35 Lawrence Philips article deals with the uneasy way the publisher and Malinowski’s heirs were dealing with the publishing of Malinowski’s diaries, afraid as they were for reputation damage. Philips, L. (2008).
CHAPTER 3

Predominantly I became the scientist who was enthusiastic about doing his research but who needed some help to get access to the Jewish community. For the sake of science, academics help their fellow scientists, at least when their fellows don’t come too close to the field of study or area that they are themselves claiming. But I also was a journalist trying to write a story about the Jewish community. I was someone who seemed interested in the coffee business because of coffee business opportunities in Holland. I was a possible contact who would be interested in acting as an agent for security and intelligence devices in Holland. I was a soccer player who (because I was from Holland) must have played on a professional basis and was knowledgeable about tactics. I was the friend of a key informer, someone they liked, or the acquaintance of the wife of a former chief minister, someone they respected.

In this flux of identities the academic identity – that of the researcher performing research on the Jewish Diaspora businesses - faded into the background. Is it dishonest to get information and data that way? Should I have been more pronounced in putting forward my identity as a researcher? Latour has the strong impression that in research in social science ‘interactions (…) were overflowing in all directions’. He claims that if you stretch any given face-to-face interaction, it sure enough becomes an actor-network. Any interaction is already distorted by ‘heterogeneous entities that don’t have the same local presence, don’t come from the same time, are not visible at once, and don’t have the same weight’. That is my observation as well, when I am performing as a researcher. I had the impression that although I was openly presenting my identity as a researcher, the interfering ‘heterogeneous entities’ made people adapt that information to fit into their own stories. My action more or less disappeared in their actor-networks. I became the person they wanted me to be. Put differently, most of the time they could not care less what I was doing, and they scarcely considered the possibility that they would become actors in a thesis. I arrived anonymously. There was (almost) no authority to back me up, no power to which they had to defer. My actions, if noticed at all, were considered of no vital importance. My presence was a passing matter. So, who would be impressed when you started telling them that you were a researcher doing research on… By that time, at that point, their attention would already have faded away. Nevertheless, and luckily, when they were not too busy the people I spoke to or interviewed liked to tell lighthearted stories about themselves, and when there were at first sight no conflicting interests, or when they had not already told their stories too many times, they loved to talk about the businesses that they were involved in. The bottom line seems to be that as a researcher you have to make sure that the information that is given, lightheartedly or not, is not used lightheartedly.

---


39 That does not say that in the course of the research period that might change. Accordingly your presentation should change as well.

40 The many cases in journalism where people who are interviewed find themselves incorrectly quoted or represented make this issue relevant.

66
As a researcher you want to get noticed. I discovered that I felt the urge to let my presence as a researcher becomes more or less common knowledge in the local network. More or less, because, given anthropology’s unique qualitative methodological niche (participant observation) I was part of and participated in the practice that I was investigating, but at the same time I needed to maintain a certain distance in order to be able to observe. The extent to which I would be noticed depended on how compelling the proclamation of my identity as a researcher was, and how sensitively the surrounding heterogeneous entities reacted. But why and for whom was I acting like this? Was it for my own sake, to re-assure myself about my identity and to get clarity of mind about what I was doing? Was it the scientific community watching over my shoulder with a clear set of rules that I had to commit to? Or was it that I wanted to be clear to my research subjects about my role as a researcher and that, from a moral point of view, I had to make them understand what the implications could be if they took part in the research? All of these considerations seemed counterproductive. The least of my worries seemed, strangely enough, that I wanted to know more about the practices that were unfolding in front of me. By creating ‘clearness’ about my role I was drawing boundaries, and when I did so compellingly enough I was implicitly urging people to check theirs as well. I was surrendering to the urge to create a clear-cut, unified Self. I shut off the possibility of a multiple and more fluid investigating Self and for that matter the possibility of fluid methods. The absence of the well-developed self-reflective qualities of the researcher could result in two things: First, bad ethnographic research, and second, a half-hearted relation to the autonomous Cartesian ‘fat Ego’. The first option is what nobody wants. The second option is what generally has been the quantitative method’s line of attack against qualitative research: a method that has problems to tear loose of that ‘fat Ego’, and implicitly has failed to push the inherent qualities of qualitative research to its limits. The inherent qualities of qualitative research would demand the application of more fluid methods and the one who has to deliver that quality is the researcher.

More fluid methods imply that the researcher needs to assume a more fluid, diffuse and de-centered identity. But this ‘method’ has important pitfalls. On the ethical side, seen through the eyes of the researched subjects, there might be feelings of betrayal when the researcher is acting differently from the manner they expected. In the aftermath of research, when the results of the research are controversial, it may appear that the thin line between sincerity and opportunism has been crossed. The second pitfall, seen from the position of the researcher, is that as an ethnographer you run the risk of becoming what people want you to be. When studying networks, for Latour, it is important to keep the social as flat as possible. As the social would include the researcher, it might be problematic to keep the ego as flat as possible as well. The result might be a loss of ego—as my Walk on Water cinema experience shows. To a certain extent a loss of ego is inescapable when you want to do research as an ethnographer.

Keeping your ego as flat as possible is easier said than done. The easiest way has always been to treat the uneasy part of the ego like moral judgment, values, desire or frustration as the absent Other of the Cartesian Ego, that which was to guarantee objectivity in science and to distinguish science from non-science. A moral dimension can never be treated as objective. When morals, values, or irrationalities interfere in the researcher’s practice, he could try to articulate and isolate them, in a diary for instance. Or he could try to identify, treat and describe these normative thoughts cryptically or veil them as social facts (class, ethnicity, race, gender) in doing so the

CHAPTER 3

researcher’s subjective standpoint would disappear as if it were something that could be discussed separately, arbitrarily, and disconnected from the researcher’s doing his research. That is not Latour’s idea of how to keep the social flat. The researcher could never be considered as free from moral judgment, either consciously or (for sure) subconsciously. It would be pointless to think it possible to leave your ego out of your work. Your ego has always been inescapable. It is ‘what we always already exercise in virtue of being immersed in a network of human relationships that constitutes our life together’.

Should issues of morality and ethics then be addressed without having common standards and an objective sense of circumstances? Latour would hesitate to keep the social as flat as possible. He would not mind personalising these issues. It helps that Latour is not ‘interested in giving a social explanation of anything’. Others would claim that that is an inconceivable way of interpreting action and that, in defence of objectivity, a document should not turn into too much of an ego-document. But then, what should methods be capable of? Methods should do justice to the ethical dispositions and moral sentiments that exist both at the level of the social practice of a research community and at the level of the individual researcher. At the same time methods also seek to add a moral dimension to the accounts given in the social sciences. Methods, then, detect and point to the enactments that make things appear and be present, but also to what disappears when things are made present. This absence is either an absence that is manifest, because it is a relevant absence, or an absence that needs more effort to detect, because as an Otherness it is absence that is hidden. That means accepting and dealing with a more complex complexity-reality; a reality that we never seek to complete because it is always in flux. There is no way that we can know everything. It is also of no use to try to know everything. More fluid methods point to what the enactments of in-here presence leave unnoticed, what is allowed to disappear, as irrelevant, unproductive, frightening, etc. These absences might have an important and necessary capacity. As Otherness they might sustain what has been made present. A ‘method’ that has an open eye for possible incompleteness and that detects limits and allows new realities to appear has been put forward by Law as ‘method assemblage’. Method assemblage must be seen as ‘the crafting of a hinterland of ramifying relations that distinguishes between (a) ‘in-here’ statements, data or depictions (b) the ‘out-there’ realities reflected in those in-here statements; and (c) endless ramifications of processes and contexts ‘out-there’ that are both necessary to what is ‘in here’ and invisible to it’. That makes method assemblage a combination of a reality detector and a reality amplifier.

A new more ‘real’ account of Jewish presence is detected and amplified in this thesis through the use of method assemblage. My intention was to produce a distortion into clarity of the oscillatory patterns of Jewish (business) presence and absence in the Straits. I was puzzled by the seemingly casual way in which anti-Semitism was gaining ground in the Muslim countries in Southeast Asia. I thought it dangerous to let the popular imaging of Jews and the anti-Semitic writings in the Straits go uncontested. I thought that the way in which the scientific community had been dealing with this matter was inadequate. It concerned me that the corporeal Jew had been ‘allegorised away’ in the Straits. The link with the Jew’s Othering capacity had been too easily made, and it

47 Ibid.: 42.
48 Ibid.: 14.
Researching the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

seemed free of obligations. Later, as the research progressed, I was concerned to notice that these processes of Othering were paramount within the Jewish community itself as well. The processes of exclusion and inclusion that unfolded before my eyes in the tiny Singaporean Jewish community struck me as antisocial and sometimes even cruel.

3.5 Start-up of the Project

Ethnography is about fieldwork, which is ethnography’s unique selling point. Methods in ethnography focus on the period of fieldwork. It has, however, become increasingly difficult to do traditional fieldwork in the Malinowskian sense. In general ‘the field’ has become more fluid, more connected and therefore more difficult to isolate as a single site. More sites have become relevant to the attempts to grasp reality in any particular site. The ‘reflexive turn’ in ethnography is still operative mostly on the level of data collection, where the autonomous ego of the individual researcher doing his fieldwork becomes relevant. But Science Technology Society (STS) studies push reflexivity in ethnography further, perhaps to its limits, and also point to other sites in academic practices that are influential in producing knowledge, thus shifting the attention away from the ethnographer doing his fieldwork. The thesis becomes the relational materiality that ‘embodies’ discussions on ethnographic methods. The focus is redirected to other time-space arrangements that help to produce a thesis. This re-direction does more justice to the long negotiating process of what to include in a thesis and what to leave out, what is possible and what is considered impossible, what is practical and what is impractical, and where to seek for support and where not.

For instance, it directs the attention to the ‘pre-conditions’ or ‘organisational context’ of a research that otherwise would disappear into the background. These phases generally harbour more hardships, conflicts and moments of despair than is generally acknowledged. Normally these feelings disappear or are ‘deleted’ when the thesis is finished. Traces may be left for deciphering or decoding in forewords where the researcher is thanking the ‘relevant’ persons. They might be traced at the promotion ceremony, or in the corridors of the department or faculty where the progress of the writing process is monitored. One has to read between the lines, or keep one’s ear to the ground in the relevant places to trace and track these sentiments. These ‘pre-conditions’ might have to do with a troublesome start-up period, the lack or presence of emotional back-up in the field, one’s physical and mental fitness, the quality of one’s cooperation with one’s promotor or co-promotor, a reading committee that is cooperative, a situation at home that may or may not cause you to feel needed in two places at once, an abundant or restrained budget, a lack of institutional support, the birth or arrival of a child that needs your company and care – all of these leave their marks on the act of researching and producing a thesis.

A researcher’s first reaction is usually to disregard these connections as only fractional, or as partial. They might be considered to be irrelevant and ‘out of range’. They would be hard to make concrete, and would produce useless, subjective knowledge. But would the solution, then, be to leave these connections out and treat them as undesirable baggage? I would suggest not. But attending to them has its price. Fractional or partial connections lead the way to multiplicity, and

49 In many of the discussions between the ‘tall guys’ in the privacy of our office in our department, COM, there were often sad suggestions that our niche, organisational anthropology, would be excellently applicable to investigating the strategic ‘games’ that were played in our own work space. One could suggest that a possible STS research topic is literally lying on the doorstep of the department.
dealing with multiplicity makes for slow progress. Multiplicity hinders the taking of short cuts to single realities, but the idea of slowing down is perfectly acceptable - Latour puns on ‘slow-ciology’ in recommending this broader view of the way to do research, which involves accepting that you can live with the idea that truth and reality are no longer your arbiter or your destiny. These assumptions turn things upside down. They seem counterproductive in comparison with what we have always required from science, and they seem to question the eagerness in the sciences to deliver certainty out of social explanation. ‘It dissolves the idea, the hope, the belief, that we can see the horizon, that we can see long distances. The consequence might be that (...) we will learn less about certain kinds of things. But we will learn a lot more about a far wider range of realities’.

A thesis is a complex relational materiality that at least is a joint venture of actors and their achievements. The process of writing a thesis is not so easily divisible into relevant and irrelevant time-space eras/areas. The researcher wants to make sure that the thesis as a packaged ‘relational materiality’ generates new connections that live up to the hopes that the researcher has in it, and the promises he has made to the community he is writing for. Of course the researcher is an important node in producing the thesis, but although the researcher is doing the job, the possible optimal or sub-optimal effects of his research do not lie in the hands of the researcher alone. Within a system of producing knowledge the researcher is floating on currents that he is partly aware of, let alone that can be influenced by him.

The idea of starting a research project does not emerge out of the blue. To get an obscure theme like the Straits’ Jews onto the research agenda requires perseverance. Hope and the agonies of doubt are emotions that sink in during the process. To reach your goal it is necessary to act strategically and to use one’s (steel) teeth once in a while. When at some point the ‘green light’ to start the research is given, the emotions which characterise the starting up phase seem to be forgotten but this is a false dawn. They are not gone and forgotten, but have conveniently been ‘deleted’ as not meaningful. They have been put away as being of minor importance, or at the most as contextual. These deletions trouble the memory of how a ‘relational materiality’ like a thesis takes shape. The start-up phase - at least in my case and for many of my direct (PhD) colleagues, with slight differences - has been of major importance. If I look at the start-up phase of my own thesis, the traffic light to indicate that the project could go on never became deep green. It was a pale green, sometimes even a flickering orange. It was sometimes even turning disturbingly red. In the start-up phase there was doubt, despair and hope that cast its shadow or its light on the task of the researcher. This phase was characterised by a mixture of craftsmanship, serendipity, the use of the right ‘marketing techniques’ that produced the right arguments to make the right people curious, the search for the financial resources that would make it possible to widen the scope of the research (or at least not to narrow it down), and the search for the right intellectual and strategic support.

The research did not start the moment an agreement was signed at the P&O office. If there was a particular moment which I could internalise in my stories about my research as ‘the starting moment’, it was on a terrace in Bugis Junction Mall and MRT station. I had a few appointments in Singapore in connection with my work. I met with Heidi Dahles on a terrace in the mall at

---

52 Meaningfulness lies in the very basic fact that this thesis would not have been produced if the light had remained ‘red’.

70
Researching the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

Bugis Junction MRT\textsuperscript{53}. We were discussing her research in Singapore on the Overseas Chinese. I was telling her about an article that I had written on Jews in Surabaya\textsuperscript{54}. The idea grew that it would be worthwhile to look at smaller diaspora groups in the region than the Chinese, for instance the Jews. A wish that I had not yet fulfilled, start a Ph.D. project was fuelled\textsuperscript{55}. I was invited to write a preliminary proposal with which it would be possible to write an application for a NWO or faculty grant. Professor Dahles, who was not yet a professor at that time, would become co-promotor. Later, when her ambition to become professor had been realised, she became my promotor.

Many of the insights that have been developed in this thesis have their roots in my life before I started working in my faculty-department Culture, Organisation & Management (COM). My commitment to science did not start at the moment I began working at COM. The frequently heard argument that it is only after your thesis is complete, that the ‘real’ work starts, did not apply to me. My life story has been such that my best efforts have been influenced by ‘parameters’ different from those in more usual promotion trajectories. So, in a way there was no escape from making my dissertation more or less my ‘life’s work’, simply because my life before I began the thesis had already been largely relevant to the work\textsuperscript{56}. Apart from finding me in a few dead ends, and finding the timeframe a constraint, the process, as far as I am concerned, went smoothly. Although I was repeatedly accused at home of being married to my work, and although the J-word had been temporally banished from daily parlance at home, I tried not to let my work interfere too much with my private life. Anyone who has gone through a PhD thesis trajectory will endorse the claim that this is impossible. The inevitability to having your work interfere with your private life and vice-versa is, ironically, in line with what a complexity approach would put forward.

A partner for the project was found in the scientific bureau of the Dutch Jewish Museum, the Menasseh ben Israel Institute (MbII). The special chair for Jewish Studies in the faculty of social sciences at the VU was an obvious choice. The chair was held by Professor Dr. Meijers. He was to become my promotor. The Dutch Jewish Museum was interested in a history of Jews in the Dutch Indies. Apart from a study of Lode van Brakel\textsuperscript{57} and some more journalistic attempts\textsuperscript{58} to start a ‘Jews in Indonesia’ project there had never been a serious study of Jewish presence in the Dutch Indies. The NIOD also expressed their interest because it was a field of research that they had not yet covered. There had been research on Jews in the West-Indies, but the Jewish part in the Dutch colonial history in the East was unknown. In cooperation between the NIOD and our

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{53} MRT: Mass Rapid Transit system.
\item \textsuperscript{55} I knew Professor Dahles from the time she was working at the department of leisure studies at Tilburg University. I already had worked together with a colleague of her writing a PhD. project proposal on youth tourism in Amsterdam.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Not to forget that it suited my personal ambition, and my inability to avoid a pitfall during the process, which was the lacking of the sense that a topic needs to be narrowed down. In a way the complexity approach has turned this pitfall in a virtue.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Journalists Arjan Onderdenwijngaard and Theo Wilton van Reed have a long-term commitment to this topic. They have been receiving grants from journalistic funds. Their tactics to acquire money for research leaned on the appealing idea that there might still be a ‘lost tribe’ in Indonesia.
\end{itemize}
CHAPTER 3

department a well attended symposium59 was organised at Felix Meritis, where I gave a presentation. A seminar on the topic was held. The presence at that seminar of prominent scientists like Professor Anthony Reid, Professor van Bruinessen, Professor Evelien Gans, and Professor Abram de Swaan added to the strength of the symbolic and cultural capital surrounding this project on Jews in the Straits.

There were, however, doubts about there being an actual Jewish presence in Indonesia, which would be a prerequisite for a proper ethnographic research project. It became a running gag in the family and amongst close friends that I was doing research on people ‘who are present, but also absent’60. In the previous sections I have, using the principles of complexity, explored new ‘sites’ of research which methodologically would normally lie out of the range of ethnographic research. In this exploration, in which my own research has been the point of reference, the ‘reflexive turn’ has been pushed to its limits. In the next sections I offer a more conventional ‘audit trail’. I had to serve different research communities and traditions as the research involves multi-disciplinary interpretations61. Much that ethnographers would take for granted in their research would not necessarily apply in other disciplines.

3.6 Multi-sited Research without Multi-sited Research Permits

An organisational issue in the start-up phase was the application for the requested permits to do my research in the Straits region. In a multi-sited research project the most obvious way of doing the research is to ‘follow the people’ or ‘to follow the thing’62. Multi-sited cross-border ethnography is seriously hampered by the obligation to obtain the research permits that each separate nation state in the Straits requires. In the academic world it is common knowledge that there is an alternative way to do research in the region: that is, by evading official regulations and restrictions. One could get a regular visa as a tourist, or one could be sponsored by an organisation that does language courses, for instance63. For researchers in Indonesia, as against those in Singapore, there is some space to manoeuvre, which could possibly lead to being able to gather relevant data without the required permits. From the beginning my intention was to do it the official way. I needed official permission in order to be granted access to historical sources, such as those at the Arsip Nasional in Jakarta or at the National Archives in Singapore. And after the Bali bombings and 9/11 the restrictions preventing westerners from roaming freely on Indonesian territory had increased64.

---

59 Seminar, Friday 2 September 2005 held at the NIOD (Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie) Antisemitism Today: A Phenomenon of Globalisation? The Symposium was held at Felix Meritis in Amsterdam; Thursday 1 September 2005. Organised by the NIOD and the VU. About 150-200 visitors attended the symposium.

60 This is a poor translation of a much funnier ‘Ze zijn er wel, en ze zijn er niet’ that should be defiantly pronounced with telling illusionist-like gestures.


63 A so-called social cultural visa.

64 This was especially so under the influence of PBB Islamist Yusril Mahendra - at that time minister of justice, with the responsibility of combating terrorism. It was now impossible to stay longer than 30 days in Indonesia, whereas before one could automatically get a two-month visa. Mahendra did not include the Dutch in the group of nationals that would be able to obtain a visa on arrival. They had to apply for a visa at one of the Indonesian embassies abroad.
In my preliminary visits to Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore I tried to establish the right contacts to organise my research period. My first moves in Indonesia were to look for connections with the Protestant Christian University, Duta Wancana. The Duta Wancana University has ties with my university, the Vrije University, because of their shared religious background. There was some expertise in the field of Judaism studies at Duta Wancana. The message, however, was that if I wished to apply for a research permit, the way would not be via the private Duta Wancana but via a state university, either Gadjah Madah University or the Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN), both in Yogyakarta. That instance of the snowball method proved successful. When I contacted the IAIN, Ibu Alf Theria Wasim of the IAIN Yogyakarta was most helpful to me. Ibu Wasim is a local expert on the relation between Islam and Judaism and is well connected in Indonesian scientific/political life. As an internationally oriented scholar she understands the ‘organisational’ concerns and dilemmas of western scholars doing research in Indonesia. She made it clear that if I wanted to study Judaism, the best way to do that would be via IAIN, via the study of Islam. Studying Judaism should be proposed as a means to understand the common grounds of Christianity and Islam. Given the tensions at that time between the Christian and Islamic militias at Ambon, for instance, or the tensions at Timor and Aceh, there was a need to gain more insight into the way in which to solve the ethnic religious conflicts that were afflicting the country. Analysing the common grounds in Judaism of Christianity and Islam would possibly be helpful in finding a peaceful solution. Ibu Wasim’s name on the research proposal helped to open doors and guaranteed a swift handling of the research proposal. During my fieldwork period we kept in touch and cooperated pleasantly.

There was some self-censorship involved in the submission of my research proposal at Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia (LIPI). At the time of the application it was not yet 100% sure that the study would be limited to Jews alone, which is why the application was couched in broader terms, including other, smaller diasporas in the region as well, like the Armenian, Parsees and Arabs. In my reports to LIPI I had given notice of my focus on Jews, but that seemed not to cause any concern with regard to my permit. The idea of ‘following the people or thing’ across borders, into Singapore for instance, was practically almost impossible. I applied for a multiple entry visa but my application was rejected. I had to make sure that all of the information I wanted would be gathered during one official visit. The restrictions on acquiring a research permit and visa for Indonesia left me no room to move around freely in the Straits as a researcher. I was not allowed to leave Indonesia while doing the research. If I did leave, I would have to start the procedure once again. That procedure had taken a week to complete in Jakarta alone. The decision relating to my application of a multiple-entry visa was delegated from central to district level, at home base Yogyakarta. That turned out to be an unpleasant ploy, as the Yogyakarta administrators were already demanding the payment of levies for which no receipts were given. I decided to not get further involved in this possible swamp. I thought that it would be best to

---

65 Thanks to Robert Soetio, Gerrit Singhi and Leonard Epafras.
66 See in the preface of Dahles, H. (2001) Tourism, Heritage and National Culture. Dilemmas of a local community. Richmond Surrey: Curzon. P. x. where she indicates that she needed the ‘right’ sponsor before a permit was handed out and an access for research was possible.
67 She was acquainted with former minister of foreign affairs Alwi Shihab, former president and party-leader of the PKB, Abdurahman Wahid, and the - in 2005 - deceased religious pluralist, leader of the Paramadina foundation, Nurcholis Madjid.
68 The appliance procedure was said to have improved a lot.
69 Performing the research on a tourist visa was not advisable. When I was in Indonesia some researcher were taken into custody for doing research in Aceh without the required permits.
count my blessings and profit fully from my Indonesian single entry permit. I decided to begin by staying in Indonesia for as long as necessary, and to visit the places where this permit would be required for me to be able to gather my research data.

The way to find institutional back-up was pretty much the same in Singapore. Geoffrey Benjamin, whose name I came across when looking for hits in the university library at Singapore, turned out to have been supervising MA and BA thses on the topic of Judaism in Singapore. When I contacted him he was most helpful as well. We kept having regular talks in which we discussed the progress of my research. His knowledge of the local situation and his Jewish network were indispensable in the start-up period. He agreed to my using his name on an application for a grant at NWO and at my faculty. He agreed to find a way to invite me to his Singapore Nanyang University. However, when I arrived in my first official period of my fieldwork, it appeared that he had not been able to gain the support of his University. He advised me to go to the National University of Singapore, more specifically to the Asian Research Institute, directed by Prof. Anthony Reid. Professor Reid had been one of the editors of the influential volume on entrepreneurial minorities in which the Overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia and Jews in Central Europe were compared. A sequel to this research in which Jews in the territory of the Overseas Chinese would be studied, appealed to him. Professor Reid became my second co-promotor and allowed me to become a visiting affiliate of the research community of the NUS Asian Research Institute. Via this prestigious Asian Research Institute it was no problem to acquire a permit for research in Singapore. The permit was for a cross-border community study on Jews in Singapore. In the application ‘the third space’, the Israeli angle, was left sketchy as it was not 100% sure yet that the study would include Singapore’s opaque relations with Israel. That was obviously not done without a reason. I did not want to give the authorities a reason to refuse my application (for security reasons) when it was not yet sure whether or not this Singapore-Israel relationship would be worthwhile to investigate.

There was no institutional back-up in Malaysia. It became clear, after visiting the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, with which our department has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), that applying for a research permit in Malaysia would be an uncertain and lengthy procedure. An exact time schedule was requested which would be impossible to deliver. The topic was thought to be too sensitive. At least that was the message I received when talking with fellow scientists at the University of Malaya. Because I was already involved in permit applications in Indonesia and Singapore, I decided not to start the one for Malaysia. Based on the preliminary study of secondary sources, the idea was to focus mostly on Singapore and Indonesia. The research that I anticipated I would need to do in Malaysia could be performed as a tourist in my holiday breaks.

71 For instance the Perpustakaan Nasional, the Arsip Nasional, and the library of the Institute of Strategic Studies in Jakarta – but it also felt safe to have an official research permit while talking to leaders of Islamist parties, or to people in the Indonesian administration on the topic.
72 The Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek.
73 Nanyang Technological University focus is on the natural sciences.
75 Self-censorship was applied again. Of course, there was more than just a ‘gut feeling’ that the Israeli angle would be an interesting lead to follow in the research.
76 Ethics prescribe the careful consideration of rights and obligations. Officially it is illegal to perform research without a permit. But as the research involved only the study of a bundle of relational materialities (a cemetery) I decided to deal with this issue in an opportunistic way.
3.7 Data Processing and Key Informers

I was familiar with the Straits because of my work as a journalist. I experienced no culture shock and I did not have to start from scratch. I was used to the surroundings and in my work I had passed through the phase of amazement that colorful tropical surrounding could induce. There are no colorful descriptions of locations in this thesis. I was used to the people and knew about the regional social and cultural mores. I knew how to handle brokers who wanted to cut your budget and how to deal with the bureaucracy and corruption. That was, of course, a blessing and a pitfall at the same time. It meant that to some degree there was no blank space in my research. The place had already inscribed itself in my research space. My amazement and fascination would have to derive from the topic of my research. This allowed me to focus properly and to dig deep, but it also shut me off from the unexpected and the irregular that an initial phase of amazement could bring. I conducted my research in Indonesia from my home base in Yogyakarta. This was preferable for practical, emotional and financial reasons. Yogyakarta is an Indonesian sub-hub in air traffic. The city is conveniently located in Central Java between the two biggest Javanese cities, Surabaya and Jakarta. I expected to spend most of my research time in these two cities. In Yogyakarta I worked together with the IAIN. Life is cheaper there than in Jakarta or Surabaya. I had already rented a house in Yogyakarta and I had friends there.

I had always carried a notebook with me when I worked as a journalist in the Straits area - not an electronic one, but a classical hardcover one with blank pages. The only thing pre-printed on each page was the specification of where to write down the time and location. These notebooks became my primary data carriers for my research too. All of my ideas, observations, reproductions of talks, meetings, people to contact, addresses and ‘things to do’ were scribbled in these notebooks. In a later phase I transferred these notes to my computer system, and from these notes it was possible to make more systematic notes in the categories that I had produced. Loose ends were not yet processed into these categories. The cases that had not yet been dealt with, the contacts not yet pursued or ideas not yet worked up flowed over into a new notebook as reminders. Every new note book started with writing down the loose ends from the preceding notebooks. I have organised my data according to the people from whom it derived. The categories that I used were mostly people. Specific stories, observations, insights or ideas belonged to specific people. I made a distinction in the region between Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Initially this method gave me no problem as I was able to relate place, events, actants and people to one another easily. After all, there were not that many Jews around. But when the total number of people contacted grew, this started to give problems in the phase of data processing. It was sometimes difficult to match an event, idea or insight with a particular person. My brain had to make the connection, and sometimes the connection was very faint. No back-up was possible. I sometimes worried that I would wake up one morning with a blank memory or that I would crash my motor and injure my head.

On the one hand, this method allowed for combinations that I would not have thought of. The practice of doing research in an urban setting, like Singapore, is different from the practice in a village. The evening is the most appropriate period of the day to process your data, but in an urban setting there is no time in the evening, as there is plenty of (communal) activities take place then, and there are lots of social obligations to fulfill outside your home. On the other hand this method slowed me down because it sometimes took too much time in the reporting phase to trace the information in my system. It is advisable to make time beforehand or during the process of data collection for more efficient categorisation. My data gathering was mostly based on intuition. Much of the data that has been used and many of the stories that finally made it into
CHAPTER 3

the thesis are not the result of a systematic exploration. During performance of the research, I
was not yet fully aware of the route I would take both theoretically and empirically, and I
certainly had little understanding of the categories or concepts that would be most important to
me. They emerged during the fieldwork and in the reporting phase, in articulation with a constant
reading and re-reading of relevant theoretical material, and when assessing non-coherent data or
outliers. They re-appeared in every new note-book as embryonic ‘work in progress’
considerations. Some stories that were included in the thesis popped up spontaneously during the
writing or emerged when I was re-reading and combining my data. In retrospect I felt that I did
the right thing in keeping my methods as flat as possible, to give space to a ‘ruthlessly empirical
approach’, in Latour’s terms, and to ‘just describe the state of affairs at hand’77. That state of
affairs is helpfully explored with ANT, with respect to relationships that create durable and
robust networks – relationships that include both human beings and (relational) materialities.
ANT is considered to be ontologically relativist in the sense that it resists the appeal to
essentialise actors’ characteristics down to ethnicity, religion, race, class, gender, for instance.
That relativism is not applied to natural objects. Paradoxically, ANT does not de-essentialise the
affordances or properties of natural objects. Their ‘real’ affordances or properties are thought to
be influential for the robustness or weakness of a network78. The three case-study chapters of the
diamond trade and the fashion and coffee business, respectively chapter 5, 6 and 7, deal with
these affordances more extensively.

But how ‘ruthless’ can you be in your empirical approach when the ‘state of affairs at hand’ is
characterised by complex oscillations between presence and absence which are difficult to grasp
with standard methodological ethnographic procedures. ANT’s methodology draws heavily on
more advanced ideas in ethnography on methodology and reflexivity79. But ANT’s deliverables
do not include a vision of how to deal with a presence being felt in two places at once, for
instance, or with an absence in which the traces of a previous presence still reverberate. These
deliverables - essential for a better assessment of what I have labelled the Straits Jewish
Diasporascape - had to come from Complexity thinking. When my directions became clearer,
with the help from Complexity, I faced a dilemma. Should I proceed with my research in a
‘traditional ethnographic way’ and try to add my piece of the reality puzzle, but run the risk that I
would end up tokenistically concluding that reality is more complex than I had assumed? Or
should I proceed along the lines of complexity thinking and explore new ways of capturing the
diasporic mobilities of Jews in the Straits? I chose for the second option. In fact, for me it was
the only option. This is one of the reasons why this thesis contains a (disproportional) long
theoretical discussion. One might argue that this thesis does not look like a standard
ethnographic thesis, which is a proof of competence. That was a point of concern to me.
However, I was convinced that the theoretical discussion touched upon some interesting issues
relevant to my research. I was more concerned with how I was going to proceed methodologically. As I was being prevented from moving about the way I wanted to, I felt that I
could commit only halfheartedly to a ‘movement driven social science’. It is only recently that
methodological ‘innovations’ have been developed in mobilities research that simulate the
movement of people and objects, and the frenetic activity of a place like Singapore80: time-space

---

77 You might say in computer language that I made a huge data-aski file in MS-Dos. See: Whittle, A. & A. Spicer


Researching the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

diaries, following the people, following the objects, following movements in time-space, the cultural biographies of objects, recovering memories, using observations, participating while interviewing, etc. However, apart from the clear focus on material objects, most of these methods are familiar to ethnographers, which is not to say that most of these methodological ‘innovations’ have already been applied in ethnographic research and explored in the ethnographic ‘reflexive turn’. My concerns gradually disappeared when I came to believe that I was better off with a flexible methodology than a clear-cut and well-planned methodology. I had to find ways to deal with a vague and messy reality. To face that reality my methods had to be messy as well. Methodologically I was triangulating and mixing methods but - as has been made clear in the preceding - with porous and fluid angles in the researcher-reality-methods research space. There are some methodological steps in this triangulation and mixing of methods that need further consideration for the sake of the audit trail.

A first important step was to connect with persons who were easy accessible to me. These were Jewish academics working at one of the universities in Singapore. Via these contacts I hoped to find ways to get close to my research subjects. Functions like the German-Israeli diplomatic anniversary described earlier were important, and so were religious services and other functions which would give me a good insight into Jewish community life. From there on it would be easier to connect with businessmen and look for possibilities to study their businesses. It was of importance that I would find ways in which to attend such meetings and functions. This was where my key informers, Ruth and Ann were very helpful. Ruth is an Israeli national and has been most helpful in establishing contacts in the Jewish community. She is a colourful woman and very outgoing. She loved to go to these functions. She was popular because of her extroverted character, but she was not liked by everyone. She understood, being an academic herself, that in ethnography it is important to get close to your research subject. She is a non-religious Jew. She was very much in favour of a study of the Jewish community that would reveal

83 Ruth and Ann are not their real names. I have chosen to make the participants in my research anonymous only partly. For obvious reasons it is not wise in Indonesia or Malaysia to acknowledge a Jewish identity. That is different in Singapore. My greatest concern was not to inflict any harm. In the cases where it was unsure if my findings would inflict harm, I made the participants anonymous. In some cases there was a fear of physical harmful situations. As a researcher you bear the responsibility not to let your findings lead to a possible backlash against your informants. The backlash need not necessarily be physical. Harm can be done as well when privacy is violated. Where it was difficult to determine beforehand what effect naming a participant might have, I decided to play safe and made the participants anonymous so when informers asked for confidentiality I obliged. However, sometimes it did not make sense not to name the participants. In those cases I had to find a correct balance that had to be thought over again and again in each case. Those cases concern public figures. Secondary materials - for instance newspaper articles - may be used, describing the activities of that particular person or the institution that the person is part of. Using aliases would not make them unidentifiable. In two of my cases, the CBTL and the FJ Benjamin case, that was the issue. Both concerned high-profile company leaders who to achieve publicity have made their private lives public in newspapers or other media. That problem occurred in other cases as well, for instance when dealing with history. The historical cases are built around a specific single person. Complexity thinking would insist on the particularity of each single case and person. Each single person has a unique position in a networked reality. Complexity asserts that to make such people anonymous would suggest generalisations, which - as complexity would insist - have to be made with the greatest reserve. This of course is a very rigid point of view. That rigidity is undermined when you put the past into the present, as I have done in the Manado case. The argument against making the participants anonymous because the case deals with things from the past would not make sense. However, the way this community has sought the dialogue with their environment via internet and interfaith meetings organised by Paramadina, a moderate Islamic organisation, would suggest an approval to mention names. Using aliases would not make them unidentifiable. Still it seemed better to play safe and not to use their real names.
CHAPTER 3

the processes of inclusion and exclusion in this community. She was critical of the orthodox Baghdadi community. The Weltanschauung of Orthodox Judaism and the wife’s subordinate position in orthodoxy was a thorn in her flesh. In addition she was not impressed by an ongoing research project in the Jewish community in which ‘the people that matter’ were adulated too much for her liking. She favoured a study that would throw light on the life of the ‘ordinary Jew’ in the Straits. I just agreed that it would be interesting. Whether or not I was going to do this I left unsaid.

I regularly received mails or phone calls in which Ruth announced a function to which she invited me. I became a sort of chaperone. For a middle-aged woman on her own, who likes to go out, that is convenient. For me, looking for opportunities to link up with the Jewish community, it was convenient as well. Singapore is a place where friends come and go. Staying in Singapore for five years makes you a ‘long-termer’. New friends must therefore be sought. For the older generation’s singles, these kinds of functions provide the possibility of hooking up with a social group. Younger people are interested in different leisure domains. The urge to connect with co-religionists might be felt more strongly when there is an absence of familial bonds. For newly arrived Jewish professionals who want to settle in Singapore, pronouncing a Jewish/Israeli identity gives them this possibility. It is not strange to see a re-emerging of religious affiliation in this enactment. The synagogue in this respect is for many, just as it was for me, an important first point of orientation.

My friendly relationship with Ann was of a different stature. I had regular coffee dates with her. She was active in Gesher and I ran into her at different times and in different places. Unlike Ruth, she was more reserved. As a social scientist herself, she showed great interest in my research and we regularly discussed my progress on the campus in one of the coffee joints. We also discussed more personal matters. She kept her distance in community situations. She seemed not to be willing to actively link me with community members who would be of interest to me. In that situation I found it more appropriate not to ask for it as well. I felt reluctant to ‘use’ her contacts for my ‘participation observation’ research. In contrast with Ruth, who would love to see the community agitated and having to deal with some controversies, Ann’s participation was more in the background. At that time Ruth was already planning to leave for the US. Ann had a more long-term perspective on Singapore. She guarded her reputation. She was attracted to orthodoxy because of the rituals, but she would consider herself a Conservative Jew. In the US, her home ground, there were possibilities for her to join such a denomination. In Singapore religiously/ideologically, she was more attracted to the reformed Jewish UHC. She regularly attended UHC functions as well.

3.8 The Research Process: Historizing and Mixing Methods

The ‘real’ work started in Singapore, in the second part of my first stay in the region. At last I would be able to relate to a ‘real’ Jewish community and I would have the chance to employ my

---

85 ‘Gesher’, Hebrew for bridge, tries to bridge the social and cultural distance between the three communities – expatriates, Israelis and local Baghdadi. In a way Gesher is using Singapore as a social laboratory in which it is exploring a way in which to build up a cosmopolitan, glocal, pan-Jewish identity.
86 I arrived in Singapore from Jakarta on Chinese New Year in February 2004 and was hosted by the Asian Research Institute (ARI) from the NUS. I returned to Holland in April. I stayed on the campus of the NUS. I arrived in
expertise as an ethnographer. The period of trying to find traces and building blocks for my allegorical tales in Indonesia and Malaysia was over. I would now be able to connect with a community of ‘corporeal Jews’ and concentrate on their businesses. During my first period in Singapore I had already prepared this second period. I had looked for suitable housing possibilities and had connected with key-informers. I had visited archives and libraries and had met some members of the Straits local communities. I had been able to identify three case-studies that I wanted to work on in this second fieldwork period; the diamond business with a focus on the diamond house of Weiss and Shein, the Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf business, and the fashion house of FJ Benjamin.

The first thing I did in my first research period was to go to the synagogue, meet with the rabbi again, and to ask him for advice. The rabbi suggested that I should write an official letter to the Singapore Jewish Welfare Board for permission to perform the research. The Singapore Jewish Welfare Board manages the two synagogues, the community center and a home of the elderly. At this stage it had already become clear that it would not be an easy job to gain access to the Singapore Jewish community. The best way to start was to spend time at, and lurk around the premises of the Jewish community. Singapore has a small but active Jewish community. By the start of my second period of research there had still been no response from the Singapore Jewish Welfare Board. Again I met with the rabbi and asked for advice. The rabbi didn’t see the lack of a response as a refusal. Things obviously didn’t work that way. It was better just to mix and mingle and I was welcome to attend the services. That was good enough for me, for the time being. At least there had been no refusal. But it did not make my position as a researcher clear. For most of the members of the community, however, if they had given it any thought, which I doubt, it seemed not to be an issue. My intentions became clear even to the Bagdadi Jewish community leaders only when I was interviewing them about their businesses. Most of the activities in the community are initiated by the orthodox community. The reformed United Hebrew Congregation and the Israeli community have their own functions. They do not have their own synagogues. I enrolled in a social circuit which involved me in attending study sessions of the UHC, farewell lunches for the ambassador, services in the synagogue and had lunch or breakfast afterward, celebrations of Israeli national holidays, and discussions with guest speakers at Gesher meetings. These functions were occasions where I was able to practice the research method of participant observation. In the older days of anthropology participant observation used to take place in villages. I was practicing it all over Singapore, sometimes at the homes of well-to-do community members, sometimes at meeting rooms at the American club, or at the local Jewish community center, or at first-class hotels where Israeli national anniversaries were celebrated.
CHAPTER 3

I held 32 interviews in Singapore. I hesitate to call them interviews because that suggests a formality that was absent, at least in most cases. They were rather mildly structured conversations that sometimes even had the character of an exchange. Before the interviews I noted the things that I wanted to know and the questions I wanted to ask. At the end of the conversation I checked if my data was complete. If there wasn’t enough time I asked that we should meet again and tried to make another appointment. If it was obvious that this would remain the only conversation, I tried to focus on the most important issues. I taped these conversations as often as possible. This was not seen as something strange. I always said that I was doing this because I would forget things otherwise, and that I wanted to focus on the interaction. Scribbling notes in my notebook would distract my attention. The most relevant interviews were transcribed. Conversations that were not recorded were written down in my notebook and transferred to my ‘system’ afterwards.

There were different ways to get access to the business practices that I wanted to investigate. For FJ Benjamin (FJB) and the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf (CBTL) it was important to get in touch with the management. CBTL’s management was approached directly. After an interview with the CEO it was possible to get access to lower management levels also, in order to get a clearer picture of the organisation. For FJB a detour was necessary via a prominent member of the community. She arranged an interview for me with the CEO, after which it was easier to get in touch with a lower management level. The level of access was limited in these two case-studies. Consequently the case-studies are not ‘classical’ ethnographic organisational studies in which I was able to focus on the work floor and use participant observation as a method of research. Participant observation was possible only in the wider social surroundings in which these two entrepreneurial families were operating. These two businesses are high profile in Singapore. Singapore’s media is business minded. The national – quality – newspapers, the Singapore Straits Times and the Singapore Business Times, cover local business news extensively and are a rich source of secondary material. Other weekly or bi-weekly media have also provided valuable material on which to build these two case-studies. Of course it should be said here that Singapore’s media are controlled by the government. However, that did not seem to be too much of an obstacle in these case-studies. As far as it is possible to judge this rightly, there were no occasions on which the controversial government media policies specifically and directly interfered with the business practices I was researching. Interference takes place on a general policy level. When assessing these secondary sources it was, however, necessary to keep in mind that the information that could be obtained from these sources was never complete, and, it was also necessary to keep in mind that the companies had a strong interest in projecting a positive image in the press. For the third case study I held a number of interviews (ten in total) with the Singapore Jewish diamond dealers. Access was possible after the intercession of my local supervisor and of one of my key informers, who were acquainted with two of the dealers. I was able to interview one of the dealers several times and he provided me with a thorough description of the inside of the business. Mentioning his name paved the way for access to other dealers also. I approached one dealer directly via the internet.

The oral history department of the Singapore National Archives was of great support to the research. The department provided me with (parts of) transcripts of interviews that had been held in the 1980s and 1990s with members of the Jewish community. These extensive interviews

---

90 In Indonesia I held 30 interviews and in Malaysia 3 interviews. In the Annexure there is a full list of all the interviews.
gave a good insight into the routes that had been taken throughout the Straits by members of the community. It helped me to give the research a perspective in time. I used this oral history material to reconstruct the lived experiences of Jewish community members. The stories that are told in this oral history material should be seen as textual self-presentations. They provide interpretations by the Jews interviewed of their own lives. The events that they describe are their own versions of history, which do not necessarily have to match with facts or interpretations that are given by others or in ‘official’ versions of historical events.

This oral history material gave the opportunity to link the lived life of members of the community and their family histories with the in-here presence of the Singapore Jewish community. It also allowed checking for interconnections in the wider Straits. Different senses of time entered the field. Decision-making in the businesses was put in a more balanced time perspective, in combination with matters of lived lives and family histories. To deal with history in this way is to run counter to the way in which history as a science is commonly perceived; a science that delivers descriptions and interpretations of political highlights and events of the past. The perspective in this thesis situates the daily lives of common people centrally. In doing so I connect with the Annales, a historical school of thought with well-known representatives like Le Roy Ladurie, Braudel and Le Goff. A combination of anthropology and history is sought for in this school. Generally that combination is called historical anthropology. Anthropology and history, as scientific disciplines, do not automatically cohere. Anthropology is expected not to deal too much with history, and history is expected not to deal too much with anthropology. These borders have been clearly drawn for decades. Anthropology has been equated with space, and history with time. The ethnographer respects history as a context, but history does not add special value to his study of the more non-institutional aspects of the social. Historians lay great stress in their methods on the credibility of official written and oral sources. The Annales has provided a combination of the two and sought for a new way to look at cultural and social history. This crossover has given history new dimensions for analysis, but these insights do not come uncontested. The act of bringing history and ethnography together might be judged as eclectic or opportunistic. Both scientific disciplines wish to see each other at the most as only

91 There were several oral history interviews in the Singapore National Archives with members of the Jewish Community. Some of these interviews were only accessible only after authorisation of the family and for limited use only. Some, for instance the Isaacs interviews, could be used only as background information. Frederick Jacob Isaacs, Accession number 0000378. Date interview 21-3-1983. Mrs. Felice Isaacs born Ezekiel. A000575/08. Date Interview 23-5-1985. Other interviews could be used within the general policies the archives have with regard to the use of their materials: Savi Kunari, in Communities of Singapore, Part 1 A369. Date interview 17-1-1984. Singapore, Oral History Department, 1989. And: Savi Kunari. Singapore as an entrepot. A0001203. Date interview 22-10-1990. David Marshall. Date interview 5-11-1984, Jacob Ballas, A000163/04 (1) Date interview: 6-12-1983. Albert Lehah A0000296. Date interview: 15-7-1983. Charles Simon. A395. 1984. Joseph Grimberg. Interview 9-10-1983. B0000342. ‘The use of this oral history material should be seen as a tool to reconstruct the lived experiences of an actor. "Taken as a “text”, the expression of oral history material must always be seen in terms of “self-portrait” or self-presentation given to us by our subjects, and the historical events described in the “telling” are the informant’s carefully selected versions of history, which may not necessarily be congruent with other historical facts and interpretations’. In: Sarasombat, Y. (1998) Oral History and Self-Portraits. Interviewing the Thai Élite. In: Lim, P.H., Morrison, J.H. & C.H. Kwa (Eds.) Oral History in Southeast Asia. Theory and Method. Singapore: National Archives of Singapore and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. pp. 66-85. p. 83.

complementary to their own discipline. In this respect reactions in the academic world do not differ much from the less admirable qualities of ‘real’ world, being inspired by parochialism. Methodology is a level on which ‘wars are waged’ between the disciplines. When you try to combine them you presumably end up by messing things up. A less parochial stand would be to argue that anthropologists might offer inspiration to historians to apply a range of new methods to dealing with the past. And, vice versa, historians might offer the same advantages to anthropologists in dealing with the present. A possible difference would be even less insurmountable than often it is often suggested, since, as Levi-Strauss put it, ‘the historian strives to reconstruct the picture of vanished societies as they were at the points which for them corresponded to the present. While the ethnographer does his best to reconstruct the historical stages which temporally preceded the present existing forms’. Complexity would claim that, when you follow connections, these connections need to be followed wherever they may lead instead of following them only as far as the border of a scientific discipline. This does not mean that as a social scientist you should be free from any methodological constraint. History has a valuable methodological tradition of source-criticism. That would complement anthropology’s reflexivity, in which the researcher as a ‘source’ in research is assessed and criticised.

3.9 Methods: Where the Reflexive and Complexity Turn Meet

Diaspora implies multi-sitedness. A multi-sited research has some challenging methodological implications for an ethnographer. That challenge is not only practical: how should the research be conducted? Multi-sited research also questions basic assumptions in and expectations of method itself. What would multi-sited mean in terms of Complexity methodology? The Malinowskian view of anthropological fieldwork that favored descriptions given from the ‘inside’ has increasingly lost its legitimating base and representational power. Although Malinowski’s Kula Ring research already had a multilocal perspective, his legacy was the classic model of single-site fieldwork. In a single-sited research project the field as a terrain was clearly mapped. The field(s) remains central. That Malinowskian view demarcated the phase in which (empirical) data collection had to be done. That demarcation is still close to the classic idea of the ethnographer going to ‘the field’. ‘The field’ exemplifies the symbolic capital for ethnographers, and has for a long time been the unique selling point of ethnography. ‘The field’ is part of the romanticised image of the unorthodox hero standing with both feet in the mud, gaining a better – an emic understanding and knowledge of ‘his village’. The multi-sited approach that Hannerz and Marcus have put forward is still mainly Euclidean. Just like Malinowski, Hannerz was also referring to multiple locations for research. Multi-sitedness initially did not mean more than mapping some extra terrains. Marcus was testing the limits of ethnography and referred to yet another ‘site’, the

94 Ibid.: 5.
98 In Malinowskian ethnography the ultimate indication of a successful fieldwork was when the researcher surrendered to the field and got absorbed by it, while retaining a reflexive distance. The Malinowskian researcher at some point felt that he had become an insider, and had become part of family or kin groups. From that position he was able to give an insider’s –emic view of his researched subjects. The litmus proof for fieldwork success was when parting there were mutual feelings of sorrow. A sigh of relief when parting would be considered as a sign for non-fully connection. See: Hannerz, U. (2003: 209).
Researching the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

researcher, instead of ‘only mapping terrain’. In the mid-nineteen eighties, in an emerging genre of reflexive ethnography, popular confessional tales were used to direct the attention to the researcher. The ethnographer became the most important tool in ethnographic research.

The ‘field’ as a single site in one’s research is increasingly permeated not only in space by other sites, but also in time by other research phases. Research does not stop when one leaves a site, nor does it start when one physically arrives at the site. Time-space compression, for instance through internet and travel, have made it easier, both for the researcher and for his research subjects, to let boundaries between spaces and phases in the research blur. You can stay informed about your ‘field’ via the internet. Fieldwork time is exceeded by research time. And websites with no particular geographical location, possibly containing disruptive information that would reflect on the result of your research, may enter the field unexpectedly. This implies that ‘webs of power’ that need to be unraveled are not confined to the phase and space of fieldwork alone. They also ‘contaminate’ other sites in the research process. It has become increasingly difficult to isolate ‘the field’ from the rest of what needs to be researched and that is important to know about, both in time and in space. And it has therefore become increasingly relevant to include other possible new ‘sites’ in the research.

Van den Heuvel argues that it is difficult to separate researchers from their research and the methods they use. But the implication that the researcher in the ‘reflexive turn’ is the most important tool for research seems hard to digest. It has remained neglected in the social sciences dominated by quantitative research. In semi anthropological, novel-like descriptions of ‘the field’ his position in the ‘field’ was ridiculed and described as that of a Tijl Uilenspiegel. Methodologically the ‘reflexive turn’ in ethnography situated the researcher more centrally, but it seems that cold feet prevent this turn from being pushed to its limits. To do so would mean a distancing from the ‘field’ as the unique site where ethnographic methods apply, and a loss of the ethnographer’s unique scientific selling point. The line of defence in ethnography, in trying to cope with methodological concerns, has always been the insistence on ‘hygienic’ standards aligned with mainstream quantitative methods. But that remains a defense strategy.

Complexity, in ANT and Latour’s model, would take the ‘relational materiality’, the thesis, as the starting point for analysis, rather than sticking to the fieldwork phase only. The making of a thesis would include the whole research process of designing a research proposal, the funding, the organisation, the collecting of data, the processing of the data, writing up the results, and finally presenting the results. Ethnographers seem to have been doing quite well. Latour’s long-awaited methodological insight into how to conduct an ANT research project appears to be not too


Three of my key informers used Amsterdam as a stop-over when going to the United States and visited me.

My use of data from internet hate sites is exemplary of this. In common research it is counterintuitive to use these sites as material in the research, but the way in which I have used the material is to show the possibly disruptive effect it might have - the expectations of the future - when this information as a ‘fire’, from outside of what is considered as your research field, is trying to do its contaminating work. These messages from hateful people seeking connections with possible allies who are in far-off places but dwelling in similar realities, although disseminated at a distance from your research field, might enter the field before you know it. This shows the double position you are in as a researcher, noticing it (detecting it), but at the same time using it (amplifying it). I don’t have a solution for that. Methods are not outside of the system under scrutiny. They help to create realities, even when the realities are morally reprehensible. But I feel that to ignore such material and leave it out in analysis would be reprehensible.


CHAPTER 3

different from the way ethnography has been conducted\textsuperscript{105}. The implications for assessing one’s research according to Complexity or ANT principles lie on a meta level. The ‘complexity turn’ is a continuation of the ‘reflexive turn’. Complexity principles give different perspectives and starting points, but not necessarily different ways in which to conduct network research.

For complexity there is nothing outside the system, including methods. Combining the reflexive and complexity turn means that through the use of your methods you not only describe but also help to produce the reality that is understood. The act of writing, of producing a relational materiality like a thesis, makes the very world that it seeks to describe. Methods participate in the enactment of realities\textsuperscript{106}. \textit{What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning}\textsuperscript{107}. Many scientists would consider this statement as malicious. It undermines methods inheritance of hygiene and makes some counterintuitive claims about the character of science and the role of methods in it\textsuperscript{108}. Such an enacting position has as its ultimate goal to warn us not to use methods in an automatic way, as some sort of mechanical replacement that takes over critical thinking and urges us to think critically about how to acknowledge and create acceptable versions of reality\textsuperscript{109}. In a world that is complex, fuzzy, messy and full of contradictions, why then should methods be any different, as if they were something that stands outside reality? That means that there is no ‘external world’ or reality to which scientific observations and methods may refer. Methods are themselves components of the system that is being investigated. To understand a complex system such as the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits, demanded the use of obscure and innovative lines of inquiry. Of course standard ethnographic methods that have been developed over the years are useful and good in what they do, but they might not be good enough to study the indefinite and the irregular\textsuperscript{110}, which is the case in the Straits Jewish Diasporascape.

A cynic may suggest that this present discourse, this long verbal detour is an attempt to conceal the fact that there is no method at all in this ‘allegory’ research project, and that the researcher was wandering aimlessly in his demarcated research space looking desperately for clues. Of course that is partly true. An aimless wandering around, and even a measure of desperation, were needed to sensitise oneself to the complex and the elusive. I tried to catch the new, complex configurations of a social that is movement-driven through the use of method assemblage, which points to the \textit{endless ramifications of processes and contexts “out-there” that are both necessary to what is “in here” and invisible to it}\textsuperscript{111}. A feature of these new configurations is the new ‘flickering’ combination of presence and absence\textsuperscript{112}. A reality is enacted in this thesis that is built up by referring in the first place to absences. Absences are investigated through ‘units that are’ – presence; and presence is investigated through ‘units that are not’ – absence. Method assemblage does not tell us how to find these units. There are no standard methods for that. The researcher becomes an investigator, a detective who is using a combination of intuition and common sense to find traces

\textsuperscript{105} Latour, B. (2005).
\textsuperscript{106} Law, J. (2004: 45).
\textsuperscript{108} Law, J. (2004: 13).
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.: 11.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.: 3-4.
\textsuperscript{111} Law, J. (2004: 42).
and leads. Once these traces and leads were found, I used a variety of methods and various modes of participation at the research sites I probed. I have directed the attention in this methodological chapter to sites that ‘normally’ lie out of range. This reflects the insight from complexity that small causes can have big effects. An ‘organisational context’ opens up when fieldwork is not confined to the traditional ethnographic ‘field’ only, but directed to the actant, the ‘thesis’. Suddenly there are many more actors involved in producing ‘reality’ than only the researcher. As a participant observing the embodied site of the researcher as the researched, I have pointed out the complex mental dimensions that are involved when probing. On a mental level, filtered or unfiltered, pushing the ‘reflexive turn’ to its limits, there might be fairies and demons in the researcher’s mind that produce interferences which shape the present, the absent and the Other. The ethnographer is the most important tool for analysis. Without critical self-reflexivity and ‘tool maintenance’ the researcher’s interferences might become too strong for the ‘reality’ he is enacting.

I have allegorically condensed a new ‘elusive’ social landscape which I have coined the Straits Jewish Diasporascape. In the next chapter - Chapter Four - the Jewish Diasporascape is further depicted through the use of allegorical, historicising tales that link the past with the present. The boundaries between what is Othered and what is made manifest are softened and played with by using allegories. These allegories may not necessarily cohere, or they may interfere with the networked reality that will be enacted in Chapter Five, Six and Seven. Nevertheless they are brought together in this Diasporascape (system), holding out the promise that the tiniest of causes can have big effects. An a priori deletion of these possible small causes – for instance because of their presumed irrelevance – might just be the reason that change in a system is not understood or anticipated upon. Another promise is that, the reader will be offered a ‘complexity proof context’, or in ANT terminology ‘a hinterland’ through the assembling of these tales.

---

4. Depicting the Hinterland of the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

4.1 Introduction

The enactment of the Jewish Diasporascape, with the choice of the Straits as a region, will be further pursued in this chapter. There must be a wide range of possible depictions of the hinterland of the Straits Jewish Diasporascape possible. This hinterland is indispensable and conditional as an embedding of the ‘business’ chapters, Chapters Five, Six and Seven which deal with the Diamond trade, FJ Benjamin and the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf respectively. It is by no means the intention, nor would it be possible to produce a complete and ‘right’ hinterland. A hinterland is not some kind of context or ‘structure’ with which the presented enactments are articulated and from which cause and effect relations might be distilled. A hinterland is the ‘out there’, the indefinite fluxes or fluids that harbour inevitabilities and surprises. These inevitabilities and surprises might seem antithetical to the business rationales that are thought to be common in business practices. These fluids harbour agency’s improvisations, which in iteration might produce undeniable forces. Or they might produce, suddenly, as a ‘fire’, small and far away causes that can have big effects. The hinterland defines a ‘topography of reality-possibilities’. This hinterland can therefore never be completely depicted. The allegorical tales that will be presented in this chapter should be read as incitements for further research. They point to leads that might be followed and thoughts that might be pursued in order to understand the other side of the ‘common reality’ of Jewish presence in the Straits. The idea is that these tales together add up to a more or less clear picture of what a Straits Jewish Diasporascape would entail. A Jewish ‘empire’, the Straits Jewish Diasporascape, as a new allegory, is enacted in which relevant distinctions, connections and relational materialities are put forward for Jews in time and space.

Jews are considered as antithetical to the divisions of empires or nation states. They tend to sit astride any common division and therefore exemplify the feebleness of ordering. As an embodiment of ‘Otherness’ - as Bauman has darkly put it – Jewish ‘unfitting becomes a fissure in the world order through which the ultimately invincible chaos is, reluctantly and depressingly, sighted’. In a system Jews operate away from points of equilibrium where they embody ‘unexpected, unpredictable and irreversible movements’. In the enactment of a Jewish Diasporascape this thesis takes Jewish mobilities as the norm. Rather than making them an exception or anomaly, Jewish nomadism is taken as a starting point. The Straits as a region fits this nomadic reality well and, as a regional spatial metaphor, is well equipped to ‘society©ise’ the mobilities that are involved in the complex processes of Jewish social interchanges that have taken place over many centuries and transgressed many borders and boundaries.

To capture Jewish mobilities in the Straits, their anchorages need to be considered within the routes they have taken in the Straits and their wider connections in a (global) world. Although the mobilities within a ‘Jewish empire’ are said not to have been laid down by borders that demarcate

---


87
CHAPTER 4

colonial empires or nation-states, this does not mean that these borders are and were not important. Jewish oscillations between presence and absence in the Straits might well be a historical by-product of this dominance. Many social configurations are still nation-state or empire driven, including those of diasporas. It would be worth the effort, but it is an illusion to think that it would be possible in this chapter to escape in form and depiction from this dominance and assess this Jewish Diasporascape freed from these colonial and post-colonial divisions.

In the first section early tracks and traces are followed to determine the scale and scope of Jewish presence in the Straits. An answer is sought for the question of how it has been possible that as an ethnic-religious category Jews in the Straits have been largely invisible. At the same time this section deals with some relevant distinctions between the different Jewish denominations or ‘blood groups’. In the second section Singapore’s position as a central node in the Straits Jewish Diasporascape is assessed. A global overview is given of how a Jewish community has emerged in Singapore, in time, and how Jewish life has been created and re-created. A central node in a system does not become central on its own. It is nurtured by nodes that eventually become less connected. Singapore could become a central node in the Straits Jewish Diasporascape because it is problematic for Jews to set down anchor in the wider Straits. The third section deals with the messianic Jews in Manado in Indonesia, with Abraham Fontein as their Jewish progenitor. The Fontein family history shows what it means to be Jewish in a place with hardly any Jewish communal life. This family life history is exemplary for Jewish Dutch families in the Netherlands Indies that had to re-orientate their future in the Indies after Indonesia’s independence. The fourth section, the history of the Jewish cemetery in Penang, deals with a dwindling Jewish Penang community in a hostile environment. The politics that surrounds this heritage site makes a contested Jewish presence visible. The claim in this tale or narrative is that an absence of effective counter narratives has made space for the anti-Jewish discourse endorsed by the Malaysian nation state. This absence of counter narratives has helped to create a national Malayan anti-Jewish atmosphere which has had its effects on Jewish ‘inhabited’ (business) networks.

4.2 Jewish Presence in between Myth and Reality

4.2.1 Early Tracks and Traces

The mapping of the Jewish Diaspora has always been a popular (Jewish) pursuit and is helpful in the search for ‘the lost tribes’ of Israel. This search has interested scientists but was also a subject of Jewish public interest. Myths of newly found ‘lost tribes’ in forgotten places, like the jungle of Brazil or Colombia, were told by storytellers who drew large crowds in Amsterdam’s Sephardic community as early as in the 17th century. These stories coincided with initiatives from prominent Jews in the Dutch Republic, like Menasseh ben Israel, to found new Jewish ‘colonies’ in the tropical New World. At that time new waves of immigration to the Dutch Republic from Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe and Sephardic Jews from the Iberian Peninsula caused serious problems. Only a limited part of this influx could be accommodated within the Dutch Republic’s borders. These overseas exotic places appealed to the imagination. A Sephardic expedition to find out about the Cochin Jews living in India is illustrative, as is a publication in a Yiddish newspaper which in 1687 reported ‘news from Dutch East Indies has come that many thousands of black and white Jews have lived there for almost 1,400 years. They have arrived there after the destruction of Jerusalem. Among these people there are some very clever people and they possess the same books, and the Torah,
Depicting the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

as here in the land5: Up until recently ‘lost tribes’ were still being ‘discovered’. Their roots were investigated. Perhaps they derive from the Ethiopian Jews, the Falasha or the black South African Lemba. The Lemba claim descent from the Levites, one of the lost tribes. Even modern DNA research is used to investigate claims of Jewishness6. In Jewish orthodox faith this interest in the ‘lost tribes’ should also be understood with respect to salvation. On the day of salvation God will reunite all descendants of Abraham and make the dispersed tribes return to Jerusalem.

Stories that connect Jews with the Straits are old. As early as in King Solomon’s time, Jews were looking for the land of Ophir that was thought to be located in the Indies. In the Old Testament one finds the following: ‘Solomon also built ships at Ezion Geber, which is near Elath in Edom, on the shore of the Red Sea. And Hiram sent his men - sailors who knew the sea - to serve in the fleet with Solomon’s men. They sailed to Ophir and brought back 420 talents of gold, which they delivered to King Solomon’7. King Solomon was known for his love of splendour. The city of Ezion-Geber on the gulf of Akaba was the port from which in the period around 950 BCE King Solomon encouraged Phoenician traders, accompanied by Hebrew sailors, to sail in search of oriental commodities for his entourage8. His kingdom linked the Phoenician ports of Tyre and Sidon with the Red Sea and lay astride the main trade routes with Egypt and Mesopotamia9. Jews were deported to Mesopotamia into what is known as the Babylonian Exile10. New communities were established in Mesopotamia and in the wider Mediterranean area. The Temple at Jerusalem, which metaphorically exemplified the wish to bring dispersed Jewish life together again, was their central focus. Every Jewish male from the age of twenty, wherever he might be, was expected to make an annual contribution to its upkeep11.

In Alexandria, the port capital of Egypt, Jews were so numerous that it became the biggest Jewish city. Jews probably comprised one third of the city’s population12. In general their communities were led by well-born families. Their hereditary boards of administrative and judicial functionaries supervised the implementation of contracts and orders13. Their government with its own Jewish council presided under an ethnarch, who ruled like a ruler of an independent state. Egypt was the intermediary between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean and became an

---

6 NRC Handelsblad 24-3-2001
10 In 586BC.
12 Jewish settlements were by no means restricted to Alexandria. In 162-160 BC the Ptolemies permitted Onias IV to build a smaller duplicate of the Jerusalem Temple at Leontopolis on the eastern edge of the Nile. The Egyptian Jews, despite this new temple, like all other communities of the dispersion, continued to pay their annual tax to the Temple at Jerusalem. See: Grant, M. (1973: 30) and Grant, M. (1973: 62).
increasingly important center of Jewish mercantile and financial activity. Jewish merchants travelled from there to Southeast Asia in Persian and Arab vessels. In the eight and ninth centuries Jewish radhaniya (Rhadanites) merchants established trade relations with Europe, India, and China and with the Islamic Middle East and North Africa. Ibn Kordabheh, postmaster of the caliph of Baghdad, wrote in the years between 854 and 874 on their trade routes. Their diaspora network is considered to be the largest trading network in the world at that time. From Europe these merchants took slaves, swords, and furs to India, China and the Muslim lands and they brought back musk, aloes, camphor, cinnamon and other commodities. In this long-distance trade an inter-communal system guarded their independence as a separated group. It also regulated internal feuds and rivalry between the entrepreneurial families involved. This long-distance trading system was supported by Jewish communities along the routes overland and the Maritime Silk Road.

There is only one known Arabic source (as yet), the c Aja'ib al-Hind (c.1000), that speaks of Jewish merchants in Sribuza (Srivijaya), who participated in the India-China trade. To get to China and vice-versa, the Strait of Melaka, the Strait between the Malaya Peninsula and Sumatra, had to be used. Spatially, the Jewish dispersion in Southeast Asian territories, spread via India. The earliest and most significant settlement of Jews in India was on the Malabar Coast. These Jews probably came by sea after the destruction of the second temple in 70 AC. Other Jewish communities are found in pre-Islamic India - before c. 1100 as well, but they seem to have remained isolated and immobile until the expansion of Islamic power re-established their links with mainstream Jewish life in Babylonia, Persia and Egypt. In the 10th century Persia (Iran) dominated the India trade. However, Egypt rose to be a regional power and gradually took over. Iraqi Jews were attracted by the rising power of Egypt, set out on a new course and moved to Egypt. In the 11th and 12th centuries Jews obtained a disproportional share of this trade with India. There were Jewish trading stations in over twenty different places on the west coast of India, and further south well into Indonesia. They were linked to Egypt and the Red Sea terminuses. But this also meant a decline of the importance of the centers of the Jewish Diaspora in Babylonia or in Baghdad. There was a shift westward to Egypt and Spain, mostly from Jews from the western caliphate, and secondly a move eastward, mostly from Jews of the eastern

---

17 Barnavi, E. (Ed.) (1992) A Historical Atlas of the Jewish People. From the Patriarchs to the Present. New York: Schocken Books. pp. 78-82. Bieder, J. (2007: 18) The Jews of Singapore. Singapore: Suntree. Bieder speaks too easily of the use by Jews of a Maritime Silk Road. She does not make clear where and how she found that interesting information. She is probably referring to Chinese sources that speak of the coastal regions of Wu, Wei and Qi —now the Shandong Province, as thriving centers of shipbuilding and silk production. This means that silk transportation to open up foreign markets overseas was available. Emperor Han Wudi (who reigned 140-87 BC) is said to have used these routes that provided access to the Roman Empire via India. There seems to be no validation of the idea that Jews were also using this route. But again, the fact that Jews were already engaged in long distance trade in the 9th and 11th centuries, at least overland, makes this statement worth investigating. See at http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/zhenhe/132334.htm last visited 30-6-2009.
Depicting the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

caliphate, to Khorasan, the northwest of Iran, Central Asia and the frontier of Hind (Afghanistan).\(^{20}\)

Benjamin van Tudela and Marco Polo referred to old Jewish settlements on the Malabar Coast at Cochin. Jewish settlements in Surat and on the Malabar Coast, in Calicut and Cochin probably date back to the first centuries of this era. The role of ‘the merchants of the sea’ was assigned to locally settled foreigners. That role, until then played by Indians, most probably was taken over by guilds under the direction of Jews and Christians. Jewish trade flourished and Jewish settlements increased during this period\. Because of the close connection with the mainstream of Jewish activity in the Middle East and Egypt, Jews in India became powerful for some time. After the thirteenth century the Jewish communities in India became isolated. Temporary upheavals occurred, but this was mainly due to the arrival of Arabic-speaking Jews from Iraq and elsewhere\.\(^{22}\)

The exceptional life history of Caspar the Jew, who lived at Cochin, is interesting\. Caspar was born in the first half of the 15\(^{th}\) century in Posen in Poland. Local pogroms made him flee with his parents to Castile. Later Caspar’s family moved to Alexandria. As a young man he crossed the Red Sea to Mecca and travelled to India. He was captured, enslaved, and only after forty years, when he converted to Islam, did he regain his freedom. As a free man he settled in Cochin, married a Jewish girl of the local Jewish community, and started a family. Caspar became an admiral in the service of the Arab Prince of Goa. Caspar was captured by Vasco da Gama while he was investigating the strength of da Gama’s fleet. He appeared to be a well informed and experienced pilot of the Indian Ocean. He knew of the businesses in the region and had knowledge of the different regional languages. Vasco da Gama became the godfather of the baptised Jew Caspar and together they returned to Europe. Caspar’s adventurous life story is therefore relatively well documented. But is Caspar’s life story exceptional? It is possible that similar life stories of other Jewish seafarers, land travellers or settlers have escaped the eyes of documenters. It is also possible that the Jewish background of a trader or merchant is not recognized in similar documented life histories. Jews could have been easily mixed up with Arabs, Armenians, Parsees or other Eastern strangers.

New Jewish settlements occurred with the expansion of Islam and Islamic trade. In the world of Islam the increase in commercial activity included the trade in and use of slaves. But oriental luxury items such as spices and drugs were also traded. In that respect Jewish trade was not different from the general Indian trade of Islam. However there is evidence\(^{24}\) that an important part of the Jewish overland trade seems to have been the traffic in eunuchs and slaves. It is even speculated that at the eastern frontier with al-Hind the traffic in slaves was one of the main reasons, if not the main reason, for Jewish presence, and that Jewish settlements coincided with great increases in the importance of the slave trade throughout the eastern Islam regions.

CHAPTER 4

4.2.2 Jews in the Early Colonial Times

In the wake of Dutch and British Colonialism, Jews from Europe and from the Jewish Baghdadi trade Diaspora established their presence along the sea routes that connected Europe and China. For the Baghdadi Jews, after Bombay and Calcutta, the port cities in the Straits were the next stop-over in a chain of trading stations. European Jews came as sailors with the colonial powers. Or they had come like Caspar the Jew and pushed further along the paths of migration that were laid down in early Jewish histories. A scant number of sources, not more than just a few words or lines that mention religious backgrounds, reveal that Jewish traders were active in Aceh, for instance. In the 16th and 17th centuries Aceh was a regional market for camphor. Jewish Abraham Nabarro was on the ship the Kaiser on its way from Melaka to Aceh. In Aceh he met with a linguist, the Israelite Abraham, who was working for the Acehnese Sultanate. A Jew accompanied Sir James Lancaster on his 1601 expedition. In Central Banda Aceh, the residential area Blower is mentioned as a quarter where Jews once lived.

Because of the monsoons in maritime Southeast Asia, traders who sailed between India and China generally needed to spend a season in port somewhere near the Strait of Melaka to wait for the winds to turn for the onward journey. The monsoon laid down the trading and ship movements. Trading outposts were established in Malaya where ‘the rhythm of the monsoon’ was most favourable, and in the Indonesian Archipelago. This maritime society was not hostile to newcomers. But this does not mean that the Portuguese, the first Europeans who entered this Southeast Asian maritime world, arrived in a political and commercial vacuum. The Indian Ocean with the adjacent Persian Gulf and Red Sea, and the South China sea, linked by the north-south and east-west Indonesian maritime crossroads, engendered age-old and regionally well known maritime trading networks. These maritime networks were well connected with a wider network of overland trade routes. Numerous merchants, sailors and nobility were involved in the inter-Asiatic trade. The products that were traded guaranteed high profits with relatively small lading, like cotton textiles, tea, silk, porcelain, pepper, cinnamon, cloves, mace and nutmeg. The seaports had their hey-days within this network. They were the junctions of the thriving trade. In the Strait of Melaka and the Sunda Street several maritime routes converged. These straits were important for local rulers as the place to establish entrepôts or staple towns. The European newcomers chose these towns as footholds in the area. The maritime culture in the Straits was multi-ethnic. There was already an intricate web of Asian maritime trade before any Europeans set foot in these parts of the Far East, and centuries before the ‘voyages of discovery’ traders had exported

---


27 Personal inquiries while on a trip to Banda Aceh. Part of the cemetery in Aceh is reserved for Jews. De Vrijdagavond. (1924) 1 (1) p. 343 shows a picture of a fence that was put up as an entrance to the Jewish Cemetery in Banda Aceh, that was situated on the general cemetery. The text above the fence is: ‘dit hek heeft wijlen A.M. Bolchoner overl. 24 Juni 1897 aan het Israëlitisch kerkhof ten geschenke gegeven’. De Vrijdagavond was a Jewish magazine that was distributed in Holland in the 1920s and 1930s.


spices to the whole of Eurasia. The ports were crowded with traders. These traders imported cloth, political systems and religious ideas from India, and porcelain, technology and people from China 31. Well respected, they brought commerce and cosmopolitanism to the ports and prestige to local rulers. They competed with other merchant groups on the trading routes 32.

The Portuguese gradually expanded their trading network from the Portuguese central outpost Goa in West-India, which they had conquered in 1505, to the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian Archipelago. At the end of the fifteenth century Melaka was the first port city on the Malay Peninsula that the Portuguese targeted. Tome Pires, a Portuguese apothecary, described Melaka in 1512-1515 as ‘a city that was made for merchandise, fitter than any other in the world, the end of the monsoons and the beginning of others. Melaka is surrounded and lies in the middle, and the trade and commerce between the different nations for a thousand leagues on every hand must come to Melaka’ 33. According to Pires, some 84 different languages could be heard on Melaka’s streets 34. Just like most other coastal trading ports in Southeast Asia, foreign traders lived in separate quarters with their own leaders. There were Arab, Javanese, Tamil, Malay and Chinese quarters where the merchants, often married with local women, resided permanently 35. The Portuguese encountered and integrated in a commercial and maritime network in which traders from divers ethnic backgrounds participated. What about Jewish merchants? In line with what has been described before, it is most probable that Jewish merchants already resided in Melaka when the Portuguese arrived.

Reid’s account is interesting with respect to the categorisation of Otherness in Southeast Asia 36. A long-held historical perception is that first contacts with Europeans who arrived in the Malayan waters have to be looked at in terms of war, conquest and a military-maritime supremacy. Reid on the contrary argues that foreign ships were always welcome because they represented wealth and power. Europeans just represented another element in a region that was enormously diverse and that was accustomed to having its ports crowded with people of every kind. Foreign traders were a relatively normal phenomenon. References to categories of religious background were limited to familiar religions only like Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism or Hinduism. Jews as an ethnic or religious category did not exist yet. Portuguese fleets increasingly entered Malayan waters. They behaved like ‘Franks’ (Feringgi) - the same people who had attacked the holy places during the Crusades. A classification was needed to distinguish these ‘Franks’ from other visitors, especially Muslims 37. Jews, as far as they had followed in the wake of these Portuguese expeditions, would have been identified with these ‘Franks’.

But what about other Jews, originally from Cairo or from Malabar settlements in India, who were already present in the Malayan maritime waters? They must have already had a deviant but harmless position, as competing seafarers or super-cargoers, as interpreters, moneylenders,

CHAPTER 4

money exchangers and brokers. When they travelled in Persian and Arab vessels, and they were not outspoken about their ethnic and religious background, they must have been identified with those who owned the vessels and looked like them: the Arabs. Categorising Jews in Southeast Asia has always created a problem of statistics, and therefore, for those who draw conclusions from statistics, a problem of identification and analysis. In colonial statistics Jews were sometimes considered as ‘other Orientals’ together with Chinese and Arabs. At other times they were counted as ‘Europeans’ or as a separate category of the Europeans. They were hardly ever autonomously categorised as ‘Jews’. That has made Jews, as a separate category, almost unrecognisable. That situation, even in the present time, and now due to other circumstances, still causes confusion.

4.2.3 Marranos

Meilink-Roelofsz elaborates on the early 16th century presence of Jews in Melaka with regard to, the delicate position of Jews on the Iberian Peninsula at that time. In Iberia converted Jews, also called Marranos or Christian Jews, had been conspicuously successful after they converted to Christianity. They had made the most of the opportunities created by their baptism. Intolerance towards Jews had resulted in the banishment of this very important commercial group in Portugal. That was felt in Asia as well. This success aroused envy and hatred. Their Christianity and allegiance to the Church was assumed to be no more than skin-deep. They were accused of remaining Jewish in their hearts and in their private lives.

Anti-Jewish sentiments cropped up in Melaka as well. The opinion grew that Marranos who had established themselves in Melaka should be deported to Portugal. The Portuguese government, however, was afraid that a deportation would cause a scandal. This leads Meilink-Roelofsz to the conclusion that these Jews must have occupied an important position in Asia. This might not be too far fetched a conclusion considering the important share Jews had in the sale of spices in Europe in the first half of the sixteenth century, and their involvement in fitting out various ships for the Indies. Later there was suspicion about the relationship of Jews with the Dutch. Their


39 For this argument see Reid, A. (2000: 161).

40 Wright’s account of the Armenians in Singapore and Malaysia is exemplary. She writes that there is a tendency to confuse Armenians with Jews, or even to speak of Armenian Jews. The ethnic identity of well-known Armenians Martin, Tigran, Aviet and Arshak Sarkies, better known as the Sarkies brothers, was regularly confused with that of Jews or Parsees. They ran or leased the Eastern, Oriental (later renamed Eastern and Oriental hotel) and Crag Hotel in Penang, the Raffles, the Adelphi and the Sea View Hotel in Singapore, and the Sarkies Hotel in Rangoon. Wright, N.H. (2003) Respected Citizens. The History of Armenians in Singapore and Malaysia. Middle Park, Australia: Amassia Publishing. pp. 78-79.


44 See for instance the article of: Antonio De Vasconcelos Nogueira (n.d.) The Portuguese Jews and Modern Capitalism. Trading, Insurance, Banking, Business, and Economic Thought in Amsterdam from earlier 16th to the first decades of 20th centuries. Universidade de Aveiro (Portugal). pp. 7-8, which contains a list of the notary records of the participation of Portuguese Jews as shareholders of the Dutch Companies, VOC and WIC. In the years 1602-1604 nine Portuguese Jewish shareholders for what could only be the VOC were on the list. The year 1623-1624 lists 18 Portuguese Jewish shareholders. But the list in that year does not make a distinction between the VOC and the WIC. In 1602-1604 that distinction was not relevant because the WIC started as a company only in 1621.

94
loyalty to the Portuguese was questioned. They were accused of participating in the business of the Dutch rivals. It became prohibited to sell voyages to Portuguese Jews in Asia. Jews were excluded from official positions. Jews who had not converted were even denied entry to Asia. The number of Jews already established in Asia, however, was too large to proceed against them, and they were reluctantly permitted to carry on with their trade\textsuperscript{45}.

The origins of this Jewish (Marranos) merchant group in Melaka remain unclear. It might be assumed that in the period of Inquisition on the Iberian Peninsula, Jews were eager to participate in ventures to the Far East. The immigration of New Christians to the Spanish colonies in the New World meant safety from the growing grip of the Inquisition. The Portuguese settlements in the Far East might have had the same appeal. But in line with what has already been assumed, they could have been part of a gradually extending Jewish trading network that ‘originated’ in Persia and eventually made its way via India to Malaya. That gradual extension might even have come along the same paths that Caspar the Jew had taken from (East) Europe to Iberia, from Iberia to Alexandria and from Alexandria, venturing further into the Far East. It is not said that when in 1497 Jews in Portugal were forcibly converted or fled to Amsterdam or other cities in the West, their involvement in the Far East was European-based only. The tensions that led to forcible conversions and expulsions in Iberia must have been mounting. The pogroms did not happen overnight. Jews fled from Christian Spain in 1391, and part of that flow found refuge in Alexandria and in cities like Aleppo and Damascus. This also applies to Jewish expulsions between 1492 and 1502. Again a considerable flow went eastwards\textsuperscript{46}. Zenner, for instance, writes about the influx of settlers in the Ottoman Empire in the late 15th and early 16th centuries of exiles from Spain. These new immigrants settled for instance in the Ottoman Empire and in cities like Aleppo, Jerusalem and Damascus, and traded with other Sephardic Jews in Europe and the rest of the Mediterranean\textsuperscript{47}. According to Zenner their orientation was to the Mediterranean, but that does not necessarily mean that there was no orientation further east at all. It is due to this Mediterranean focus and the Euro-centered focus in studies on colonialism that the traversing of adjacent trade regions further East of the Mediterranean are neglected. Would it not be in these crossovers that Jews would have been able to flourish? There must have been more Jews from Iberia that took the route of Caspar the Jew. Caspar’s life history is probably not so very exceptional. The documents that would support this assumption lie in the archives relating to Capar’s route. Experts like Fischel\textsuperscript{48}, van Brakel\textsuperscript{49}, Goitein\textsuperscript{50} and Gross\textsuperscript{51} point to documents that must be sought for in Arab or Indian sources, for instance among the Geniza documents (for the 11\textsuperscript{th} to the 13\textsuperscript{th} centuries). An exploration of these sources would shed light on more pre-colonial and early colonial eastwards-directed Jewish mobilities.

\textbf{4.2.4 Jews of Islam and Jews of Christianity}

The Jewish Diaspora in the Straits harbours distinct Jewish groups of which the difference between Ashkenazim and Sephardim is the most important. That difference is almost congruent

\textsuperscript{49} Brakel, L.F. (1975).
\textsuperscript{50} Goitein, S.D. (1973).
\textsuperscript{51} Gross, N. (Ed.) (1975).
with the distinction that Lewis makes between Jews of Islam and Jews of Christianity. With the spread of the power of Islamic states and the radiation of the Islamic religion, Islam acquired great numbers of Jews of very different and disparate communities. Jews entered the world of Islam by immigration from Christian territory, they converted to Islam, or the territories they were living in were conquered. Islam spread across a vast territory extending from the Atlantic in the West to the borders of India and China and beyond those borders into Southeast Asia. The most visible Jewish communities in Southeast Asia that originated from the Islamic world were Arabic or Persian-speaking native Jews of Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan also referred to (in this thesis) as Baghdadi Jews. The term Baghdadi or Iraqi Jew eventually came to include the Arabic-speaking Jews from Syria, as well as those from other parts of the Ottoman Empire.

The stream of (pre-) colonial emigration of Jews originating from Iberia gradually dried up. In the Ottoman Empire, Jews had to compete with other (for the Ottomans) fairly reliable minorities like the non-Catholic Christians, Greeks or Armenians. In Southeast Asia the Chinese were competitors. This Jewish emigration had always been a fresh source of rejuvenating skills and knowledge, essential for the intermediary position of this non-Muslim community in a Muslim world. Religious intolerance and hostility towards Jews grew, especially, when Islam purified and authenticated itself. Islamic militancy arose when Jews of Islam became conspicuously wealthy and powerful, while their Islamic surroundings were not able to profit from the economical opportunities that had become available. In such situations, claims of disloyalty became easier to substantiate. Jewish unbelievers were said to distort real Islamic faith and dhimmi restrictions were laid upon them.

For that matter it was no wonder that Jews, like many oriental Christians and Chinese, were only too eager to link their destinies to the forces of European mercantilism that were penetrating the Muslim world. It would possibly liberate Jews from their dhimmi status. It was obvious that this penetration of European powers meant a weakening of Islamic society, in Southeast Asia as elsewhere. For Jews of Islam, European mercantilism brought another incidental circumstance. It brought together two different Jewish ‘tribes’, Jews of Islam and Jews of Christianity, and thus gave a new dimension to Jewish reality in the Straits.

52 The distinction between Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews is much discussed. Lewis claims that there is no theological or legal significance to this distinction. This difference is only about minor differences in ritual. They do not deny each other. Lewis claims that the only relevant distinction is between Jews of Islam and Jews of Christianity and refers to a civilisational and not a religious connotation. They have developed very different cultural traditions. Lewis, B. (1998) The Multiple Identities of the Middle East. New York: Schocken Books. Pp. 37-38.
54 Bernard Lewis subdivides the Jews of Islam into four groups. First there is the Ottoman group falling under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire. This group is subdivided into the Spanish-speaking Jews who had come from the Iberian Peninsula and the Arabic-speaking native Jews of Syria, Iraq and other countries. Second there are the Iranian Jews, whose language was Persian and who are to be found in Persia, Afghanistan, Central Asia and in more remote Eastern corners of the world. Third there are the North African Jews in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, and fourth the Jews of Yemen. Lewis, B. (1993: 26).
59 A dhimmi is a non-Muslim subject in a Muslim land that is governed according to the sharia: Muslim religious laws.
68
Depicting the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

The official story is that the VOC enlisted only Dutch Reformed personnel. The VOC was a Dutch Reformed enterprise. Civil servants were all recruited from within Protestant circles. The Dutch Reformed church was more or less the State Church for the Republic of the Seven Vereenigde Gewesten. The aim of the VOC enterprise was not to colonise but to gain trading monopolies. The VOC is said not to have had Jewish personnel in their service because of Jewish religious laws that made operational management problematic. Sources gathered by reverend J. Mooij, however, reveal that in 17th Century Jakarta it was not uncommon to find requests from Jews who asked to convert to Christianity. These 'stowaway Jews' ‘had to shake off the fallacies of Judaism’ before their requests for baptism were accepted. Like Jacob Cornelisz on the fourth of May 1665 who, ‘van Joodse afkomst en religie versocht op belijdenis tot de H. Sacrementen toegelaten te worden vertoonende met even getuigenis van zijn scheepsofficier en na zijn gedrag nader vernomen werden en aenstaende donderdag hem nader bescheid geven’, or Jewish soldiers Israel and Rudolf, who on the second of February 1631, ‘siende soldaten nu corts uijt het vaderlandt gecomen, doen belijdenisse des geloofs voor de kerkenraedt ende soeken den H. Doop te ontfangen, de dwalingen des Jodendoms verwerpend’. This shows that although the admission of Jews to the Indies was restricted, it was still possible to enlist, most probably by hiding one’s Jewish background. A shortage of personnel in the crisis year of 1782 urged the VOC to make arrangements to enlist Jewish personnel as well. An agreement was made with the Hoogduitsch–Jewish congregation. The congregation was consulted on kashrut rules and rules on working on the Sabbath and holy days. However, it remains problematic to determine the total number of Jews living in the Dutch Netherlands-Indies. It is this invisibility that has always been a hindrance in getting a clear picture of Jewish presence in the Indies. Even less material seems available for Jews in the British Empire.

The dominant colonial empires split up the ‘natural’ entity of the maritime Straits in British, Dutch and Portuguese compartments. Early tracks and traces of Jewish presence are found in sources that deal with discoverers and the works dealing with establishment of colonial empires. Seafarers started their voyages and linked Europe with Southeast Asia. Little attention has been paid to the routes and nodes in between these two central nodes. The colonial enterprise was focused on how to get as much revenue as possible from point B (Southeast Asia) to A (Europe). In this singular linearity, Jews tend to disappear. Later, when the colonial powers withdrew, the

62 Jacob Cornelisz, of Jewish descent and religion, asks permission to get baptized. His request will be considered and his officers will be asked for inquiries about his behaving. He will be given a decisive answer the next Thursday. Mooij, J. (1929: 672).
63 Israel and Rudolf are soldiers who just arrived from Holland. They want to confess their faith, get baptized and declare that they have shaken off the fallacies of Judaism. Mooij, J. (1929: 365).
66 Mr. Hen, a Jewish Dutch lawyer who was living in the Dutch Indies in the first half of the 20th century, estimated the number of Jews living in the Indies at 2000. He mentions a function at their improvised synagogue in Batavia at the first evening of the Jewish New Year in the mid nineteen twenties. There were 75 people attending the service. He concluded that, by multiplying this amount with ten, in Batavia alone there should be living 750 Jews. See: De Vrijdagavond (1925) 2 (31) pp. 66-68. Estimation is based on a census that was taken in 1930 and that gave a total number of 1095 Israelites. The editorial staff of Erets Israel commented, as they were sending the magazine to around 800 addresses in the Indies, that a fair number of Jews must have hidden their Jewish identity. See: Erets Israel (1933-1934) 2 p. 12.
CHAPTER 4

Straits was split up into the emerging nation-states, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. These colonial and national compartments have been compellingly meaningful, again at the expense of groups that display a cross-border ‘habitus’, like Jews, and whose meaningful interactions and social configurations, as has been argued, are not easily perceived when not assessed in the more ‘natural’ unity of the maritime Straits. Jewish global dispersion obviously would make Jews appear at points that lie somewhere in between. They would stem from unknown places, act in unobvious situations and appear in uncommon dress, just like Caspar the Jew. Traces of their presence might have disappeared unrecognised because there was no eye for multi-linearities and dis-congruencies. In the Straits -the port cities of Singapore, Surabaya, Jakarta, Penang, Melaka, and Manado all have had or still have a Jewish community of which the composition, origins and links are not univocal. In the next section the oscillations between Jewish presence and absence in Singapore, as the southern anchorage and entrepôt in the Straits that got its place on the map of world-wide trade, will be considered.

4.3 Central Node Singapore

4.3.1 The Baghdadi Jewish Trade Diaspora

The earliest entry in Singapore referring to the presence of Jews was in 1830. In 1846 out of 43 merchant houses six were Jewish. In 1849 there were 57 Jews; 30 men and 27 women. They followed in the wake of the expansion of the British Empire. The policies of Daud Pasha, ruler of Iraq, between 1816 and 1831, were not favourable for Jews. They were persecuted. By that time the Baghdadi Jewish Trade Diaspora was already very well established in India and it expanded further into Southeast Asia. Jewish communities formed a chain of trading outposts along the sea route to China, with community members originating from Aleppo and Yemen, but chiefly from Baghdad. One of these successful traders was David Sassoon. His business empire emerged in the 1830s. The Sassoons could get a grip on the trade by getting access to the traded produce at the source, which other traders had never tried before. In a tight, family-based organisation, Sassoon financed crops, acted as banker, advanced money to dealers, manipulated prices at auctions, and opened up branches of the businesses he had in other parts of the empire. He had access to the highest levels of English society. Merchants had to depend on the integrity of others. There was no legal security or guarantee for the great sums that were involved in their trading. Consequently an important business asset was a good reputation. Sassoon had a reputation for punctiliously honouring his business deals. In addition, the risk of breaking an engagement was minimised by using his next-of-kin in his business dealings. The chief cause of David Sassoon’s success was the use he made of his (8) sons. This is exemplary for the way in which other Jewish families in the region conducted their business. The branches of these Far East businesses were to set up congregations and were managed and staffed by co-religionists to facilitate Jewish observance, in Singapore too.

72 Roth C. (1941: 49).
A Jewish progenitor in Singapore is considered to be Abraham Solomon, a Baghdad-born trader of Sephardic origin, who arrived in Singapore via Calcutta (where he had lived for five years) in 1836. He was one of the six Baghdadi Jewish merchants who petitioned the British colonial government for two plots of land for a synagogue and a cemetery. In 1841 they acquired the right to lease property in what later became Synagogue Street, to be used as a synagogue, which at the time was not more than a shop house. Within walking distance of the synagogue, in nearby Orchard Road, they acquired a 99-year lease on land to be used as a cemetery.

4.3.2 Opium

By the 1830s the most lucrative trade in Calcutta was in opium. Opium was a convenient medium of exchange for the trade in tea and silk that came from Canton. When this trade between Calcutta and China emerged, traders moved to Singapore as well. This trade, which was legal at the time, had yielded enormous profits for the East India Company. In the 1830s the EIC monopoly was broken. This allowed other British companies and also merchants from other ethnic groups, like the Parsees, Armenians, Arabs and Jews, to participate in the opium trade. The British merchant houses had profited from the opium trade but competition from these other traders was too fierce. A European merchant, W.G. Gulland declared that 'for the opium trade, pure and simple, in itself, I care nothing; it is wholly in the hands of Jews and Armenians'. Other illustrious Baghdadi Jewish families, like Ezekiel, David and Ezra, had followed in the wake of the expansion of the British Empire and had established themselves via Surat and Bombay in Calcutta. They too became involved in the opium trade. Jewish businessmen like Elias Hardoon and Eli Kadoorie became well known traders in Shanghai and Hong Kong. Raffles declared Singapore as the first free port in the British world. The means to operate as a free port came from the taxes that this opium trade yielded (the estimate is around 50%). In the 1870s and 1880s the Sassoons had taken control of the opium market on both sides of India and made their fortune. In order to reduce transaction costs they had been underselling by strict cost control and by using their family ties they could allow the smallest possible advances on cost and charges.

Moral objections against the opium trade were loud and persistent. In 1910 the Singapore government took over the opium farms on the island. The trade stopped being the source of super profits for the merchant houses. Nevertheless it still remained ‘the grease that lubricated the entire imperial machine’. For the European traders it was difficult to make a transition from opium-based trade to the more regular trade in commodities. With their acquired wealth, Jewish traders had already re-directed their business to stocks and properties, and to tin, rubber and textiles. Because of the Great War there was an extensive supply of (confiscated) German properties in Singapore in which the Jewish traders invested.

---

77 Roth, C. (1941: 40).
The port of Singapore grew in its importance with the building of the Suez Canal. Economic growth generated an influx of poor Jewish Baghdadis next to an increase in the number of merchants from India. They were fleeing from the occasionally unfavourable religious climate in the Ottoman Empire. They came to live in the mahallah (the Jewish quarter), around the synagogue, in the residential area of Middle Road around Prinsep Street. They were small traders, dreaming of trade opportunities, and were attracted by job opportunities with their brethren. In 1878 this community had around 200 members. Marriages took place within the group, even with cousins. As a result there was always some familial interconnection. In about 1900 the men:women ratio in Singapore was eight to one. Intermarriage was, and still is, strongly disapproved of. Because of this lack of women, intermarriage with local women had to take place, and it created a sub-group of ‘peranakan Yahudi’.

Another Jewish patriarch of the Singapore community was Manasseh Meyer. He was born in Baghdad in 1843 was raised in Calcutta and came to Singapore as a young boy in 1861. In Singapore he stayed with his maternal uncle, an opium dealer by the name of Joshua Rafael Joshua. In 1864 he returned to Calcutta to study Hebrew and bookkeeping. In 1867 he went to Rangoon to set up a business. In 1873 he returned to Singapore and together with his brothers Reuben and Elias he started Meyer brothers. Elias was based in Calcutta, but Reuben and Menasseh were based in Singapore. They acquired their wealth in opium as well, but also diversified into real estate. At the time Manasseh Meyer was considered to be the richest Jew in the Far East, exceeding even the Sassoons in wealth. He acquired properties and bought plots of land which later became central commercial areas. He owned the Adelphi Hotel and the Sea View Hotel at Katong. Together with his Uncle Joshua Rafael Joshua and Abraham Solomon he became a trustee of the new synagogue, the Magain Aboth synagogue, that was built to cater for the religious needs of the fast-growing Jewish community. It was built near the mahallah, in Waterloo Street, close to the Tanglin area into which the wealthier Jewish businessmen had moved. There was a clear class distinction within the community. The rich lived luxurious lives outside the mahallah, and their children were educated at expensive European schools. The poor lived in a relatively isolated fashion in the mahalla, thus recreating their Baghdadi community life. The majority of these Jews were Iraqi Jews. Born and brought up in Iraq their language was Judeo-Arabic. Middle-class and upper-class Baghdadi Jews identified with the colonials. They tried to succeed in business and acknowledged that for social and economic upward mobility they had to provide their children with a good education. Class distinction was expressed by denying the poor the opportunity to move out of the mahallah. In the mahallah it was possible to observe strict religious laws and, for instance, to buy kosher food. The shamash (caretaker of the synagogue) and chazzan (cantor) lived in the mahallah, and learned Jews provided for religious education and preparations for Bar-Mitzvah. The middle classes went in and out of the mahallah to attend religious functions or to engage in community service. The upper class was able to provide for their religious needs privately. Someone like Menasseh Meyer - following David Sassoon in Calcutta - built his own synagogue, the Chessed-El synagogue, next to his house at Belle Vue. He hired poor Jews from the mahallah to make up the minyan (the number required for saying certain prayers). He stocked poultry and had a cow house. He employed a shochet (a

---

Depicting the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

ritual slaughter) and a chef de cuisine to run a kosher household. He supported Jewish spiritual life by building the Talmud Torah Hebrew School especially for those who did not have the means to provide their children with proper Jewish education. For religious matters he consulted the most learned rabbi in Baghdad at the time, Joseph Hayyim.

4.3.3 A New influx: Ashkenazic Jews

At the turn of the century Singapore’s booming economy also attracted Ashkenazic Jews from all over Europe, which created a more heterogeneous group of Jews. Living conditions improved. The Katz brothers, German Jews started their business in 1860. Other Ashkenazic Jews were Rahamin Penhas, a Jew of Iberian origin, Weiss and Shein - Romanian Jews, Bellilios, a Venetian Jew who married in the Baghdadi Judah family and the Frankels, Lithuanian Jews who were in real estate and dealt in European furniture. The Getz Brothers & Co. was an American Jewish company, which also employed Baghdad Jews. When visiting the community in the early 1920s Israel Cohen, observed that there were already antipathetic sentiments between these Ashkenazic and Baghdadi Jews, especially in the first generations; ‘due as much to difference of colour as of provenance’. But there were also intermarriages and cross-overs between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. The Frankel family for example, was highly involved in community life. Most of the Ashkenazic Jews were successful in business, or were engaged in other prestigious occupations. They were closer to the ruling British elite than the Baghdadi Jews, but they remained outsiders. There was the ruling class and there were the others. We were the others, quite simple; we were considered as the natives. Even incredibly wealthy Jews who practically owned Singapore at the time never penetrated further than the periphery of British colonial society. The British aura of unassailability was undermined when the Japanese invaded Singapore in World War Two. Singapore, the stronghold of the British Empire, appeared not to be so strong after all. The invasion fuelled already slumbering anti-colonialist sentiments in Southeast Asia and when Singapore was liberated and British rule returned, their presence was no longer undisputed. The position of Jews in Singapore during World War Two seemed not unambiguous. About half of Singapore’s Jewish population, which numbered 1500 before the war, had fled to India or Australia and eventually the entire Jewish community was interned.

Some latitude was given for the performing of religious rites during the period of the internment. The Japanese invaders seemed curious about Judaism, reacting with what Bieder calls a strange mix between awe and anti-Semitism. In trying to find an explanation of why Jews, in comparison with other ethnic groups, were treated relatively less badly, she quotes Tudor Parfitt who stated that the Japanese ‘never abandoned the basic premise of their idea that Jewish power in the world could be manipulated in Japan’s favour and that persecution of Jews would not serve this end’. In the First World War the Japanese government had shown sympathy for the Zionist aspiration to build a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. In 1939 the Japanese developed the so-called Fugu plan, in which Japan would give Jews a homeland in Manchuria. The plan was based on the conviction that the Jewish people, because of their interconnectedness across the

Apart from some Jews from befriended Axis, or neutral countries like Romania and Chile, who hide their Jewish background.
CHAPTER 4

world, through the Jewish Diaspora, had tremendous economic and political power. By rescuing European Jews from Nazi Germany Japan would gain the support and favour of American Jewry. An anti-Semitic publication at that time, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which was believed to be a genuine document and not a forgery, was influential, seemingly also for officials. This positive attitude towards Jews seems to have changed during the course of the war. The change in attitude is believed to have been influenced by German anti-Jewish propaganda

Many upper- and middle-class Singapore Jewish families who had fled during the war started new lives in Australia, Palestine, the UK and the United States. There was an influx of Baghdadi Jews who lived in Indonesia and had fled the political instability that followed the Indonesian independence. Many of them left as well, going for instance to Los Angeles, where they still have their own congregations. Consequently Jewish presence in Singapore declined in this post-war period. The remaining families took charge of rebuilding community life. The two Synagogues and the Talmud Torah building had not been destroyed during the Japanese occupation. British Jewish servicemen participated in the rebuilding. The Jewish Welfare Board was formed to help the needy, and the young opened a branch of the Habonim (the builders). A new rabbi was found. The establishment of the State of Israel brought new opportunities. Many who had lost their possessions in war time and who saw no prospects to start over again in Singapore considered making Aliyah (migrating to Erets Israel – the Promised Land). They were assisted by The Jewish Welfare Board. The Menorah Club, a group of young community members, became active in trying to bring the community together. In order to do so they organised social, recreational, cultural and spiritual activities. In 1959 a new building, the Reuben Manasseh Meyer Communal Hall, funded by the Meyer Trust, opened its doors and served as the Talmud Torah School. It provided a meeting place for the young community members. Israel became one of the focal points. The Foreign Ministry of Israel, the Israeli Embassy in Rangoon, and Zionist organisations sponsored activities to re-build community life and to provide information on the possibility of making Aliyah.

The end of World War Two was followed by the transition from British rule to independence. This transition was looked at with Argus’ eyes by the Jewish community. The victory of Lee Kuan Yew’s party, the People’s Action Party (PAP), and the problems he had with the communist-oriented left wing in his party made conservative and business-oriented members of the Jewish community decide to leave Singapore. In the early 1970s the Singapore Jewish community had only around 500 souls left in it. This fear proved unfounded. An extensive social engineering plan unfolded under Lee Kuan Yew’s government that aimed at the creation of a multi-cultural Singapore. A newly defined national identity was created with the Overseas Chinese, Indians, and Malays as its pillars. The PAP’s government revealed itself as business-oriented with a touch of socialism in the mix too. Lee Kuan Yew’s party has been in power ever

---

92 In a workshop on ‘The Jews in Indonesia: Perceptions and Histories. 10-11 June, 2009. NUS. Singapore, the ambivalence of the Japanese attitude towards Jews was a point of discussion amongst the attending scholars. Perceptions and policies regarding Jews during the war seem to have been racially and ideologically inclined, but there were also practical and humanitarian considerations. Historically there seem to have been many ways in which anti-Semitism has found a breeding ground in Indonesia; the Japanese, following German anti-Jewish policies during the occupation, being one instigator.

93 The goal of the Habonim was defined as ‘educating its youthful members to a thorough appreciation of their Jewish heritage and imbuing them with a spirit of friendliness toward all races and creeds’. See: Bieder, J. (2007: 114). The Habonim also collected money for the Jewish National Fund.

since and has brought an up-beat, regionally unprecedented prosperity to Singapore and its citizens.

### 4.3.4 Another New influx: Jews from the Homeland Israel

Singapore’s prosperity is not uncontested. The Singapore project has not been able to escape from the impression that it is an Overseas Chinese undertaking. When Singapore declared its independence it was looking for international support. The founding of an ethnic Chinese miniaturist state surrounded by Muslim neighbours was controversial. Singapore’s right to exist is not undisputed. This controversy was stirred up by Singapore’s choice of Israel as its defence partner. Israel appeared to be the most pro-active in answering to Singapore’s call for assistance. Singapore’s independence became inextricably linked with Israel. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has assisted in building up the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). The SAF utilised Israeli doctrine, training methods, and equipment. Singapore manoeuvred itself into the position of a Garrison state, a state that is surrounded by hostile neighbours. Both Israel and Singapore were aware of the sensitivities that surround their military relationship. Both of them imposed a total information blackout on their relationship. The cooperation was kept a ‘secret’ for thirty-five years.

It was only in 2004 that the blackout on the story about the Israeli military presence in Singapore was lifted, on the Israeli side, via an article in the Haaretz newspaper. In Singapore Lee Kuan Yew had already disclosed ‘the secret’ in 2000 that the Israel Defence Force had helped to establish the Singaporean Army and that the so-called ‘Mexicans’ were in reality Israeli military working on this secret project. Israel’s foreign policy towards its Diaspora communities has not been an example of consistency, but this position was contradictory to Israel’s efforts to become recognised and accepted in Asia. Israel considers Singapore as an important Asian node that Israel wants to connect with. The strategic location of Singapore, and its non-Muslim population, makes it an excellent hub from which new connections can be set up in the wider region. Israel opened a trade office in Singapore as early as in 1968. The military cooperation, the visiting delegations, and the stationing of advisors laid the foundations for a continuing presence of Israelis in the region. The focus at that time was on military tactical training and military strategic issues. The cooperation has now been expanded into many other fields as

---


97 *Haaretz* newspaper 16-7-2004.


101 Ibid.
CHAPTER 4

There is definitely a new generation coming, paved by old generation generals, young staff bringing new ideas, technological knowledge about the issues that matter in the modern days, like civil defence and terrorism counter measures. Singapore is regularly forced to deal with Israel’s presence in its borders. With Israel as the catalyst ‘Other’, Singapore has to show its good intentions to its neighbours and once in a while Israel’s presence is ‘artfully deleted’. It appears to have been difficult to find the right balance. The links have never been totally concealed. A discussion in 1991 during a meeting of Isi Leibner, leading a World Jewish Congress delegation, with George Yong-Boon Yeo, a minister in the Singaporean government is an example of this. Leibner expresses his dissatisfaction with the nature of the Israel-Singapore relation: ‘(…) it disturbs me that this is still a ‘closed’ relation’. (…) ‘Friendly countries should be open with each other’. Yeo answers: ‘We have to be the shrewdest judges of this, taking into account our own neighbourhood. Israel is insensitive to this, and has done things that are highly embarrassing for us in the region. It has leaked information; (…) it must recognise our sensitive spots, and stop pushing’. Singapore’s policy is, what Urry would call, to ‘cover their (the Israeli) tracks and lay the ghost to rest’. The ‘ghost’ here is the scandal that might be ignited by small causes and that could potentially have unpredictable harmful effects. But Israel does not let itself be deleted whenever Singapore, Indonesia or Malaysia wishes. Leibner’s assessment is: ‘he (Yeo) appears not to appreciate that after centuries of having to win acceptance solely on others’ terms, Jews, and especially Israelis, are not prepared to deny or suppress their identity in order to appear “acceptable”’. In this shaky balance, information is strategically leaked. Singapore leaks to show its muscles and to scare off its neighbours. Israel leaks information to enhance the possibility of its recognition and acceptance in Asia. Israeli mobilities are nevertheless hindered. Israel is not satisfied with its position as a potential source of scandal which makes them an easy target for Otherings, concealments and deletions. It wants its presence to be fully acknowledged. After all presence would be more effective if their links and networks in the Straits were publically acknowledged instead of being denied or kept hidden. On the other hand, some industries and businesses are surrounded by seccreties, most notably the defence and civil defence industry, which may be the area where the bulk of the relations between Singapore and Israel will be found. These links might have to remain hidden for ‘security reasons’.

---

102 Interview Kwa Chong Guan, Institute for Strategic studies Nanyang Technological University, Singapore 8-2-2005. Kwa Chong Guan is former head of SAF and nephew of Lee Kuan Yew’s wife. He hinted that he has travelled to Israel several times when Israel was building up Singapore’s defense system.

103 Ibid.


105 Singapore reportedly seems to restrict the use of the Israeli flag on embassy cars or on Remembrance Day. But that is denied by the Israeli ambassador. Interview Israeli Ambassador to Singapore, Itzhak Shoham: 28-6-2005


107 A personal contact who was close to the Israeli Embassy in Singapore showed a letter written by former Ambassador Itzhak Shoham in which he recounted the aid Israel had provided in the relief operations in the Tsunami hit area. That same list of relief aid from Israel can be found at: http://www.icci.nl/nieuws/hulp/doodgezwegen.htm the home-page of the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, 3-1-2005. The letter and this homepage criticise the lack of honest reporting concerning Israel’s part in the tsunami relief operations. Israel’s efforts to assist in Aceh are not explicitly mentioned in this letter.

108 This is of course, highly political terminology that gives room for multiple interpretations.
4.3.5 Modern time Jewish Singapore

The dwindling of the Singapore Jewish community ended when Asia’s booming economic future began to manifest itself. Multinational corporations, banks and finance companies established offices in the country and brought with them a vast number of expatriates, including Jewish expatriates. In order to survive, in this period, the 180-strong Baghdadi Jewish community opened itself up to the influx of new Jewish blood from different groups. The community’s policy, expressed via the Jewish Welfare Board, was to focus on cohesion between the different ‘blood groups’, rather than differences. The constant factor and main group remains that of the Baghdadi Jewish families, of which the Benjamin and Isaacs family are the largest, with a presence that exceeds three or four generations. These long-time Baghdadi residents are central to the community’s continuation and heritage. The financing of community activities is secured via an extensive number of trust funds like the Reuben Meyer Trust, the Isaac Meyer Trust, the Amber Trust and the Abdullah Shooker Trust. These funds are managed by Baghdadi community members and are mostly earmarked for specific purposes. The most substantial charitable donations have come from the Sir Manasseh Meyer Talmud Torah Trust, the estate of Meyer Isaac and the estate of Jacob Ballas. The operational expenses to ‘run’ a community, like the wages of the appointed rabbi, a Jewish educational infrastructure, an old age home, the availability of kosher food, a welfare body, together with the up-keep of the ‘hardware’ – the synagogues, a cemetery and the burial society - are covered by these trust funds and have provided the community with a long-term perspective for the future.

Although cohesion is stressed in the policy, in practice there is a social and cultural distance between the Baghdadi community and the two other communities, the Israeli and the (American, Australian and European) expatriate communities. But these two new groups have brought new vigour to community life. However, the leading role played by the Baghdadi Jews is undeniable. There are individuals in all three groups who try to bridge the gap between the three ‘blood groups’. Former Israeli ambassador Itzhak Shoham, and before him David Danieli, attended services and functions of the United Hebrew Congregation (UHC) and worshipped at the Magain Aboth Synagogue. Some of the Israeli and expatriate Orthodox Jews feel attracted to the Orthodox Sephardic profile of the Magain Aboth Synagogue and prefer to attend services there. Conservative UHC Jews feel familiar with the Orthodox liturgy and sometimes prefer the services at the Baghdadi’s Magain Aboth Synagogue. A group of young people consisting of members of all three communities formed a community initiative called Gesher (Hebrew for bridge). Gesher initiated educational and cultural events for the entire community.

The UHC, the expatriate group, was formed in 1991 by Ashkenazic expatriates mostly from the United States, Australia, the UK and other Western countries. Most members are sojourners. The leadership is in state of flux. Members originate from Reform, Conservative or Liberal congregations which do not feel comfortable with the Orthodox Sephardic profile of the Magain Aboth Synagogue. In 1995 the UHC was approved as an official society by the Singapore government. The UHC has no synagogue and rabbi, but every year at the time of the high holidays a rabbi comes over and they gather at venues like the American Club or in hotels. The Baghdadi community does not automatically offer their venues for hire at ‘brethren’s rates’.

Expatriate, Israeli and Baghdadi Jewish families have found common ground in creating a Jewish educational infrastructure. The Sir Manasseh Meyer Talmud Torah offers Jewish education for

[109] Interview Felice Isaacs 26-4-2005
classes in the age groups of 4 to 13 years, and the Ganenu Jewish Learning Centre is a Jewish
kindergarten. The schools enable young people to meet and to work on Jewish education.

The Chabad rabbi of the Jewish Community, appointed in 1993, has been actively involved in
opening up the inward-oriented Baghdadi community and bringing the three communities
together. The rabbi’s and the Jewish Welfare Board’s policy was on the one hand to preserve the
Asian Baghdadi heritage of the community and on the other hand to find a way to stop the
decline of the community. It was made clear that there would be no compromise with regard to
the Orthodox Sephardic Baghdadi signature of the congregation. The effort made at outreach,
while maintaining strict Hasidic Judaist principles of learning, which is the signature of the
Chabad movement, proved the right combination. For Chabad, both in understanding and
performance, Judaism means to live close to the (613 mitzvot) commandments of the torah. In a
strict sense, according to Chabad principles, Orthodox Judaism does not exist. The term
orthodoxy in Judaism came into existence only when Reform, Liberal or Conservative Judaism
drifted away from what is believed to be (according to orthodoxy) central to Judaic faith, and the
members of these other groups needed a point of reference to position themselves. The strict
observance, with a strong focus on education and outreach, has given the community a new
direction. For the Baghdadi community this meant a re-appreciation of the old customs handed
down by their ancestors. When the Baghdadi dominance and the Chabad outreach seems to be
overpowering for instance in matters of education, the other ‘blood groups’ have to guard their
own principles. The Chabad movement has become pointedly present in Singapore. Chabad
sends young orthodox Jewish men abroad to serve in a community and perform outreach
activities. The rabbi has been instrumental in getting these ‘Chabad boys’ - as they are called in
the local community - to Singapore. This new direction and vigour is exemplified with the
building of a new seven-storey building, the Jacob Ballas Center, next to the Magain Aboth
Synagogue. It provides for Jewish needs at the most central spot in the Straits - the city-centre
of Singapore. And, as a new actant in the Straits Jewish social configurations, it expresses on the
one hand the engagement and the vitality of the Jewish community in Singapore. On the other
hand it raises the question as to why this ‘natural gravitation’ in the Straits has been towards
Singapore, and not to the other port-cities in Malaysia or Indonesia. The next section intends to
give a clearer picture of how this has worked for Indonesia, and more specifically for the
Minahasa region in Northern Sulawesi.

---

110 Interview with local rabbi Abergel 26-5-2005.
111 Interview with Bruce Rosengarten 7-6-2005 and Beth Ginsberg 16-5-2005, both of whom are active in providing
a Jewish educational infrastructure in Singapore. The new direction of the Singapore community has had its impact
on the composition of the board members of the Jewish Welfare Board. In the past these chairs were open only to
local (Baghdadi) Jewish permanent residents. Recently (2004) also Israeli and Western expatriates have also had a
chair.
112 The Jacob Ballas Center was built with the money from the Jacob Ballas Estate. Ballas passed away in 2000. He
had a stock broker’s firm, J. Ballas & Co., and was a chairman of the Stock Exchange (1962-1968). He was a
generous philanthropist. He was devoted to Israel and had relatives there. Half of his estate went to Israeli charities.
The other half went to charities in Singapore. See: Singapore Straits Times 7-11-2007. A new focal point for Jews in
Singapore.
4.4 Oscillations between Messianic and Orthodox Judaism in Minahasa

4.4.1 Christian Minahasa and Jewish Progenitor Abraham Fontein

Minahasa is one of the few places in Indonesia where Christianity is the dominant religion. The Christian Minahasa area, of which Manado is the capital, has an ambiguous relationship with Java-centered Islamic Indonesia. Christians form a high proportion of the population in Manado. Numerous Christian sects have built their chapels in one of the Manadonese streets. This interest in Christianity has also led to the investigation and appreciation of the Jewish roots of Christianity. Banners in Manado’s streetscape urge the Manadonese to go on a Holy Tour to the Promised Land. This appreciation seems to exist not only on a religious level. Christianity is a strong Minahasa identity marker. The appreciation of Judaism, Jews and Israel seems to have become an important part of the expression of this identity. There is, for instance, admiration for the way in which Israel defeated the Arab states in the Six Days War of 1967, and there is respect for Israeli leaders like Sharon and Netanyahu, who resist the Middle Eastern Muslim threat.

In Indonesia Judaism, Jews and Israel are not neutral categories. The general public in Indonesia is made to believe that on an official level Indonesia and Israel have no links. The idea that there is or once was a Jewish presence in Indonesia raises eyebrows. Judaism is not recognised as an accepted religion in Indonesia’s Pancasila state ideology. Israel’s foreign policy has not been an example of consistency towards its Diaspora communities, but an absence of links with Indonesia would be absurd, given Israel’s efforts to become recognised and accepted in Asia. This section emphatically points to the existence of Jewish traces in Indonesia in the past and the present. A Manadonese Jewish family history serves as an example of the experiences many colonial (including Jewish) families had in the unstable transition from the colonial period to the independence of the Indonesian nation-state.

In the Dutch colony the organisation of Jewish life became noticeable only in the early 1900s. The initiatives to establish Jewish communal life did not come from civil servants but had to come mostly from private individuals – the so-called ‘particulieren’. Although most of the administrators in the VOC period (1602-1795) were reformed Christians, this did not mean that no Jews embarked as sailors on the ships that went to the East. Administrators in the service of the Dutch colonial government were frequently transferred from place to place within the archipelago. Occupying twenty different posts within twenty years of service was not exceptional. Unlike administrators, ‘particulieren’ had the possibility to settle in a particular place. Jewish particulieren mostly took the initiative to organise a Jewish community and were able to provide for a relatively stable and sustainable organisation.

Nevertheless, if this was true of the Jewish progenitors, no matter how pious and firm they were in upholding their standards it could not be said that their offspring were able or were willing to do the same. To marry within one’s own religion was almost impossible. ‘Degeneration’ seemed

---

113 Fontein was not his real name.
114 Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and recently also Confucianism are officially recognized as religions within Indonesia’s Pancasila state ideology.
117 For this argumentation see Gelder van, B. (1920) De Vestiging Der Eerste Nederlandsch-Israëlistische Gemeente in Batavia. Vragen van de dag, 35 pp. 701-707.
inevitable, and this made Jewish genealogic heritages slowly dissolve away. Their offspring ‘disappeared in the kampong’. Zij vermaagschapten zich met de dochteren des lands, zoo niet erger, waren in ondergeschikte rangen of minderwaardige bedrijven werkzaam, en verloren de voeling met het Vaderland, met hunne verwanten en oude geloofsgenoten aldaar geheel(...). Indië noemde men niet ten onrechte het débouché van de mislukten in de Hollandsche familien. Abraham Fontein was a Jewish progenitor and ‘particulier’. He was born in 1875 as the first child of eight in the Winschoten Jewish family of Markus Fontein and Alida Wijnberg. At a young age (1892) Abraham went to the Dutch Indies. He was a grenadier/rifleman in the KNIL and was stationed in Kota Radja in Aceh. After leaving the service Abraham Fontein became a high-profile entrepreneur in Manado. In 1902 he bought his first shop. There are still Fonteins in Manado who are descended from Abraham Fontein. The Fontein’s family history is exemplary of the experiences of many families that settled in Indonesia in the colonial times and experienced the unsettled transition from the colonial period to the independence of the Indonesian nation-state.

It is noteworthy that John Fontein, a descendant of Abraham Fontein, together with a descendant of another Dutch Jewish family, has ‘re-invented’ Jewish life in Minahasa almost a century later. Their focal point is the synagogue at Jalan Korengkeng in Manado. This is exactly where Abraham Fontein opened his shop a century before. Their initiatives show how, in a hinterland of Minahasa’s peculiar position in the Indonesian nation state, and Israel’s urge to connect in the wider Asian region, from seemingly disappeared Jewish traces, in oscillating patterns between Messianic Judaism and Orthodox Judaism, and Jewish presence and absence, Jewish life has re-emerged.

4.4.2 The Businesses of Abraham Fontein

There were regularly advertisements of Abraham Fontein’s entrepreneurial activities in the Minahasa newspapers. His activities were subsumed under the names of enterprises like the Firma A. Fontein & Co. and the Handelsvereniging Noord-Celebes or N.V Hvg A. Fontein and the Menadosche Handelsvereniging. In 1908 he opened a carriage, shoe and saddle-factory called the ‘Eendracht’. In the Minahasa newspaper Tjehaja-Siang Fontein announced a sale at his store of carriages, carriage parts, and horses. His merchandise was mainly for the European community. He travelled to Europe regularly to look for new merchandise. ‘New arrivals’ were announced in advertisements. When he returned to Holland, Abraham Fontein also visited other European countries. He closed deals with factories, or became the agent of new Dutch products. He sold his merchandise in a general store, the ‘Toko de Concurrent’. He was selling a wide range of goods, but his niche was Western luxury goods that were not otherwise obtainable. He sold gramophones, gramophone records and musical instruments, steam...
Depicting the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits

engines, modern enamel kitchenware, fashion items, cigarettes, cigars, liquors, liqueurs and Javanese arak. But he also employed travelling salesmen who sold his products on markets and had trade representatives who were selling the balsam and soap that he produced in his own balsam and soap factory. There are advertisements in Erets Israel of abbey syrup and balms like Pinesylvin balsam and other pine balms. He had a cinema and he distributed films. He had an ice-factory and a coffee-roasting plant. He sold Dutch tobacco, canned herrings and Dutch rusks. But he also closed deals within Indonesia. He was, for instance, the sole importer in the North of the Celebes (Sulawesi) of Surabayan cattle cake. Fontein announced the opening of his Oranje Hotel in 1918.

Fontein was one of the first who used photos in advertisements in Minahasa newspapers to promote his sales. In 1932 he announced the opening of his new ‘Toko AFC’ (A. Fontein & Co.). He is standing in a white suit in front of the door of his one-storey shop, which has a Dutch Heineken beer brand sign - Amstel - on top of it. Other boards with signs on them can be seen in the shop windows. His car is parked next to him and his servants are standing behind the car. Abraham Fontein had close relatives in the Dutch Indies. He announced the arrival and temporary stay at his Toko ‘de Concurrent’ of W. Fontein, who was most probably his youngest brother Wolly. Wolly was a salesman for the Surabaya R. Hartnuss watch, bijouterie and engraving company. Wolly was selling gold, silver and nickel watches and gold, diamond and brilliant jewellery.

Abraham Fontein’s entrepreneurial spirit seemed to have been relentless. He wanted, for instance, to have a music band in Manado. The band would also promote the sales of his music instruments. He asked the city council to support his idea and to donate a monthly sum of 125,- Dutch guilders to the cost of maintaining a band of fifteen musicians. The Dutch administrators however, considered the costs too high - there were many more important issues that needed their financial support - but their answer was that the city council was willing to give a subsidy only if the Manadonese citizenry would support the idea of a band and donate a monthly sum. This finance method had already been successfully applied in Buitenzorg and reportedly the band added zest to the festivities in town. The band toured the town and stopped in front of the houses of citizens who had donated money.

The monthly Zionist magazine, Erets Israel, was happy with Fontein’s initiatives. Manado was considered an outpost of Jewish organised life. Keren Hayesod, the Ned. Indischen Zionistenbond, the Vereniging voor Joodsche Belangen and Keren Kajemeth Le’israel all had their representatives in cities like Batavia, Bandung, Semarang, Yogyakarta, Surabaya, Malang, Medan and Makasser. Fontein was never a representative of any of these organisations in

---

125 See Minahasa newspaper: Tejehaja Siang 15-5-1912.
126 See Minahasa newspaper: Tejehaja Siang 1-2-1910.
127 See Erets Israel orgaan van het secretariaat voor Ned.-Indie van het Palestina Opbouwfonds ‘Keren Hajesod’. Tevens Officieel Orgaan van den Ned.-Ind. Zionistenbond. Vierde jaargang 1929-1930, P.92. Keren Hajesod is the Palestina Opbouwfonds (the fund to build up Palestine) and Erets Israel is its monthly magazine. The first year of publication of Erets Israel as magazine, was in 1926-1927. The last (16th) year of publication was 1942.
128 In the Tejehaja Siang (data unknown) Abraham Fontein was courteously recommending the big spacious rooms that could be rented for fl. 5 a night or fl. 100 a month.
129 See Minahasa newspaper: Fikiran 8-7-1932.
130 See Minahasa newspaper: Tejehaja Siang 15-2-1911.
131 Buitenzorg was until 1949 the Dutch colonial name of what now is the city of Bogor.
132 Erets Israel (1927-1928) 10, p. 90.
Manado, but nevertheless Fontein showed concern for the Jewish cause. He donated to the fund for the support of German and Austrian Jewish refugees in Holland.\footnote{Erets Israel (1937-1938) 8 p. 21. Manado, A.B is donating 1 guilder.} News from an outpost like Manado was treated as something special in Erets Israel. For instance, there was a report about the 162 guilder check that Fontein sent to the secretary of Keren Hayesod.\footnote{Erets Israel (1927-1928) 10 p. 90.} In the note that accompanied the check, Fontein wrote that after his 33-year stay in the Indies, he still felt a member of the wider Jewish community. Because of Erets Israel he had become inspired again to do his bit to help Keren Hayesod. He had organised a film evening to collect money for Keren Hayesod. He had loaned (his) cinema without charge, donated a film from his own cinema rental shop, publicized the event, sold tickets at his shop together with his son and daughter, and with the help of two Chinese businessmen (who printed the tickets and programmes for free - and the city council that did not charge entertainment tax) the Manadonese citizenry had had a wonderful film evening.

Other European Manadonese family names like Ezekiel, de Lange, van Essen, Winter, Meyer, Jacobs, Rosenberg and Abraham suggest a richer Jewish past than is documented. The Jewish community in Manado gathered in Fontein’s house.\footnote{The granduncle of Eleazer Ben Eleazer recalled the Fontein’s house as the place where Jewish Minahasan gathered.} The synagogue most likely was not more than a part of the Fontein’s house which was made available for such gatherings. Fontein’s house is right on the corner of Jalan (street) Garuda (which used to be the Wilhelminalaan) where the only traffic mirror in town helps drivers to have a good view of a blind bend at the corner. This traffic mirror was the city marker that directed people to Fontein’s ‘synagogue’. The synagogue was destroyed during the Japanese occupation. The connection of the family Fontein with ‘Yahudi’ still exists in Manado. In the Manadonese vernacular the Fontein family members, with John Fontein as the padre de familia, are the Manadonese ‘Yahudi’.

4.4.3 Abraham Fontein’s Offspring

About a century after Abraham Fontein’s arrival in Indonesia, John Fontein together with his son Oral Fontein and Eleazer Ben Eleazer (Eli), a descendant of another Manadonese Jewish family, is the initiator of a Jewish ‘revival’ in Manado. They maintain a synagogue at the back of John Fontein’s re-built house on the same location as Abraham Fontein had his store. The end of Dutch colonialism, the Japanese occupation, and the birth of a new republic have left their marks on the Fonteins’ family life. Abraham Fontein died in a prison camp in 1945.\footnote{Both of his feet were amputated because of an infection. He is buried in Semarang in the Dutch Cemetery’s field of honour.} John’s father, Alfred Fontein, son of Abraham Fontein, also died in a Japanese prison camp. He was accused of espionage. Alfred was beheaded by the Japanese in 1942. His younger brother Pinkie Pim, who also was accused of espionage, was talked out of the camp by his first wife, Helen Giselle, who was half Canadian, half Japanese. Abraham Fontein’s Manadonese business empire dissolved. In the aftermath of the independence struggle most of his possessions were nationalised. Pinkie Pim had his own store in Manado called ‘Toko Eigen Geluk’, which, as the name of the store indicates, he had managed to build up independently of his father. Pinkie Pim failed to take over his father’s business and returned disillusioned to Holland. The family tried to sell as much as
possible, but this was for amounts that did not represent true values. The shops, the cinema, the houses and the factories were all confiscated.

Pinkie Pim returned during Permesta. He made a detour via what is now called Papua Barat, which remained a Dutch colony for a while longer. From there he made attempts to regain his family’s properties, but this turned out to be a waste of effort. It was a turbulent period in Minahasa. A unity fostered by the Christian community had worked well for a while, but it eroded in time. Loyalties in Minahasa shifted. There was strife between revolutionary nationalists working together with the pemuda’s (the youth groups), who were seen as collaborators with the central Indonesian government, and Minahasa regionalists, who favoured a Dutch-sponsored federalism. The returning Dutch were not unwelcome in Minahasa after the Second World War. In 1946 there was even a political party that campaigned for the integration of Minahasa into the Dutch State. The Dutch style and pace of emancipating Minahasa had suited local leaders. But the call for a national state had its appeal as well. This dilemma is exemplified by the position Samuel Ratulangie took in 1945. He became Minahasa’s first appointed republican governor to Sulawesi. As a pragmatic nationalist, his position was one of participating in the ‘Indonesian nationalist movement as a political exercise, without sharing many of its goals, but hoping against hope that it would result in a federalist structure’. In the process that led to the founding of the Republic of Indonesia, Samuel Ratulangie had urged the greatest possible decentralization of powers to the outer islands. Minahasa is a rich agricultural area. Copra and rubber are important export products. Much of the export (of copra) did not go through the official customs but was smuggled into other areas outside Indonesia. The strong autonomous outer island position of Minahasa and its good economic prospects for international trade diverged from Jakarta’s attempts to monopolise the copra trade. This relatively autonomous position of Minahasa was a thorn in the flesh for Jakarta. In 1958 rumours of weapons deliveries to discontented Minahasans by the US and the Philippines made Sukarno attack Manado and bomb. Earlier Sukarno had ordered the closure of the Manado harbour, but local leaders had refused. This was the start of Permesta for Minahasa. Permesta was not anti-nationalist. Minahasan fighters fought on both sides in the conflict. It was a clash between Minahasa’s wish for greater autonomy and Jakarta’s urge to centralize power. The government’s efforts at the equitable distribution of wealth and services had failed, and no proper compensation was being given for the revenues that were being drawn from Minahasa, such as for the up-keep of the infrastructure.
CHAPTER 4

In this turmoil Pinkie Pim and his brothers and sisters decided to remain Dutch citizens. They left for Holland. The offspring of Alfred Fontein, Pinkie Pim’s deceased brother, became a citizen of the new republic of Indonesia. Alfred’s wife, Margaretha Anies, re-married with a local Muslim, who became the children’s stepfather. In 1948 John, the second son, went to the SMP in Makassar. After finishing high school in 1951, John went to the Sekolah Teknik in Malang. After two years of education he started working at his father’s half brother Johan Adolf Fontein’s firm Semen Dawai. In 1955 his uncle left for Holland as well. John Fontein stayed in Surabaya. He became the second man in a trading company. In 1958 he married and for a while he and his wife travelled backward and forward between Surabaya and Manado. John wanted to return to Manado, but starting again in Manado would not be easy. He had no home of his own any more. His parents’ house had been confiscated (bought for a mere trifle) by the military.

Back in Minahasa, after Permesta, John’s fortunes turned. In 1965 when the Chinese and the communists were hunted down John sensed that if he wanted to regain some of the family’s lost properties he had to act fast. With the support of the pemuda pancasila, whom he had joined while in Java, and from whom he had received a mandate to open a Sulatara branch, he was able to regain a part of the family’s properties. John had become the representative of the Markas pemuda pancasila Sulatara (Sulawesi Utara) and he was a member of Sukarno’s PNI (Partai Nasionalis Indonesia-The Nationalist Party) and later of the commando IPKI anti-G-30S. He was supplied with weapons by Kodam, the troops of Nasution. John and his pemudas, armed with machetes, roamed the streets. In 1965 he was able to throw out the military group that was occupying his family house. He claims to have used ‘soft therapy’, which means that he used the threat of pemuda pancasila. Up until the present time, the matter of the ownership of the house has not been clarified. John’s uncle had sold the house, but at a give-away price. As the representative

145 Margaretha Anies,
146 Hasan Ali
147 John has one older brother, Abraham, and one younger sister, Poppie, both living in Surabaya now. Two half-sisters from his step father Ali Aziz and his mother Margaretha Anies are Muslim and live in Sulawesi.
148 Functional youth groups. Pancasila is a term that stands for the five principles of Indonesia’s state ideology - one supreme god, nationalism, humanism, social justice and popular sovereignty – which were enunciated by the founding father, Sukarno, in 1945. See also note 151.
149 Sulatara is an acronym of Sulawesi Utara, which means North Sulawesi.
150 Headquarters of the pancasila youth group in Northern Sulawesi.
151 IPKI (Ikatan Pendukung Kemerdekaan Indonesia), translated as League of the Supporters of Indonesian Independence, was Nasution’s anti-communist movement. G30S is short for Gerakan 30 September (1965) (The 30th September movement). Fontein was dissatisfied with Sukarno’s flirtation with the PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia - the Communist Party). He resented Sukarno’s inclusion of Communism in his formulation of a state ideology Nasionalisme-Agama-Komunisme (NASAKOM) and became a member of the IPKI, and of SOKSI (Sentral Organisasi Karyawan Sosialis Indonesia), a labour union. SOKSI was formed by the army to counter the PKI’s labour union SOBSI (Sentral Organisasi Buruh Seluruh Indonesia). SOKSI was one of the three founding organisations of what later became Golkar. John became involved in the Pemuda Pancasila, formally inaugurated in 1961 as the ‘onderbouw’ of IPKI. The Pemuda Pancasila was acting as security for functions of the SOKSI. In the aftermath of independence it was difficult to separate clear, distinct groups in the symbiosis of younger nationalist politicians’ activities, army and youth gangs. Pemuda Pancasila is said to have been born out of IPKI. See: Ryter, L. (1998) Pemuda Pancasila: the last loyalist free men of Suharto’s order? Indonesia. 66, p. 56. Later (1973) PNI and two Christian parties formed the PDI (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia). As a Christian and Sukarno loyalist John Fontein joined PDI while remaining active for Pemuda Pancasila. In 1991 Fontein and the PDI organised a petition that summoned the Sulawesi governor to step down, and in 1998 he attended the PDI congress in Bali. At present, because of vicissitudes about membership fees, John Fontein and his son Oral have withdrawn their PDI membership.
152 In 1959 Nasution reorganised the army by designating 16 military territorial commands: the Komando Daerah Militer (Kodam).
of the ‘tukang parkir’ in Manado, John Fontein is able to organise a crowd, but it is not sure if this ‘preman’ type of support will sustain.

John Fontein has always been politically active. He was arrested in 1967 as an adversary of Suharto. In 1973, as a Christian loyal to Sukarno, he joined PDI (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia) while remaining active for Pemuda Pancasila. During orde baru, the New Order under Suharto (1965-1998), everybody who chose not to support Golkar or one of its institutions was asking for trouble. He was the only person in Manado who openly wore PDI clothes, badges and insignia. He had a business in furniture but this did not work out. He was black-listed, which is why he opened a restaurant, one that has a reputation for also serving dog meat. As a restaurant owner he was less dependent on a business network. His motto was that when people are hungry they want to eat, and when the food is good people will come back no matter what you are, Golkar or PDI.

The Fontein family cherishes their preman reputation. This reputation conflates well with their Yahudi background. Their role model is Yapto Soerjosoemarno, the well-known and feared former leader of Pemuda Pancasila, with whom they are acquainted, and who has a similar mixed Eurasian-Jewish background. He is the son of a descendant of the royal house of Surakarta and a Dutch Jewess, and brother of a celebrity, the actress Marini. Pemuda Pancasila was the notorious political vehicle of Suharto’s regime that officially was established purportedly to organise Indonesian youth according to Pancasila principles. Yapto is considered as a hard-core loyalist of Suharto’s New Order. His name was linked with the ‘mysterious shootings’ Petrus operations of 1982-83, where gangs of wild kids (Gali-Gali: Gabungan anak-anak liar) were finished off violently. In these Gali-Gali circles the name Yapto was ominously pronounced. Yapto’s daunting reputation conflated with anti-Jewish imaginary. The Fonteins, as the Manadose Yahudi family, have a similar status. Hard-headed as he is said to be, John Fontein has refused to change his European name. Eurasians took on a different name - for instance, a wife’s name - to avoid the confiscation of their properties by the authorities of the new Republic, but John Fontein was proud of his Eurasian background. This Yapto-like identity served well in his work in the security business. The prominence of Indos (Eurasians) in this line of work has a history that goes back to the colonial period. He was involved in providing security for the general elections in 1987.

153 Preman has a double meaning. It is translatable as private person or freebooter, but also as riffraff.
154 Golongan Karya: the political organisation of public officers and functional groups that was Suharto’s political vehicle at the time of the New Order.
155 There is no proof of an official black list, but it was considered better not to be on it if there happened to be one.
156 Interview 29-01-2001 Pasar Minggu, Jakarta Selatan with Mevr. Dolly Soerjosoemarno, maiden name Dolly Zegerius, born 1925. In the Second World War, in 1943, she married Soetarjo, who was at that time studying at the TH in Delft in the Netherlands. Mrs. Soerjosoemarno has a peculiar life history. She told me of two Dutch-born female friends who still live in Jakarta and who, just like her, had followed their Indonesian husbands to Indonesia after WW II. Back in Indonesia their husbands joined the TNI in fighting the Dutch. Soetarjo is a descendant of the Surakarta royal house of Mangkunegara. Dolly Zegerius had a Jewish father and lived in Amsterdam. Dolly and Soetarjo had four children of whom the famous actress Marini and the - now - politician Yapto have reached the status of celebrities.
158 Ibid.; 49.
159 Interview van Bockhove. Date: 17-9-2003.
John followed the Megawati-line\textsuperscript{161}. He was also involved in resisting the ousting of Megawati in the PDI-coup by Suryadi in 1996\textsuperscript{162}.

Oral Fontein, John Fontein's eldest son, initially followed his father's political aspirations, but later started to loathe politics. To him politics have become dirty business. Oral now wants to concentrate on religion. He considers religion to be spiritual and clean. He is fully occupied with organising this new family activity, but the business of religion seems to have a discordant angle as well. During the execution of the research Oral and a few other community members expressed their discontent with Eli, the rabbi of the Manadonese Jewish community\textsuperscript{163}. It concerned the allocation of money that had been donated by Beth Yeshua, a Holland-based messianic Judaist organisation.

### 4.4.4 The Manadonese Jewish Community

Eli is active in letting the outside world know that there is a Jewish community living relatively safely in the Manado area. Eli is skilful in making contacts with possibly interested parties. He has been actively seeking support for the community via the internet. He has visited Jakarta to meet with David Khatony and his deputy, Miriam Salomon, the Ketua2 Kommunitas Yahudi\textsuperscript{164} in Indonesia. As a ketua David Khatony\textsuperscript{165} was regularly asked to participate in interfaith dialogues such as The Nations Pray (TNP) organised by Paramadina, the moderate Muslim organisation that was led by Nurcholis Madjid\textsuperscript{166}. Khatony hesitated to accept these kinds of invitations. He was not a learned Jew. He was also concerned for his safety\textsuperscript{167}. Recently Eli has taken over the role of David Khatony, and attends these meetings as the Indonesian Jewish Community’s (IJC) representative. Eli feels relatively safe in Manado, but even in Jakarta, in his provocative young enthusiasm, he does not shun wearing Chasidic Jewish clothes. He has become the Jewish spokesperson in the media and he is asked for comment on Jewish- and Israel-related media issues\textsuperscript{168}.

\textsuperscript{161} Megawati is the second daughter of Sukarno and Indonesia’s president from 2001-2004.  
\textsuperscript{162} Interviews John Fontein: 19-12-2003 and 26-12-2003  
\textsuperscript{163} Eli is an alias,  
\textsuperscript{164} The heads of the Indonesian Jewish Community.  
\textsuperscript{165} Interview David Khatony Jakarta 25-03-2004. David Khatony is the youngest of an originally Surabaya based Baghldi Jewish family of seven sisters and six brothers. He is the president of the Jewish Association in Indonesia and regional representative of the Asia-Pacific Jewish Association. He runs a run-down hotel, a travel agency, and an internet café in a very strategic location in the center of Jakarta. He takes care of the family's property in Indonesia. Most of the time Khatony is not in Indonesia. He has either travelled to Los Angeles, where most of his brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews are living, or he is in Australia, where there is another branch of the family and where he was educated. His father, Jacob Khatony, was a trader from Baghdad and arrived in Indonesia in 1915. Jacob Khatony died in Singapore and his remains were buried in Israel. He was married to Toba Solomon, an Aceh-born and observing Jewess, also of Iraqi descent, whose family lived in Kotaradja Atjeh in Sumatra. The grave of Toba’s mother is in the Jewish part of the cemetery of Kota Radja (Banda Aceh). There are no reports yet of the present state of the cemetery in Banda Aceh, which was destroyed by the tsunami. David Khatony, 'Indonesia's left over Jew', (see Cohen, D. (1999) The Jerusalem Report. 25-10-1999), has been an important source of information for Jews and scientists studying the Jewish Diaspora, when in Indonesia, and looking for Jewish contacts. See for instance: Hadler, J. (2004) Translations of Anti-Semitism: Jews, the Chinese, and violence in Colonial and Post-Colonial Indonesia. Indonesia and the Malay World. 32 (94).  
\textsuperscript{167} Interview with David Khatony, Jakarta 25-03-2004  
\textsuperscript{168} An article that was taken from Harian Komentar and that was put on a discussion forum at yahoo. http://groups.yahoo.com/group/gorontalomaju2020/message18276 last visited 8-12-2006 deals with the burning of
Despite their Jewish roots, the Fonteins are Christians. But they feel attracted to Judaism. They aligned themselves with Evangelical Christianity, more specifically with the grey area between Pentecostalism and Messianic Judaism. Pentecostalism emphasises the works of the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity, with the Father as the first and the Son as the second elements. They have become close to the church of ‘roh kudus’, where the Holy Spirit is worshipped as a more all-embracing and abstract element than the son Jesus. This is how they have become reconciled to Judaism, which condemns the worship of Jesus. Worshipping the Holy Spirit is more neutral and draws from insights derived from the study of the Old Testament, which have made them more prone to Torah-observance. Messianic Judaism is labelled as a cult movement by mainstream Judaism. In general a Messianic Judaic congregation is composed of born Jews who have accepted Jesus as their saviour and Gentiles who have adopted a Jewish identity and lifestyle. Messianic Judaism is in essence philo-Semitic. It makes it possible to combine a Christian upbringing and an ethnic Jewish background. There are Messianic Israel Ministries in the US which claim that messianic gentiles are the descendants of the ‘lost tribes’ of Israel. There would be no obstacle for them to claim that by faith and by descent they can adopt a Jewish lifestyle. The way to make the cross-over from Christianity to Judaism is via a conversion which includes circumcision, re-baptizing and acceptance by a ‘Jewish’ court. Mainstream Judaism rejects this cross-over from Christianity, and asserts that Christians are not Jews. This is a cherished certainty that Jews used to have. For the internally divided religious and ethnically pluralistic Jews, Christians have been the ‘Other’. Christians were those ‘who we are not’.

Oral Fontein is circumcised (brit milah). Two of his sons and a couple of other members of the community are circumcised as well. Eli, their rabbi, had been outspoken about this. If you want to be a Jew, you have to be circumcised. The circumcision was done by a Muslim doctor who had converted to Christianity. Most of the members have been baptised again. The services at the synagogue are strange mixtures of Jewish Orthodoxy and messianic rituals. The minyan, the minimum number required to say certain prayers, is eased and also includes women and children. The torah scrolls are taken out of the aron kodesh, the part of the synagogue where the scrolls are kept. Eli had made the scrolls from prints from the internet. The prayer books, Buku Doa B’nie Yisrael Synagogue, were also made by Eli and the community. The Hebrew songs and prayers are phonetically printed. The Orthodox Jewish liturgy is followed exactly, but the community obviously does not know what it is singing and praying. When the torah scrolls are brought back, the second part of the service starts. The women take over. They pray together until they are in a

---

169 The first service that I attended at the synagogue was led by the head of the Gereja Roh Kudus.
170 Harris-Shapiro, C. (1999) Messianic Judaism. A Rabbi’s journey through Religious change in America. Boston: Beacon Press. p. 1. Mainstream Judaism labels Messianic Judaism as a cult movement and its members are regarded as apostates. Harris-Shapiro is a rabbi and a lecturer at Temple University in Philadelphia. Harris-Shapiro’s study is highly controversial in learned Jewish circles. As a sociologist of religion Harris-Shapiro uses Messianic Judaism as a mirror to explore the borders and boundaries within Judaism. She is puzzled by the lack of a consistent and logical reason to reject Messianic Judaism. Moreover because there seems a tacit acceptance of other ‘apostate’ Jews as part of the ethnic Jewish community who are, for instance, close to Buddhism or who are atheist. See at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carol_Harris-Shapiro last visited 14-10-2009.
171 Ibid.; vii.
172 Ibid.; P. 2.
trance and start to speak in tongues. A sick man is brought in. Together they pray for him, lay their hands on him, and ask God to heal him.  

Eli was shocked, back in 1999, when he had heard from his aunt that his great-grandfather had been Jewish, but in a way it also explained a lot for him. He is from a mixed religious background - his father is Christian and his mother Muslim. He was raised as a Christian. He started studying Judaism and tried to connect with other groups that were dealing with Judaism, most notably the messianic Judaist groups in Jakarta and Yogyakarta. In Jakarta David Khatony had made it clear to him that Jesus and Judaism are incompatible. Eli wanted to start a synagogue. In Manado he contacted the ‘Yahudi’ family, the Fonteins. They seemed interested in cooperation. They have been actively seeking members for their new enterprise. They searched for Jewish names in the phonebook. They contacted the people they found in that way and invited them to come to the service on Saturdays.

The reason for the discontent between Eli and some community members has to do with a donation. The community had received 15 million rupiah from the messianic Judaist Beth Yeshua in Nijkerk in Holland and Eli had already spent 6 million of it without giving any account. Eli was acting alone and keeping information that he acquired via the internet to himself. Oral, the son of John Fontein showed letters that had been written to ask for money for the renovation of the synagogue. He complained that the letters were too ‘plin-plan’; too opportunistic. The community’s identity was adapted differently in different letters, depending on the nature of the organisation the letters were addressed to. Here the organisation seemed messianic, and there orthodox. Oral finds this intolerable. Oral thought that it should be made clear that they are messianic Jews. ‘Ndak man menghilangkan Yesua’; they would never abandon Jesus Christ. A rift between the two men has become unavoidable.

Eli considers himself an orthodox Jew. He follows the Jewish religious laws, but he claims that these laws are the same laws that Jesus had followed. He loves God and Jesus, but this does not mean that he wants to be labelled a Christian. A genealogy study tracked his family tree back to his maternal great-grandfather, who was a pure-bred Jew from The Hague. This proof was important to him. A turning point occurred for him when, sponsored by a Dutch company, he was able to buy his grandfather’s house. He stopped cooperating with the family Fontein and opened a new orthodox synagogue at his grandfather’s house in Tondano, close to Manado. Later Eli reported with great pride that he had gone on what almost seemed to be an ‘aliyah’ to Singapore. He sent back pictures showing meetings with the local Singapore Chabad rabbi Abergel and the rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregation, who is in Singapore for a month every year to celebrate some functions with the reformed community. He was even accepted in the minyan.

---

174 These observations were carried out during two trips to Manado to visit the community in September and December 2003. The community obviously needed guidance. (Jewish) Visitors are asked whether or not the community is conducting the services in the right way.
175 I was kept informed via e-mail.
176 That information was sent with great pride. It was if it was a proof of his right. He received the genealogical data via an aunt in the USA.
177 Sigmo Beheer B.V.
178 Immigration (returning) to Israel.
179 Journalists have been eager to write the story of a synagogue in this remote corner of the world and to show their sympathy and respect for Eli’s mission to build a place in which Jews and Israelis may pray and feel comfortable. The Israeli Channel 10 recorded the opening of his synagogue in Tondano.
4.4.5 Israeli Jewish Presence in Manado

It was previously acknowledged in Indonesia that some businesses and institutions in the private and public sector had unofficial links with Israel. News of these links surfaced regularly, but they were usually denied, or when the proof of contact was undeniable the Palestinian question was put forward as an unbridgeable gap preventing rapprochement. In 1993, for example, according to media reports in the Middle East, there had been separate meetings to discuss diplomatic ties between the Indonesian minister of foreign affairs, Ali Alatas, and Shimon Peres. In Israel the newspaper Haaretz also confirmed the news that Israeli businessmen had gone to Indonesia in search of trade ties and that the Israeli ambassador from Singapore had flown in to facilitate the mission. The Jakarta Post, which was at that time not as free in its news coverage as it is nowadays, called the report speculative, saying that there would not have been more contact than a polite exchange of words at a luncheon in the Austrian capital of Vienna, where Alatas and Peres were heading their countries’ delegations to the United Nations’ conference on human rights.

In 2001 an Israeli official was able to deliver a speech at a seminar at one of Jakarta’s universities. He stated that Indonesian businessmen were eager to trade with their Israeli counterparts, and vice versa. The Jakarta Post reported that former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid had tried to create a trading link between Israel and Indonesia. Israel was interested in buying palm oil, coffee, plywood and furniture from Indonesia. Indonesia was interested in importing telecommunications equipment and high-tech products from Israel. In Indonesia there were doubts about Indonesia’s sticking to the Israel trade boycott that Arab countries had imposed. After all, some Arab countries traded openly with Israel. Wahid tried to formalise these trading relations and met secretly with the Israeli minister of trade, Reuven Horesh, in Jakarta early in January 2001. He thought it would be better to formalise these relations than to keep these connections secret, and force companies and institutions to operate in the dark.

But Wahid was trying to connect on a more practical level too. He was instrumental in establishing ‘safe places’ for Israelis and Jews in Indonesia. The Christian Evangelical doctrine, with Christian Zionist and Charismatic Judaism groups, serves as a natural bridgehead for Jewish interest in the Diaspora, even to the extent that Christian groups have become natural allies of Jews in the Diaspora. The Comity of Christian Alliances was set up in the Knesset in 2004. It was formed to arrange meetings of Israeli politicians and Christian preachers, businessmen and members of parliament all over the world. The predominantly Christian Minahasa area, with its capital at Manado, is such a place. Via the ketua2 of the Jewish community, the Manadonese Jewish community got in touch with Israeli who were seeking business opportunities in Minahasa. Yosh Zev, an Israeli businessman, and Lev Kadt, a Jewish American businessman, had

---

180 That was reported in the Al Ittihad newspaper in Abu Dhabi, which quoted Beirut and Israeli Radio. During the luncheon Peres said that Israel was interested in establishing full diplomatic relations with Indonesia. Alatas, however, responded that this could be achieved only once the Palestinian question and the Arab-Israel conflict were resolved. Yegar, M. (2006) The Republic of Indonesia and Israel. Israel Affairs. 12 (1) pp. 136-158. p.146.
181 The Jakarta Post 24-7-1993
182 Ibid.
184 At that time Egypt and Jordan had full diplomatic relations with Israel. Mauritania, Morocco and Qatar were about to join these two Arab countries.
organised a business trip to Manado in which Wahid would join. Wahid was going to show that his intentions to connect with Israel were serious. The Synagogue in Manado would be officially opened during the trip. Salomon, Khatony’s deputy, would also join in. The news that an Israeli delegation, together with Wahid, would be present at the official opening of a synagogue on Indonesian soil would not go unnoticed. Salomon had prayed that the trip would be cancelled because she was afraid of a media backlash, and she saw it as a divine sign when she received the news that the trip had been cancelled because Wahid was ill.

For businessmen like Zev and Kadt, Manado is an attractive business hub. Minahasa is a rich agricultural area. There is nutmeg and gold, and some of the world’s finest marble can be found in the area. But what is most important to them is the friendly attitude towards Jews and Israel. Zev, Kadt and Salomon were more than welcome in the area. They were investigating the possibility of stationing an Israeli consular representative in Manado. The export of Israeli agricultural technology would be lucrative. Salomon was considering the start of a kibbutz-like corporation in the area. Kadt had bought a bottling plant to exploit the hot springs in the area and he was trying to get a permit to open a casino. Wahid’s PKB was instrumental in establishing links.

The line of argumentation in this section is that Jews have never really left Indonesia. It might take more effort to trace them. The attention is re-directed to the processes in time and space that have made them disappear. The peculiar oscillations between orthodox and messianic Judaism in Manado show that Jewish life may seem to have disappeared, but that the traces of this seemingly discontinuity in presence might become visible again. However, to track these traces, as this section has shown, it is necessary to have an interdisciplinary frame of mind and to relate the past to the present. Without a historical investigation this presence cannot have the depth that it has now. Most probably it would otherwise have been considered as insignificant or unimportant, and prey to the ‘art of deletion’. Israel is a relatively new chapter in Jewish history. Israel represents the ‘homeland’ in the Diaspora triangle. The focus in diaspora studies is traditionally on exilic ‘return to the homeland’ mobilities. In this section I have shown that Israel has become a node from which, directly or via Singapore, new connections outside Israel are being made. (Israeli) Jewish businessmen in Indonesia look for trustworthy anchor points and turn to their brethren to establish connections. For that matter, Minahasa might emerge as a hub for (Israeli) Jewish mobilities.

4.5 The Jewish Cemetery and Penang Heritage

4.5.1 Penang, the Pearl of the Orient

A beautifully located and well-kept Jewish Cemetery makes it clear that Jews have lived, worked, loved, prayed and died on the Malay Peninsula. Jews were one of trading groups that inhabited Georgetown on Penang island, the ‘Pearl of the Orient’. Jews had to compete in trade with more obvious merchant groups like the Chinese, Malays, Indians, and later the colonial traders, but

---

186 Zev and Kadt are aliases.
187 Interview Oral Fontein date: 15-9-2003. Oral showed a photograph of Zev together with a local PKB official and a high-ranking local military officer.
they also had to compete with other smaller trading groups that had anchored in Penang, like the Arabs, the Burmese, the Thais, Bugis, Armenians, Ambonese, Javanese, Sikhs, Gujaratis, Parsees, Tamils, and traders from Aceh or from other parts of Sumatra. In colonial times Penang was a popular place to reside in. It had architectural splendour, pleasant recreational spots, it was renowned for its food, and it had a good reputation for its educational standards. At that time Georgetown is best described as a collection of urban villages and traditional neighborhoods. Georgetown’s outlook was a ‘particular blend of original morphology, historical significance and architectural variety which symbolises the evolution of the multi-ethnic community’\(^\text{189}\). Nowadays Penang is popular with tourists for its heritage. In July 2008 Penang was nominated to be listed as a World Heritage Site. Penang’s colonial past and its multi-cultural heritage is re-imagined in the atmosphere of a living tradition replete with trades and handicrafts of days long gone\(^\text{190}\). Georgetown is a real Chinatown, but in Georgetown there is also place for a Little India and a Malay quarter. Street names like Acheen Street, Rangoon Street and Armenian Street remember a once diverse multi-ethnic presence. This once multi-ethnic presence is imagined in intangible relational materialities, the ‘landmarks’ or artifacts. Penang has colonial artifacts like Fort Cornwallis and the Victoria Clock Tower, but also Chinese clan houses like the Khoo and the Cheah Kongsi, the Cheong Fatt Tse Mansion, a house of worship like the Accen mosque, a Protestant graveyard and the Syad Alatas Mansion\(^\text{191}\).

Heritage is not a neutral notion. A nation-state, a city or any other such regional authority is able to project a desired ‘right’ image through a categorisation and valuation of its heritage sites\(^\text{192}\). These sites have become important in sensing place and identity. Heritage sites have become identity markers with which national, regional and ethnic boundaries can be defined. Consequently ‘reading’ heritage sites has become a way to understand the drawing of these boundaries. Strangely, the internet site of the PHT, the Penang Heritage Trust\(^\text{193}\), lists Penang’s most attractive and important heritage sites but omits the Jewish cemetery is suspiciously absent\(^\text{194}\). Even more strangely, the street name of the road where the cemetery is located, Jalan Yahudi, has been changed. One would imagine that such an extraordinarily located Jewish cemetery would be a unique selling point for tourists, and that as a heritage site it would add luster to Georgetown’s multi-cultural identity. How can this Jewish absence from Penang’s heritage be read, and why is there seemingly no room for Jews in Penang’s multi-ethnic collective memory?


\(^{190}\) See for instance the leaflets of the Penang heritage trails organised by the Penang Heritage Trust (PHT). PHT is a NGO that is dedicated to the promotion of Penang’s cultural and built heritage.


\(^{192}\) In a globalised world, cities have become competitors. Investors are lured and in combination with attracting the ‘right’ people to live in a city, investments are artfully exerted. They are the drive wheel with which new, positive social, cultural and economic dynamics are generated. See: Florida, R. (2002) *The Rise of the Creative Class – And How it is Transforming Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. New York: Basic Books.

\(^{193}\) PHT is a Non-Governmental Organisation that is concerned with the preservation of Penang’s heritage sites.

CHAPTER 4

4.5.2 The Jewish Cemetery at Yahudi Street

The Jewish Cemetery in Penang is on the Jalan Zainal Abidin, which was once known as Jalan Yahudi, or Yahudi Road\(^{195}\). To rename a street is not an innocent activity. The naming of streets is politically motivated\(^{196}\) and is a product of the interplay of cultural and linguistic experiences\(^{197}\). In the Malay political and cultural landscape naming streets might be seen as a way of superimposing the authority that derives from ‘Malay-first’ policies. In these policies national Malay identity and culture should be cherished in the heart of the indigenous Malay, but in practice things do not work that way. In colonial times there was an official, colonial naming. After independence, colonial street names were replaced by new Malay names that were not direct translations from the old colonial names. This was sometimes impractical. Many citizens kept using the old English colonial names. Malay-speaking citizens would understand that Beach Street had become Lebuh Pantai, but not that Waterfall Road was now Jalan Kebun Bunga or that Western Road had become Jalan Utama. And tourists, who do not understand the Malay language, were confused when someone pointed to a street and used the old colonial name, while this name was not on their tourist maps\(^{198}\).

Only the colonial names in Georgetown were translated into Malay\(^{199}\). Besides the impracticality of this renaming it was also considered as a denial of the colonial heritage and an effort to singularize the multi-layered (also colonial) identity of Georgetown. Not everyone could appreciate the erasing of the traces of colonial times and the imposing of ‘bumiputra’ (Malay-first) authority. As a protest the new names on the street signs were repeatedly struck out and replaced by the old names. The city council had to replace the street signs and hang them high up on lampposts instead of at the usual head height\(^{200}\). But the contestation is not only between the colonial and the Malay. The naming of streets in Georgetown draws on a variety of hidden ethnic/linguistic sources. Each ethnic group is encapsulated in its own linguistic schemes that do not necessarily intersect with or transgress the dominant Malay linguistic schemes. Drawing on the possible different ethnic linguistic schemes in Penang, there would be more than one name possible for one and the same street, for instance a Chinese Hokkien or a Chinese Cantonese name. Each ethnic group mapped Georgetown according to its own indicia in order to orientate

---

195 At present both the spelling Jalan Yahudi and the spelling Jalan Yahudi are used. The cemetery was visited twice, first on the 1st of June in 2005 while visiting a masters student doing research on the Penang heritage. The first time was a more extensive visit. The caretaker provided information. However, the caretaker’s family was unable to provide extra information in addition to the information given by Che-Ross or Bhatt. The location of the synagogue on Nagore Road was also visited. However, nothing about the building was reminiscent of its previous function as a ‘synagogue’. It just seemed to be one of the many shop houses in the area. See. Raimy Che-Ross (2002) A Penang Kaddish: The Jewish Cemetery In Georgetown. A case study of the Jewish Diaspora in Penang (1830s-1970s) and Himanshu Bhatt (2002) The Jews of Penang, both of whom presented their papers at the 4th Colloquium of ‘The Penang Story’ on Penang’s historical minorities. This was organised by the Penang Heritage Trust (PHT) and STAR Publications at Penang.

196 For instance the Pretoriusplein in the old Transvaal neighbourhood in Amsterdam was renamed in Steve Biko Plein to honour the South-African PAC leader Steve Biko. The choice of a square in the Transvaalbuurt was obvious because of the ties the Dutch and the Afrikaners had in Apartheid South-Africa.


200 The same is noticeable in the Voerstreek in Belgium, where a zone between Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia reveals comparable contestations.
and spatially conceptualise its surroundings. Changing the colonial street names into Malay expressed a rupture with the colonial past, but at the same time it also expressed the apparently subordinate position of the other urban ethnic groups to the Malay.

What catches the eye is the solid fencing of the cemetery in Penang. This fencing might be the reason why the cemetery is still in such good condition. Fencing off a Jewish graveyard or the Jewish part of a graveyard is a frequently recurring theme in discussions about how to preserve Jewish presence. The cemetery in Penang looks secure. The cemetery is adjoined by the backs of shop houses and other buildings that form a ‘natural’ border for the cemetery plot. The boundaries of the cemetery are enclosed by a two-and-a-half meter high wall that is secured by pillars. A heavy iron gate carries a sign saying Jewish Cemetery. In the cemetery, the Cohen graves are set apart from the other graves. The graves and gravestones look well preserved, but the plot as a whole is overgrown with weeds and grass. It is still a place of sanctity, though, and has preserved its peaceful look. This is most probably due to the physical presence of a caretaker’s family that guards the plot. The caretaking has been in the hands of an Indian family that has already lived on the premises of the cemetery for generations. In return for their caretaking they are allowed to live in an improvised dwelling and they receive a small monthly fee that is paid via intermediaries from nearby Buttersworth. Every month these intermediaries seem to visit and inspect the cemetery. An official of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission is maintaining the grave of an officer who died in the Second World War.

The cemetery was a gift to the local Jewish community in the early 19th century. Before the establishment of the nation-states Singapore and Malaysia, Penang and Singapore were two of the Straits Settlements of the British colonial empire on the Malay Peninsula. Singapore has become

201 A preliminary study of the Jewish cemetery in Penang has been made by Raimy Ché-Ross. Rainy Che-Ross has not yet produced what would be a very welcome follow up, which he announced in 2003. When I arrived in Southeast Asia, there was a sort of MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) that divided the Straits research area in three. Joan Bieder, Rainy Ché-Ross and Jeffrey Hadler accounted respectively for Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. The topic of this part of the world had been ‘claimed’. I had to break that code, convinced that with my Complexity – connectivity approach I would over-ride the splitting up of the research area. In his study Hadler, J (2004) follows two tracks, anti-Semitism and the Jewish presence, but in sympathy with the anti-Semitism without Jews’ discourse he also makes the switch to the Chinese presence. Bieder, J (2007) has produced a beautiful but rather ‘unproblematic’ book that fits into the tradition of descriptive research on Jewish communities. The book is ‘authorised’ by the trust fund of the Jacob Ballas Estate, which sponsors the publication and speaks of it as the definitive book on the history of the Singapore Jewry.

202 (Western) graffiti and vandalism controllers would claim that this outlook is not ideal for discouraging possible hooligans.

203 Raimy Ché-Ross (2002) talks about ‘people from the church’. Most probably these are Christians who act on behalf of the trustees of the cemetery. Charlie Daniel indicated that the Singapore community has no obligation to guard the cemetery in Penang. Interview Charlie Daniel Date: 4-3-2005.


205 There are more versions of the origins of the cemetery. Himanshu Bhatt (2002) claims that an English lady, (Ché-Ross identified her as Mrs. Shoshana Levi, wife of Tzolah, who died on the 9th of July 1835, and who was buried in the cemetery) donated the plot of land to the Jewish community. Nathan, E. (1986: 172) claims that it was an American tourist who paid for the plot in gratitude for recovering after having fallen ill on a voyage. Both Ché-Ross and Nathan, however, state that they have not been able to verify their claims.
CHAPTER 4

the more important of the two. The number of sources that deal with Jewish presence in Penang is not abundant. The Ephraims were mentioned as the community leaders\textsuperscript{206}. 28 Nagore Road was the place where Jews in Penang gathered for services. It was not a real synagogue but the services were held in a small room of the house of a community member, the late Hayoo Jacob\textsuperscript{207}. The men sat on rugs that were spread on the floor. With coconut oil filled glass containers were used as yahrzeit\textsuperscript{208} lamps. In the corner of the room was the special chair that was used for Brit Milah\textsuperscript{209} ceremonies. The Ark held eight Sifrei Torah\textsuperscript{210}, in unadorned cylinders\textsuperscript{211}. This was in the late 1960s\textsuperscript{212}. The Ephraim family’s presence in Penang goes back to the 19\textsuperscript{th} century when the businessman Ephraim, coming from Baghdad, joined the Penang community which at that time consisted of numerous watch dealers\textsuperscript{213}. His son Baruch Ephraim\textsuperscript{214} recollected that in his youth about fifteen families, numbering about seventy people, made use of the synagogue. Baruch’s son Charles still lives in Penang and is considered to be one of the last remaining Jews in Penang. Other Ephraims, like Tefa Ephraim, Charles’s sister, have left for Sydney. The members of the local families who were buried in the cemetery include the Manassehs, Mordecais, Jacobs, Ephraims and the Moses family - mostly Jews of Persian ancestry. Most of the community members have migrated to Australia. A minyan\textsuperscript{216} was hard to fulfil and the lack of religious knowledge has prevented the continuation of the services in the synagogue. The synagogue in the terrace shop house was closed in 1976.

The last burial at the cemetery in Penang was that of Harry Moses in 1978\textsuperscript{215}. There have been appeals for Jewish men in Singapore to go to Penang to make the necessary minyan\textsuperscript{216} to conduct the rites. Singapore community members like lawyer Harry Elias, together with diamond dealer Savi Kunari, who at that time were vacationing in Malaysia, were asked to go to Penang. They met with the Penang Jewish community and other community members from Singapore who had also rushed to Penang. Elias and Kunari did the ritual washing and made sure that the burial rituals were performed in the right way\textsuperscript{217}. Charlie Daniel, the Singapore community Shamash\textsuperscript{218} and chazzan\textsuperscript{219}, was also called by the Ephraims to come to Penang to conduct the burial rites\textsuperscript{220}. Despite the help from Singapore, the Jewish community in Penang had become too small to reproduce itself. The Jewish community in Penang has ‘evaporated’.

\textsuperscript{207} According to his gravestone he passed away in 1964.
\textsuperscript{208} Yahrzeit is the anniversary of a death.
\textsuperscript{209} Brit Milah means circumcision
\textsuperscript{210} Sifrei Torah or Sofar Torah has the same meaning.
\textsuperscript{211} Cowen, I. (1971: 151).
\textsuperscript{212} Cowen published her book in 1971.
\textsuperscript{213} See: Himanshu Bhatt (2002).
\textsuperscript{214} His gravestone indicated that he had died in 1976.
\textsuperscript{215} Harry Moses, male, died 1978, 21\textsuperscript{st} April at the age of 62, of Septicaemia BPH. See: Rainy Ché-Ross (2002).
\textsuperscript{216} The quorum to conduct a service requires ten male adults.
\textsuperscript{218} The Shamash is the synagogue janitor, who lights the Hanukah lights.
\textsuperscript{219} The chazzan is the reader or minister.
\textsuperscript{220} It is not clear whether or not this was the same burial. According to Ché-Ross’ inventory, two other burials were performed in 1976, and one in 1972. Charlie Daniel recollected that the burial was in 1973 or 1974. The rites were performed in Ephraim’s house. Most probably it was Basookh Ephraim’s burial, but that was in 1976. Interview Charlie Daniel. Date of interview 4-3-2005.
4.5.3 Re-directed Discussions

There are locutions that show that the negative image of Jews has been naturalised in daily Malay language and, as linguists would claim, has also entered the Malay mind. The word Yahudi in Malay or in Bahasa Indonesia has two meanings. In Teeuw’s Kamus Indonesia Belanda (1991) it is first translated as ‘Jew’. A second meaning is conjugated in the word memperyabudikan, which means ‘to abuse’ or ‘to malign’. Other new combinations with the word Yahudi have been added to the Malay national vocabulary. An example is the word rumput Yahudi. The word for grass in the Malay language is rumput. Rumput Yahudi therefore means weeds. There are different ways to imagine how anti-Semitism reached the Straits ‘backwaters’ and has made the Jewish category (as the Other) visible in Southeast Asia.221 The way the cause of solidarity with Palestine has been portrayed in Malay media is considered influential.222 The Palestinian cause is strongly coloured by a pan-Arabic Muslim sense of unity. This has made the Palestinians a symbol of the repression of Islam by the West, and Jews are automatically the enemy. Another strong influence is post-colonialism and the emergence of the nation-state in the Straits. The re-emergence of ethnicity as a meaningful category in nation building gave room for the ‘necessary’ appearance of a (harmless) ethnic group that could be ‘Othered’.

In discourses that concern Jews,223 their capacity to become the ‘Other’ has been a vehicle to redirect discussions. In these redirections most studies point to the (frustrated) ambitions of Muslim intellectual or political layers in society. Kessler, for example, points to ‘Diaspora envy’.224 ‘Diaspora envy’ was directed towards the ultimate proponents of Diaspora, Jews. Contrary to the Malay ‘tribe’ Jews showed the ability to preserve a strong ethnic identity, with a sense of mutual dependence, while operating in globally integrated networks. He argues that the hatred directed towards Jews is the result of frustration, and that this frustration stems from an eagerness to become just like the Jewish ‘tribe’. Other redirections place Mahathir and his demonisation of Jews in relation to the forging of an unsteady Islamic Malay identity. There have been attempts to make steady sense out of Mahathir’s views and statements,226 but, they were (... ‘so contradictory and interpretations of them have diverged so widely that historians might well be tempted to throw up their hands in...”

---

221 For instance the Japanese occupation in World War II. In what ways has the Japanese invader been instrumental in proliferating anti-Jewish propaganda provided by the German ally? And what about the influence of Malay students studying at pre-war Muslim universities in the Middle East?

222 This is thought to be controlled by UMNO, Mahathir’s political vehicle.

223 For instance the discourse on ‘antisemitism without Jews’ and the re-direction to anti-Sinicism.

224 Kessler derived this term from an influential book published in the 1990s: Tribes by Joel Kotkin. The tenor of Kotkin’s study was embraced by the Malay intelligentsia and leaders. They appealed for a Melayu Baru movement, a ‘Malay Tribe’. This idea was adopted by a rising Melayu Baru corporate elite. In a sense it is a variation of Sukarno’s interest in an Indonesia Raja, a greater territory that would include all Malay people. The difference was that a Melayu Baru would also connect all Malayans scattered over the world, who now exist in little, isolated Malay enclaves. Less ambitious than Sukarno’s dream, the idea of a Melayu Baru would be the vehicle to create a Malay identity that would fit the requirements of participating more convincingly in a global world. It would fulfil the need to integrate tradition and modernity without losing a strong Malay sense of ethnic identity. Kotkin, Joel (1992). Tribes. How Race, Religion, and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy. New York, Toronto: Random House. Sukarno, in the Konfrontasi period, is said to have opted for an extension of Indonesia’s national borders that included Malaya. Giebels, L. (2001). Soekarno. President. Een biografie 1950-1970. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker. Chapter 7.


Nevertheless 'Othering' Jews in the Straits has become a convenient means of mystifying the social and economic problems that threaten Muslim or national Malay unity. Mahathir has regularly played the anti-Zionist or anti-Semitic card in which anti-US and anti-Jewish sentiments conflate. The regional marionette is Singapore. Singapore is seen as the willing tool for Jewish interests. It is easy to lose track in the midst of all of these redirections. As behooves a sly politician, Mahathir’s stance was negotiable and open to pragmatic and political considerations. There was even room for an appreciation of Jews, Israel and their accomplishments. In Mahathir's unremitting and irremediable anti-Semitism', Jews. 'Zionist' PAS was undermining the credibility of the UMNO government. Religious and political leaders were prosecuted using that same security act. See: Leefer, M. (1995: 185-186). To counter Islamist PAS growing popularity, Mahathir regularly demonised the PAS, representing them as Jews. 'Zionist' PAS was undermining the credibility of the UMNO government. Religious and political leaders accused each other of being 'infidel' or 'kafir'. These tactics were applied to make it clear that UMNO was the sole legitimate representative political party taking care of Malay interests. See: Wong Mei Ching (1996).

Nevertheless 'Othering' Jews in the Straits has become a convenient means of mystifying the social and economic problems that threaten Muslim or national Malay unity. Mahathir has regularly played the anti-Zionist or anti-Semitic card in which anti-US and anti-Jewish sentiments conflate. The regional marionette is Singapore. Singapore is seen as the willing tool for Jewish interests. It is easy to lose track in the midst of all of these redirections. As behooves a sly politician, Mahathir’s stance was negotiable and open to pragmatic and political considerations. There was even room for an appreciation of Jews, Israel and their accomplishments. In Mahathir's unremitting and irremediable anti-Semitism', Jews. 'Zionist' PAS was undermining the credibility of the UMNO government. Religious and political leaders were prosecuted using that same security act. See: Leefer, M. (1995: 185-186). To counter Islamist PAS growing popularity, Mahathir regularly demonised the PAS, representing them as Jews. 'Zionist' PAS was undermining the credibility of the UMNO government. Religious and political leaders accused each other of being 'infidel' or 'kafir'. These tactics were applied to make it clear that UMNO was the sole legitimate representative political party taking care of Malay interests. See: Wong Mei Ching (1996).


The press and international currency speculators like George Soros are said to be influenced by Jewish interests. In the mid-1997 Asian financial crisis there were persistent rumours of a Jewish agenda to bring down Malaysia’s economy. George Soros was said to have taken the lead in speculative attacks on the Malaysian currency, the ringgit. But there are also groups of Islamic ‘insiders’ regularly identified as agents for the Jews or for Israel. In the long-lasting rivalry between political parties UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) and PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, translated from the Malay as the Islamic party of Malaysia) have been regular scapegoats. Because of its Islamic credentials PAS is a major challenge to the perpetually ruling political party, UMNO. See: Leifer, M. (1995: 185-186). To counter Islamist PAS growing popularity, Mahathir regularly demonised the PAS, representing them as Jews. 'Zionist' PAS was undermining the credibility of the UMNO government. Religious and political leaders accused each other of being ‘infidel’ or ‘kafir’. These tactics were applied to make it clear that UMNO was the sole legitimate representative political party taking care of Malay interests. See: Wong Mei Ching (1996).


Mahathir has been Othered by opinion leaders who (and this is Kessler’s point) ‘eagerly develop the theme of Dr. Mahathir’s unswerving and irremediable anti-Semitism’. H.S. Hughes quoted in Kessler, C. S. (1999: 26).

Mahathir has been condemned by the Clinton administration because of his anti-Semitism. Later, during the Bush administration, Mahathir had become a key ally in the ‘war against terrorism’. That alliance gave Mahathir room and legitimisation to manipulatively use restrictive tools, like the Internal Security Act (ISA), to counteract the Islamist -PAS threat. At the same time also followers of his former deputy, Anwar Ibrahim, who had been depicted as the epitome of unwanted Western-democratic-style politics, were prosecuted using that same security act. See: Asia Times, 17-5-2002 Mahathir gets White House rehabilitation. http://www.atimes.com/se-asia/DE17Ae03.html last visted 16-2-2004.

Who’s anti-Semitic? It’s not so clear-cut. Singapore: The Straits Times 3-2-2004. Uri Avnery was heading the Israeli Peace Movement, Gush Shalom, and is a former member of the Knesset.
Mahathir’s sound is anti-Semitic. As the Malaysian state representative you might expect him to have been aware that his sound legitimises practices that make anti-Semitism in Malaysia look casual, and conflates anti-Semitism with Malaysia. This unworliday anti-cosmopolitan attitude reflects on the country as a whole. There are hardly any critical voices in Islamic media condemning Mahathir’s statements. Anti-Semitism is closely watched in the Western world. Alarm bells ring when blatant forms of anti-Semitism are expressed. These alarm bells are not tolled in the East. Monitoring institutions like an active anti-defamation league (ADL) are absent. Anti-Semitic slogans, speech, and the publication of anti-Semitic writings hardly engender any public protest. 

These words are common currency in the Arab Islamic world where they pass for evident truth (...) and this direct form of racism, purely and simply is practiced as a normal category of the ‘political debate’. Mahathir’s muckraking raises the concern that in the Islamic world ‘displays of anti-Semitism are being met with inexcusable nonchalance’.

4.5.4 A New Re-direction

Renaming streets in Georgetown and the neglecting of the Jewish heritage does not erase the Jewish cultural reality in Penang. There are innumerable ways of knowing a city, its streets and its artifacts, including a Jewish one. The streets in ‘Malay-first’ Georgetown are not a bounded, singular and coherent space. The superimposed Malay cultural reality is but one presence ‘which defers to another and differs from another’. Any singularity includes tensions and differences. A city, a nation-state, a region and for that matter space, is multiple, multi-layered or multi-dimensional. A presumed Jewish absence urges one to investigate this act of ‘deferring and differing’. The Malay singularity is contested. This singularity might gradually wipe out the relational materialities, or actants, that have evolved from a once Jewish corporeal presence. But the tangible relational materialities, and the intangible stories, lost memories and hidden identities are not so easily wiped out. It just takes more effort and imagination to identify Jewish itineraries. This thesis is the result of such an effort.

The ‘art of deletion’ is never innocent. When irrelevance or insignificance is used as an appreciation or label, one might wonder whether or not there are hidden interests involved. The range of visibility needed extension in order to be able to detect these hidden interests. In this chapter the ‘topography of reality possibilities’ (the hinterland) is explored with the purpose of presenting a ‘new’ reality. This new reality is used as a resource to mess about with the presumed ‘literal’, manifest representations that have ‘deleted’ Jews. The intention is to disturb what has almost become the vain art of ‘allegorising away real Jews’. This is an ontological choice. In this new reality a Jewish Diasporascape that even includes Malaysia is made present. In re-occupying the seemingly evaporated Jewish space in Malaysia, the corporeal Jew has to deal with casual anti-Semitism. A comment of a blogger (Azlan) on being Jewish in Malaysia illustrates this. ‘If I’m a Jew in Malaysia, I’d rather maintain that fake identity my family had developed and guarded years ago and remain hidden. I don’t see much good in coming out in the open about it. After decades of indoctrination brain-washing and anti-Semitism propaganda by our politicians onto the rakyat, no way a Jew in Malaysia will admit who he or


237 Yoke Sum Wong (2005: 26) is using Derrida’s vocabulary.
CHAPTER 4

she is 238. The Penang Jewish cemetery is a potentially rich source for finding Jewish tracks and traces in order to embody Jewish networks even in Malaysia. With the design of a Straits Jewish Diasporascape this thesis, following the principles of complexity theory, has opened up the potential for an alternative understanding.

The aim in this chapter was to tell a few of the many allegorical tales which, accumulated like this, would amount to a more clarifying, maybe more just, more or less coherent account of what the present reinvention of a Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits would entail. And, at the same time, the aim was to provide a dynamic, indispensable and conditional ‘hinterland’ that would embed the next three chapters in which the networked Jewish business realities of the Diamond trade, FJ Benjamin and the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf are made present.

5. Enacting the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits: Diamond Trader Networks

5.1 Introduction

Within Jewish Diaspora entrepreneurial networks, the worldwide trade in diamonds makes for particularly informative analysis. Jews have been able to become one of the main players in the diamond trade and business in Southeast Asia. Diamonds and precious stones have been useful to materialise the connections that far-reaching trade routes established between Europe, the Middle East and further east into Asia. Symbolic value was added to the stones. The illusion had been perpetuated that a diamond is a scarce and therefore valuable commodity. The diamond is a ‘pebbly object transformed into a twinkling, astronomically priced jewel’. The diamond trade has evolved into a worldwide multi-billion dollar business. On the one hand it is a modern and complex business that features all of the up-to-date communications, information technologies, modern marketing and other business techniques that are on offer. But on the other hand, the trade has remained insular. It is of a peculiar significance that Jews have been able to monopolise the diamond trade. A cooperation network has been established that allows them to act as monopolists. But this Jewish predominance in the diamond trade is eroding. Descriptions of the diamond business tend to be based on data from the 47th Street New York wholesale diamond traders, which are still dominated by orthodox Jews. But new connections are being made within these networks and new nodes are emerging. Mumbai, the home base of the Jains of Palanpuri, is an important emerging node in the trade. These Jains are said to be taking over the business from the Jews. Their businesses have expanded to other diamond centers in the world including to relatively proximate Singapore. The goal of this chapter is to analyse the eroding position of the Jewish dealers in Singapore. It will be made clear how they have adapted over time to the changing conditions of their trade and how in the Straits their Jewish ethno-religious identification and affiliations connect with this organisational pattern.

Jewish traders are not Singapore’s numerically dominant group of diamond traders. Far from central nodes like New York, Antwerp and Tel Aviv, there is an amalgam of (ethnic) backgrounds that participate in the Singaporean diamond trade. Next to the Indians there are (the majority) ethnic Chinese and there is a small group of Europeans. Singapore Jewish traders are of different ‘blood groups’. There are orthodox, non-orthodox, Eastern, and Western Jews, and last but not least there is a group of Israeli traders. The trade is a cooperation network. The aim in this chapter is to provide track records of a few of these diamond dealers and their firms. A rich, thick and extensive time-space description will be given of the ups and downs of their businesses. The leading question is how a Jewish ethno-religious identity and the resources within a Jewish community are put to use in their business? Is there a J-factor that gives an advantage, or is their business hampered because of this factor? These questions are made answerable by focusing on the core relational materiality or actant, the diamond, and on the modes of ordering in this networked trade. But first, some of these traders will be introduced. It is made clear how these firms have linked up with the (global) diamond trade and how other ethnic groups have infiltrated the business.

---

CHAPTER 5

5.2 The family Firm as Organisational Mode of Ordering

In a personal account of ‘The History of Jews of Singapore’, the local Singapore Jew Eze Nathan made a list with trades and professions in which he also inscribed some diamond dealers firms. One of these firms is Weiss, Shein & Co. Pte Ltd. The firm was established in the 1920s and according to advertisements in the Shalom Singapore, the periodical that is published by the local Jewish community in Singapore, Weiss, Shein & Co. Pte Ltd. was ‘still a solid name in the ’90s’. This solid name, however, was no guarantee that their business would make it into the new millennium. In 2004 the firm was in the process of voluntary liquidation. The second firm I will describe, not on Eze Nathan’s list, is the business of Savi Kunari and his sons. Their Afghan Malay Trading Company initially traded with Afghanistan, the country the family had left in the mid-1950s. Later they founded Sinaco Corporation, in which they redirected their business and focused on the diamond trade.

Weiss, Shein & Co.

The firm Weiss, Shein & Co. was a family firm in which four Ashkenazic Jewish Romanian families cooperated; the families Shein, Weiss, Iancu and Brody. First Penang, and later Singapore, were the home bases from where the partners in the firm operated. The business started with a Weiss who came to Singapore in the early 1900s. His brother Moritz Weiss came to Singapore in the 1920s. They started a business together but this did not work out. Moritz Weiss went to Penang in Malaya and started working for himself. When his brother died, Moritz Weiss came back to Singapore. Moritz Weiss traded in diamonds but also in other precious stones and pearls. The business went well and he wanted somebody to help him. He arranged for a relative, a nephew of his by the name of Solomon Shein, to come from Romania to Singapore. Here the second family, the Shein family entered the scene. Though based in Romania a third family, the Brody’s, seemed to have already been well connected with Singapore. Brody Sr. was a well to do major wine producer in Romania. Brody’s wife, her daughter and her niece were already in Singapore. The idea was that Solomon Shein would marry Brody’s daughter. The niece was an Iancu, a member of the fourth family which became involved in the diamond firm Weiss, Shein & Co. During the 1930s the Brody’s lived for a couple of years in Singapore but Mrs. Brody chose to return to Romania. Their daughter needed proper education.

---

3 All names that are used in the diamond case-study are aliases. The data in this section is drawn from interviews with Jim Iancu, son of Iancu Senior. Jean Pinsky, husband of Madeleine Iancu and brother in law of Jim Iancu. Eric Brody, son of Yan Brody and nephew of Jim and Madeleine Iancu. Solomon Kunari, son of Savi Kunari. Additionally, data from interviews with Ramesh Thawardas, the President of the Diamond Dealers Club was used. It was not possible to check the data with written material. The data is based on the memories of the diamond dealers interviewed, which might have been fragile from time to time.


5 Shalom Singapore (1995) Issue Nr. 2. September. Singapore: Jewish Welfare Board. Shalom Singapore is a very irregular publication. In 2005 there were 15 issues; the last was the Pesach Special in April 2003. The first issue was in May 1995, with a cover by Mr. David Marshall.

6 There is a tombstone in the Jewish cemetery of a Weiss who died in 1928, that is considered to be his.

7 It was no problem to move around on the Malay Peninsula. The borders between the different states were permeable. In those days (the first half of the 20th century) Singapore, Malacca and Penang were Straits Settlements under direct British rule. Pahang, Perak, Selangor and Negri Sembilan formed the Federated Malay States, that had a strong entrenchment of British administrators. The Unfederated States, like Johor, Kedah and Kelantan, retained a considerable measure of independence and were suspicious of suggestions of union or federation. In: Kennedy, J. (1962) *A History of Malaya*. London: MacMillan. p. 252.
Diamond trader networks

The Second World War disturbed the connections of these families for a while. However, business flourished. Weiss and Solomon Shein had two passports, a British and a Romanian one. During the Japanese occupation they used their Romanian passports and because of Romania’s status as an axis power the Japanese did not intern them. In Europe during the Second World War Iancu Sr. was interned in a labour camp because of his socialist sympathies. He was marched into the Ukraine and worked behind the demarcation line on the German side. When at the end of the war the Russians ‘liberated’ the camp, half of the camp prisoners were executed while the other half managed to get away. Iancu Sr. was in the lucky half. After the war the Brody’s and Iancus were able to get out of Romania, the Iancus in 1946, and the Brodys in 1947-48. The only way to get out of Romania was to bribe your way out. They headed for Singapore. Weiss, who at the time was still in Singapore, seemed to have arranged for the necessary visas. Weiss had two marriageable daughters in Singapore. Iancu and Brody became their bridegrooms and joined Weiss and Shein in the business. Weiss & Shein became Weiss, Shein & Co.

Before the Second World War Weiss, Shein & Co. traded not only in diamonds but also in gemstones and other items, like jewellery and watches. It was only after the Second World War that they specialised in diamonds. Weiss had friendly connections with a Jewish family in South Africa, the Abrahams family. The Abrahams were direct sightholders with De Beers. Sightholders were at the top of the diamond distribution chain. Abrahams got the rough diamonds directly from De Beers, which meant that they were in the first line of distribution. Sightholdership was only assigned to only between 100 and 120 respectable firms, most of which were Jewish. Weiss, Shein & Co. established a partnership and took shares in Abrahams' company Liberty Cutting Works. It was a highly profitable deal for both sides. Abrahams wanted a distributor in the Southeast Asian region and Weiss, Shein & Co. needed a factory where the cutting was done.

This manufacturing on South African soil also meant that because of a South African tax incentive De Beers could give a ten percent discount on the stock. The ‘rough’ was polished in South Africa and transported to Singapore. Weiss, Shein & Co. would take a percentage of Liberty Cutting’s output that suited the Indonesian and Malaysian markets. These were the Cape Goods: bigger stones, with good purity, lower coloured, slightly yellowish diamonds with a very good South African cutting. South Africa was producing a lot of these stones and Weiss, Shein & Co. made huge profits, especially in the 1950s and 60s during the Korean and the Vietnamese war. There was a fear that the whole East would become communist. Consequently portable wealth, especially diamonds, became very desirable.

In this period Shein decided to move to London and started working for himself, but he kept his share in Weiss & Shein. The other three, Weiss, Brody Sr. and Iancu Sr., became the managing directors in Singapore. With Shein there, their network was strategically extended to London, which was at that time re-emerging as a center in the diamond trade. De Beers later moved their offices to London as well. From London Shein became a major supplier for Weiss, Shein & Co. In Antwerp, which was already a main center of the diamond industry, Weiss, Shein & Co. was working with an agent named Joseph Komkommer. Komkommer was a leading figure and a representative of the fourth generation of a Jewish family in the Belgian diamond industry. In Hong Kong they had always worked with a Chinese agent. Israel was of small importance to them in terms of supply.

As business grew, flows of diamonds changed hands at a growing pace and new regions and sub-regions became interconnected. It is imaginable that in the earlier years these tightly knit family...
networks were able to meet local demands, but when the business grew this three or four family network became too small. The ethnic boundaries of the related families had to be transgressed. Wider professional connections in the region with other Jewish traders, which would have been possible in the U.S. or in Israel where there are plenty, were severely limited. Demographically the critical Jewish mass was only small. There were at that time only a few other Jewish dealers active in the region like Gutwirth and Storch. At a point in the 1950s the demand became so high that Weiss, Shein & Co. had to give ratios to their customers. A system of distribution was needed to match supply and demand in the peripheral zones in the Straits region. The need for an extra level of middlemen became obvious. It was a matter of scale that demanded that new interconnections had to be made, Jewish or not. Weiss, Shein & Co. became middlemen who also served smaller, non-Jewish dealers outside the direct family circle.

The Kunari’s Afghan Malay and Sinaco Corporation
Savi Kunari was born in Afghanistan in 1933. The Kunaris are of Sephardic origin and they have lived in Afghanistan for generations. Afghanistan lies at the crossroads of the Persia-China silkroad. Kunari’s grandfather traded between Iran and Afghanistan. Kunari’s father traded between the towns of Herat and Maimana. Maimana is a border town close to what is now Turkmenistan. He used donkeys to carry his goods and it took him six months to go back and forth between Herat and Maimana. He traded in the Afghanistan silk worm, different animal skins, wool, cotton and spices. At home in Afghanistan they traded in all kinds of commodities, for instance foreign currencies. There was no foreign bank in Afghanistan at that time. They were like wholesalers. Whatever the country needed, they would supply from their imports from foreign countries. They had channels all over the world.

Kunari left Afghanistan for Bombay at the age of sixteen to work for his uncle in an export-import company. This uncle had left Afghanistan and set up a trading business with Afghanistan, with Kunari’s father as his Afghanistan partner. He had asked for Savi Kunari to help him out in Bombay. For Kunari, Bombay was a breeding space where the idea of setting up his own business could ripen. He spent three years in Bombay before he moved on in 1954 to Singapore, where he started an import-export-oriented enterprise. He sent rare goods such as motor car spare parts, tires, textiles and manufactured goods to Afghanistan. From Afghanistan he imported carpets, rugs, spices (cumin seeds, poppy seeds), nuts (almonds and pistachio) and dried food products. He gave his company the name Afghan Malay Trading Company.

In 1965 his parents decided to leave Afghanistan and move to Israel. Initially Kunari tried to proceed with his business with old friends, but replacing these family connections with old friends did not work well. There was not enough certainty that the money that had been sent for the purchase of stock had really been remitted, and the quality of the imported goods no longer met the required standards. They continued working with these friends and acquaintances for

---

8 Gutwirth was a well-known name in the region at that time. The name Storch is in a list of Singaporean Jewish firms in Nathan, E. (1986). It would be interesting to know whether or not these diamond dealers worked together using the ‘credit system’, or if each one of these dealers laid down an individual network with this own dealership as the centre.

9 These data are drawn from the Singapore National Archives, Oral history interview with Savi Kunari, in Communities of Singapore, Part 1 Accession number 369, date of interview 17-1-1984. Singapore, Oral History Department, 1989. And data from Oral History interview with Savi Kunari, Singapore as an entrepôt, Accession number 0001203. Date of interview 22-10-1990. Personal meetings at the Magain Aboth Synagogue and from interview (7-6-2005) and E-mail contact with Solomon Kunari, Savi Kunari’s son.
two-three year, but the trade became troublesome. They lost money. The necessary base to conduct business with Afghanistan was gone.

When he stopped trading with Afghanistan in 1971, the Afghan Malay Company had to redirect its business. The company diversified into dealing with gold, jewelry and diamonds. To re-direct the business Kunari made use of his family and close business friends. He already had an extensive family network in Israel, and he had a brother living in Milano in Italy. He often went to Japan to find commodities for trading with Afghanistan and had established an extensive network there as well. It was through these friends and family members that they were able to start with a stock of diamonds and jewelry worth 500 million dollars.

Until his death in 2005 Savi Kunari was in business together with Solomon and Aaron, two of his sons. They set up the Sinaco Corporation, which focused on the diamond trade. This corporation is US based, with Kunari’s son Aaron leading the business in New York. Together with his son Solomon, Kunari was in charge of the Singapore operations. Kunari’s sons have their own family. Aaron and Solomon followed their university (religious) education in Israel at the Bar-Ilan University at Ramat Gan, of which Savi Kunari was a trustee. Bar-Ilan University is known for providing a dual curriculum of religious and secular studies. Both of them took Business and Economics degrees. Samuel, Kunari’s third son, served in the Singaporean Army and was sent to Kunari’s brother in Milano where he got his professional education on the job. Samuel and Aaron live in the U.S. Aaron is a graduated Gemologist. In Israel, Solomon joined a company where he could find out if he liked the business. He could stay with family. Solomon: *We knew the trade already. We never had holidays, school holidays was your work, so as we were growing up at the time during school, at school break at vacation, we used to be in the office. There was no vacation. Once in a while we had a trip here and there, but it was mainly in the office*.

The Jewish Community in Singapore was profoundly saddened when Kunari passed away, and the diamond business lost one of its role models. Savi Kunari’s was a well-known name in the diamond industry. He had served in different roles and was a strong advocate of the diamond exchange in Singapore. These diamond exchanges are important institutions that facilitate the diamond business and that organise the trade. Singapore has a diamond exchange center. Having such a center means that you count as a diamond city, not least because when it comes to voting over diamond business-related issues, each diamond exchange center has one vote, no matter how small it is.

### 5.3 Diamonds Connecting South Africa and Asia

Jews and precious stones have been interlinked ever since the first millennium. Christian diamond polishers migrated from Antwerp to Amsterdam to meet the demand for a growing local Amsterdam diamond industry. This branch was free of medieval trade and guild restrictions because in Europe, up until the 16th century, the diamond was still a relatively rare commodity. Amsterdam Jews have the craft from these Christian craftsmen. Networks connected Jewish Centers in the Ottoman Empire with Southeast Asia, India, the Mediterranean and the Netherlands. The Indian trade in diamonds, more particularly the coral-diamond trade, was an

---

10 Interview Solomon Kunari 7-6-2005.
important line of business for Jews. Portuguese Jews had settled in Amsterdam in the late 16th century and most of them were involved in the Indian diamond trade. In 1784 the Christian diamond polishers unsuccessfully tried to create a ‘diamond-polishers guild’. In the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, Jews managed to take control not only of the trade but also of the polishing industry. Portuguese-Jewish traders polished their rough stones in an environment like that of a home industry. This home industry was considered a continuation of their trade. In the mid eighteenth century diamond manufacturing in Amsterdam gave work to about 600 diamond workers. Most of them were Jewish. The polishing of the rough diamonds was farmed out to family or acquaintances within Jewish circles. Apprentices were recruited from these same circles.

In trade, Portuguese Jews made use of family networks that reached as far as the Portuguese colony of Goa, from which the stones were transported. In historical research on Jewish trading, networks were found which facilitated Jewish trading activities in the 17th century. In research on the inner workings of 17th century Sephardic Jewish entrepreneurial activities, it was found that in relation to any given route at any particular time, small mercantile colony members were connected with one another and with neighboring settlements. Generally these networks were grouped around two or three interrelated families that interchanged stations alongside this route when necessary. These Portuguese Jews understood the details of the trade with the Indies. They spoke the languages of commerce - Spanish and Portuguese - and were still in touch with their brethren in Portugal. They also maintained contact with Jews of Cochin and the Malabar Coast. In 1685 Sephardic merchants from Amsterdam sailed to India and visited the Jewish community in Cochin. The Cochin Jews had assisted the Dutch against the Portuguese in 1622. The risks, hazards and uncertainty of long-distance trade were manageable with this secure connection between next of kin, and through intermarriage. A characteristic feature of the way entrepreneurial activities in the diamond trade were conducted was these networks based on kinship.

Over time, London and Amsterdam changed places as the centre of the diamond trade. The British EIC, which had a monopoly of England’s Indian trade, permitted Jewish immigrants in Britain, as independent merchants, to import uncut diamonds. The EIC used a system of individual licenses that were issued by the EIC’s India House. Until the end of the 18th century most Indian stones used by the European diamond industry were imported through London. The diamond merchants exported silver and coral to India and returned to London with

---

13 This would suggest that a locking in of a Jewish predominance in the trade occurred in an earlier phase than the establishment of De Beers control over the mines in South Africa.
diamonds. The coral was first brought to London from Leghorn, where Jewish merchants were instrumental in the shipment of the coral to London. They had a direct share in the Indian diamond trade through Jewish agents in London. Agents of English firms, mainly English Jews who went to India for this purpose, managed the Indian end of the trade. In around 1750 there were about ten Jewish diamond agents in Madras. In the EIC period Jewish merchants invested only indirectly in the Indian trade by advancing what were called ‘bottomry loans’. They made use of the EIC ship’s officers’ privileges. These officers were privately allowed to take a quantity of goods on each voyage. The value depended on the officer’s rank. Large-scale investments via this backdoor were not possible. Until the 18th century most uncut diamonds came from India. The crafts and commerce in precious stones, pearls and jewelry were conducted on the Indian Ocean trade routes. Europe became economically prosperous and imports intensified. The market for diamonds grew as more people became able to afford the expensive stones. It is not clear when, in Southeast Asia, a substantial demand for polished stones grew and how this market was structured. One might assume that there was a local demand for polished stones in India and Southeast Asia in colonial and pre-colonial times. In Borneo, Indonesia, there was a local market in rough stones. These stones were polished locally. Diamond dealers had local elites as their clientele. The overseas Chinese believed in portable wealth, and their part in the demand could have been substantial. Of course, there could have been a demand from the Europeans colonists in Southeast Asia as well.

Large diamond fields were discovered at Kimberley in South Africa in 1869. This discovery changed the nature of the trade, with the availability of large consignments of rough diamonds. Until the economic crisis in 1873 the diamond business was very lucrative and attracted many investors. During the 1873-1896 depression most of the mining concession holders at the Kimberley mines had to file for bankruptcy. A sharp decline in the price for diamonds, combined with the necessary large investments miners had to make to obtain a part of the business, caused many bankruptcies.

Founded in 1888 by Cecil Rhodes, De Beers, was able to obtain most of the mining concessions with the aid of the French Jewish Rothschild’s banking family and the German Jewish diamond trader Alfred Beits. De Beers virtually established a monopoly in the South-African production and trade of rough diamonds. The diamond business became dominated by a cartel-like organisation: De Beers Mining Company Limited. De Beers nowadays still controls the Central Selling Organisation (CSO) that distributes the rough diamonds. De Beers was keen to acquire newly discovered diamond fields to control the supply. By keeping a buffer they could regulate the price. De Beers Consolidated Mines was able to control about ninety percent of the world diamond production. Jewish enterprises had a large share in this development. Not only the production but also the trading in and marketing of the greater part of all uncut diamonds was concentrated in the hands of a few mostly Jewish firms which worked closely together with De

---

27 Herrman, L. (1930: 54).
Beers. Organisationally this system had the features of a syndicate. Each half year the whole stock of rough diamonds was sold to the CSO, and the supply of diamonds was adjusted to the demand. With this one-channel principle in operation prices could be kept on a stable high level. This cartel-like feature has determined the structure of the diamond business ever since, and directed the business rationale. An intricate organisational structure based on trust - from source to retailer - still characterises this industry and trade, and a unique internal legal framework takes care of legal issues.

5.4 Connecting with the Rest of the World: The Diamond Exchange of Singapore

The Diamond Exchange of Singapore (DES) was Asia’s first diamond exchange. In 1976 it was registered as the Diamond Importers Association of Singapore (DIAS). The official goal of the Exchange was to organise the traders and to raise professional standards in both the diamond and the jewelry trade. The World Federation of Diamond Bourses (WFDB) structure ensures enforcement of uniform trading and rules of ethics. In May 1980 the DIAS was accepted as a full member of the WFDB. In 1984 the Diamond Exchange of Singapore took over the functions of the DIAS. Together with the Trade Development Board of Singapore (TDB) the DES organises trade missions to other parts of Asia. It hosted the 24th World Diamond Congress in 1988. The bourses are the symbolic centers of the diamond business. The purchase of diamonds in Asia has been growing spectacularly. Large numbers of new diamond brokers, buyers, manufacturers and other traders are now coming from the East, from China, Malaysia, Korea and Thailand. Cities in the East like Tokyo, Mumbai, Shanghai, Bangkok, Dubai and Hong Kong have opened their own bourses.

Membership of the WFDB is prestigious in the world of the diamond trade. However, this position is not reflected in the exterior of the offices of the Diamond Exchange of Singapore at the Far East Shopping Center. The Shopping Center is not one of the more luxurious malls situated in Orchard Road. It is a rather anonymous building, suggesting that the reason for choosing this location was to divert the attention from the fact that millions of dollars worth of diamonds are stashed in there. The ‘epicenter’ of the diamond trade in Singapore, the office of the DES, is no more than a small office packed with documents and files, where a secretary holds sway. The office building is heavily secured. There are cameras everywhere. A visitor is recorded a dozen times on video tape before he gets to the office he wants to visit. Just dropping by to ask for information is already considered to be a suspicious act. If you want to make an appointment you are urgently requested to use the phone. The door of the office opens only slightly when you ring at the doorbell. There is a cautious atmosphere. Names and telephone numbers are given with great mistrust. Most of the dealers who hold office in the Far East Shopping Centre at Orchard Road are Jewish or Indian. Chinese dealers are under-represented in the Centre. They have their offices in other parts in the city.

References:
29 The Economist Intelligence Unit (1992).
The main objective of the DES is to promote the regional diamond business, so the DES regularly organises promotion missions. The DES is in permanent discussion with International Enterprise (IE) Singapore, the organisation that promotes overseas growth and international trade. A recurrent topic is the Goods and Services Tax (GST). A 5% goods and services tax is imposed on all goods imported into Singapore. Eighty percent of the diamond business is not done in Singapore but in the region. It was important to bring this issue forward and to ask for understanding of the problems that the traders have with documenting exports. ‘Of course we had to zero rate them, I mean they are technically exports, but because they are hand carried exports they are not done by way of airfreight, so we needed a way and set of documentation that allows us to zero rate them so that we don’t have to charge our customers GST’. Singapore has launched several GST relief schemes for foreign and local companies to enhance the city’s appeal as a logistic import-hub. Unlike the various schemes that are available to facilitate these imports into Singapore, there are no schemes available to foreign companies that purchase goods locally for redistribution from Singapore, so technically the export of the diamonds is not free from GST, but the DES negotiated for a vague construction that gave special dispensation for loose diamonds. According to Ramesh Thawardas (now the Vice-President of the organisation) by securing this advantage, the DES has made sure that the diamond trade still has a future in Singapore.

Jean Pinsky, formerly a partner in Weiss, Shein & Co. and now working for himself, re-started his trade under his own name Diamsky (Pinsky Diamonds), in the Far East Shopping Center. His stock is now kept to a minimum. He hardly ever goes to the special committee meetings. ‘From time to time the dealers sell to each other. It is not a really active bourse. Once a month I think. One of them makes an office lunch and they invite everybody to meet everybody, and sometimes you know, you see something you need, then you buy, then they see something they buy from you. Instead of going overseas, now on the spot, you pay a little bit more and there you are’.

Pinsky pays around a thousand dollars a year for his DES membership. The membership fee is levied to maintain the DES office, to pay the secretary, and to cover other expenses. 60-70% of the dealers in Singapore, of a total of 25-30, are members of the exchange. 60% are Gujarati, 30% are Chinese and 10% are Jewish. The growth is in the percentage of the Gujarati dealers. Fifteen years ago the percentage of Gujarati was only about 30%. This growth is partly at the expense of the Chinese, and partly at the expense of the Jewish dealers. It is no surprise, then, that after a long succession of Jewish presidents of the DES, the last two presidents have no longer been Jewish. Ramesh Thawardas, a Sindhi, was the successor to Jewish Savi Kunari. At the moment a Chinese dealer has become the successor to Thawardas. This changing presidency is dealt with in the next section. It is exemplary of the Jewish waning dominance and shows the growing influence in the trade of other ethnic groups.

5.5 Connecting with Other Ethnicities: A Sindhi as President of the DES

Jews are losing ground in the diamond business. Since 1976 the directors of the DES have been Jewish. Jan Brody (one of the partners of Weiss, Shein & Co.), and Savi Kunari have served as President, Vice-President and Honorary President of the organisation. Kunari was President until

34 Interview with Ramesh Thawardas, Vice-President of the DES. Date: 16-6-2005. Zero rating means that the GST on the supply of goods and services is set at 0%. A taxable person will not charge any GST on his zero rated supplies.
35 The Business Times Singapore 1-6-2005.
36 Interview Jean Pinsky 17-2-2005/3-3-2005/2-6-2005.
2002. When you are president you automatically occupy a seat in the WFDB committee. Kunari served two terms. The constitution does not allow the President to serve more than two consecutive terms. The diminishing of Jewish dominance in the trade is further reflected by the ethnic background of the board members, who hold central positions in the WFDB. Their names are still mostly Jewish, but the advance of non-Jewish interests in the business is undeniable. Recently a Chinese dealer, Yee Heng Chiong, was appointed president of the DES, the Singapore section of the WFDB, and Ramesh Thawardas now holds an important position in the WFDB as the Chairman of the promotion board.

Ramesh Thawardas, a Sindhi, was the first non-Jewish DES President. He served in the first years of the new millennium. He considered it an advantage to have an ethnic background which is neither Jewish nor Chinese nor Gujarati. It was possible for him to be more neutral. He holds positions on the different boards which regulate the trade, and the trading community accepts him ‘although’ he is a Sindhi. He says that it was not easy to enter the diamond business as a Sindhi. He was born in Indonesia. His great-grandfather on his mother’s side went to Indonesia in 1880. His father came to Indonesia in 1930. Ramesh was educated in Bombay. The Sindhi are mainly in textiles and garments, and so were his father and grandfather. Ramesh, however, found that this line of trade was not really what he wanted. He decided to ‘branch out’. Together with a Gujarati he started a diamond trading company. This Gujarati friend’s family was already involved in the diamond trade, but the family later quit this line of business. Ramesh continued on his own. Ramesh: ‘So, essentially I am an outsider, in a very tightly held Gujarati business, it was tough for me initially to break into this close-knit society’.

The Jains of Palanpuri in Surat, who initially controlled the diamond trade in India, are just a small clan of Gujarati. The trade is now slowly spreading to other Indian communities as well, but 60-70% of the Indian traders are still Palanpuri Jains. Initially the Jains spread out in Asia but they were also trying to get a foothold in Western diamond centers like Antwerp and New York. Their tactics proved successful. Prior to India’s gaining independence a few pioneering Gujarati who were importing polished diamonds for the local market decided to move to Antwerp. Before 1950-1955 there were hardly any cutting operations in India. The cutting was done either in Antwerp or in New York, and the traders bought the polished diamonds from Western trade companies. India gained independence in 1947. Under Nehru a democratically governed centrally-planned economy was adopted. India’s central aim was to become self-sufficient. A high import duty on diamonds had to be paid, that heavily restricted the legal import of diamonds into India, or made it almost impossible.

These Palanpuri Jain families realised that if they wanted their business to grow, they would have to go to Antwerp to learn the skills of cutting and polishing the diamonds, and take this knowledge back to India. There has always been a large consumer market in India. ‘I remember my family, every wedding that my mother, grandfather spoke about, there was always diamonds and jewelry involved, and I believe that was truth with lots of other Indian communities, the Gujarati for sure, the Tamils in the south for sure, and the Sikhs in the north, there was always a diamond consuming culture’.

The Jains initially started their business as a family business. Slowly it developed into a wider clan business. It started up with one patriarch, who either started as a trader or as a rough dealer, and

---

37 Interview Ramesh Thawardas 16-6-2005.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
who slowly allowed brothers, uncles and nephews to join the business. The business would grow
and start to spread out into other cities and countries. This was also a way to avoid conflicts
within a family. Organisationally it was not sound to have seven or eight male members of a
family together in one firm at one location. It was better to spread them out over different
locations. Strangely enough, for Ramesh Thawardas the two most important men in his career,
his mentors, were not Gujarati but two Jews: Savi Kunari and the father of Eric Brody, Jan
Brody. ‘I was extremely close to Mr. Kunari. He had three sons, and he considered me as his fourth son ’.
Kunari and Brody were the godfathers of the trade in Singapore. Ramesh learned the ins and outs
of the trade mostly from them. He proved to be a bright and eager learner and he showed
commitment. This is why, according to Ramesh, the godfathers in the trade ‘adopted’ him.

The Straits region is of course a backwater in the trade as a whole. More important regional
centers in the Far East are Mumbai and Hong Kong. Relatively few Jews are engaged in the trade
in all these centers in the East, but numbers do not tell the whole tale. If one looks at numbers in
Singapore, most of the dealers are Chinese. They operate mainly as retailers. They don’t seem to
be interested in the middle section of the trade. The middlemen’s section is far less lucrative.
There have been quite a few local Chinese wholesalers in Singapore, but they did not last. There
are path-dependent elements in the Chinese participation in the diamond business. The Chinese
were already goldsmiths. Thawardas: ‘Most of the goldsmiths in this region were Chinese. Take Thailand,
take Vietnam, take Malaysia, take Indonesia, take Singapore, take Hong Kong, for a goldsmith, someone
dealing in gold jewelry, in gold, for them to expand in diamond jewelry was a very natural step’. But as
wholesalers, at least in Singapore, they did not last and they had trouble finding successors for
their businesses: ‘second, third generation, they all faded away’.

The money in the diamond trade is made at the rough end and at the retailers end. The higher
end of the trade is still said to be firmly in the hands of De Beers and the privileged Jewish
diamond dealers, but as I have already said; their position is being eroded away. The retailers end
in Singapore is the domain of the Chinese. This makes sense because of the profit margins in
retail but also because Singapore is Chinese and the majority of the Singaporean consumers are
Chinese. In this business consumers like to buy from their own kind, at least that is Solomon
Kunari’s observation: ‘The margins you make in the retail is much more than in wholesale, that is why the
Chinese are going to the retail (...) You don’t see that many Indians in retail, because people won’t buy as much
from them I suppose, people like to buy from their own culture (...) people just feel more comfortable with their own
people’.

5.6 How to Keep the Network Stable

As members of the DES and of the WFDB, dealers agree to abide by the international laws of
the federation, which help the diamond dealers to conduct their business and to resolve internal
disputes. These internal disputes hardly ever come out in the open. The business is ‘self-cleaning’,
but these self-regulations have led to an image of a trade as being closed, secretive, and prone to
shady business practices in which ‘morals’ seem of secondary importance. An important
disciplinary action is to suspend traders who do not abide by the internal rules. There is at least
one arbitration case every week in New York or other major centers. There is seldom an

40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Interview Solomon Kunari 7-6-2005.
arbitration case in Singapore. The last case the DES handled happened two or three years ago, and it did not even reach the final stage of arbitration, as there was a successful mediation before the case reached this stage. But this does not mean there are never conflicts. The conflicts that arise are generally between dealers and retailers. The Jewish dealers are mostly wholesalers. ‘You don’t sell from wholesaler to wholesaler. You sell to shops so there is no conflict whatsoever. I never heard of a conflict between them’. But what about the different ethnicities which are involved in the trade in Singapore? How is it possible that traders unknown to one another seemingly do not hesitate to consign stock worth millions of dollars to other traders of different ethnic background?

The rules and obligations of the diamond bourses say that if you agree to arbitration, you have to follow the verdict of this arbitration. Some bourses allow for an appeal, but once the appeal process is heard the verdict is final. You are not supposed to go to court to start a new law suit. If for whatever reason a person does not want to accept a verdict, the person is expelled. If you are expelled this means that in practical terms you are out of the business. Internationally and sometimes nationally (if you live in a large country like China) you can move to another city and conduct your business under another name or as another company, and a suspension might be overlooked. Ramesh Thawardas, the former president of the DES, suggested that there is still a fair amount of trust in the business between ethnicities. The greater part of the business is still being done by word of mouth, without any written documentation. This style of doing business is basically still the same as it was in the old days. The Jewish diamond dealers have laid the groundwork and principles which other ethnic groups in the trade still follow. They still maintain the code which has characterised the trade for more than a century now. ‘My word is my honour’ and similar agreement, a handshake or whatever; there is this Jewish term called ‘Mazal U’brachah’ the Gujarati use it all the time. Even the Chinese use it.

Savi Kunari would say that his business ‘does not need too many hands’. The more levels that are involved, the riskier the deals are. For him the key to success in the diamond business is the combination of knowledge, luck, good friends and of course customers. But more than anything else you have to be honest and sincere. You have to be a gentleman in this trade. ‘Other dealers honor you, trust you with diamonds worth millions of dollars. They send you goods. If you don’t want them you are obliged to send the same goods back’. Worth a thousand dollars per carat, the value of these diamonds can be up to S$500,000. If you are not utterly straight, the other dealers will be able to notice this at once. For Kunari, dishonesty won’t work in this business. Kunari: ‘We don’t even doubt integrity of each other. I go to some shops in town. I can leave with them hundreds of thousands of dollars of goods without signature, without receipt. Five lots I gave to him. And each lot costs maybe 200,000, 300,000 or 500,000. And he tells me tomorrow that I did not give him five, but four, I cannot take him to court. I cannot sue him. It’s a matter of trust and confidence’.

For Kunari, being Jewish is not helpful in the business. To do this business, he says, you have to be a good man, a gentleman. ‘At the beginning, the people sent us $500,000 worth of stock. And not knowing anything, we went around to try to sell and establish contacts and clients. If we were dishonest, we would

44 Interview Jean Pinsky 17-2-2005/3-3-2005/2-6-2005.
45 In Hebrew-Yiddish ‘mazzel und broche’ means ‘luck and blessing’.
46 Interview Ramesh Thawardas. Singapore. Date: 16-6-2005.
48 Ibid.
Diamond trader networks

not have lasted this long, if the other side would have been dishonest, it would not have lasted this long.\(^{49}\) It is this credit system and the organisation of a stock, which are most particular to this trade, and that need further investigation.

5.7 Assessing the Value of the Diamond

Every diamond is unique; unique in shape, colour, clearness and weight. Just a few diamonds already represent millions of dollars in value. Consumers express very specific wishes. Standardisation is therefore difficult. This is why it is also difficult for a firm to keep an individual stock which would enable it to meet the specific wishes of the customers. In the credit system the business developed an infrastructure in which the possibly wide arrays of the demands of consumers may be met. The trade has been looking for a way to balance the singularity and commodification of the diamond. The singularity of the diamond has been under pressure because of new marketing and branding techniques. Organisationally the consumer’s choice has been made limited without jeopardising the singularity, the uniqueness, of every diamond.

The traditional tools to designate the intrinsic value of a diamond are the four C’s: carat, clarity, cut and colour. Some say that a fifth C, ‘the certificate’, has also entered the scene.\(^{50}\) These certificates or grading reports are issued at specialized institutes like the Gemological Institute of America (GIA). The carat is a unit of weight. The colour grade differentiates diamonds from colourless to light yellow. Clarity refers to the flawlessness of the diamond’s internal composition. And the cut has to do with shapes like the brilliant, the emerald, the oval, the pear, and many other different shapes. Of course, designating a way of measuring these Cs is subjective. Carat; is bigger really more beautiful? Colour; why is one colour preferred to another colour? Clarity; what does flawlessness say about our focus on beauty? These and other questions make it obvious that these standards of measurement are not absolute.

This original understanding in the trade of the ‘objective’ measuring of these four Cs - confirmed by the fifth C, the certificate - still holds and still is vital to the valuation of diamonds. There are no signs that there are fundamental shifts in taste or aesthetics relevant to assessing these pieces of compressed carbon. But what will happen when commodification ‘markers’ get stronger and eventually exercise their power to add extra ‘signs’? At the moment the acknowledgement of a standard way of valuing a diamond means that everybody in the business is still talking more or less the same language.

Everybody understands that extra value is added when someone famous has worn a diamond. When a diamond is put in a piece designed by a famous brand designer, extra value is added as well. The same stone may be worth ten times the ‘original’ price when it is set in and marketed as a Louis Vuitton brooch. This added value undermines the intrinsic valuation of the diamond. The ‘external’ processes which add extra value to the diamond go beyond the five Cs. They cannot be measured. And this is exactly what is happening in the trade. The trade is being squeezed between forces of singularity and commodification, and commodification seems to be winning. The major diamond supplier, De Beers, is already looking for strategic partnerships with designer labels like Louis Vuitton. De Beers has even started to brand its own name in newly opened stores. These developments are changing the nature of the trade. What does this mean for the

\(^{49}\) Ibid.

\(^{50}\) Shield, R.R. (2002: 19).
way in which the trade has been organised, and what does it mean for the position of Jewish dealers and firms in the trade?

The traders have developed a credit system to overcome the problem of their holding a limited stock. It is a system in which their stones are exchanged with those of other dealers or with retailers with the prospect that the money will be paid once the stone is sold. To consign diamonds freely on credit can only work when diamond price levels fluctuate within limited margins, and when there is trust. Such a credit system needs stable price to be set. It is important to maintain confidence in the diamond as an asset. The Central Selling Organisation (CSO), which distributes the diamonds from the sources, and De Beers, together referred to as ‘the syndicate’\(^\text{51}\), have managed to maintain this stability. The monetary value of the diamond has to be kept stable so that it is a trustworthy asset to trade in. Implementing this policy has always been important in the diamond industry.

It has, however, become increasingly difficult to keep the monetary value of the diamond stable. In the past De Beers was able to control most of the supply of rough diamonds. The CSO and De Beers had to take action to keep control because of illicit diggings in African countries, for instance, and have had to manipulate the market in order to compete with independent traders who could get hold of diamonds from other sources. But the increasingly large scale of leakages of rough diamonds from major producers to the outside market has become unmanageable. And it is not only these leakages that have become a problem. The way in which De Beers has been manipulating and monopolising the market has also been subject to critique. The syndicate was accused of opportunistic and ethically questionable dealings, and their dealings are therefore regularly under investigation. The strong secretive features of the organisation, which look very much like collusion, are indicted in law suits which examine antitrust laws to counteract cartel monopolies and illegal price settings\(^\text{52}\). How was it that this questionable organisational pattern evolved?

5.8 How to Expand the Network: the Credit System

A credit system is used in the market for ‘polished’ stones. This makes the issue of trust important. Dealers give stones in consignment to other dealers or to retailers. Dealers have to wait for their money until a stone is sold. This credit system facilitates sufficient turn-over. According to one of the dealers, there would not be so many deals if cash payment would be required. Eric Brody: ‘Basically if the business is only a cash business, you only have 10% of the business being done…; it takes time for the money’\(^\text{53}\). The point is that a stone might have changed hands several times before it reaches the end of the distribution line, where the buyer is identified, where it is sold and where the money is collected from the buyer. This would not be possible if there were formal precautions and consequently costs and delays in every transaction in the distribution line.

An obvious risk with this credit system is that in the ‘polished’ trade dealers might capitalise on deals which are not closed yet, and because of this ignore their solvency. This makes trust and integrity an even more important factor in the business. The diamond business is one of the last businesses where your integrity, where your reputation was everything. When somebody slurred your reputation or

\(^{51}\) Ibid.; 29.


\(^{53}\) Interview Eric Brody 10-9-2003.
Diamond trader networks

The period of credit is negotiable. A period of three months is often agreed upon, but the period of credit is regularly extended to six months or even a year. The wholesaler tries to sell stones to other dealers or retailers who think they have better options to find buyers. Different deals are of course possible, depending on the risk each party wants to take. The more risk one is able to take, the more profit will be involved. Consignment is the form of transaction with the lowest risk. Paying cash is the highest. In between you have all kinds of credit arrangements. This part of the business is especially stressful for the wholesaler. To find potential customers is not a problem, but it is difficult to close a deal. There is always the question of trustworthiness: ‘The fear of how many good customers you have; it is not a problem of selling, you can sell a million a day, or ten if you want, but would you see the money back? When you collect, when you have the money in the bank, then you know that a sale is done, and profitable, otherwise anybody can close (a deal) on you anytime’.

Jean Pinsky is suspicious when too much glamour and luxury is added in operational management. ‘An Israeli came here having a huge office, why you need a big office? So, every time he wanted something, I said no. I give you, you give me cash. He took and he took (from others), and one day he disappeared.’ Of course there always will be dealers who are cheated. All dealers know the stories. The Achilles heel in this business is that when you want to sell, you have to give credit. At the same time this same credit system provides the dealers with a way to cope with dilemmas which are inherent in the diamond trade. Jean Pinsky: ‘Even big shops, people came and said I am a princess of Brunei, gave them credit, went to the hotel to deliver the goods, got a cheque, but in the end no princess and no money.

The Lucky Plaza in Orchard Road in Singapore, a sort of little Hong Kong, does not have a good reputation. Hong Kong is considered as a more important force in business than Singapore. Business in Hong Kong is considered to be keener. This mentality is reproduced by Hong Kong dealers when in Singapore. Jean Pinsky:

‘One Hong Kong dealer was opening with a show on the weekend. He pushed a Belgian manufacturer to give to him. You don’t need the goods, give me your goods. The fellow said give me more, give me more, why don’t you give me all and I will give to you Monday morning. Monday morning he said; I sold it. I will give you the money, a week, two weeks, oh, I can’t pay you because the fellow I sold it to is from Indonesia. The man said, give me the address, I will go there. He went to the street, doesn’t exist. Nothing. The poor man packed and left. But this is one of the many you know who...You can’t do business giving to somebody else to make you rich. These fellows appear from Hong Kong, stay here for one, two years and all of a sudden they jump. The locals very seldom, but the imported people (...) come with the idea of doing this originally’.

There are of course also other more official, networked, ways to find out about those dealers who are officially suspended. WFDB members can get access via internet to vital WFDB information on suspended traders. In an instant the whole diamond community worldwide is

---

54 Ibid.
55 Interview Jean Pinsky 17-2-2005/3-3-2005/2-6-2005.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
able to know when someone has crossed the line of what the community of dealers agreed upon as trustworthy dealing. The industry takes great care to keep the business clean internally. This is not so strange when you realise that the credit system is its Achilles heel.

It is a myth that dealers trust each other blindly in this credit system. The other’s trustworthiness, solvency and reputation are under scrutiny in every deal, maybe for only a split second, but it is certainly scrutinised. The reaction might be a gut feeling, or be based on gossip. Prejudices based on ethnicity, on who is local and who is an import, might be of importance. It is this amalgam of thoughts and feelings which crosses one’s mind, which is triggered by some small event, by a wrong expression or a good first face-to-face impression, that results in giving or not giving a mazzel when a deal is set up. It implies that a wide range of relevant fluids are relevant to the enactment of the networked diamond businesses. The aspect of trust is just one of many.

5.9 How to Cross Borders using Submarines

The ease with which diamonds can be transported has always been important to the value of these small stones. They are therefore thought to be especially desirable in stressful situations and places. You will find diamonds in places where life is uncertain, where there are wars, where people are on the move or on the run, and where capital has to flow easily from one side of a border to the other side. Following diamonds means following capital flows. These flows represent the constant interactions in and between networks, in which occasional border crossings stand in the way of a smooth flux, or where the relevant legislations are eager to confiscate a part of the flow in order to create a bigger benefit for the people inside the border.

Pinsky of Weiss, Shein & Co. started work in Penang when he was invited to come to this part of the world to engage in his uncles’ business. Penang was then a free port. Trading in diamonds was more difficult in Kuala Lumpur (KL), where much more paperwork was involved, and where you had to pay taxes. ‘You had a business in Penang, but you see, when the locals are smuggling and you can’t because you are so visible as a European, you couldn’t do it, so you wouldn’t do it’. These taxes were in effect till the late eighties and early nineties. Pinsky: ‘after that the government got the idea that it had no point putting taxes on diamonds because 99% was smuggled’. How did the dealers deal with these taxes? Weiss & Shein had to be conservative. With the reputation the firm had, it was not possible to evade regulations. Jim Iancu, a former partner at Weiss, Shein & Co.: ‘There is a lot of dealers who have done and continued to do business in Indonesia. We didn’t want to take the risk of bribing customs officials, smuggling goods, and if someone doesn’t pay you, you cannot do anything about it’.

The company tried to bring goods into Indonesia a few times on an experimental base. Iancu also once went to Jakarta. He didn’t have to smuggle diamonds into Jakarta by himself. The goods were delivered by third parties, the so-called submarines. For Weiss, Shein & Co. the solution was to do business and sell from Singapore. Pinsky, a former partner in Weiss, Shein & Co.: ‘What they (the buyers) do with the diamonds, you don’t care. If we sold directly, we did it very little for people who were, to show they have some bills. You know, they have diamonds in their shop and they must show they have some official bills, but that was, you know, nothing’.

59 As Brody said, there is no purpose in establishing the GST policies of different national territories at different times. With or without free ports, with low, high or non-existent tax rates, the diamond trade would continue.
60 Interview Jim Iancu 20-5-2005.
61 Interview Jean Pinsky 17-2-2005/3-3-2005/2-6-2005.
Diamond trader networks

Eric Brody’s father did business in Rangoon, Burma, in the late 1940s. Eric himself also went to Burma, to Saigon in Vietnam, and to Phnom Penh in Cambodia: ‘those places were exciting to me to do trading’ 62. For Eric Brody, once a partner in Weiss, Shein & Co. excitement was the reason why he started out for himself. He liked to travel in the region. Staying put in Singapore and waiting till the clients came to you was not his style. He started his firm, Saxon Gems, in 1987. His position as a middle-man was still crucial. ‘You had people in Indonesia, Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Semarang, Surabaya, those places all had people. Anxious people, with money, with a wealthy growing middle class coming in the late seventies, eighties’ 63. Eric Brody leaves it open whether he himself took the risk of carrying the diamonds or if he used a ‘submarine’. ‘Basically when you come into Jakarta, you can come in with a huge amount, and the customs officer knows perfectly well what you got, but he knows you, you slowly developed a relationship, you go to see your man, you pay him 100 US$ and whatever you want can come in (...). There are so many ways, they are small little objects, it is so easy to put in one’s pocket, one’s linen’ 64.

Most of the diamond dealers are open and confirm that there is considerable traffic in diamonds crossing borders semi-legally or illegally. This does not mean that they themselves were involved in this semi-legal trafficking, but from an entrepreneurial point of view it does not make sense if you just wait for the customers to come to you. The trade is too dynamic for this. Linda Koenig, diamond and jewelry dealer in Jakarta: ‘Everyone is doing it. If you don’t join the party we can not do our businesses, if I pay let’s say 60-70 on import tax and the Chinese don’t do it, how can I do my business? It is not because of the grudge, but it is the truth. They don’t pay, or if they pay they pay under the table’ 65. Eric Brody: ‘Well this is a sensitive point. I would say that most of the business is done by what we call submarines. Submarines, I don’t want to use the word smuggling on tape, but it comes to the same thing basically. (...) So, it’s nonsense, forget about paying taxes, nobody does it, nobody even knows about the taxes in this business. (...) Please don’t bother asking people about taxes, because they think your knowledge is limited. (...) Basically nobody is paying the tax. If you are paying the tax you would be bankrupt in no time at all (...) the margins are so small, even when they put the tax at 5-10%. We are expected to make a fair, small margin and likewise it is understood that they will want us to make a living. We cannot say a 1000$ and sell for 50$. You see the most we can give them is two, three percent (tax) more or less’ 66.

Weiss, Shein & Co. operated as wholesalers on this intermediate level. They had experienced the heydays of the business back in the 1950s and 1960s and their business was flourishing. They were able to live luxuriously from their trade. In the seventies the future was still promising. Other family members joined the business. A nephew, Jean Pinsky and Iancu Sr.’s younger brother, Yonel Iancu, came from Israel to join them. Another nephew, Bausch, also joined but not for long. He went to Australia to establish his own diamond business. Once in Singapore

---

62 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Linda Koenig is a second-generation Indonesian from Jewish descent, born in 1951. She is a diamond dealer and manufactures jewelry. She opened her first shop in 1974. Her Jewish descent has not been made public. She is acquainted with the Vice Representative of the Jewish community in Indonesia. She has her workplace in an annexe behind her house, a luxury villa in the middle of the old city in Jakarta. Her grandfather was Friedrich Koenig. He was involved in the diamond trade. Her mother, Joyce, and her father opened the business in Jakarta in the early 1950s. Linda Koenig's father was raised as a catholic. Linda's father has never admitted that he has Jewish blood. If they asked him about his background he always said he was Greek. Linda tells that her father was hiding his Jewish background. 'He is very scared. He is a very hati-hati man. He is cautious. We live here and people don't like it'. She has a lot of friends in Catholic circles that say to her, 'Let's go there, Let's go to Israel, and then we will find out', but she's too afraid to upset her mother. She showed me a menorah that she recently ordered via the internet. 'A few year more from now and I will sort it out. The time is not right now'. Interview Linda Koenig, Jakarta 18-12-2003.
Pinsky married the daughter of Iancu Sr. The wedding took place in Israel. At that time Jim Iancu, a son of Iancu Sr., also joined the business. These profitable years ended at the end of the 1980s. The increasing competition from other diamond centers, most notably from Mumbai, made the profit margins smaller. When the competition is getting tougher and the profit margins are getting smaller, a general rule in the trade is that you have to expand and ‘streamline’ or find some area of specialisation. The aim when streamlining the business is to eliminate and/or integrate levels in the distribution or production chain in order to reduce costs. The levels involved in the diamond business are the rough dealers, the cutters, the wholesalers, the middlemen and at the bottom end, the designers and retailers. When a firm tries to control different levels of the production and distribution chain, it most logically tries to eliminate the intermediate levels: the wholesalers or middlemen, and Weiss, Shein & Co. and the other dealers operated on exactly this level. They had to reconsider their role in the trade. De Beers’ new policies, which involved streamlining the trade and opening their own stores at the retail end, were squeezing them out.

5.10 Alternative Modes of Ordering: Jewish Ethno-Religiosity and Business Ethics

The idea which informs this section is that there are Jewish ethno-religious institutions or Jewish religious beliefs which intersect with the business practice in the diamond trade. Classical economics fails to explain why diamond dealers don’t just run off, carrying with them somebody else’s diamonds which are worth millions. Neither can these theories make sense of the credit system, the backbone of the diamond business. The *modus operandi* in this credit system is based on trust. ‘Culturalist’ explanations are sought for in family and extended ties in the Jewish ethno-religious community. Disciplining via these ethno-religious ties guarantees that the credit system is maintained. This has given the Jewish diamond dealers an economic advantage over outsiders and has kept non-Jewish dealers out.

What about Singapore and the Straits? This case study of the diamond trade focuses on Singapore, which is a peripheral region for the trade. In the central nodes of the trade, like New York or Antwerp, the trade is dominated by orthodox Jews. The Jewish ‘blood group’ of the dealers in Singapore is more diffuse. Only the Kunari’s are eastern orthodox Jewish. Weiss, Shein & Co. consisted of non-orthodox Ashkenazim. The members of this extended family have an ambiguous relationship with the community dominated by the orthodox Baghdadi Jews. Their commitment to the community is not unequivocal. Eric Brody hardly shows his face at the synagogue. He is more into the Far Eastern religions. Jim Iancu was active on the editorial board of Shalom Singapore, the periodical which is published by the Jewish Welfare board, but left after editing one or two issues. He was instrumental in making it possible for the US-based reformed Jewish United Hebrew Congregation (UHC) to start a chapter in Singapore. A foreign Jewish organisation like the UHC had to have local supporters to apply for such permission. This caused discontent with the orthodox community which accused him of dividing the community.

But it is also not true that they don’t feel any attachment to the community. The Brody’s still have a chair with their names on it in the synagogue. Until his passing away Brody Sr. still paid for these chairs, but they hardly make use of them. Eric Brody, who is also a photographer, was asked to take the photographs for a book commemorating the Chesed-El synagogue. His

---

67 See for instance: Richman, B.D (2005)
brother, Joe Brody, is a well-known lawyer and academic in Singapore. The community takes pride in his success. Jean Pinsky, Jim Iancu’s brother-in-law, goes to only the most important religious functions at the synagogue, like Jewish New Year and Pesach, but still honours his connection with the Israeli community. He attends Israeli community functions, like Remembrance Day, which are held in the venues of the Jewish community or at the top-end venues on Orchard Road. There is a strong sense within the local Jewish community of who is an outsider and who is an insider. There is a local division between Sephardic Jews and Ashkenazic Jews and there is a division even within the Sephardic part of the community. The part which is of Baghdadi descent is the dominant group. Other Sephardic Jews with different regional backgrounds, like the ones from Afghanistan, India or Turkey, are relative outsiders. However, they are still more closely connected with the local community than the Ashkenazic families.

The Ashkenazic diamond dealer families in Singapore are not very observant. Their rituals are different, their food is different, and they do not mix easily. Jim Iancu: ‘They didn’t accept us as part of the Jewish Community, although yes, we were Jewish’. As an Ashkenazi, Jim Iancu always felt an outsider. ‘They still feel that they are invaded by foreigners’. Jim Iancu explains the rift between the Ashkenazim and Sephardim historically. ‘In my grandfathers time there were very few Ashkenazim and they were quite well off, whereas the local Sephardim were quite numerous, a couple of thousands in those days. Most of them quite poor and they were quite envious’. The community was far from a unity. Shared customs did not help in creating a unity. What was dividing them was sometimes felt more strongly than what was holding them together.

European Jews were instrumental in having the trade expanded to Asia and its backwaters like the Straits - that is, the part of the trade which was connected with the newly found sources in South Africa and was later monopolised by the De Beers conglomerate. In regard to ethnicity, labelled here as ethno-religious fluids, a point of investigation was whether or not the Jewish rabbinical court, the Beth Din, the authoritative body of the Jewish legal system, would play a role in legislation in the diamond trade. There is no rabbinical court in Singapore. The nearest Beth Din is in Australia. The Diamond Dealer Center in Singapore (DDS) has never initiated arbitration in Australia. There has never been a precedent. This rabbinical court has been consulted by Singaporean Jews only in some familial matters like divorces. The dealers stress that most of their dealings are with local retailers. These dealings are occluded from the sight of the exclusive legislation of the diamond trade system. National legislation would solve these disputes. Trade between the local dealers is limited. Disputes between them have never reached the level of arbitration as they were settled before the disputes reached that stage, but it is not said that the disputes of local dealers with dealers outside Singapore are not dealt with in other Beth Dins.

As in Singapore, there have been hardly any arbitration cases in either Hong Kong, where the Chinese dealers dominate, or Mumbai, where the Gujarati dealers dominate. However it is too easy to draw the conclusion that the Chinese or the Gujarati part in the business has been growing substantially because of ethnic legal systems comparable with the ethnic ‘Jewish’ legal system. It is not claimed that a similar Chinese legal system stemming from Confucianism and for
the Palanpuri Jains stemming from Jainism would enforce the rules and work in a way similar to but independent of the dominant ‘ethnic’ Jewish legal system in the diamond trade. This line of reasoning would imply that there are divisions in the diamond trade along ethnic lines, as if these subsystems worked almost independently of one another and as if the dealers did not do business with one another. But this argument would be hard to sustain in the case of Singapore. In the Straits, Jewish diamond dealers deal with other ethnicities as well. They have to deal with one another. After all, were they to stick to their ‘own kind’, there would only be a few brethren around for the Jewish dealers to deal with.

Singapore has the only functioning orthodox Jewish community in the Straits area. There is simply no other place in the Straits where orthodox Jews can practice their religion. The grid in the local orthodox Baghdadi community is paramount. This also works for Jewish orthodox diamond dealers like the Kunaris. Members of the community who have started a new life in places like Sydney and Los Angeles still keep a(n) (emotional) bond with their ‘roots’ in the Straits. A functioning Jewish legal system with rewards and punishments would be possible if the Jewish Singaporean community members were strongly attached to their local community. The rabbi would then act as a mediator. But for non-Baghdadi dealers this is no option. As already said, in practice only familial matters like divorces have ever been taken to the Beth Din in Australia. Although the local rabbi would like to see it differently, business and religion are different matters for the majority of the dealers.

Diamond dealers with other ‘blood groups’ have a weak attachment to the local community. For them, Singapore is mostly a transit city. Singapore’s reach in the diamond trade is not confined to the Straits alone (any more). The diamond business has evolved into a global business with global connections. Because of the possibility of instant communication, the misdoings of a dealer in one part of the world are immediately known at the other side of the world. This mode of disciplining, which the globalisation of the trade has forced upon the dealers, weighs more heavily on them than one’s possible gain or loss of religious capital in the local community.

An Orthodox Jewish dealer accumulates religious capital when a prestigious marriage partner is found in an arranged marriage for one of his children. The idea is that the inter-generational prospects of the firm are guaranteed by your child’s marrying the right partner. In Weiss, Shein & Co. both of the later Co’s were partners in the business and partners of the marriageable daughters of the founders of the firm. The idea of arranged marriages does not appeal to the new generation of diamond dealers in Singapore. An inter-generational perspective of their business is absent. It is certainly not a way to accumulate ethno-religious capital or goods. They would rather see their children marry with someone they love, although the orthodox still prefer a Jewish match. The Weiss, Shein & Co. dealers were pessimistic about the prospects of the business in the Straits. Pinsky: ‘People might think that it is an interesting business, but it is not. It is a stupid business’. He has never advocated the possible entrance of one of his children into the business. The dealers’ children are well educated and pursue careers outside Singapore in the places where they were educated - in the United States or Australia. If they want to marry within Jewish circles, Singapore is not a good place to find a spouse.

---

75 See for this argument: Richman, B.D (2005).
76 Interview Ramesh Thawardas 16-6-2005.
What is seen as a way of accumulating ‘religious capital’ is ‘to give back to society’. Donations through charity are common in the Jewish community, and are thought to be a way to ‘measure’ one’s commitment to the community. Jewish businessmen have been generous in their donations. For example, out of forty beneficiaries for the Law Faculty of the National University of Singapore in the period 1991-2000, eight donors were Jewish businessmen or their trust funds. Weiss, Shein & Co. donated too. Such personal charity is meant to strengthen community life, but a more substantial and structural support comes from trust funds. These funds largely cover the operational costs of the two Singapore synagogues and pay for the wages of the rabbi, the chazan and the administrators of the Jewish Welfare Board in Singapore.

Charity or donating to the operational costs of the synagogue was a common practice in the diamond dealers’ community too. Chairs in the synagogue were bought for family members. Kipa’s (headcaps) were donated to provide guests who visit the synagogue with the required head covering. One could sponsor the daily synagogue breakfasts, the lunches after Sabbath service and the dinners at religious functions. But this interest in charity has not evolved naturally. One of the former treasurers of the Jewish Welfare Board (JWB), Mrs. Felice Isaacs, had to particularly convince the very rich to make charity a more communal matter rather than a private matter. As a former JWB member she made the effort to convince the richer members of the community to donate to the Jewish community. She became a trustee of eight trust funds: the Singapore Jewish Charities Trust, Reuben Meyer Trust, Abdullah Shooker Trust, Flora Shooker Trust, the Amber Trust, the Talmud Torah Trust and the Maghain Aboth Synagogue Trust. As a trustee of these funds she holds a key position in the community.

The community has examples of generous members in the community who have ‘epitomised the basic tenet of Sedekah and the Jewish spirit of giving’ by leaving (parts of) their fortunes to the Jewish community. Meyer Ezra Isaac, for example, who was born in Penang in 1899 and died in Singapore in 1989, made his fortune in the gramophone business as the sole distributor for His Master’s Voice gramophone records. Apart from the Red Cross and the St. Andrew Mission Hospital, he benefited two Singapore Jewish organisations: the Jewish Welfare Board and the Jewish Cemetery Fund. His assets were worth around S$28 million. Jacob Ballas, the relatively recently deceased former head of the Jewish Welfare Board, is another example.

An article was published in Shalom Singapore which explains the legal and financial in and outs of charity. A trust is one of the leading techniques for making charitable gifts. The article describes what the benefits of a trust fund are. One of the sermons of the Singapore rabbi in which he dealt with the issue of usury is exemplary. He stressed that a good Jew should be

---

77 http://law.nus.edu.sg/alumni/benefactors.htm last visited 8 August 2005. These numbers might be not so significant considering that Joe Brody, a member of the Jewish community, is a law professor at NUS.

78 It is therefore a relevant question to ask whether or not these charities from businesses stem from deeply felt Jewish obligations, or if the community in Singapore is adopting the (Jewish) American way of fundraising.


81 Shalom Singapore (1998) Issue Nr. 10. April. Family Trusts. Singapore: Jewish Welfare Board. An old idea for a new generation. The trust agreement is a private agreement between the settler and the trustee. The trustees can retain control over the amount, timing and purpose of the charitable gifts. The existence of the trust is highly confidential. There is a duality of ownership between trustee and beneficiaries, which means that neither is in control and that the trust is therefore not accessible to claims. Singapore taxes can be avoided when a trust is located in a tax-free jurisdiction.
nothing more than a cashier with regard to creditors, someone who is temporarily given a sum of money. The money is not yours, the rabbi stressed, and it is not a proof of good virtue to charge interest and keep this money to yourself. You have to do something with the money which is given to you. Charity, he stressed, is a good option.82

Jewish ethno-religious activities such as forming trusts or donating to charities lie in the realm of anthropology. Business sciences take another angle when looking at these ethno-religious matters. Their point of reference is the neo-liberal hero of rational choice who tries to maximise his profits, and their assumption is that business and religion are worlds apart from each other. In a relatively new discourse which is labeled ‘Jewish business ethics’83 the Jewish businessman is no longer allowed to think in terms of a separation of business and Jewish morals and religion. A ‘business is business’ attitude, in which a denial of religion-based moral dimensions in one’s behaviour as an entrepreneur is rejected. A businessman should act with a moral conscience, which entails more than profit seeking and maximising profits. In this discourse moral conscience is linked with Jewish religion. But it is exactly this link which the diamond dealers immediately dismiss as far-fetched. Their overall reaction is that business and religion have nothing to do with each other. Second thoughts generally produce some reconsideration on their part. Of course, moral values are passed on in one’s upbringing, and these are religion related especially in orthodox circles. The most pronounced one is ‘honesty’, which is not surprising given the fact that the organisational structure of the business is almost pinned down to trust. Honesty and trust go hand in hand. It is not surprising that trustworthiness in the observance of duties towards customers is mentioned as second determinant of behaviour. The diamond business is one of the last businesses where your integrity and your reputation are everything. If you agree to a deal you stick to the deal. Deals are generally settled with a handshake and the Yiddish words ‘Mazal und Broche’. These agreements have the same value as contractual agreements.

Weiss, Shein & Co. is regarded as a firm with a long-standing good reputation. Honesty and trustworthiness are their trademarks. The third generation of active dealers had to liquidate the firm, because they found that there was not enough common ground among the partners any more to continue the business. Seen from ‘end game’ logics of ‘conventional’ economics, when a firm is voluntarily liquidated, every partner will take as much for himself as possible, but in this case, the liquidation occurred in a respectful and trusting way. The inter-generational aspect was important here. Two of the partners were going to go on with the trade. There would have been considerable damage to their business prospects if the reputation of the firm was slurred. But this was not the only consideration. The manner of the liquidation was also a way to honour their predecessors in the firm. By liquidating the firm in a respectful way they showed their loyalty to the seniors in the firm. The two nephews who succeeded Weiss and Shein, Yan Brody and Iancu Sr., together with the Afghani Jew Savi Kunari, were the godfathers of the business in Singapore. Internationally they have a good reputation. Even dealers outside the Jewish circle use their names with great respect.

82 Personal observation while attending a service at the synagogue.
Diamond trader networks

The level of religious observance is thought to be important to the frame of reference for a dealer’s system of ethics. A dealer might typify ‘Jewish ethics’ in his dealings more as a cultural force rather than a religious force. The more orthodox, the more one would be inclined to allow religious belief into one’s daily trading activities. In the case of Weiss, Shein & Co., all the dealers who worked for the firm were non-orthodox Ashkenazic Jews. In settings with larger numbers of orthodox dealers, cutters and manufacturers, business ethics based on Jewish religious principles would be more relevant. For a possible influence of Jewish business ethics they point to the diamond business in New York and Israel. The Singapore region where they have to conduct their businesses is practically non-Jewish, and contacts between Singapore Jewish dealers are not frequent. Each dealer has his own network. Most of the business is done with non-Jewish retailers.

5.11 Another Alternative Mode of Ordering: the Fifth C of ‘Conflict Free Diamonds’

In 2006 the diamond community was horrified by the news of the violent death of a prominent diamond merchant in Antwerp. He belonged to the close-knit community of the ethno-religious Jains, all from the province of Gujarat in India. He was under suspicion of dealing in so-called ‘blood diamonds’ or ‘conflict diamonds’. The trade in these diamonds is controversial. It has a strong connotation with illegal money-laundering practices and the evasion of international codes of business conduct, and has been a means of financing the purchasing of weaponry for use in international war zones. Rebel groups in Africa were selling diamonds to finance their wars. The diamonds which were found in these war zones were sold via illegitimate dealers and ended in cutting centers in Antwerp or Tel Aviv. Initially the diamond business did not show an active interest in checking these practices. Internal discretion was seen as more important. In an earlier period this discretion or secrecy had already been applied during the time of apartheid to ensure the continuation of a smooth flow of diamonds from South Africa, the home base of De Beers. In spite of the world’s almost unanimous anti-apartheid stance and the concomitant official refusals to deal with South African firms, it was an open secret that diamonds were being laundered through a series of De Beers’ subsidiaries. This apparent lack of ‘ethics’ in the business has harmed the overall image of the trade.

At the beginning of the new millennium the South African government called together the involved parties: the industry, the NGO’s and the governments. Together they started the

---

84 The first Jain diamond dealers came to Antwerp in the 1960s. They had already been involved in the diamond business in India. They realised that, to get a larger proportion of the trade, they had to move to the centre of the trade, where the rough diamonds are divided and polished. The Jain clan that nowadays trades in Antwerp is tightly knit, having around 450 Indian families with a strong interrelation, numbering around 1800 persons. See: Dirks, B. (2006) Antwerpen wil Little Bombay niet kwijt. Volkskrant. 18-12-2006. p. 4. The ‘Hoge Raad voor Diamant’ in Antwerp estimates that at the cost of the Jewish traders the Jains now possess 60-70% of the trade in diamonds. It is not clear whether this percentage refers to the total number of transactions or to the total volume of the trade in US $. The Singapore dealers stress that Jews, by being active at the top segment of the trade, are indeed involved in lesser transactions, but that these transactions still represent the major part of the trade in value. The Economist Intelligence Unit (1992) states that 80% of all polished diamonds sold the world over pass through Indian hands, and while Indians hold 65% of the $26-billion business, the Jews have been reduced to holding 25%. The Volkskrant (Dirks, B. (2006)) considers the diamond business worth Euro 39-billion. In 1995 the business was estimated in a publication of the Hoge Raad van de Diamant and the Antwerp Convention Bureau to be worth $21-billion. (Hoge Raad van de Diamant & Antwerp Convention Bureau (1995) Antwerpen een diamantsprookje. Antwerp a diamond fairy tale).


Kimberley negotiations. The Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS) came into effect in 2003. The participating governments in this scheme agreed not to allow any rough diamonds into their territory without an approved KPCS (conflict free) certificate. The certificate makes it possible to trace a diamond to the place where it was mined. It was estimated that in the 1990’s that as high as 20% of the world’s diamonds were illicit - used for money laundering, to evade taxes, to buy drugs, weapons and other clandestine goods, or simply stolen. Apparently the Kimberley scheme has brought this percentage back to less than 1%, but the diamond trade and industry are still under pressure. A negative image does not fade away overnight. New and even stronger negative markers were projected when Hollywood became involved. The film Blood Diamond released in 2006 shows the ruthlessness of the trade and its traders in the Sierra Leonean war zone.

Dietrich puts forward in a report which investigates the illegal trade in diamonds, that these conflict diamonds are a small part of the total of illegally traded diamonds worldwide. This substantial illegal trade has long been tolerated by both the industry and governments. The industry and the trade do not tolerate interference, and keep saying that they are well capable of self regulation. Governments give mixed signals and allow a grey area in which there is room for ongoing discussions about zero-rating the business for example. In the meanwhile the result is what Van der Bunt calls an institutionalised pattern of behavior which is the result of what is best described by the specific Dutch word ‘gedoogbeleid’. This means that although things are officially forbidden there is a certain level of permissiveness in the implementation of the relevant laws.

In the Singaporean case, much as in the Belgian diamond trade, part of this permissiveness is the use of a fictive customer referred to as ‘Don Pedro’. Invoices to this fictive customer are widely used in business transactions to mask and evade import restrictions. The result is that there is only limited government control over the financial transactions within the diamond trade. The involved parties negotiate a ‘status apart’ for the diamond trade with respect to GST and other legal and semi-legal issues. This has allowed the emergence of a closed system with its own dynamics. This relatively free status provides an ideal cover-up for the trade in conflict diamonds. The flows of conflict diamonds could easily make use of the already institutionalised semi-legal flow of diamonds crossing borders, evading financial and legal control.

Until the late 1990s, other than in the NGO world there was little international interest in the excesses of the diamond industry. The diamond wars in Sierra Leone, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have changed the situation. A campaign in which NGO research organisations together with UN expert panels cooperated has put the issue of conflict diamonds on the agenda. A strong lobby caused the image of the diamond to change from that...
of a ‘girl’s best friend’ to a commodity drenched in blood. The message was clear: the industry had to know that the consumer wants only conflict-free diamonds. In addition to the four Cs (clarity, color, cut and carat) there was now another C; that of Conflict-free. This conflict-free image seems to have been a Western marker only. It has not reached the Far East. It is not (yet) an issue in those parts of the world. The dealers in the Straits, of course, know about blood diamonds, but customers don’t seem to ask for conflict-free diamonds. On the administration side, Singapore’s Ministry of Trade and Industry participates in the Kimberley Process Classification Scheme (KPCS) and provides dealers with a template for a Kimberley Process Licence Application. In applying for the license one agrees to import and export rough diamonds controlled under the scheme. Abiding to this scheme dealers agree to import and export rough diamonds only from and to participants of the KPCS. It seems to be a paper tiger only. One of the dealers is ambiguous over the government’s intervention. According to him Singapore is already restrictive in many other ways. Pinsky: ‘It's such a small place (...) you can’t dispose of diamonds here (...) it is so much controlled by the government. It is not Hong Kong, here is not Bombay. Here thank God from every point of view we are secluded (...) they have so many barricades here, GST controls and that and this, you know it is like in a fish bowl, and you can’t hear’. It remains a question if and to what extent the government’s intervention will influence the practice of the diamond trade effectively.

5.12 New Nodes and Israeli Diamond Dealers in Singapore

The negative, opportunistic image of the diamond trade has affected the power base of the old cartel. Because of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the civil wars in African countries, and the discovery of new mines, De Beers is increasingly losing control over the supply of diamonds. De Beers’ position is undermined by the powerful block of the Russian diamond industry. Russia is said to supply only 50% of their diamonds via the Diamond Trading Company (DTC), since 2001 the successor of the De Beers-controlled Central Selling Organisation (CSO). The other fifty percent is sold to Russian manufacturers. It is impossible to monitor this separate flow. There is a suspicion that Russia is holding back diamonds in order to create a stock as insurance in times of economic crisis. Russia would be able to manipulate the market via this stock, the volume of which is said to be bigger than De Beers’ ever held. It is argued that this Russian stockpile is the main reason that De Beers changed its policies and is looking for other ways to organise the diamond business and trade. After all, the Russians are now able to manipulate the market in the same way that De Beers has been able to for decades.

But there are more threats to the diamond cartel. One threat comes from Israel which has increasingly become an important player in the diamond market. Lev Leviev is an Israeli tycoon from Tel Aviv. He is a close friend of former president Vladimir Putin of Russia. Leviev has mines in Russia, Angola, Namibia and Congo. He is trying to get a foothold in Botswana as well. Botswana is an important African supplier of diamonds but, with a 15% share in the stock of De

94 Interview Jean Pinsky 17-2-2005/3-3-2005/2-6-2005.
CHAPTER 5

Beers, it still is very much De Beers oriented. In order to detach the African countries from the power base of De Beers Leviev is opening cutting factories in Africa, for instance in Windhoek, Namibia. The aim is to create goodwill in diamond producing African countries. Leviev gives African diamond countries the opportunity to prove that it is false to assume that it is better not to have diamonds cut in Africa. He is appealing to African self consciousness, which is of course a powerful message in uplifting morals on the African continent.97

In the Second World War Jewish diamond traders in Antwerp were robbed of their belongings by the German Gestapo. After the war only half of the Jewish families came back to Antwerp. The other half did not survive the Holocaust, or emigrated.98 Emigration to Israel was one of the options. It is not clear how many of the diamond traders and workers chose this option, but they must have contributed to the establishment of Tel Aviv as one of the leading diamond centers in the world. In the early nineties there were about 10,000 workers cutting diamonds in Tel Aviv and its direct environments. But the old center, Antwerp, also saw an influx of Israelis. Georgian Jews came from Georgia in Russia, via Israel, to Antwerp.99 A number of Israeli dealers have sought opportunities in the Far East, in Thailand and now also in China. This ‘Israeli Diaspora’ was also visible in Singapore. A substantial number of Israeli traders were active in the diamond business in Singapore.

One of these traders’ families is the Charny family. Izik Charny is a second-generation Israeli. His parents were born in Israel. Both of his grandmothers and grandfathers are from Tashkent and Bukhara in Uzbekistan. Izik’s parents were not involved in the diamond trade but he has a wide range of other family members who are. Some uncles in New York and in Australia deal in diamonds. While growing up in Israel he was slowly introduced into the business and learned some cutting. After his military service he went to Australia. ‘After the army you just want to go on holidays’. More and more Israeli men, after fulfilling their military duty, go abroad and enter a sort of liminal stage in their lives, to test limits and abilities, to get away from the war, and to be exposed to new experiences and challenges.100 For Izik Charny it was a way of finding out in what kind of business he should start. It was not an option to start in Israel. He visited his cousins in Australia where he got an offer to start working for an American diamond trader’s house in Singapore. Singapore was not new to him. An older brother and another cousin already resided in Singapore. The American company which Izik started to work for was considered, together with Weiss & Shein, as the biggest trading house in Singapore. He left when the company had to apply for Chapter Eleven in New York. The partners encouraged him to start his own business and promised to support him. Izik applied for permanent residence in Singapore. He is still working on an employment pass today.

His direct family only slowly got involved in Izik’s business. Izik: ‘Sometimes you don’t want to involve so much of your family, you know. The biggest thing is when you have your own goods. From time to time you get

100 Interview Izik Charny 30-3-2004.
Diamond trader networks

Stronger. You sell, put the money back. Sell, put the money back. Diamonds, usually you don't have much liquid. Everything is in the diamond. But that makes you the strong kind of thing. And when you decide you are strong enough, then you can decide to start to put some money out.103

Another Israeli firm was run by Ari Massoud. Massoud established his trading office in Singapore in 1986. When interviewed he was preparing to leave Singapore and to resettle in Israel. He had some side-activities in Singapore as well. He did some administrative work at the Embassy’s premises. Massoud’s grandparents came from Bukhara in Uzbekistan. His immediate family was not involved in the diamond business. His aunt’s husband, a Belgian Jew named Rachman, inspired him to go into the diamond trade. He learned the ins and outs of the diamond trade in Israel and moved to New York to work, but this did not work out well: “I was a little bit too young. New York was a little too big for me. I was alone, didn’t make much money, worked very hard, New York is the hardest. You have to have the utmost knowledge, and you have to be on the edge all the time, it just overpowered me, I didn’t think I had enough knowledge to tackle my life.”104

The same Rachman offered him a job in Singapore. He wanted Ari to close a company which owed Rachman money. He was added as a partner to look after Rachman’s interest. After three months the partners asked him to stay and make a restart. Massoud took the offer, but three years later the two other partners fell out. In 1986 Massoud went on his own, keeping the same name of the company - ProGems. Massoud has already been in Singapore for 23 years. His main markets now are Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. With a double passport (Israeli and British) he has no problems in travelling to Indonesia and Malaysia, but his interest is in China. Everybody in the trade is closely watching the progress of the Chinese. He considers the developments in China to be the biggest revolution in the diamond industry. Restrictions on doing business in China are still putting brakes on the new developments, but as he argues; “there is new money which is dying to be spent. I have a friend that knows of a jewelers shop in China that was promoting one ring, which was sold for $2000, in a month he sold 2500 of those. You work out the numbers.”105

It is this same money from China which is said to be keeping Singapore alive as a shoppers’ paradise. Singapore used to attract lots of weekend visitors from Jakarta and Malaysia, but this has changed. Elites in the region have decided to spend their money locally as well. All of the shops selling branded goods have established themselves in the mega malls in Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur as well, but as a center with many branded shops Singapore is still attractive to new generations of Chinese consumers who go on a shopping spree and, according to Massoud, spend “tons of cash.”106

Larry Yung, a Chinese investor and the second richest man in China, bought 17 million stocks from the Anglo-American mining company. De Beers watchers consider this an indication that the Oppenheimer family is withdrawing from the mining part of the business. They don’t want to rely on the rough diamond part of the business any more. The Oppenheimer part now amounts to only 2.29% of the total stock of the Anglo-American mining company, but they still own 40% of the stocks in De Beers. This is seen as a strong signal that the Oppenheimer dynasty is giving up their strategy of controlling the market via control over the supply of rough diamonds at the mines themselves. Their Anglo-American mining company is said to be on the brink of a take-

\[\text{103 Interview Izik Charny 30-3-2004.}\]
\[\text{104 Interview Ari Massoud 27-6-2005.}\]
\[\text{105 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{106 Ibid.}\]
over by the Russians, another serious candidate for buying them out\textsuperscript{107}. The De Beers market share shrunk to 65\%. This is not enough for them to keep a firm grip on the supply side. This new policy was inevitable\textsuperscript{108}. This implies that there will be some dramatic changes in the organisation of the De Beers business.

De Beers no longer wanted to be listed as a public company. In 2001 it was announced that De Beers’ major shareholders were buying the company\textsuperscript{109}. A new, transparent, De Beers free of conflict diamonds has to be designed via strategic partnerships with renowned brands in the field of fashion and design, like Moet Hennessy Louis Vuitton (MHLV). The focus is on increasing the demand for diamonds and jewelry by laying the accent on the marketing of the diamond. De Beers is encouraging their clients to streamline their business, and at the retail end De Beers has opened stores which sell guaranteed ‘conflict free’ diamonds. This means that they have started to compete with their own customers, who receive their rough diamonds via the DTC and the sight holders.

The DTC’s choice of sight holders has changed as well. Preference is given to sight holders who invest in these new policies and who are willing to go along with De Beers’ streamlining concepts. The exclusivity of being a sight holder is no longer automatically given to the old, respectable and trustworthy (Jewish) diamond houses. New sight holders are appointed from traditionally lesser acknowledged regions like India, Israel and China. Of course, these changes do not happen overnight and they also have consequences for the (Jewish) diamond dealers in Singapore.

5.13 Two Generations of Diamond Dealers and Future Scenarios

How are the diamond dealers in Singapore dealing with the new situation, and what does it mean for the way in which they conduct their business? Weiss, Shein & Co., as one of the old-time main players, failed to anticipate the new developments in the trade. They went on operating in a general way, ‘dealing in all qualities, colours, shapes and sizes’\textsuperscript{110}, in much the same way as they had always done. It was difficult to abandon the habits of the past, when the business was still flourishing. In the end Weiss, Shein & Co. did not need to opt for a new direction in their business. When Yan Brody, the last of the two second-generation directors died, Weiss, Shein & Co. ‘imploded’. There was an irreconcilable difference of opinion among the family shareholders about what to do with the business. They decided to voluntarily liquidate the firm.

After the voluntarily liquidation, Jean Pinsky, one of the nephews who joined Weiss, Shein & Co. in the seventies, started his own business. Pinsky’s offices are located at the Far Eastern Shopping Centre. He is one of the older generations of (Jewish) diamond dealers in Singapore. He complains that being a wholesaler he is operating in the ‘wrong’ part of the business: ‘The

\textsuperscript{107} Vermeulen, B. (2006).
\textsuperscript{108} This new policy has been designed by a new director of the Oppenheimer clan, Nicky Oppenheimer, who took over the position of his father Harry Oppenheimer (1957-1994), who, in turn, had taken over from his own father, Ernest Oppenheimer, the founder of Anglo-American, which in 1926 became the largest shareholder in the De Beers cartel founded in 1888 by Cecil Rhodes. Ernest Oppenheimer was from a large German Jewish family. ‘He was in many ways the prototype of the multinational businessman: German by birth, British by naturalisation, Jewish by religion, and South African by residence’. At: http://www.edwardjayepstein.com/diamond/chap8_print.htm last visited 27/4/2007.
\textsuperscript{109} The amount that was mentioned was $17.6 billion US dollars. Vermeulen, B. (2006).
money is being made at the top, in rough trading, and at the bottom of the distribution chain, the retailers' end: But how to adapt? For him, and for most of the other Jewish wholesalers, it is not an option to go along with the idea of streamlining their business and inevitably increase their scale and scope. This new way of operating the business would require considerable investment. More than that, it involves changing to a modus operandi that would erase their position as dealers. The concentration would be on bulk demand, and on the consumers’ wishes, which lie in between the top and the lower end. The valuation of the diamond would no longer be designated only by the four Cs, carat, clarity, cut and colour. Branding and marketing in the retail segment would be a major factor.

When retail becomes more important, the question remains whether or not Jewish-owned stores or chains would be able to attract enough customers. The ethnic component is important here. Is the consumer motivated by branding and marketing strategies only, or is he still led by ethnic incentives when purchasing diamonds and jewelry? Will the Chinese still buy at Chinese stores, the Indians at Indian stores, and the Malays at Malay stores? Or would they instead choose to shop for a branded Massoud special ‘Queen’s cut’, a heart which is made of three diamonds, two half moons and a princess cut, or a Kunari line of jewelry? The lower end of the diamond segment is already the domain of the Gujaratis. The most logical option for Jewish dealers is to specialise at the high end of the business. This is what Solomon Kunari is doing. He concentrates on the big and expensive stones which still need a specialist’s eye and an extensive network. The old competitive advantage of an extensive Jewish network in combination with the impracticability of standardising at the higher end of the diamond business is expected to preserve their share. This would mean that the credit system would still remain organisationally valid for the time being at this high end of the business.

The vice-president of the Singapore bourse, Ramesh Thawardas, has offices on the same floor as Jean Pinsky. He belongs to the new generation of diamond dealers. He epitomises the shift in the system. He is trying to adapt to the new circumstances that the trade offers. According to him the diamond dealers in Singapore are reluctant to adapt to the new ideas in the business. ‘They are still trading diamonds, rather than marketing the diamond. His policy is to be more open. This is reflected in his spacious and bright offices, which are decorated with Indian artifacts and have a well designed interior. The entrance is welcoming and very different from the small fortresses other dealers have.

It is not odd that the Jewish diamond dealers are not happy with these new policies. They have to say goodbye to the unique way of practising their business, which is based organisationally on the trustworthiness that was said to exist within close Jewish family ties. From an organisational point of view you might say that their system was an early attempt to streamline and save (transaction) costs. As the trade grew, this mode of organisation had to reach beyond (extended) family ties. This resulted in the institutionalising of a credit system in which Jewish domination in this trade was combined with an inter-ethnic modus operandi in which a good reputation and trust were essential. This credit system was a way of coping with the increase in the scale and scope of the trade. This was still managed within ethnic boundaries or by an extension of it, in which ‘outsiders’ were obliged to adapt to the rules which were set by a Jewish-dominated centrally-organised distribution system with an intricate set of self-regulating business rules. The diamond

111 Interview Jean Pinsky 17-2-2005/3-3-2005/2-6-2005.
112 Interview Ramesh Thawardas 16-6-2005.
itself, as an actant, sometimes worth hundreds of thousand of dollars, still needed to go from hand to hand before it reached the end of the distribution line.

In these most recent adaptations in the trade, the diamond does not need to be so mobile anymore. Instead of having the ‘unique’ diamond brought to them, the clients will have to come to the branded shops which sell branded specialities. The diamond will be more accessible to a greater public which is not hampered by too much traditional knowledge about the four Cs. But at the top-end, specialised Jewish dealers will still serve those who are willing and able to pay for real exclusiveness rather than brand exclusiveness.
6. Enacting the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits: FJ Benjamin, Brand behind the Brands

6.1 Introduction

The catwalk, spotlights, cameras, beautiful models at upbeat exhibitions, hip parties and trendy shows are all part of the high glamour fashion feast which is organised each year to turn Singapore into a regional fashion hub. National organisations like the Singapore Tourist Board, the International Enterprise (IE) and the National Heritage Board join hands and cooperate in the annual editions of Singapore’s Fashion Festival. The festival and Singapore’s fashion retail had been concentrating on well-known high-end international brands and on the high-spending fashion-savvy tourist from the region. This orientation changed in 2004. The aim now is to include Singaporean designers in the festival too. The thinking is that Singapore should be more than a shopping heaven for only branded clothes, and that the city needs to have its own fashion labels to show the world that ‘glocal fashion’ is alive and well in Singapore. But the spotlights, catwalk and models are not enough to make a fashion hub. It has to be grounded in inspiration and creativity. Is Raffles City (a high-end Singapore shopping mall) indeed ‘the next best city to Milan for fashion’? Do Asian fashion designers like Sven Tan, Nic Wong and K Mi Huang have the drive and talent to make it on the international scene? Singapore is receptive to fashion and could well be the home for an Asian label which is popular even in Europe and the United States, but this is still in the future. The perception is that designs which come from the East are too culturally derivative. There is too much focus on the idea that East meets West instead of creating unique ‘grounded’ international trends. But what would it take to make Singapore a big name in the world of fashion? How could the city capture the fancies of the consumers? Fashion is a lucrative trade which requires strong business acumen.

FJ Benjamin thinks it has this acumen. His is one of the leading Southeast Asian fashion firms in the Straits, but there is something special about it. Whereas when speaking in ethnic or ethno-religious terms, businesses in the region are predominantly Chinese, FJ Benjamin has a Jewish identity. FJ Benjamin’s executive officers are of Iraqi Jewish descent. But is it a Jewish family firm? Stating this bluntly in front of the FJ Benjamin’s CEO would raise some eyebrows. After all they are listed on the Singaporean stock exchange and they are supposed to run a commercial, western type of business. But this does not rule out the possibility that, Jewish ethno-religious resources are not put to use in the business. This is the leading question in this chapter. If FJB puts its Jewish ethno-religious identity to use in their businesses, how do Jewish rules, ethics or laws, at individual or communal level (the J-factor) intervene in their business? Does this factor give them an advantage or, on the contrary, is FJB’s business hampered because of this J-factor?

This chapter provides a track record of FJ Benjamin’s (FJB) businesses as a networked organisation as a way of attempting to answer this question. A rich, thick and extensive description will be given of the ups and downs of FJB at the end of the twentieth century and well into the first decade of this new millennium. First, the core actants in fashion around which

---

1 The Straits Times Singapore. 1-4-2004. Singapore Fashion Festival Special. In Singapore there is no free press the way the democratic West would like to see it. The press is government controlled. The Straits Times is the national Singapore newspaper. Singapore print is dominated by Singapore Press Holdings (SPH). This publisher is government-linked and publishes daily newspapers like the Business Times and the Straits Times. Today, a free English-language tabloid (regularly used in this thesis as a source) is published by the state-owned broadcaster Mediacorp. The newspapers are very much pro-business. The news that they bring is not objective. It should be seen in the light of that government control.

2 The Straits Times Singapore. 8-4-2004. Life! Fashion.
the FJB networked organisation has been built are identified. Then the organisation is further unraveled by looking at strategies to keep control of the firm, the firm’s labour policies, their access to capital, their succession strategies, and matters relating to generational differences. Their strategies to cross borders in the Straits are investigated particularly in relation to anti-Semitic influences in the region, and finally the chapter looks at the fact that the business is anchored in the Straits, as against its involvement with the Jewish Diaspora homeland Israel.

6.2 From Garment Trade to Branding

Everyone is involved with fashion every day. People wear clothes for practical reasons. They wear them to attract, to reveal emotions, to include and to exclude, and to make themselves identifiable and distinguishable. Fashion represents a complex variety of connections which, in the professional world of fashion, are organised in globally integrated networks. A fashion item can be made of cotton, silk or linen, it might be half synthetic, or it might be made out of wool. Just one button on a jacket sleeve represents totally different production combinations from the yarn of which the button hole of this same jacket is made. They are parts of the orderings in a world of conscious and unconscious attachments of materials, products, signs, identities and meanings which create fashion items. The world of fashion is about brands. The fashion industry creates brands through marketing and advertising. A fashion brand is a combined relational materiality which in itself is composed of many different relational materialities or actants. Each actant, if studied separately, would open up a new world of investigation.

The fashion industry is one of the most geographically dispersed industries. Most countries used to have some domestic clothing production. Of course the textile and apparel networks have changed in time and space. Jews have always played a dominant role in these changes. In the nineteenth century Jewish immigrants brought tailoring from ‘the old world’ to the new world. New York became the centre of the modern garment industry. Jews ran its business. The garments were distributed by an extensive network of Jewish peddlers. The peddlers followed the pioneers into the frontier region. When they settled, they were followed by new young peddlers. This is how in the mid-nineteenth century a nationwide Jewish network was able to reach the dispersed settlers. Kotkin estimates that at about the beginning of the twentieth century, in 1885 to be more precise, almost all of the garment factories in the US were owned by Jews, and that the vast majority of all hat makers, furriers, seamstresses and tailors was also Jewish. In the 1920s the rag trade in New York employed 40% of the female Jewish population and 20% of the male. This over-representation of Jews in the garment and fashion trade and industry, which had developed in time, paved the way for a continuation of Jewish involvement in this trade and industry.

---

5 Kotkin, J. (1992: 48-49) states that in 1885 97% of US garment business were Jewish owned, and that in the early twentieth century 50% to 80% of the workers were Jewish.
Garment production is based on easily learned skills. The production is technologically simple and the barriers for entry are relatively low. One does not need huge capital resources to enter the business. The manufacture of clothing is still highly labour intensive. Basically it is a sequence of related manual operations. Originally there was a clear demarcation in production between manufacturing and retailing, but in the last quarter of the 20th century the textile and apparel commodity chain changed from a production-based into a 'prototypical buyer-driven commodity chain'. It was the 'streamlining' power of retailers and branded clothing companies which changed the nature of the clothing sector. Garments became fashion items (signifiers) whose value no longer depended on the materials, the labour process and the use of technology only, but also on the value of the design and branding of the fashion labels.

In addition, garment and apparel production became denationalized because of imports from low-wage developing countries. A further relocation from the center was induced by the gradual removal of quota constraints in the industry, in terms of the World Trade Organisation’s Agreement on Textile and Clothing. Although there has been a production location shift to low-cost countries, this has not led to a substantial international competitive advantage for these countries. High value-added activities like design and branding remained Western based, and the industry in low-cost countries did not find a way to break out of a locked-in low value-added manufacturing. Garment production in the West became less and less obvious. The overall advice for producers in the West was to 'automate, relocate, or evaporate'. The garment trade has decentralised and is now ruled by agglomerations of small and specialised firms. Success depends very much on quick instinct, reliable networks, a nose for trends and the right timing.

What did Jewish manufacturers do? Did they adapt to the changes and automate and relocate, or did they evaporate? From a path-dependent point of view Jews had a 'head start' in the business. A notorious anti-Semitic internet site, Jew Watch, which is 'keeping a close watch on Jewish communities and organisations worldwide', is unambiguous about the persistent role Jews play in the fashion industry. This site identifies the (changed) names of some Jews in the industry, with names like Ralph - Lifshitz - Lauren, Kenneth - Cohen - Cole, Isaac Mizrahi, Calvin Klein, Tommy Hilfiger, Guess, Gitano, Jordache and Levi-Strauss. For these anti-Semites the fashion industry supplies an affirmation of their prejudices. This anti-Semitism is a business threat, especially when the sites spur one to boycott 'Jewish' fashion labels.

In East and Southeast Asia, first- and second-generation Newly Industrialised Economies (NIE) fulfill the role of mediators between buyers and producers in a business structure which is called

---

14 See at: http://www.jewwatch.com/jew-capitalists-fashion.html last visited: 1-2-2006. Jew Watch became well known because when one searched the word 'Jew' via Google this site was the first one listed. Google claims that this listing is the result of computer ranking algorithms. Google has researched the matter and gave the explanation that the word 'Jew' is often used in an anti-Semitic context. Jews more often refer to each other as 'Jewish' and Google the word 'Jewish' instead of 'Jew'. See at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jew Watch last visited: 2-3-2006.
CHAPTER 6

‘triangle manufacturing’\(^{15}\). The buyer originates from an advanced economy, the mediator is from a NIE-like country and the clothing producer is in a developing country\(^{16}\). These NIE firms make use of their former mediating roles by launching Western brands in the Asian market. They connect Asian manufacturers with Western companies which need to outsource, but very self-consciously they also take their first steps in branding their own clothing. They not only brand for the regional market but also aim higher - at the US and Europe. In the (former) NIE country Singapore, FJ Benjamin (FJB) is one such mediating firm.

6.3 The Family Firm

FJ Benjamin Holdings is a mid-sized trading company. The founding father of the company is Frank J. Benjamin. Frank Benjamin was born on 29 December 1934. He is a second-generation Singaporean. The firm’s history is that the business started in 1959 with zero company capital. In 1963 Frank Benjamin married his wife Mavis, who is also second-generation Singaporean. To start up the business Mavis was able ‘to stand surety because of her ‘gainful’ employment as a teacher at the American School’\(^{17}\). Frank Benjamin’s grandparents had come from Iraq to Singapore at the turn of the 19th century. Both his parents and his wife’s parents were born Singaporeans. Benjamin’s maternal grandfather was in optical retailing, while his paternal grandparents were involved in textile retailing.

Frank Benjamin’s father was an only child and inherited the business of his paternal grandparents. He was doing well in his textile retail business. In Benjamin’s recollection the family was quite prosperous. They had an imported American car, a refrigerator and servants. The Second World War, however, put an end to his father’s businesses. All shops were destroyed in the war. Early in 1942 it was decided that women and children who carried British passports had to be evacuated by boat from Singapore. The Benjamins made it safely to Bombay, where the family, with the support of the British government, was pensioned for the rest of the War period. Benjamin’s father stayed in Singapore, together with other male members of the Jewish community. They were put in a camp in Siam Road\(^{18}\).

Frank Benjamin has two younger brothers, Nash and Joe, one older brother, Edward, and two sisters, Louise and Violet Benjamin. After secondary school he joined an uncle, FJ Isaacs, in the optical business. There was not enough money for further education. The Benjamins are related to FJ Isaacs. FJ Isaacs and Frank Benjamin’s mother are brother and sister\(^{19}\). The Isaacs still run an optical business in Singapore. Frank’s older brother, Edward Benjamin, also worked at FJ Isaacs before he started working for himself. Frank Benjamin’s entrepreneurial spirit is adulated in the FJB company story. He started from scratch and dreamt about becoming a successful businessman\(^{20}\). He left his uncle’s shop after eleven boring months and moved on, seeking new business opportunities. In 1955 a Jewish community friend who worked for Getz Brothers, an American general trading company, got him a job as the head of the tobacco and paper department. It was the time of communist insurgents, who were destabilising Malaysia. He

---

\(^{17}\) The Sunday Times Singapore, 7-1-2001.
\(^{19}\) Interview Felice Isaacs 26-4-2005.
\(^{20}\) The Sunday Times Singapore. The Lunch interview. 20-3-2005.
discovered that he was good at selling and gained a ‘tremendous amount of confidence to go out on my own’.

He tried to open a photo camera shop next door to FJ Isaacs’ optical business. This was in partnership with another uncle, who had come to Singapore via Indonesia. However, the business failed.

In this first period Benjamin was trading in almost anything. In the mid-sixties he became an agent for a line of clothing apparel. This is when he started to build up his fashion empire. Frank Benjamin’s youngest brother, Nash, started to work with his brother at an early age. They have always worked in close cooperation. ‘I’ve always admired Frank, since young, for his excellent foresight and vision. That was one of the reasons I didn’t want to study any more. He had a small import-export company. I was 17, itching to work. Our chemistry was great from the start - until now.’

Nash is Frank’s most likely successor. He is now his deputy. Douglas Benjamin, Frank Benjamin’s oldest son, is another candidate. He has been given the management of the fashion retailing division. He is minority stockholder. After his two and a half years of (compulsory) military service in Singapore, Douglas went to England for his education. Staying abroad was, of course, an option, but he chose to return to Singapore. Douglas never had to consider whether or not he wanted to join his father’s business. It had never been an option for him to say ‘no’. It has grown on him. The same is true for the issue of succession. It is not something which is discussed extensively in the family, although it is clear that in the near future some important succession decisions have to be made. ‘My roots are in Singapore; I still got my friends from school here, and made new ones. I feel very attached to Singapore, of course many of my nieces and nephews have decided to stay abroad. Especially the girls who found a husband outside Singapore. There are not that many marriage candidates. They decide to follow their husbands and don’t come back. But there is still a very tight bond in the family, we keep in touch.’

‘He (Frank Benjamin) is still very much around and involved, he flies all over the place and comes to work every day. When he retires, he will make his decisions, it could be one of us, it could be one from the outside, whatever decision we make, we have to make sure it is for the best of the company, and not for the best of some member of the family, because if that member of the family is not capable, it would be the best thing for the whole company to collapse.’

---

21 FJ Benjamin quoted in the same.
22 As intermediaries Jewish merchants were involved in introducing modernity. Clocks, watches, reading glasses, telescopes were the merchandise that they traded in and which can be considered as the instruments by which modernity was introduced. See: Lewis, B. (2002) What went wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 131.
23 This is most probably Abe Ezekiel, uncle Abe, family of Felice Isaacs, maiden name Ezekiel. In the 1930s the Ezekiels had optical shops, Ezekiel & Son, in Batavia and Malang. ‘Weak eyes? Be-wise Ezekielise. Dus voor Brillen naar: M. Ezekiel & Sons’. In: Erets Israel (1941) 15 (8) p. 14.
26 On 2-5-2006 FJ Benjamin Holding Ltd announced that Frank Benjamin was stepping down as group CEO with the intention of making a seamless transition to the next generation of leaders within the group possible. He will continue to serve as Executive Chairman and will play a primary role in defining the Group’s overall strategy and vision. It was Nash Benjamin, Frank’s younger brother, who succeeded him as Group CEO of the firm. In completion of the new staff organisation the firm appointed two Singaporean Chinese, Mark Koh and Matthew Chan, and Ralph Polese, who is a senior and experienced in managing luxury brands in Asia.
27 Interview with Douglas Benjamin 11-5-2005.
28 Ibid.
CHAPTER 6

The firm has a good relationship with the media. ‘Fashionably Frank’\textsuperscript{29} gives plenty of human interest-like economic news. In Singapore as everywhere else, the fashion and lifestyle media prescribe what to wear, how to behave and where to go. These media needs icons and incidents as a result of which the social status of the family in Singapore has developed into the equivalent of that of movie stars. ‘People think that we are the Dynasty family, that it is Dallas here. Of course we fight, we disagree, we argue, but at the end of the day we are still a family and we work together.’\textsuperscript{30}

At one time the firm was front-page tabloid news all over the world. FJB was hosting the Manchester United team on a trip in the Far East. It was at Frank Benjamin’s mansion at Bukit Timah where David Beckham allegedly started a Rebecca Loos-like affair with a Malay model. The blame was more or less laid on FJ Benjamin because they facilitated Beckham’s misdemeanor. The suggestive headline of the main tabloid in Singapore was ‘We invited young people like models because….’\textsuperscript{31}. The Beckham affair was a newsworthy incident. The party was held with good intentions, stated FJ Benjamin. ‘We are an internationally-known company and it is not a nice thing….’\textsuperscript{32}

In the ‘essential register of the top 300 Singapore High Society’\textsuperscript{33}, the Benjamin family was listed no less than five times. In addition to Frank and Nash Benjamin, Frank’s oldest son Douglas, his wife Odile, and Frank Benjamin’s second son Samuel are mentioned. Soon number six will be on the list as well. Frank Benjamin’s youngest son, Ben Judah, gave up his law studies to join the business as well. But for Frank Benjamin it is not something which goes without saying that his family members automatically join the business, let alone that they are automatically given management positions. Actually he is said to have discouraged his son Douglas from joining. Douglas would easily have been able to find a job somewhere else, but he was eager to start in his father’s business. The company story goes that he had to prove himself and had to start from the bottom. He started to learn supply-chain mechanics and later he became a sales assistant.\textsuperscript{34} He got promotion from his managers, not from his father.\textsuperscript{35} ‘Every family member who works for the group must have a role to play and must prove himself. I am in fact harder on my sons who had to start as salesmen in the group’\textsuperscript{36} and ‘I never forced my children to come into the company. There will be no automatic succession. I may even get an outside chief executive when the time comes’.\textsuperscript{37}

Douglas’ two younger brothers, who also joined the company, underwent the same ‘initiation rites’. Douglas Benjamin states that every family member in the business has to be capable. The firm is too big and the responsibility is too high to have incapable persons in it just because they are family. ‘So it will be a strategic decision, a personal decision, you know (...) obviously he (Frank Benjamin) has to make the decision who will carry his legacy on’.\textsuperscript{38} Samuel Benjamin, Douglas’ younger brother, holds a managerial position as the assistant general manager of BMI, the timepieces division of FJ Benjamin holdings and he is the director of the Devil’s Bar nightclub - a famous Manchester

\textsuperscript{29} ‘Fashionably Frank’ was the heading of an article in one of the Singaporean human interest business magazines. \textit{Prestige} (2005). Frank Benjamin. Fashionably Frank. In appreciation of the very best in life. April.
\textsuperscript{30} Interview Douglas Benjamin 11-5-2005.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{The New Paper}. Singapore’s No.1 Tabloid. 14-4-2004.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Prestige} (2005: 221).
\textsuperscript{35} Church, P. (1999: 138).
\textsuperscript{36} Frank Benjamin quoted in: \textit{Business Times Singapore}. 20-3-1997.
\textsuperscript{37} Frank Benjamin quoted in: \textit{The Sunday Times Singapore}. 20-3-2005.
\textsuperscript{38} Interview Douglas Benjamin 11-5-2005.

162
United hot spot in Singapore’s nightlife. Douglas’ wife Odile is also in the business. She is developing her own clothing label named ‘O’. In this function she is a member of the designing board, and is also the divisional director for the licensing division.

Frank Benjamin is outspoken about the contribution which his wife Mavis has made to the success of the business. Mavis Benjamin holds a key position in the business as well. Frank Benjamin married her in 1963. Her Singapore-based family was planning, like many families at the time, to move to Los Angeles, where there is a substantial Baghdadi Jewish community. Mavis was teaching in London. She returned to Singapore to join her parents and go to LA but after meeting Frank Benjamin she changed her mind. She stayed and married him. Benjamin, who was at that time setting himself up as an entrepreneur, was not making enough money to provide for his new family. As a teacher at the American School Mavis had to make sure there was enough income. The cooperation with his wife in the same company has been fruitful. It was easier to solve problems when they discussed business issues together and exchanged viewpoints.

Stressing one’s family life in the business media is potentially dangerous for a family firm which is listed, especially when these family members are working in management positions as in FJB. Listed firms are expected to have professional management, which is considered to be incommensurate with the favouritism in family firms. The image of professionalism is undermined by the idea that the company reserves management positions for family members only.

Despite the glamorous touch, the overall image of the company is one of a hard-working family firm. Frank Benjamin, for instance, prides himself on the relatively sober upbringing of his children. ‘There were many times I had to say ‘no’ when my children wanted expensive things because I wanted my children to realise that the value is not in material things but in what they can afford’. The Benjamin’s family life is presented as harmonious. The children have been decently raised and endowed with essential entrepreneurial virtues. Together with Frank Benjamin’s good reputation in business circles as the head of the family and CEO of the company, this family image is not as damaging as it could be. Frank Benjamin rejects to label FJB as a family firm, but there is ambivalence in this rejection. He points at the very small number of family members which are working for the company. At the same time, he gives credit to the many good employees who work for the company, whom he regards as family. He wants to stress that capabilities are the most important factor when it comes to employing staff. ‘We are working with very capable staff. Without them this company could not have been as successful as it now is’. (...) ‘there are only six family members in a large company with 1,200 staff but there are many good people working for us that are regarded as family. It is a very competitive world, one must be extremely careful about bringing in family members to a business. If they do not have the right people and business skills, then they could destroy the business’.

6.4 The J-factor in Crossing Borders Strategies

In the mid 1960s Singapore was at a crossroad in the retailing business. When FJ Benjamin started in the fashion business he was one of the first in Singapore. There was not much competition at the time. Fashion in Southeast Asia was something which had its own dynamics and where trends from the West had followers only in small layers of society. Benjamin realised that if he wanted to become a player in the fashion retail market he should have some winning

40 Ibid. p. 221.
products. He had success with three: the glamorous Glomesh handbags for women, Amco Jeans, and the French high fashion brand, Lanvin.

FJ Benjamin got the idea to sell Lanvin clothes when his brother came back from Hong Kong from a business trip with a Lanvin tie. With Lanvin, FJ Benjamin targeted the Japanese tourists who started to visit Singapore. Lanvin is a very reputable fashion label which was founded by Jeanne Lanvin in France in around 1900, when she set the trend for orientalism in western fashion. Jeanne Lanvin brought out dresses for women in light pastel colors with embroidery and beading, kimono sleeves and broad obi belts. When FJ Benjamin brought Lanvin to Singapore it became a hit instantly. He could make S$300,000 to S$400,000 a month with shop prices at that time of only S$6 for one square meter. Benjamin was constantly looking for these kinds of trends. He tried many different lines, and once in a while he had a catch. He made history in Singapore by opening the first single-brand Lanvin retail boutique at the Hyatt Regency hotel in 1975.

Communications in those early days were not as well developed as they are nowadays. We had no fax, no computer, no internet. In the beginning it was just a matter of sitting behind the typewriter and writing letters to European or American companies asking for samples of merchandise. He had never travelled to Europe and he started with no knowledge whatsoever of the world of fashion, but it was a world which he learned to appreciate because it challenged his skills and abilities. It is probably the excitement of viewing new merchandise each season, the development of new collections, new concepts of retailing and the employment of new marketing techniques that got me hooked.

He needed capital in order to be able to import Amco jeans and to wholesale the brand in the region. He looked for bank facilities. He had no inclination to look for capital within his social group, the Jewish Community. He was introduced to the formerly Dutch ABN bank. They saw Benjamin’s business plans and gave him financial support. This made it possible for him to finance the import, and from then on, in 1969, the business took off seriously.

In the 1970s, 1980s and much of the 1990s Singapore proved to be an exciting and dynamic place for retailing. A constant reinvention of their business model was needed so that they could keep up with the times. In the period after their success with Lanvin, FJB brought other new brands to Asia. There was a steady stream of announcements in the press of new brand launches. The media in the city-state have a clear business focus. FJ Benjamin’s activities and the family’s ups and downs are rewarding topics. The introduction of yet another brand which would shine on Singapore’s catwalk, the Orchard Road’s pavements, always seemed newsworthy, but as one might expect, some new brands became successful while other brands never appealed at all or soon lost their appeal and passed into oblivion.

---

42 FJ Benjamin quoted in: Church, P. (1999: 138)
43 Lanvin was the rival of Chanel. In France it was labelled the sleeping beauty brand. Lanvin never had fashion classics like Chanel No. 5, Chanel’s braided bag or tweed jacket. See: [http://www.siamfuture.com/thainews](http://www.siamfuture.com/thainews) last visited 24/4/2003.
46 Interview Frank Benjamin 9-3-2005.
FJ Benjamin, brand behind the brands

FJB was able to pull strings in the media. Grimberg; ‘they have a very good PR’. Their home base was Singapore but their aim has always been regional, for advertising and communication too. In the early 1990s the firm was looking for an agency with a regional network which would be able to communicate and advertise the FJ Benjamin’s products and brands in the Asia-Pacific market more consistently. This Asia-Pacific market, with countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Australia, Taiwan, Thailand and Australia has been and still is their main target not only when they were planning for investment and expansion, but also, when sales figures lagged and business prospects turned out not to be as bright as predicted, for divestments and cutting costs.

The fashion industry is a small world. ‘Everybody knows us, everybody knows everybody else’. In every major fashion industry, in Italy, the United States or the UK, FJ Benjamin is an established name. There is a strong denial of a possible ‘J- factor’ in their network ties. Whether someone is Jewish or not is not taken into consideration. ‘They may be Jewish, they maybe non-Jewish. We don’t approach them because they are Jewish and therefore we want to do business, our approach is whether or not the brand has got a potential in our markets, if it has, we don’t care who it is. We approach them, negotiate the agencies and representations of our markets.

The important issues when dealing with a possible business partner seems transparency in providing information about business structure, the capital base, looking at the potential of a brand and the countries where it should be positioned. Is it working or not? Jewish or not Jewish is not an issue (any more). The scope and magnitude of their business dealings have gone beyond this level. ‘We sell to Australia; we sell to the Middle East. They don’t have to be necessarily Jews. We are not looking at that kind of advantages. We are looking at the country, the potential of the brand. Can it work or can’t it work. Maybe, there are some people who depend on it, but we never have. A Jewish firm and garments in Singapore, it is only us. We don’t go to people because they are Jewish, nor come people to us because we are Jewish.

For instance, he speaks about the start of their long representation of Guess?. ‘We didn’t go to them because they are Jewish. We saw their store, and thought it is a fantastic concept. We didn’t know they were Jewish. We find out their names, addresses, contacted them, they asked how we handle things in Singapore, wanted to see a business plan, what is the structure. They gave us the agency five years, and then they extended it for another five years. And then for ten years. It is just a matter of performance. If you don’t perform they are going to take it away from you. It is not a matter of Jewish or non-Jewish any more. They want to check our reputation like we want to check their reputation. And that is the basis how we do business, and not on the base of you are a Jew and therefore we trust you. Not in today’s world. Those days are over.

FJ Benjamin has been an agent for Gucci for twenty years and for Lanvin for twenty-five years. The longevity of the firm’s relation with these brands shows that brand owners consider FJ Benjamin as a good and reliable mediator in the region. FJ Benjamin’s Jewish background is no issue. ‘They all know. We are a Jewish firm. I am open about that. And I think there is absolutely no problem. There is a tremendous amount of respect, and trust, because we are doing our business the way it should be done. We never ever depended on our Jewish background. Fendi was not Jewish, Bill Blass was not Jewish, Lanvin was

---

48 Joseph Grimberg is a prominent member of the Jewish Community and on the board of directors in FJB.
50 Interview Frank Benjamin 9-3-2005.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
not Jewish, so you see, I have more non-Jewish agencies than I have Jewish agencies. The bottom line is whether you can do the business, or not. If not, it is the end of the story. If you can, you want to prolong it. Because that is what business is all about.\(^{54}\)

The new policies of well established brands is a serious threat to the mediating role of FJ Benjamin in the region, Gucci for instance. Gucci needed new policies to reinvigorate their ailing business. Part of their new policies was to end their long-term relationship with FJ Benjamin. They wanted to streamline the business and take everything into their own hands. They bought out FJ Benjamin’s rights. This was as serious setback for FJB, but Frank Benjamin thought there were still enough established brands and new brands coming in which needed their expertise in the region. Streamlining would be an option for some established brands, but not for all of them. There would always be brands that FJ Benjamin could be the agent for. But it was clear that with these new policies it would be necessary to redefine their future and position as mediators in the region.

6.5 Anchorage in Singapore

FJB’s commercial activities in the Straits are managed in Singapore. Singapore has advantages which cannot be found in the surrounding nation-states. The communication infrastructure is good and the local buying power is much better than in the rest of Southeast Asia. Strong links have been established between the entrepreneurial FJB family and their home ground, Singapore. Already, five generations of Benjamins have lived on Singaporean soil and four generations have been born Singaporean. There had been chances to leave Singapore, but most of the family members never made the decision to go. In the post-Second World War period leading to Singapore’s independence in 1965 many Jews left the island. What made the Benjamins decide to stay?

The Japanese interned Jewish men in Singapore for the duration of the Second World War. Just before the Japanese invaded the Malay Peninsula, Jewish women and children were evacuated to India. In the direct aftermath of the war, the Jewish community in Singapore had to regroup. British authorities gave the internees the possibility of joining their family wherever they were. Frank Benjamin’s father went to India to re-unite with his wife and children, who were refugees. For the Benjamins there was no question that they were going to stay in India or move to Britain. In Singapore, Frank Benjamin’s father had to start from scratch again in Singapore. He found all of his retail shops in High Street and in the Change Alley business area ruined. There was a great deal of poverty and the available housing facilities were poor. Instead of starting a new business, Benjamin’s father became sales manager for a commercial company.

A second wave of Jewish immigration occurred when Israel became independent and a return to the Jewish homeland was made possible. Poor Singaporean Jews choose this option, especially because Israel was financing the ‘repatriation’. A third wave of immigration occurred when the People’s Action Party (PAP), led by Lee Kuan Yew, became strong. Singapore’s future became unsure. The PAP was believed to sympathise with the communists. It turned out that the PAP

---

\(^{54}\) Ibid.
was allying itself with the communists only to get the British out. At that time the richer Baghdadi Jews chose to sell their properties and moved to Israel or Los Angeles.

The Benjamins did not leave. They had their businesses and they saw enough opportunities up ahead. "We didn’t think about it or planned it. Circumstances left us here, as far as I am concerned. My uncles were in the optical business, other uncles were in lucrative textile businesses, and I guess nobody thought of throwing it all away and go away. So my entire family from uncles to cousins stayed on in Singapore. I already was involved in the business, and I felt I was already too much in the business to just close it and walk away. So we stayed on (...) Now, we are deeply entrenched in Singapore."

Singapore has become the Benjamin’s home not only because of their businesses. They are one of the leading families in the local Jewish community. Frank Benjamin is the long-term head of the Jewish Welfare Board, which is where most of the important decisions concerning the Jewish community are made. His son, Douglas, is involved in facilitating Jewish education in Singapore. The Benjamins are consulted in many ways and express their views about Singaporean business matters. They are businessmen whose opinions matter. Of course, with sales figures which indicate that a substantial part of their sales and profit are still made in Singapore, the Singaporean home market is important to them.

Frank Benjamin’s son Douglas, a second-generation partner, is highly accessible to the local media. With a clearly cosmopolitan disposition, he articulates broad views about the new developments within the retailing branch and how Singapore and Singaporeans could play an active part in these developments. He shows an educated interest in retail and actively participates in debates on Singapore’s retail future. In these debates he refers to his global travel and business experiences in the US or in the Middle East. These experiences are points of reference for this younger-generation manager. Frank and Nash Benjamin are also consulted. The comments made by these first-generation businessmen are mostly about the brands they sell or concerning the new lines of fashion they want to launch. When it comes to more personal interviews, they foster their image of down-to-earth-businessmen who were already working at a young age and had to start from scratch.

Good taste matters in the fashion industry more than in any other business. In his fashion statements Frank Benjamin is consistently loyal to the brands he represents. The lifestyle elements which the Benjamins display on their Singaporean home ground would be labelled as nouveau riche in the West. This is illustrated by the observation of a Singapore journalist who interviewed Frank Benjamin, and who was intimidated by the glamorous refinement of Frank Benjamin’s dress. "The shirt was set off stylishly with a yellow Gucci tie (...). The picture of urbane sophistication was completed with a Girard-Perragaux watch also sold here by the firm. Looking at all that"

---

55 The British were having trouble with the Communists, who were trying to oust them from Singapore. The position of the PAP was not clear, but it turned out that the PAP's strategy had isolated the communists. When Singapore became part of the Malay federation the communist threat dwindled. At that point there was great confidence in the PAP, and when in 1965 Singapore was thrown out of the federation again, that fear did not return.
56 There is a thriving Asian Sephardic Jewish community in Los Angeles with strong connections with the Jews in the Far East, the Kahal Joseph Congregation.
57 Interview Frank Benjamin 9-3-2005.
58 The Edge Singapore (2005) Retail-tainment. Week 2-8 May.
59 FJ Benjamin was a long-term representative of Gucci. They got the rights to represent Gucci in 1978. It was their top-selling brand through most of the 1980s until 1993, when the 73-year-old Italian luxury goods maker nearly went bankrupt. The Straits Times Singapore. 12-1-1995.
refinery I had to remind myself Mr. Benjamin’s expansive fashion empire started out as a small trading firm dealing in paper products and novelties from a one-room home-based office.

6.6 Jewish Communal Support and Business Ethics

Frank Benjamin feels comfortable with his profile as a start-from-scratch/trial-and-error type of entrepreneur. Although he didn’t inherit his business from his father but started it himself, he did get advice from the community elder and successful businessman, Jacob Ballas. Ballas was not only someone who invested in Benjamin’s firm when Benjamin needed capital to expand it, he was also a director in the firm and a personal mentor. I always knew him from the Jewish community, but (initially) we were not so close. He is quite a bit older than me (...) he always said he wanted to join me in my business because he was an investor. And I said I didn’t need any at that time. But in 1981 we made a bid on the Changi Airport shops. Fashion shops, and we were also looking at opening a Lanvin shop in Los Angeles at Rodeo Drive. And then I heard we had the Changi bid, I was in America that time, in Los Angeles, and I realised we needed capital, a few million dollars, so I called Jacob Ballas, and said, you always said you wanted to join in the business, this is the opportunity, are you interested? He said yes, he would take 15-20% and we worked out a deal... He joined. He was a very respected leader of the Jewish community and a very close friend of mine so I offered him the chairmanship of the company. But he didn’t do any work for the company, he was just an investor.

When Benjamin’s business became successful he started to employ people from the community to work in the company, in the warehouse or as salesmen. However, it was not that being a member of the wider Jewish community automatically qualified one for a job or some other form of support. Frank Benjamin was a member of the Jewish Welfare Board and the board members paid visits to members of the community who needed support. For instance a Chinese Jewish man who just was released from prison; ‘He was Chinese Jewish, I suppose more Chinese because his mother was Chinese, but he appeared to me a very suitable person to do our jeans, because he had the physique, I offered him a job, he took it on, worked very hard, made a life for himself, got married.’

The leaders of the local Jewish Community felt it their socio-religious duty to help their brethren. But again there is the awareness that becoming ‘too social’ or showing too much enthusiasm with religious objectives might be misinterpreted as unprofessional. ‘No, no, I went to visit him as a member of the Jewish Welfare board but I felt that commercially he was very suitable for the position. No, there was no social obligation to take someone from the Jewish community. All of them were gainfully employed at the time. Except for a few. And when we found that they were able to do the job, I employed them.’

---

60 The Sunday Times Singapore. 20-3-2005.

61 Interview with Joseph Grimberg 26-5-2005. Jacob Ballas was not married and had no children. The community story goes that he was devoted to his mother (See also: Shalom Singapore (2000) Issue number 13. April. Singapore: Jewish Welfare Board). Another woman who was important in his life, but kept in the background, seemed to be his personal doctor, Dr. Roselyn Leong, a woman from Chinese descent. In the orthodox Baghdadi Jewish community there is a strong objection to intermarriage. Jacob Ballas himself would have liked to see it differently, but despite his influential position these conventions that embody the fundamental values of this Sephardic Orthodox Jewish group could not be Routed. ‘I would have liked to see more conversions, more Chinese become Jewish, or more Jewish become Chinese, makes no difference to me. If they married and become Jews it does not matter to me. But to a lot of people it does matter’ Interview Jacob Ballas. Singapore National Archives. Oral History Department. A000163/04 (1). Date 6/12/1983.

62 Interview Frank Benjamin 9-3-2005.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.
Business rhetoric says that business has nothing to do with religion. The Singapore rabbi said that one of his tasks was to convince businessmen in the community that these matters cannot be separated. Occasionally these matters claimed his rabbinical attention and he gave advice to businessmen who asked questions regarding their business dealings, but the relationship between the local rabbi and an influential business family like the Benjamins was not free from patronage. The Singapore Jewish community and the employment of the rabbi, chazzan, caretakers and other staff rely heavily on the financial and organisational contributions of a few influential business families, including the Benjamins.

This reliance is reflected in religious, ceremonial and ritual functions. A businessman like Frank Benjamin holds a prominent place in these functions. He is rewarded for his active involvement. The Benjamins’ seats are in the front rows in the ‘international area’ of the synagogue. Frank Benjamin acts as the representative of the community when there is contact with guests from outside. Observations during these services made it clear that during services there are moments when one’s commitment to the community is rewarded as well on these occasions. For instance, you may be asked to read a part of the Torah scrolls or be asked to draw the curtains (Parochet) and open the doors (Peticha) of the Holy Ark (Aron Hakodesh), or be called to sit on the Bima (Aliya) next to the cantor.

After service at Sabbath lunch Benjamin’s round table is (implicitly) reserved for important guests like the Israeli ambassador, who regularly attends the service on Sabbath mornings. No one would sit uninvited at their table. Benjamin’s religious capital is further accumulated by giving charity. His honoured place in communal life is guaranteed via his donations towards the financing, for instance, of community breakfasts, lunches and dinners. At the celebration of the 125th anniversary of the Magain Aboth synagogue most of the businessmen donated prizes for the lottery. The Kunaris, the Charny’s, the Sassoons, all business families, were present. Not surprisingly, the first prize was a luxury timepiece from FJ Benjamin.

FJ Benjamin’s offices have been closed on Saturdays for many years. FJB personnel had a five-day working week long before any other international company. Of course, having the day off on Sabbath is opportune for the fulfilling of religious obligations. It is tempting to identify meaningful (read ‘causal’) religious intervention here, in order to explain (Jewish) business acumen. Frank Benjamin himself would abstain from this, Jewish twaddle, as he would call it, and insist that the ability to be in the right place at the right time is just a matter of rational choice.

6.7 Strategies for Expansion: an IPO (Initial Public Offering)

FJB’s IPO track record reveals how firmly FJB had been anchored as a firm in Singapore and the wider Straits area. In July 1996 FJ Benjamin announced that it had received approval in principle to list its shares on the main board of the Stock Exchange of Singapore. The IPO was needed to financially accommodate FJB’s expansion strategies. ‘We managed to achieve positive and profitable growth through our twin strategies of niche marketing and regional expansion’. Seemingly there was no incentive to look for support in other directions like the Jewish community or international (Jewish) business contacts. An IPO seemed the most logical step to finance their growth plans.

---

65 Interview with local rabbi Abergel 26-5-2005. The rabbi mentioned that he had discussed a few of these ethical issues with community members, but because of the confidentiality of these matters he did not want to elaborate on them.

CHAPTER 6

FJB launched its IPO in Singapore at the same time as Guess? launched theirs in the US. This was a deliberate move. FJB anticipated a good response to Guess Inc’s IPO. FJB had at that time exclusive rights to distribute Guess? in ten countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Guess Inc. was founded by the Jewish Marciano brothers, who were born in Algeria, raised in Marseille, and based in California. It is co-owned by the New York-based Jewish Nakash family. The Nakash family made Jordache Enterprises into a global clothing manufacturer. The launching of FJB’s IPO was special because FJB had obtained the status of Central Provident Fund trustee. FJB was the first company to be given this status since late 1994. Their being a trustee of the CPF illustrates the rootedness of the company in the Singapore administration and the credit the firm has earned within governmental circles. The reaction from broking analysts was positive. The CPF status would drive up the price of FJB’s IPO issue.

FJ Benjamin Holdings launched the offering of 50 million new shares at 80 cents each. The new shares, each with a par value of 20 cents, represented 25% of FJB’s enlarged share capital. It was expected that the IPO would raise S$37 million net. S$26.5 million of the proceeds would be used to repay existing bank borrowings. About S$6.5 million would be for the group’s overseas expansion. The balance would be put aside as working capital and investments. FJ Benjamin had launched an aggressive pre-IPO publicity campaign which helped to win the favour of investors. FJ Benjamin was able to capitalise on that intangible, unpredictable thing called public sentiment. FJB knows the Singapore business milieu inside-out and has a good relation with the Singapore press. In 1996 FJB had received the Singapore Enterprise award for its record of innovation and excellence in the fashion business and for its outstanding success in the face of the difficult conditions in Singapore’s retail industry. That same year Frank Benjamin was named Tourism Entrepreneur of the Year.

The initial offering made headlines for several days in the Business Times Singapore. Opinion was highly favourable. The high profile of the company and their well-known international heavyweight brands, their strong representation in social circles, a steady stream of healthy growth figures (no business failures were mentioned) and strong regional prospects all added to

67 The timing of Guess?’ IPO turned out to be bad. When it eventually went public in August 1996 Guess? had to cut the offering price from 23 to 18 and the number of shares offered from 9.2 million to 7 million. However, analysts considered the price of Guess? shares to be too low. Prices would definitely go up when in 1998 new overseas sales would show a gain in profits. 

68 In 1983 the Marcianos decided to broaden their market for their Guess? apparel. They secured financing and distribution in partnership with the Nakash brothers, the owners of Jordache enterprises, who received 50% stock in return. 

69 The Central Provident Fund (CPF) was initiated in July 1955. Workers had to save part of their monthly wages with the board. The savings could be withdrawn upon their retirement. The CPF is used to implement schemes that accord with the national philosophy of self-reliance. In that philosophy, becoming a welfare state is considered to be undesirable. The CPF has been used to accelerate national growth through housing, healthcare, family protection and investment schemes. 

70 Thirty five million of the shares were for the public and five million were reserved for staff, management and business associates. The remaining 10 million placement shares were fully taken up. No vendor shares were issued.

71 Business Times Singapore. 30-10-1996. FJ Benjamin given CPF trustee stock status as it launches IPO. 

72 Business Times Singapore. 20-3-1997. FJB chief loves the challenge of taking risks.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.
the IPO hype. FJB’s issue followed earlier successful issues that year of Delifrance (F&B) and Labroy (shipbuilding & ship repair), but the retail market was thought to be saturated. It was uncertain if FJB’s retail stocks would be in demand. However, FJB is seen in the retail sector as a niche player with excellent product lines. This gave them a competitive advantage over the average Singapore retailer.

The timing of the IPO was perfect. A positive corporate image had been diligently cultivated and nothing could spoil a successful launch. The IPO became a big success. Retail investors’ confidence in FJB proved to be overwhelming. A reason for this confidence could be found in the strong and steady relationships with popular brands, such as their long-lasting relationship with Gucci and Guess. The strength of the management team and the firm’s good track record were seen as favorable. The growing regional exposure was also a plus. Calculations spoke of 56% of group sales coming from the Asia Pacific region. The pronounced intention was to enlarge this share to 65%-70% in three to five years. Only a gentle warning was given that, despite this impressive Asia-Pacific sales figure, still around 70% of FJB’s pre-tax profit was made in Singapore. The regional growth seemed not that profitable yet. There were questions about FJB’s growth plan, the foreign exchange risks and FJB’s level of long-term debt in relation with its equity capital. These were seen as hazardous but could not attenuate the IPO fever.

FJB’s offering of 50 million shares included a placement portion of 10 million shares and 5 million shares reserved for employees and business associates. The public tranche was fully subscribed. The 10 and 5 million placement portion had been taken up in an earlier stage. The local DBS bank was the co-manager and co-underwriter of the issue. The Price Earnings Ratio (P/E Ratio or PER) for FJ Benjamin was 11 times. Predictions were that the subscription rate of FJ Benjamin’s placement would break the 30.4 record which, together with Kian Ann’s IPO, was the highest subscription rate that year. Just like FJ Benjamin, Kian Ann - a distributor of replacement parts for heavy equipment - was recommended because their growth prediction was underpinned by their business infrastructure in the Asia Pacific region.

FJB’s Frank Benjamin was ‘overwhelmed and humbled by the wonderful response’. The initial public offering had not broken records but still was about 29.9 times oversubscribed. On the day of the listing debut the IPO fever pushed FJ Benjamin’s price up to a high of $1.35, a 68.8% rise over its 80 cent offer price. It is difficult to determine whether or not FJ Benjamin’s pre-IPO

---

75 Business Times Singapore. 30-10-1996.
76 Business Times Singapore. 6-11-1996. FJ Benjamin IPO expected to sparkle.
78 Ibid.
79 Business Times Singapore. 6-11-1996.
80 The Straits Times Singapore. 9-11-1996. FJ Benjamin taken up fully.
81 The P/E ratio is equal to a stock’s market capitalisation divided by its after-tax earnings over a 12-month period, usually the trailing period but occasionally the current or forward period. The higher the P/E ratio, the more the market is willing to pay for each dollar of annual earnings. http://www.investorwords.com/5944/price_to_earnings_ratio.html last visited 9-3-2006
82 Business Times Singapore. 9-11-1996. FJ Benjamin’s 50m share IPO fully subscribed.
85 Ibid.
86 The Straits Times Singapore. 15-11-1996. IPO fever drives FJB shares as high $1.35 for 69% premium over offer price.
campaign itself was responsible for this IPO hype. ‘Catching the market at the right moment’, his explanation of the success, represents the market as too static. An IPO is vulnerable to many different factors. The bottom line should be the company’s profitability. Bright future prospects and a strategy with calculated losses may downplay a temporary lack of profitability but there is a thin line between prospects and sentiments. FJB’s firm anchorage in the Singapore business milieu and access to the forces which manipulate the right sentiments for a successful IPO were important. The IPO followed earlier successful public listings. Riding on this flow, FJB made headlines by expressing an all-out IPO enthusiasm: ‘IPO fever is not only back, but it is raging’.

6.8 Business Complexities: the Asian Crisis and Doing Business with Israel

FJB operates in a complex business environment. The intention in this section is to show this complexity. It would be ‘too simple’ to determine (decisive) ethno-religious incentives and motives in their day-to-day dealings. By providing a thick description of FJB’s routine an insight is provided which shows how reductionistic such (culturalist) presumptions are.

For FJB the period around the IPO was successful. The sky was the limit. Offices were established in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Sydney, Taipei and Thailand. Representatives became active in the Philippines and New Zealand. FJB became a fashion and luxury goods giant which had more than 70 shops in 16 countries and 13 subsidiary companies worldwide. Expansion was planned not only in the Asian-Pacific area, but FJB also opened offices and showrooms in New York and Florence. In this state of euphoria yet another brand was added to the FJB stable, that of ‘the wonder boy of American fashion’, the Sefardic Jewish Isaac Mizrahie. Mizrahie was trying to capitalize on his growing popularity and wanted his brand I***c to become global. Singapore was the place to launch his ambitious programme for Asia. In the press conference in the Raffles Hotel in Singapore Mizrahie expressed his hope that Singapore would turn out to be ‘the opening up of a big, new world for his business’. The powerful Wertheimer family, which also owns the top French fashion house of Chanel, gave him financial backing. FJB was Mizrahie’s first Asian marketer. However, their plans fell to pieces. Shortly after the launch the region was hit by the 1997 Asian crisis. FJB Benjamin’s business was not immune from the regional economic turmoil and industry downturn and faced a serious drop of turnover. In the first quarter of 1997 FJB announced an almost 30% fall in interim profit. Regional external factors were blamed. The whims and fancies of consumers, foreign exchange fluctuations, the weakening Yen, which had resulted in a sharp drop in Japanese tourists; all were said to have contributed to the downturn. In February 1998 FJB announced that they were also shutting outlets that were selling the designers label I***c. Reorganisation and a staff cutback in Singapore became necessary. Analysts reluctantly admitted that their optimistic forecast of FJB’s profit was based on ‘positive impressions’ rather than on

---

87 FJB had allocated the bulk of its IPO to small investors. The company received applications for 1.046 billion shares worth S$836.8 million. The intention was to ensure a good spread amongst a broad range of investors. 58.8% of the 35 million shares FJB Benjamin offered to the public went to investors who applied for fewer than 50,000 shares. The S$37 million raised in the offering would be used to repay debt and expand operations, and for working capital.


89 Ibid.

90 The Straits Times Singapore. 16-1-1997. I’m going to be big. No bull.

91 Ibid. A ‘Jewish world dominance’ connection of this Wertheimer family with Chanel is also suggested in a notorious hate site like http://www.jewwatch.com/jew-capitalists-fashion.html last visited 1-2-2006.
critical assessments. They had conveniently overlooked the fact that FJB’s Australian operations had never been huge profit makers. The lesson that could be learnt from this event (but such lessons are never learnt) was that investors should be more perceptive in recognising hypes when reviewing an IPO. And IPO aspirants and listed companies had to be more open and realistic about their plans and prospects. However, FJB’s reputation was not affected; ‘FJB, while well-managed, operates in very competitive and mature retail markets’92. The crisis hit hard. The second half of 1997 was even worse for FJB than other difficult periods in the mid 1980s and in 199193.

FJB’s fortunes were reversed by the regional crisis. The policy line was to show serious intentions to reorganise the company. To turn the tide FJB closed outlets, reduced staff and cut salaries by between 10% to 50%94. The IPO price per share was S$0.80 in 1997. FJB peaked at S$1.20. At the height of the Asian currency crisis, despite the good track record, their glamorous image and the appealing brands which they were selling, the price per share dropped to 20 cents. What was earlier perceived as an asset, the importance of a regional presence, suddenly became a liability95. How to overcome these acute problems? The solution was found in activities which required a stronger commitment to their direct surroundings, more specifically to their home ground, Singapore. FJB sought for ways to profit from the devaluation of the Singapore dollar. Baby Guess? was one of the brands FJ Benjamin represented in Asia. FJB also acquired the licensing rights to design and manufacture Baby Guess? clothes and accessories in the region. This move was to circumvent the higher prices resulting from the strong US Dollar. Because of the 1997 crisis production costs were low in the region. It was estimated that the Singapore©made line would cost 40% less than the US imports96. It would be cheaper to produce the apparel in the region than to import the designer Guess? baby clothes from the USA.

In turning to the design and manufacture of the Guess? Kids brand, FJB displayed a greater sense of its rootedness in Singapore and the wider Southeast Asian area97. At the same time FJB announced the introduction and development of new, privately owned in-house brands. This required a disposition towards acknowledging that their position in Singapore and in the wider region was more enduring and sustaining. The expectations were high when FJ Benjamin secured a new franchise, that for Manchester United (MU) apparel. FJB had to outbid Royal Clicks to clinch the deal with the franchise98. With the mass appeal of soccer players like David Beckham and Dwight Yorke and the power of the MU brand, sales were expected to improve again. The 10-year deal gave FJB exclusive rights to retail and distribute merchandise and clothes bearing the MU trademark and to set up flagship stores and F&B cafes under MU’s name in Singapore and in the wider Southeast Asian region99. This was news which could give the stock price a positive impulse, but there were some doubts as well. ‘If they haven’t got a 10,000 sq ft store in the UK, can they really substantiate one in the Far East where there is limited money?’100. The estimated half a million fans of MU are ardent, but are they also potential buyers?

92 Business Times Singapore. 25-3-1997. FJ Benjamin’s profit fall: Were analysts too bullish on IPO?
93 Business Times Singapore. 1-4-1998. FJ Benjamin slips into red with $818m interim loss.
94 Business Times Singapore. 26-3-1999. FJ Benjamin cuts losses by 27% to 13.4m.
95 Business Times Singapore. 2-5-1998. FJ Benjamin: Outlook still bleak but all is not lost.
97 The Straits Times Singapore. 12-9-2000. Black is this year’s colour for retailer FJ Benjamin.
99 The Straits Times Singapore. 18-6-1999. FJ Benjamin signs on Man United.
CHAPTER 6

The Manchester United deal with FJB was MU’s first deal outside Britain. It was seen as something special. The outlets or theme stores were called the ‘Theatre of Dreams’ and embodied new developments in retail. For a total shopping experience, a ‘Reds Café’, a MU Museum and a MUTV Channel were integrated in the shop floors. ‘Fans and shoppers alike will experience the Old Trafford atmosphere at the mega store’ \(^{101}\); And ‘we’re not just selling football jerseys. We’re giving you a whole experience’. \(^{102}\) Megalomaniac vistas were not shunned. To give back to society, the intention was to even fly in MU coaches and MU players to coach the S(ingapore)-League and help Singapore to prepare for the 2010 World Cup.

Meanwhile long-established (22-year) agreements with Gucci and also with other major brands like Fendi and Guess?, were under review. The Gucci group, with brands like Yves Saint Laurent (YSL), Sergio Rossi and Gucci were beginning to streamline their business. Brand owners were terminating their franchising agreements. They cut out their middlemen. They wanted a total control of their brand’s image and distribution. As a reward for its loyalty FJB was one of the very few that was allowed to keep an agreement. According to the Gucci management FJB understood the market and had always protected Gucci’s brand name and image. FJB had stuck with them in times when Gucci’s continued existence was at stake. Frank Benjamin stated that loyalty could bear fruit in the fashion business where tastes can change overnight. ‘When the brand was down six years ago, we were faithful in selling those fruit-colored mini backpacks when nobody in the world wanted them’ \(^{103}\).

Compensation was offered for the loss of the exclusive distribution and retail rights for Gucci products through a joint venture agreement with the Gucci group. FJB was given a 35% stake in the Gucci Group NV and a share (S$8 million) in their larger businesses, including the brands Sergio Rossi and YSL. On top of this, they received a goodwill sum of S$30 million. However, the loss of the Gucci line was seen as substantial. It had been FJB’s money-maker for a considerable period of time. Analysts raised doubts whether the retail rights for Manchester United products could make up for the loss of this Gucci franchise \(^{104}\). Also FJB’s representation of Fendi, co-owned by Gucci’s arch-rival, the LVMH group, raised some eyebrows. How could FJB be the main distributor for two competing brands? Frank Benjamin saw no conflicting interests; ‘(...) my track record shows that I have not only the expertise, but also the integrity to do the job well for both of them’ \(^{105}\): The sum received for the goodwill from Gucci made the 2000 year end profitable, with net earnings of S$4.7 million, but it was clear that this goodwill sum was a once only pay-off, and that structural ‘quality’ profits had to come from sales which had to be earned, country by country. Singapore remained FJB’s largest income generator. Outside Singapore the markets remained worrisome. Businesses in Hong Kong and Taiwan were restructured and downsized.

In the year 2001 a warning went out that results in that year would be disappointing. Australian post-Sydney Olympics 2000 consumer sentiment, which was expected to strengthen, did not materialise. This was bad news for FJB, because they had just opened four new retail stores in Australia. The Hong Kong market had weak retail sentiments as well\(^{106}\). The joint venture with Gucci was no cash cow any longer. The MU franchise encountered higher than expected start-up

---

\(^{101}\) Business Times Singapore. 1-3-2000. FJB Man U megastore to cost $4.5m.
\(^{102}\) The Straits Times Singapore. 9-4-2000. Man U shop scores.
\(^{104}\) Business Times Singapore. 25-5-2000. FJB shares buck downtrend.
FJ Benjamin, brand behind the brands

costs and the F&B and entertainment operations were expected to take longer to become profitable. Singapore seemed not to be enthusiastic about MU. *When MU came to Singapore, we thought more spice would be added to the retail scene. But from the looks of it, the store is fairly quiet and not as bustling as it was expected to be*\(^\text{107}\). More and more, the MU adventure became a large albatross around FJB’s neck.

There was panic. FJB’s headquarters were announced as being for sale. The sale would substantially reduce FJB’s debt and the interest burden would be brought down. The headquarters are centrally located at the corner of Orange Grove Road and Orchard Road. The modern building, consisting of five floors clad in reflecting-glass, is a landmark in the cityscape of Singapore. There is a display of luxury brand accessories on the ground floor. FJB had an agreement with vehicle distributor Group Exklusiv (Volkswagen, Renault), which wanted to purchase the property for investment purposes\(^\text{108}\), but the deal fell through when on closer inspection the building was found to be affected by road and drainage lines\(^\text{109}\).

Another sidestep was to enter the business of media technology. FJB couldn’t resist hopping onto the gravy train of New Economy IT enticements. They had taken a 20%, US$1.6 million stake in Nextmedia, a Singapore-incorporated firm which has the patent rights to license, manufacture and distribute the Digicard, a CD-ROM-derived product. This *‘investment was seen by FJB as a ‘strategic window to related new lifestyle businesses including e-commerce’*\(^\text{110}\). FJB’s shares rose 38% before the Singapore stock exchange suspended trading in them. FJB’s investment in the joint venture added US$34 million to the paper value of FJ Benjamin. This was an indication of the allure of the internet to investors. Two partners were MIE Systems, a Swiss-based multimedia publisher, and H&Q Asia-Pacific, an associate company of US investment bank group Hambrecht & Quist\(^\text{111}\). With promises of a New York Nasdaq listing soon, FJB’s management saw this move as possible fuel for growth in their ailing businesses.

Lee Seng Chee, a Chinese Singaporean, was made the chief executive of FJB Multimedia. He was to spearhead FJB’s moves in the world of high-tech. The rationale behind this high-tech adventure was the prospect of getting first mover’s advantage in the not-yet-developed online fashion retail business. Real opportunities in online business supposedly lie in e-commerce. Because of FJB’s *‘established bricks and mortar infrastructure and with its position as an established distributor of fashion, this move was seen as sensible’*\(^\text{112}\). It is difficult to determine what the enticements to step into this multimedia business were. The decision to do so could well have been fuelled by the links FJB had within the wider Jewish-Israeli Singaporean community and more particularly with Israeli entrepreneurs who had the support of Israeli venture capital. Israeli venture capital

---


\(^{108}\) *Business Times Singapore* 22-3-2001. FJ Benjamin to sell HQ for 31.8m


\(^{111}\) According to anti-Semitic hate sites, Hambrecht & Quist (HQ) has strong links with Israel. HQ organises a yearly conference in Israel that provides a meeting point for entrepreneurs and investors to explore the opportunities generated by new technologies. On a hate site from the [www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php](http://www.stormfront.org/forum/showthread.php) (last visited 20/3/2006), Hambrecht & Quist appeared on the list of Jewish companies to be boycotted. In 1998 Hambrecht & Quist launched a venture capital fund under the name of Eucalyptus Ventures with the intention of raising $50 million, all of it earmarked for investment in Israeli high-tech companies. Eucalyptus was established as a partnership between Hambrecht & Quist and local investment firm Tamir Fishman, Mankovski and Bruce Crocker, and has its management both in Israel and in Silicon Valley.


\[175\]
providers like Vertex are very active in Singapore. The Vertex funds focus on the communication and information technology, security, and bio-technology sectors. Vertex Venture Capital (VVC) was set up in 1996 and is 51% owned by Singapore-based Vertex Venture Holdings Ltd., the venture capital arm set up by Singapore Technologies Group, which is a Government-linked corporation (GLC). In 2000 the Singapore government invested US$76m in its fund – Vertex Israel II. For Israel, Singapore is an important place from which political and business developments are monitored and from which business opportunities in the wider region are orchestrated.

It is in this context that the foundation of a local Singaporean initiative, the Israel-Singapore Business Association (IBA), should be regarded. Charles Simon, a Singapore-born Jew with a Turkish background, the founder of the association, anticipated on a change in Israeli business, which would look not only westwards to Europe and the United States but also eastwards to Asia. He foresaw that the Pacific Rim basin, Southeast Asia and Australia, would become one of the fastest growing areas over the next twenty or thirty years, or more. He thought that it would be worthwhile for Israel to take the trouble to start doing business with Jews living in Singapore, who could function as mediators and a bridgehead for the wider area.

When Charles Simon withdrew from the board, Frank Benjamin succeeded him and presided over the association. The aim of the association was to create a network of Singaporean (Jewish) and Israeli businessmen. However, the association had only a brief life-span. In the small community where everybody already knew one another there was no need to have these contacts formalised; ‘After a couple of years I found that it was a total waste of time, so I got out’. The idea in starting the IBA association was to work towards an expected spin-off from cooperation between Israel and Singapore, which had been in place since the mid-1960s. Charles Simon had already tried to do business with Israel, but this had proved to be difficult. There were differences in mentality. ‘It seems that you need an Israeli mentality, trading mentality that is somewhat different from our mentality. We have more a Singaporean with a British flavour, from our upbringing.’ FJB has done business with Israeli companies as well. For instance, they have represented Gottex, an Israeli swimwear brand. There is a wide range of Israeli export products in Singapore. For instance, Singapore’s main supermarket, Cold Storage, sells kosher foodstuff. Jewish community members also import products, but mainly for private use. For instance the matzos, kosher beef and the wine which are used for saying blessings come from Israel.

6.9 Strategies to Keep Control and Avoiding a Take-Over

The IPO had made FJB a listed company. FJB avoided being presented as a family firm. In such a firm, the family wants to be in control, especially when important business decisions have to be

---

114 See for example: the monthly report covering news and investment opportunities: Israel High-Tech & Investment Report. At: http://www.ishitech.co.il
115 Charles Simon ran a trading house, Bolter & Simon, and traded in all kinds of merchandise. He was, for example, the sole distributor in the region of the Mars candy bars. About establishing business ties with Israelis Simon said: ‘I think they are beginning to realise the last two – three years that the pacific rim basin, there are some very important countries, in Southeast Asia in the whole of pacific rim basin like Australasia, and I begin to feel that they started looking East and find some business here. And take trouble, take some trouble to perform some business with some people living in this area, because this is going to be the fastest growing area over the next twenty thirty years or more I think’ Interview Charles Simon. Singapore National Archives. Oral History Department. Access Number 395. Reel 1-22. Reel 9. 1984.
116 Ibid.
made, such as when expansion plans require capital to come in from the outside. Although FJB had been listed, the family’s disposition was to keep control over as much as possible. This came to the fore when a merger was announced between FJ Benjamin Holdings and Royal Clicks. Royal Clicks is a retail firm that sells sportswear.

Although the news was announced as if it were a merger, the media considered this to be the acquisition of an ‘ailing’ FJ Benjamin by Royal Clicks\(^\text{117}\). By April 2003, the other economic sectors had recovered from the 1997/1998 Asian financial crisis, but the retail sector still lagged behind. Regional consumer confidence was still declining and there were no indications of when the market would recover. During the first quarter of 2003 FJ Benjamin had to cope with a decline of 6% in year-on-year sales. It became necessary for the company to drastically reduce the number of its shops and employees. Costs were heavily cut. Turnover dropped from around S$137 million to S$78 million.

The markets were nevertheless stunned by FJB’s announcement of the merger with Royal Clicks. It would be one of the biggest retail sector mergers in Singaporean corporate history. FJB made the announcement as if it were given a great opportunity to accelerate growth and possibilities. The consequence would be that the name of FJ Benjamin would be de-listed. This was thought to be unbearable for Frank Benjamin, but his reaction was that these kinds of sentiments were not helpful. ‘Should I not take it because I’m afraid the name might be changed’\(^\text{118}\)? An exchange ratio value had already been calculated in which the potential synergy, the operating performances and the financial position of both companies had been taken into consideration. With the merger, the new entity would become the largest speciality retailer in Southeast Asia, with total assets of S$405 million, a net asset value of S$127 million and a retail and distribution network in 10 countries with 680 outlets\(^\text{119}\). Shareholders were hesitant. Shares of both FJB and Royal Clicks dropped. The merger was seen as a desperate attempt to survive\(^\text{120}\).

As always, Frank Benjamin’s reaction was positive. ‘Putting egos and sentiments aside, this is what the business requires in Singapore’\(^\text{121}\). He denied the idea that it would be a take-over. The merger had to be regarded as serious and he expressed his hope that the camaraderie and culture of the FJB firm would continue. This is a merger in fact and by law. (…) ‘For me to say it wasn’t emotional and sentimental to move into a merger with another group would not be honest’, (…) ‘But do you know how many companies there were that died a natural death in the old days? (…) ‘The English companies, the department stores, the family companies – they just died off because the times moved and they didn’t move with the times’\(^\text{22}\), (…) ‘Size does matter’\(^\text{23}\), stated Benjamin. ‘It is a crucial ingredient in the battle for global dominance. Each has its core strengths and believes that specialisation in these core strengths is the key to market dominance’\(^\text{24}\). It was a statement with a very bitter taste. It would mean the end of his presidency of the firm. Under the merger agreement a new chairman and chief executive officer would be appointed, and they would not be Benjamins. With a stake of only 13 % in the enlarged group, FJB would end up rather powerless.

\(^{118}\) The Straits Times Singapore. 4-7-2001. FJ Benjamin and Royal Clicks to tie the knot.
\(^{119}\) Business Times Singapore. 4-7-2001. Royal Clicks plans $64m acquisition of FJ Benjamin.
\(^{120}\) The Straits Times Singapore. 9-7-2001. FJ Benjamin enters merger ‘for survival’.
\(^{121}\) Frank Benjamin quoted in: Ibid.
\(^{122}\) Ibid.
\(^{123}\) Frank Benjamin quoted in: The Straits Times Singapore. 16-7-2001. Royal Clicks and FJ Benjamin announce merger plan.
\(^{124}\) Ibid.
As FJB was a listed firm, its principal stockholders would have to be in favour of the merger. Frank Benjamin, his wife Mavis and his brother Nash were stockholders with 58.4% of the stock. 75% shareholder approval was needed to make the deal go through. The principal stockholders made it clear that they would vote in favor of the merger. However, smaller shareholders did not show much confidence in the merger. The value of the shares of both Royal Clicks and FJ Benjamin dropped when the deal was announced. There was speculation in the media that FJB would not easily let go of its autonomy. The majority of the shareholders would be hard to convince to vote in favour of the merger. This suggested that FJ Benjamin’s future as a listed firm was in the hands of the shareholders, as it should be. But in fact these other shareholders would not have been an obstacle for the Benjamins if they had really wanted the merger to go through. The family’s control over the firm was strong. It was certainly was stronger than the 58.4% which was seen as their family share. Taking a different decision would not have depended on the rest of the stockholders. If FJB wanted the merger to go through, it would not have been a problem to get the remaining percentage, the 75% required to close the deal.

This control was guaranteed through the use of extended family loyalty within the wider Jewish community. Frank Benjamin’s son, Douglas Benjamin is a small shareholder. So is director Joseph Grimberg. Grimberg is a prominent member of the Jewish Community and has a long lasting friendship with Frank Benjamin. Grimberg and Douglas Benjamin own only a limited number of shares, but in addition to this small stake in the business, as far as shares or warrants are concerned, there is a substantial number of shares in the hands of the Jacob Ballas Estate. Jacob Ballas was a prominent member of the Jewish Community. Frank Benjamin, Joseph Grimberg and Ballas’ former long-term personal secretary are the trustees of the Estate and have direct authority to decide on the stock portfolio decisions of the Jacob Ballas Estate. As a very successful stockbroker, Ballas had the habit of buying shares in companies in which he had confidence. He had confidence in FJ Benjamin when, back in the seventies, Frank Benjamin needed money to expand his business and open stores for the Gucci franchise he had freshly acquired. I knew him (Frank Benjamin) as a young boy and also his Jewish firm. And they were doing well, they needed a little bit of help, they wanted me to join in and take some shares in the company and put money in the company which I did, about five years ago (1978). And I became the chairman of the company.

The number of shares which the Jacob Ballas Estate holds is 30 million, which makes it a substantial shareholder. In 2004 this number of shares represented 10.53% of the authorised share capital of FJ Benjamin. In practice this means that the public does not hold much of the company’s shares, as analysts had already pointed out in 1999. The Benjamin family and FJB’s chairman (at the time) Jacob Ballas, held 74% of the shares in September 1999.

This does not mean that family members did not have different opinions about which direction the company should take or that the other two trustees automatically follow Frank Benjamin in

126 Of the directors Grimberg held only limited numbers of shares and warrants on 30-6-2004. He held 50,000 ordinary shares and 300,000 warrants. The same applies to Douglas Benjamin. He held 120,000 shares and an equal amount of warrants. The CEO of the company, Frank Benjamin, held 65m shares at that time, and 25m warrants.
127 He died in the year 2000 at the age of seventy-nine. He had been the President of the Jewish Welfare Board on and off since 1961 and he was a trustee of a few trust funds. See also [http://www.saints.org.sg/dvk34.cfm](http://www.saints.org.sg/dvk34.cfm) last visited 4-7-2007.

178
decisions relating to the Jacob Ballas Estate’s shares portfolio. There are enough examples of shifts in family businesses, for example, caused by the business patriarchs’ succession preferences\(^{130}\), which make family decisions not entirely predictable. When a firm is listed in Singapore, in order to comply with rule 723 of the listing manual of the Singapore Exchange Securities Trading Limited at least 25% of the firm’s shares ought to be in the hands of the public. When added together, the number of shares held, between the Jacob Ballas Estate and the (extended) family exceeded the 75% of the total number of shares, and were enough to control important decisions like a merger. What is implied here is that FJ Benjamin is potentially able to make use of ‘ethno-religious’ affiliations and institutions like trust funds to keep control. The extent of the family’s grip over the firm is therefore veiled. The authority which two of the FJ Benjamin’s directors have as trustees over the stock portfolio of the Jacob Ballas Estate is not officially counted as part of the family share, but ‘together the percentages result in control’\(^{131}\).

It is normal practice within the Jewish community ‘to give back to society’. Wealthy members of the Jewish community create trust funds to let their legacy pass on. The direct involvement and high standing in the small Jewish Community of two of the directors of FJ Benjamin, Frank Benjamin and Joseph Grimberg, make them desirable trustees of local Jewish trust funds. Of course each committee of trustees which represents a trust fund has to respect the wishes of the (deceased) member of the community. These trust funds are important financial pillars for the Jewish Community in Singapore and provide the necessary resources to cover the ‘exploitation’ costs of the Jewish community. The estimated costs of the new seven-storey Jacob Ballas Centre, for instance was S$7million. The centre was funded out of resources from the Jacob Ballas Estate\(^{132}\). A way to guarantee a more durable source of income for the community is to keep a diligently composed portfolio of shares\(^{133}\).

The merger announced with Royal Clicks Limited (RCL) fell through. The acquisition was conditional. Both companies’ shareholders and the authorities had to approve. Frank Benjamin considered the difference of the business cultures of FJ Benjamin and Royal Clicks as unbridgeable. Royal Clicks is Indian. It would be difficult to align their interests to achieve the ‘synergies expected from the proposed merger within the time frame anticipated’\(^{134}\). FJB saw a mismatch between Royal Clicks mid- to low-end sporting goods market and FJ Benjamin’s high-end luxury goods buyers. Market analysts thought that too high a premium would have to be paid by Royal Clicks in comparison with the expected returns\(^{135}\). FJ Benjamin was asking too much for the merger. But later another reason was adduced: FJ Benjamin’s good contacts with the local Chinese business milieu. The Straits Times Singapore announced that ‘former remisier king Peter Lim was FJ Benjamin’s knight in shining armour’\(^{136}\). FJ Benjamin had found someone from outside to invest in the firm. The Singaporean Chinese Peter Lim advises firms which undergo restructuring. He was offered, or rather, as Frank Benjamin stated, Peter Lim offered to buy 65


\(^{131}\) Interview Joseph Grimberg 26-5-2005.

\(^{132}\) The Jacob Ballas Centre was completed in 2007 at a cost of S$10 million. There is a kosher restaurant, a mini-mart, a banquet hall and a children’s playground. In: The New Straits Times Singapore. 7-11-2007. The rabbi and the chazzan (a cantor) are accommodated in the centre, and there is a library and a meeting place to house the daily communal breakfasts and Sabbath lunches.

\(^{133}\) Of course that has been undermined by the current credit crisis.

\(^{134}\) FJ Benjamin quoted in: The New Straits Times Singapore. 31-7-2001. FJ Benjamin, Royal Clicks call off merger.

\(^{135}\) Ibid.

\(^{136}\) The New Straits Times Singapore. 31-7-2001. FJ Benjamin, Royal Clicks call off merger.
million FJB new shares out of 75 million in a proposed placement of 20 cent per share being placed out by FJ Benjamin.

These 65 million shares would represent almost 24% of FJ Benjamin’s enlarged share capital. Lim emerged as a substantial shareholder with 22.81% of the shares, the same number of shares which Frank Benjamin was holding. Next to the Jacob Ballas Estate, other substantial shareholders in the firm were Nash Benjamin and Mavis Benjamin (in 2004) with respectively 8.15% and 7.89% of the share capital\(^\text{137}\). Lim’s choice of FJ Benjamin raised eyebrows. Asset stripping of the company would be difficult because FJ Benjamin held no more than a ‘crumbling’ headquarters at Orange Grove and some shop inventory. It was speculated that Lim was acting for an outside party, most likely Indonesian, but his intentions seemed serious. A business friend of Lim’s, Dennis Foo, agreed to run the MU Red Café on an equal base with FJ Benjamin, with the option of developing the entertainment concept in other countries as well\(^\text{138}\). Ricky Goh, a former hotelier and another close business associate of Peter Lim’s, was going to manage the MU food and beverage chain in Asia. With the help of these local Singaporean Chinese businessmen FJ Benjamin seemed back on track again. Thanks to this Singaporean Chinese intervention, the future didn’t look as bleak as it had when the crisis suddenly hit the region.

6.10 Anchored in Singapore: the Benjamins are Here to Stay

In order to survive FJ Benjamin had to accept smaller fashion lines in its portfolio and find ways of introducing them to the Asian market. Most of these smaller overseas fashion companies are unable to stand on their own. FJ Benjamin’s answer to this dilemma was multi-label stores. Inez was the name of the new store at the six-floor Paragon Shopping Center. It was a new multi-label lifestyle store. This shopping experience added new glamour to Singapore’s shopping-scape. FJ Benjamin was going to use a 2700 sq ft second-floor unit to represent a little over twenty new labels, some of them also locally designed. The targeted audience was the Singaporean woman who likes big designer names, but who also likes to see many other brands which offer a lifestyle mix.

Inez was also a vehicle to launch FJ Benjamin’s new in-house label Odile, later named O. Odile Benjamin is the wife of Douglas Benjamin and, as Frank Benjamin claims, a very talented designer. Odile is doing the design for the Guess? Kids and Baby Guess? private labels for the Asia Pacific Region and the Middle Eastern market. FJ Benjamin has the license to design and manufacture products and apparel for these brands and retails these lines in its own stores in Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. Odile Benjamin saw a niche in the made-to-measure service. With lots of splendid balls and gatherings to attend, the local ladies are constantly stressing out over what to wear. They get frustrated and grumble about the limited fashion choice they have for their own body sizes in designer stores. Odile’s idea was that a direct contact with the designer would make life easier for them and at least would guarantee that no one else arrived at the same party wearing the same dress. Odile Benjamin moves in her clientele’s social circles, gets

\(^{137}\) With this new division of shareholders the firm states, in its 2004 annual report, that it complies with rule 723 of the listing manual of the Singapore Exchange Securities Trading Limited, that at least 25% of the firm’s shares are held by the public. In: *Year report 2004 FJ Benjamin Holdings Ltd.* Statistics of shareholdings, P. 71.

\(^{138}\) *Business Times Singapore.* 7-8-2001. FJB team up to give Man-U café a lift. Malaysia would be their focal point to open cafes.
invited to the same events, and understands the mores of Singapore’s jet set. Her anchorage in Singapore is used as a unique selling point in FJB’s strategies.

In addition to the multi-label store and the in-house women’s fashion line, O, another action taken by FJ Benjamin in the aftermath to the crisis is the introduction of new in-house brands. FJ Benjamin has started a children’s line called Paint 8, and a men’s line called Raoul. Douglas Benjamin came up with the idea that a shirts-only store would be a hit in the region. Shirts are popular as leisure wear in Singapore but also as office wear. Because of the tropical heat in Singapore the business dress code is different than in other global cities. It is generally acceptable to show up at the office in a shirt and tie rather than a suit. This dress code was legitimised by government officials. Even Singapore’s former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, usually dressed in proletarian shirts with short sleeves. However, the quality of the regionally produced shirts was generally poor. After a few washes, the sleeves and collar would become worn. The alternatives, imported design shirts, were too costly. A high-quality low-cost in-house shirt brand was a potentially lucrative new business idea. This idea further exemplifies the extent to which the Benjamins are at home in the Straits. ‘China opened up, Asia opened up in the manufacturing of textiles and wearing apparels. And all the Americans and Asians are buying from Asia, because of the prices. You can say that 70-80% percent of the apparels are made in Asia. Why? Because of the price. And why they are sold back in the US or in Asia? Because of the brand. Well, we feel that if Asian quality is acceptable to the Europeans and the Americans, then Asia can develop its own brands. Made in Asia and sold to the Americans and Europeans. It is a natural evolvement of what has been happening over the last fifteen years. So yes, of course it changed in the last 15-20 years and we are changing with it. So, what we are saying now is; hey wait a minute, we developed a brand here and sell it to them. Which is exactly what is happening’. But these professional aspirations still have a family touch: ‘My grandson’s name is Raoul but we had a competition in the company and some people came with various names. We picked Raoul because it sounded very Spanish, very European. My grandson now wants 25% of every shirt that we sell. It looks like we have a new entrepreneur in the family’.

Raoul started as a brand in the Straits with stores in Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia. Three new shops will be opened in Bahrain and Dubai. FJ Benjamin did marketing research in London with an eye on opening in England. The outcome was promising. Their product is considered to be very acceptable, the prices very competitive, and most importantly the quality is considered to be good. The manufacturing takes place in the Far East, but they don’t own the facilities to manufacture. ‘We look at certain qualities. If China makes the quality of this style of shirt, we make it there. If we can make it in Thailand, we make it there. We look at quality. Some kind of fabrics, the weaving they make the best at another place, for instance with silk. All our fabrics are imported from Italy. The finest Italian cottons, Egyptian cottons, and because we can make at such a good price in Asia we are selling quality at a competitive price’.

A next logical step would be to invest in manufacturing facilities in China. In November 2003 FJ Benjamin bought a stake in the China-based garment contract manufacturer Bright Orient Holdings. It was a two million placement share purchase (5% of the offer) as a part of the IPO of Orient Holdings, which had just been concluded. The stake was taken not just at random.
intention was to work out details of how the two firms could leverage on each other’s strengths. The Chinese company makes apparel, ties and scarves for international fashion brands and was developing its own in-house brands for the Chinese market, like Season Wind and Sefon jeans, and apparel aimed at middle-class working women.

With the investment FJB wants to gain a foothold in the potentially lucrative Chinese market. Frank Benjamin has great faith in China’s new breed of big spenders. The time of uniform cotton Mao suits that were once worn all over China is over. There is an increasing consumer spending pattern in which a significant variety of consumer products are in demand. The British fashion label Alfred Dunhill is the most popular fashion name in the big Chinese cities, followed by Italy’s Gianni Versace and France’s Cartier and Louis Vuitton. A delegation from FJ Benjamin had visited Orient Holdings factories in Shenzen, and saw opportunities to shift parts of FJB’s production to China and profit from the market access which Orient has in China. Orient, in turn, would profit from FJ Benjamin’s market access in the wider Asian Pacific.

FJB anticipates the lifting of global quota on textile imports. With the end of these quotas ‘a new world textile order’ would emerge. China has a substantial increase in export orders since the EU and the USA eliminated quotas on Chinese textile imports. In the first four months of year 2005 their textile exports to the US grew by 71% while exports to Europe rose by 48%. The Chinese have built up a comparative advantage in the low-value-added textile industry through the employment of millions of low-income women. This labour reserve is still very abundant. According to Western countries, the Chinese Yuan is kept at too low a level, but the Chinese are numb to pressure to revalue the Chinese national currency. Chinese exports are ‘causing market disruption’ and are ‘threatening to impede the orderly development of trade in these products’. Some say that it is only a matter of time before trade-barriers are re-imposed. Anticipating this reimposition of protection, Chinese textile exporters have already outsourced their production to surrounding countries like Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Pakistan to circumvent the textile quotas. They will use these countries to ship Chinese goods, outsourced or made in Vietnam, Sri Lanka or Pakistan.

In FJ Benjamin’s new business model, the strategy of making licensed original designs proved successful. To cut back on losses, for instance in Hong Kong and Australia, could never be wrong, and to concentrate on the core businesses was not a bad idea either. FJB’s questionable move into F&B, and the subsequent millstone around its neck with MU’s Red Café, has been delegated to business partners who in a joint venture understand better how better to deal with entertainment spots. The same applies for their hi-tech Digicard adventure. FJB soon

---

144 Business Times Singapore. 28-11-2003. Institutions take up 31% of Bright Orient offer.
145 The Straits Times Singapore. 21-1-2004. From Mao to haute couture.
147 Ibid.
148 Ibid. It seems that the unskilled Chinese labour reservoir is not as inexhaustible as is often suggested. The preference is for jobs in the hotel and catering industry or in stores rather than in factories. Of course with the credit crisis that might have changed again.
150 This cooperation with Dennis Foo was further developed when FJ Benjamin and Foo, backed up by developer Mapletree Investments, opened Singapore’s largest entertainment complex in St James Power Station. The idea of ‘new ideas need old buildings’ was put to use here, as was the old colonial red brick building that used to be a coal-fired power station. The idea behind this Integrated Mega Entertainment Complex is to offer an entertainment spot for both locals and tourists that caters for all tastes and where you pay one entrance fee only. Having nine clubs under one roof, the center clearly also benefits from economies of scale.
FJ Benjamin, brand behind the brands

withdrew from this enterprise. In the new retail climate it would be harping on old times to rely any longer on well-known international brands like Gucci, YSL and Fendi. In the past these brands helped FJ Benjamin to become one of the leading fashion retailers in Singapore, but the policies of these international brands have changed. Mediators like FJ Benjamin have been cut out. But there will always be new smaller brands which are planning to expand internationally in the ‘old-fashioned way’. For instance there is Gap Inc., with brands like Gap and Banana Republic, that has chosen to take the route of franchising. They want to expand via an international franchising strategy using FJB’s expertise in the region. However, there is less space for FJB to leave its mark. FJ Benjamin has to stick to Gap’s quality standards to preserve the reputation of the brand. In return for the expertise which FJ Benjamin provides as a retailer, Gap Inc. provides access to their fashion products and accessories.

The Benjamins have become one of Singapore’s most colourful and leading families. They have been settled in Singapore for generations and with a touch of nouveau riche glamour, and in a fruitful dialectic with Singapore’s wish to become a fashion hub, they have helped to recreate Singapore as a retailer’s paradise. At various times they have put their ethno-religious affiliations to use in their businesses. As a listed firm, it is supposed to have outgrown this family-firm mode of operation, but they still have applied policies which typify the family firm. Business theory stresses that business and ethno-religiousity have nothing to do with each other, but business and ethno-religious matters do intersect in the track record of FJB at times, without these intersections being exclusively Jewish. Ethno-religious resources are allocated in business practice, and vice-versa. Resources from businesses also enter the realm of ethno-religious practices. This case has showed there are ways to keep control of a business by using ethno-religious resources which other listed companies usually don’t have and are not supposed to have. Because of the small size of the Jewish community in Singapore, prominent businessmen are also prominent community members and therefore occupy seats on influential community boards. This position makes them desirable as trustees who manage and control trust funds which might contain considerable amounts of capital. These trustees have a voice in how this capital is allocated and invested in stock portfolios, for instance.

It is beyond the scope of this research to find out in what ways ethno-religious intersections are decisive or ‘significant’. Despite the fact that there definitely is an intersection, the time-spatial interface of these two worlds are so differently layered and have such different rhythms that a search for reasons why certain developments have occurred is a perilous undertaking. Cause and effect relations are not easily determinable. In fashion, the creation of surplus value is not grounded in the materials of one single ‘actant’ only. The world of fashion is too much of an open network which has too many sub-systems in it to become predictable at any point.

The Singapore Jewish community has thrived on the business efforts of families like the Benjamins. The Benjamins have been deeply involved in creating a community infrastructure to celebrate Jewish life, which is a prerequisite for their enduring presence in the Straits. This is at

152 Of course this situation need not be exclusively Jewish. In every religion, to perform an act of charity is considered as a good deed. But the strong rejection of intermarriage and the unavailability of suitable marriage partners because of the small size of the community provided the Singapore Jewish community with an unusual number of bachelors who had no offspring to inherit their sometimes considerable amounts of money.
153 The Jewish population worldwide is said to amount not more than a half percent of the total population.
the core of a meaningful life as an entrepreneur in this context. Every phase in the circle of life is attended to and all needs are provided by local Jewish religious institutions and functions. A circumciser, synagogues, kosher food supplies, religious and language education, a rabbi, a home for the elderly, a cemetery; everything is taken care of. For survival in terms of critical mass, the community depends on ‘foreigners’ who visit the synagogue in numbers and mix with the locals to some degree. This relative openness towards different denominations has created a cosmopolitan community. Differences are negotiated. Sometimes they are bridgeable (Gesher), and at other times not. The religious direction the community clings to is orthodoxy. As the president of the Jewish Welfare Board, Frank Benjamin is clear about this, as is the rabbi. Orthodoxy is the only possible way for them to connect with one another. After all, orthodox Jews are not non-Reformed or non-liberal Jews, while Reformed or liberal Jews are non-orthodox Jews. And this makes a big difference.

The Benjamin family has entered a new phase in their business practice. It is a new phase and a future scenario in one. FJB wants to become an international brand which has its home in the Straits, with Singapore as its central node, and which is ready to compete with brands from the West. This ambition exemplifies a growing self-consciousness, which is necessary to becoming competitive in the global fashion business arena. They are no longer middlemen, brokers or ‘pariah entrepreneurs’ who interfere in between two worlds. They have moved away from the rifts where absences and presences are enacted. They are firmly anchored in Singapore, and they are there to stay.
7. Enacting the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits: The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf (CBTL)

7.1 Introducing CBTL

In 2007 the Los Angeles-based International Coffee & Tea LLC, better known as The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf (CBTL), opened its 500th store. CBTL serves coffee and tea beverages in the retail coffee house industry and operates a chain of specialty coffee and tea stores. CBTL has 4,400 employees. In 2007 the revenue was estimated at US$130,000,000. After Starbucks, CBTL is the second largest U.S. specialty coffee retailer. CBTL expanded rapidly, internationally and in the U.S. Outside the US, CBTL opened coffee outlets in the Straits and also in the Middle East, in Israel, the UAE, Kuwait, Quatar, Brunei and Egypt. In the wider Asia-Pacific region they opened outlets in Korea and the Philippines. In China they even overcame the supposedly ‘lack of relevant market information problem’ and opened outlets in Shanghai (9 outlets) and Suzhou (1 outlet).

The world of specialty coffee is hypercompetitive. If a customer in the US is not satisfied at a CBTL outlet, there is always a Starbucks around the corner which is more than willing to serve a new customer. The CBTL chain was founded by Herbert and Mona Hyman in 1963. The Hymans have a European Jewish background. They opened their first outlet on San Vicente Boulevard in Brentwood. They got their idea to start a coffee chain during a trip to Europe. Coffee culture in Europe is profoundly different from that of the US. The Hymans thought they had found a niche for themselves by bringing European coffee culture to the USA. Herbert Hyman, an UCLA graduate, consulted some college friends and they agreed to invest in the business venture. Since 1963 CBTL has not only opened coffee outlets but has also imported roasted and retailed gourmet coffee. Hyman decided to retire in 1998. He gave two brothers of the Baghdadi Jewish Sassoon family, the Indonesian born Victor and his younger brother Sunny, together with silent partner and long-term friend of the family, Severin Wunderman, the first right to buy the company. Earlier, in 1996, the Sassoons had already obtained the franchise rights in Southeast Asia. As the regional franchiser they had established a chain of CBTL outlets in the Straits region.

When CBTL opened its first outlets in the malls of Singapore their presence was warmly welcomed. For Singaporeans it is said that ‘life is not complete without shopping’. Shopping experiences have to be perfect. Mall managements prescribe that a mall needs a place like Starbucks or CBTL. When a natural shopper is tired of shopping there should be somewhere to relax inside the mall. But these outlets have brought relief not only for shoppers. CBTL and Starbucks also draw visitors who want good coffee, and the outlets are perfect places to meet friends and make informal business contacts. For ethnographic researchers they are good places in which to meet informers and to tape interviews. In the Straits the coffee outlets appeal to

---

2 Based on outlets of its brand outside home base US.
7 The Straits Times Singapore. 5-9-1999.
CHAPTER 7

young, fashion-oriented customers. In Indonesia and Malaysia, more than in Singapore, the outlets are the favourite haunts of middle- and upper-class youngsters engaged in conspicuous consumption. They can display their affluence in the CBTL zones in the luxurious malls of Jakarta, like Plaza Senayan and Plaza Indonesia. Indonesian film crews choose CBTL locations for their film sets. CBTL is prominently present in a popular teenage film like Ada apa dengan cinta? which deals with the lives and loves of urban well-to-do youngsters. The prices paid for the luxurious coffee and food at these outlets would feed a regular Indonesian household for a week. CBTL outlets serve no alcohol. This makes them less conspicuous in Islamist circles.

In the US, and increasingly in Europe, these coffee chains have become so-called third places: welcoming, accepting environments between home and work, where one's mind can be put to ease. They capitalise on the need for informal public places in an urban environment where people can meet and feel less anonymous. What does it take to successfully start a networked organisation which is able to cater for such a coffee experience in the Straits? The Sassoon brothers have shown that they know what it takes. Their enterprise reads like one of opportunism, pragmatism and performance. Thoroughly involved in it, the Sassoons have gradually and cautiously expanded their business. CBTL is *The brew to be no. 2*. They aim for a top three position but at the same time they realise that they will always lag behind the indisputable number one, Starbucks.

Business in the Straits region is predominantly Chinese. The Sassoons are Iraqi Jews who have their roots in the Straits. The Sassoons are part of a wider social Jewish group in Singapore and the wider Straits area. CBTL is still a family firm as it is not listed on the stock exchange, but could one say that it is a Jewish family firm? The same question had to be asked of FJ Benjamin’s business in the preceding chapter and again the question would raise eyebrows with the CEO. The label ‘family firm’ is often linked with unprofessional business behaviour and in this context with a confusion of business with ethno-religiosity. One of the managers of CBTL Singapore put it like this: ‘the firm is in a transition period from a by the family led company towards a managerial run company’. This seems good enough for a first characterisation of CBTL’s state of affairs.

The aim in this chapter is to describe the track record of CBTL’s businesses as a networked corporation. A rich, thick and extensive time-space description will be given of the ups and downs of the CBTL firm from the end of the twentieth century well into this new millennium. The leading question is how CBTL’s Jewish ethno-religious identity is put to use in their businesses. Is there a ‘J-factor’ which gives an advantage or is their business hampered because of this factor? And how do Jewish rules, ethics or laws interfere with their business? This question is made answerable by focusing first on CBTL’s core actant; coffee, around which CBTL’s organisation is built. CBTL’s strategies for keeping control of the firm are discussed, as are their labour policies, their access to capital, their succession strategies and their generational differences. As an organisation which is active in the Straits region, their strategies to cross borders are looked at closely, especially in relation to regional and global anti-Semitism. Finally, the chapter deals with the involvement of the Jewish homeland, Israel, on their businesses, and the extent to which they are ‘anchored’ in the Straits.

---
11 Interview with Vincent Chang, Manager CBTL, 23-2-2005 and 11-3-2005.
7.2 Coffee as Actant

Coffee represents a complex variety of connections. Worldwide, it is one of the most discussed and consumed liquid substances. Coffee is all around us. People drink coffee to wake up, to get their shot of caffeine, to socialise or to withdraw from work or business. ‘Effe een bakkie doen’ in Dutch means a moment to socialise, to meet your colleagues at the coffee machine for the latest gossip. With these different customs, it is no wonder that in addition to the actual beans, the other actants in coffee retailing are meaningful as well. Even the ‘grounded’ basics are not singular. There are different sorts of coffee and these differences have become meaningful, also for the consumer. Is your coffee a Robusta, with stronger flavour than the premium quality beans, the Arabica? Is the coffee from the Middle East, or from Africa (the Ethiopian Harar) or is it from the Americas (the premium Jamaican Blue Mountain)? What kind of roast is preferred and what skills does it take to make this roast? Is it a dark roast, a full city medium dark roast, a cinnamon roast, a medium roast or a light roast? But there are also other variables that reverberate through the networks in the world of coffee. What kind of soil produces the best quality beans? Were fertilizers used or is the coffee the result of organic farming practice? Is it a mass product or is it produced by skilled craftsmen? Is it an ‘honest’ coffee, the result of fair trade, and do the farmers get a ‘fair price’?

These are only the differentials at the ‘grounded’ end of the networks in which coffee as an actant is involved in. The branding of the coffee already begins at this stage. Coffee has become a marker. No shop can afford to brew a simple pot of coffee from an ordinary filter coffee maker anymore. Every coffee shop serves quality coffee using an espresso machine. When entering a coffee outlet the customer is welcomed with a warm smile. How are you today? The customer mutters his personal coffee preferences in colourful vocabulary only insiders understand: medium mocha macchiato, double espresso, cappuccino, Americano, decaf, grande skim latte, automatic drip or French press, ground or whole bean, fiery or frosty. The coffee is put together not just by a tea lady but by a barista. These baristas, mostly teenagers, are taught strict quality control, relying on a timer to make sure they pull every shot of espresso with just the right amount of crema, the reddish gold-brown foam that floats on top of the espresso. ‘Sleep is overrated’ says a T-shirt which is worn by the baristas at the Coffee Company to praise the ability of coffee to keep you awake.

There is endless differentiation with ‘invented’ knowledge in the coffee business and in consumers’ practices. As a coffee afficionado you can show off, displaying your individual refinement in taste, or you can make a stand against globalisation. As a Singapore coffee connoisseur you might stick to local brand Kopitiam rather than unquestioningly embracing global Western brands. If you suffer from ‘caffeinism’ you would prefer decaffeinated coffee. If your stomach can’t cope with black coffee in the morning, you stick to café lattes, not with sterilized milk but with pasteurized milk. In doing so, you differentiate yourself as an individual from the crowds, you exclude, you include, and at the same time you connect. You connect because you ‘talk’; you mediate through your coffee and the place where you drink your coffee.

Next to the grounded bean there is a cluster of other forces at work which create the CBTL brand. As a CBTL customer you understand quality. CBTL uses only the finest Arabica coffee. The US-packed and sealed beans are ground on the spot. The ice-blended coffees are revolutionary and the Chicago cheesecake is unrivalled. In California, CBTL is the choice of

---

celebrities. Celebrity spotting on a CBTL terrace on the sidewalks of LA’s boulevards is a popular pastime, but the celebrities themselves join in as well. Brad Pitt in Oceans 13 is constantly sipping his take-away cup while planning another grand theft. Everything in the outlets of CBTL is carefully thought out to stimulate a ‘social feeling’. The music, the seating, the decoration, the level of ambient noise; all should add to a social and cozy atmosphere. Strangely enough, the observation in the US is that the majority of the customers have no conversation or interaction at all\textsuperscript{13}, but this seems to be part of the point. There is an absence of pressure for customers to socialise. You can be alone without feeling lonely. It is the outlet itself which compensates for the absence of friends, a lover, a family or a business associate to have lunch with.

7.3 The Sassoons

The Sassoon family has had enterprises in various regions of the world. Victor and Sunny Sassoon’s grandfather left Baghdad in the 1920s and moved to Dutch controlled Batavia, now Jakarta. He was involved in the trading of spices and fruit. Later he found his niche in the manufacturing of watches. The father of Sunny and Victor, the late Mordy Sassoon and his wife, Rebecca Aslan, started a family-owned watch-importing business called Rubina watches, which is still the largest supplier of luxury watches in Indonesia. Rubina’s watches are sold in the Time Place stores and the business is still run by the Sassoon and Elias families. Time Place has stores in Jakarta’s two most prestigious shopping malls, Plaza Indonesia and Plaza Senayan, and in the most exclusive mall in Surabaya, Tunjungan Plaza. Irwan Khatony is the general manager in Indonesia of this high profile business. He is a long-term friend of the family and is from the well-known Surabaya Baghdadi Jewish Khatony family. Irwan Khatony was taken into the Sassoon’s family business when he was young. Victor Sassoon (born 1958) and Irwan Khatony grew up together in Surabaya. They are like cousins. Together they build the luxury timepieces division of Rubina watches. Irwan Khatony is a typical Indonesian businessman who knows the world of business in Jakarta like the back of his hand. He is involved through his contacts in many other businesses. Good marketing for luxury timepieces means making use of the glossy magazines, even if this means that you have to become a celebrity yourself. Khatony is high profile in this world of celebrities, not in the least because of his marriage with Desy Ratnasari, an Indonesian celebrity. Irwan Khatony has a Javanese mother, JuJu Khatony, who converted to Judaism, and a Baghdadi Jewish father, Charles Khatony. Irwan has converted to Islam.

Rubina watches employs around 150 people. Rubina watches also recruits people from the Jewish social group of the business families. Matthew Mendelsohn\textsuperscript{14}, one of the division managers, said that one day when he was sitting at his office with a few of his colleagues the topic of Jewish genes came up. To their surprise they found out that they all were Jewish or were related to Jews. Mendelsohn used to work in Malaysia in the tourism and IT business. He met the Sassoons in Singapore at the synagogue and became part of the family. He was asked to start working for Rubina. He was aware that his recruitment was not based on his credentials but this had only made him work harder and feel more responsible.

Victor Sassoon was educated at the International School in Jakarta. He attended St. Michael’s School and St. Joseph’s Institution in Singapore. After completing his studies in Singapore he returned to Indonesia to work for his father. They agreed to expand the business to Singapore.

\textsuperscript{13} Simmons, J. (2004:93).
\textsuperscript{14} Interview Matthew Mendelsohn. 24-3-2005.

188
and at the age of twenty-two he moved back to Singapore to open an office, while his father went on with the business in Indonesia. In Singapore he met his future wife, Michelle Elias, who is from a Singaporean Baghdadi Jewish family. At that time she was only 13 years old. They had to wait to marry until she reached the age of 18. They now have 5 children, four daughters and one son, all still of school age. Victor Sassoon and his wife established a separate line of stores of Disney baby-merchandise. When his father passed away in 1986, Victor inherited the business. Victor had already obtained the franchise to bring luxury watch brands like Gucci, Cartier and Tag Heuer to Indonesia. He began expanding the business and started to diversify. Victor's younger brother, Sunny Sassoon ran a separate company and sold watches in Latin America. He was stationed in Los Angeles.

In 1990 Victor established the Sunvic group together with his younger brother Sunny Sassoon. Sunvic was their business vehicle for the organisation and promotion of big events. They became one of the largest players in this branch and brought artists like Phil Collins, Tina Turner, Michael Jackson, Metallica and Pearl Jam to Singapore. Sunny is stationed in Los Angeles, where many of these stars live. This was good for their business. At that time, just before the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the Sassoon's watch and concert business had a reported $33 million in sales. The crisis hit hard. In 1998 Billy Joel, Elton John and U2 cancelled their stage acts in Singapore. Big events were no longer manageable. Consequently they had to concentrate on the niche they had engaged in two years earlier.

The company story goes that, when Victor visited his brother Sunny in Los Angeles and was standing in a queue at one of the CBTL outlets, he ran into (Jewish) Paula Abdul. Victor had organised her stage performance in Singapore in 1992. Abdul told him that CBTL had already become a favorite among the Californian jet set. She advised him to start CBTL in Singapore. Through his work with celebrities, he knew that pop stars have a good nose when it comes to quality food. Convinced that it was the right move at the right time (in 1996) the Sassoons signed a franchise agreement with the CBTL US head office. In the agreement, Sassoon not only negotiated the franchise for Singapore but also a position as the regional master franchisee.

15 Interview with Victor Sassoon. 1-3-2004.
17 Ibid.
18 In Los Angeles there is a considerable Baghdadi Jewish community that has its roots in the Straits. It is organised in the Kahal Joseph congregation.
19 Sunvic is the acronym of Sunny and Victor.
23 The Straits Times Singapore. 3-12-2000.
24 Franchising is an organisational form in which effective control and monitoring can be exercised over the activities of franchisees (arms-length associates) operating in foreign markets without the need for substantial direct investment. It is an all-inclusive contractual arrangement that enables the franchisee (the receiver of the privileges) to use a proven and successful business formula in the production and marketing of goods and services. In return, the franchisor receives payment for the use of the trademark or brand name, training, and for merchandise supplied. Quoted from: Monye, S.O. (1997) Transaction costs and the internationalisation of business franchising. Research papers in International business. p. 2. http://www.isgu.ac.uk/cibs/pdf/1-97.pdf last visited 15-8-2007.
Within three years they had already opened 63 coffee outlets in Singapore (34), Malaysia (25) and Taiwan (4), far more than the average number of three to five outlets a year, which Hyman normally targeted in his expansion policies in the US and that was agreed on in the performance schedule.\textsuperscript{25}

The success did not come overnight. Victor Sassoon realised that the concept of CBTL in Asia needed adjustments to the Asian situation and flavour. As franchisors the Hymans were very stubborn and did not easily accept changes in the menu or in the operational procedures. It was still a very mom-and-pop style of business. After lengthy negotiations, Hyman surprisingly not only gave in to adjustments but even agreed to sell the entire business to the Sassoons and their partner, Severin Wunderman.

In 2003 CBTL already had 222 outlets in 11 countries, a $110 million in annual revenues and $9 million in net profits. The ownership and management reflects the diasporic connections of the family. The headquarters of the holding International Coffee & Tea LLC is in Los Angeles. The three stockholders are the two brothers Sassoon, Victor and Sunny, both Singaporean nationals, and Severin Wunderman. Severin Wunderman is a long-term (Jewish) friend of the family from the watch business.\textsuperscript{26} Wunderman is a silent partner and considered as the financial backer. It has not been revealed what the exact ratio of his investments is compared with that of the two brothers, but he is believed to have the largest stock. Sunny and Victor are involved in daily management. Sunny is the manager in Los Angeles and Victor leads the Asian department. The wives of the two brothers are active on management level, as are other family members like Victor's brother-in-law, Melvin Elias.\textsuperscript{27} ‘We are all related somehow’,\textsuperscript{28} In the local media Victor Sassoon is portrayed as a media-shy man who spends his leisure time with his wife and family as much as possible.

Both Victor’s and Sunny’s wife, Michelle Elias and Debbie Sassoon respectively, hold management positions in the firm. The managerial qualities of Victor’s wife Michelle are highly esteemed in the Singapore Jewish community. Members of the Singapore Jewish community regard her as indispensable to the family’s business success. Sassoon is unambiguously positive about his working relation with his wife and calls her ‘a balm for his frayed nerves’. Although, in the words of Sassoon,\textsuperscript{29} they argue a lot, it is important to have someone near you who knows your strengths and weaknesses. ‘There is a difference between someone who’s strong, understanding and capable and someone who’s been brought in as your wife for the sake of giving her something to do’.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{25} Choo (2002:65) In his study, to preserve the anonymity of the participants, Choo renamed CBTL as USCUP.

\textsuperscript{26} Severin Wunderman is a Belgium holocaust survivor who built Gucci’s watch business and retired as a chairman of the luxury Swiss Corum watch brand. At: Doebele, J. (2003).

\textsuperscript{27} Melvin Elias, the chief operating office manager in Los Angeles and brother-in-law of Victor and Sunny, quoted in: Doebele, J. (2003).

\textsuperscript{28} Melvin Elias is the brother of Michelle Elias, the wife of Victor Sassoon.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
7.4 Jewish Dietary Laws

A prominent fluid which interferes with CBTL’s networked organisation is the set of Jewish food laws. Kashrut laws have always been prominent in matters of Jewish identity. These laws keep Jews apart from their surroundings and help to preserve their faith. The individual Jew who keeps kosher, shows self-restraint and self-discipline. But food laws are also important from a health perspective. The Jewish ritual butcher, the shochet, checks the intestines of the slaughtered animals for diseases. Hygiene is guaranteed by keeping different foodstuffs apart while preparing food. Food laws also apply to coffee. An orthodox Jew who observes Jewish food laws sticks to kosher coffee. The bean in itself is kosher, but kashrut (kosher) rules prescribe that the utensils which are used on the beans should not be used on non-kosher items. For the F&B operational systems, this is already a major discipline to be observed.

Keeping kosher in the Straits seems out of place. For Jews who live in the Straits it is difficult to observe kashrut rules. Food laws are not uniquely Jewish. Muslims have comparable food laws. In Muslim countries there is a growing demand for food which is treated according to Muslim food laws. There seems to be a shift in thinking about food from ‘value for money’ to ‘values for money’.

For Islam, through this ‘halalisation’, the meaning of Islam and Islamic practice are debated. This ‘halalisation’ has been politicized. The Malaysian government strongly supports Malaysia’s developing into a ‘global halal hub’. In Singapore the MUIS, the Islamic religious Council of Singapore, has a listing of 8,000 products and 1800 premises which have undergone a halal assessment. CBTL is on this list as well. This seems to be a paradox when you consider CBTL’s Jewish background. It is even more peculiar when you consider that CBTL has undergone a kosher assessment in California, where many Jews live. Obviously in the Californian region it made sense to differentiate kosher food and beverages from the non-kosher varieties. When the Sassoons took over the business in 1998, one of the first things they considered was to make the entire line of beverage and baked goods in California kosher. ‘The CEO of the company couldn’t handle the thought of serving anything but kosher food to the community, and we thought it was something the Jewish community should benefit from and enjoy’.

In Southern California all beverage products (coffee, tea powders and syrups) are under the supervision of Kosher Supervision of America (KSA) and all the baked goods are under the supervision of rabbi Moshe Benzaquen’s Kosher L.A. (KOLA). But this is only in Southern California. In other regions, like the Straits, these food laws are only loosely applied. In the Straits only pork is taboo. One thing that is not permitted is that we serve pork. Although officially we don’t have a kosher menu, we don’t serve pork. And neither do our franchisees. So that is something we insist on. This is something that has come in the business culture. But other than that there is just a very pragmatic approach.
Instead of becoming kosher, the Asian CBTL operations joined the Halal movement. They have obtained a Halal certificate. When CBTL opened its doors in Malaysia, the rumour was spread (via internet) that all CBTL drinks contain E471 (mono diglycerides) which is said to come from pigs. Pigs have become the most notable symbol of the haram (or in Jewish terms –treife) animal. This E471 rumour cropped up again in Kuala Lumpur when CBTL was opening their franchise in Brunei in 2003. According to the local press, the effect was a substantial drop in the number of visitors. Customers were cautious and wanted reassurance that the products of CBTL were 100% halal. Food laws in Islam and Judaism overlap. Jewish customers in the Straits who follow kashrut rules strictly would certainly appreciate a kosher place. It would mean that they would have places outside their homes where they could meet friends and share food and drinks. For the majority of customers of CBTL in Southeast Asia a kosher certificate would be meaningless, but it is plausible that it would provoke an adverse reaction from Islamists in the Straits. They would be able to identify a Jewish business and find conformation of their views that Jews and Westernisation or Americanisation - this time in coffee culture - go hand in hand. This is a risk factor for the enterprise and could lead to entrepreneurial failure.

7.5 How to Gain Control? Franchisee becomes Franchisor

In 1996 Victor Sassoon signed the agreement with CBTL’s headquarters for the Asian franchise. It was a good time to bring a new brand to Singapore. Asia’s economy was booming. Consumers were eager for new imported consumer’s products. In Singapore, a handful of companies was already finding a niche in high quality expensive coffee blends catering for the cosmopolitan urbanites. Victor Sassoon negotiated with the CBTL’s founders Herbert and Mona Hyman. A mutual appreciation was carefully built up, and Sassoon could convince them that he was the right man to have this regional Asian franchise.

The idea of franchising in Asia went beyond Hyman’s scope and imagination. They had never been in Asia. And it had never crossed their minds that a franchise in Asia would be a viable business option. They had opened outlets only in California. The negotiations were tough. The founders hesitated to allow adaptations of their carefully thought out business format. Sassoon believed it was necessary to adjust the format to Asian tastes, flavours and habits. There are profound differences in taste and consumer patterns in Southeast Asia. In the US a coffee©to©go is fairly common. In Asia drinking coffee is more a social event. Asians like to have something to eat with their coffee. Sassoon introduced a wider selection of food and, considering the tropical climate in Southeast Asia, he foresaw great possibilities for developing new blended iced coffees. The introduction of iced coffee drinks was an adjustment Sassoon thought was indispensable to successfully serve the Asian market. Sassoon’s experiences with the whims of capricious stars


39 Reportedly there recently is one fully kosher CBTL outlet in Singapore, on Bras Basah Road, very near to the synagogue and certified as such by the local Rabbi.

were put to use to convince the Hymans. The Hymans eventually gave in, persuaded by Sassoon’s business attitude and persistence. Victor Sassoon’s business attitude is practical and down-to-earth. His experience and knowledge of the region were put to use. As a businessman he likes to look before he leaps into a new business venture. Sassoon felt that he had to know and understand the business thoroughly before he could go into it. ‘As a business man, I’m very hands-on, I like to know everything about a business before I go in. I believe there is no better way than to start from scratch’.

Sassoon’s assumption that the CBTL brand could be marketed as a luxury item in the wider Straits region proved right. In November 1996 the first Coffee Bean opened at Scott’s Shopping Centre in Singapore. The store became an instant success. The Asian adaptation of the ice-blended drinks hit the mark. Three years later there were already fifty-two coffee outlets in Singapore, Malaysia and Taiwan. In the first period these three countries were the main targets. The Hymans were impressed. In the meantime Sassoon became worried. The agreed period for the franchise was eight years. In principal he could lose the franchise at the end of the agreed period. ‘I’ve watched many other businesses where the principals take back the franchise after you’ve spent all your effort building up the business. You’re at their mercy and as your contract gets closer to expiry date, things will get harder for you’.

The Sassoons were accustomed to the licensing business. It was a way to do business which was also common in the world of luxury timepieces. Victor Sassoon foresaw the growing importance of franchising. The bottle-neck in franchising is how to keep effective control from a distance. Global time-space compression effects, the use of new technologies like the internet and the ease to travel, have made effective monitoring and control from a distance more and more possible. ‘The world is getting so small’. Initially he started negotiations to become at least the regional owner. In the course of the negotiations the stakes became higher. Sassoon approached the Hymans and made it clear that he would like to take the entire company off their hands. The Hymans, at that time already in their 70s, needed cash for the expansion of the firm. They also foresaw that succession in the business would become problematic because of various family rifts. They feared that if the future succession should devolve into the hands of the lawyers of the family’s disputing factions, the continuation of their legacy would be at stake. ‘His daughter was running it but it was complicated. He had a first wife, he had some kids, he had a second wife with some kids, it was complicated. And he did not have any cash. In America the duties was over 50%, so he was worried about it, and you know, what happens if he passes away?’

41 Hyman had no business experience outside the US. There was no guarantee that the business would work outside the US. The size of a domestic market is normally a critical motivating factor that encourages internationalisation. The USA, of course, has a large domestic market. Singapore has a very limited domestic market. It is therefore logical that franchisors in Singapore tend to have more cross-border international franchises than in other countries with large domestic markets (See: Monye, S.O. (1997) Transaction costs and the internationalisation of business franchising. Research papers in International business. p. 11-12. http://www.isgu.ac.uk/cibs/pdf/1-97.pdf last visited 15-8-2007
42 Sassoon quoted in: The Straits Times Singapore. 3-12-2000.
43 The Straits Times Singapore. 5-9-1999.
44 Sassoon quoted in: The Straits Times Singapore. 3-12-2000.
48 Ibid.
Eventually the Hymans decided to sell their entire business. In December 1998 the Sassoon brothers and Severin Wunderman bought the parent company for an amount which has never been disclosed\(^49\). In business circles this was considered a highly unusual move\(^50\). Apparently the Sassoons made them a financial offer they could not refuse. ‘Hyman was reluctant to sell but we had an opportunity because we had done a great job for him, we opened more than 30 stores in Singapore (…) just because we had stores here and were enhancing very fast, because we were opening the stores very fast, we are running a good operation here\(^51\).’

The Sassoons were able and willing to outbid possible competitors because of the financial backing of Wunderman. However, no other serious competitors or possible buyers were involved. For the Sassoons it seemed an acceptable risk, because as the franchisee of the Asian market they were already financially involved in the business. The two companies could merge. A mutual appreciation in the negotiations helped, but in the end it was pure business. According to Sassoon it certainly had nothing to do with the ‘J-factor’. ‘Oh, no, no absolutely not. It has nothing to do because of the Jewishness, really nothing. He was Jewish, but he was not involved in religion, absolutely not (…) it’s all strictly business (…) The fact is it was a hard deal to buy over. It was a franchiser to a franchisee (…) It was just a price, a very high price he wanted to have. We had to pay much over the market price. It was overpriced. You know, he would have waited. For others there was no point buying. They were too small to buy. Because we were franchising right, by merging it together it was worth buying it. If we did not merge together it was not worthwhile (…) Not every day you get a deal like that\(^52\).’

7.6 How to Finance Expansion

After the Sassoons’ take-over in 1998, CBTL’s immediate growth was planned in the US. CBTL’s expansion strategy had been that the Sassoons were to own all outlets in the US, Malaysia and Singapore. Organisationally, however the Asian operations are still separate from the US operations. The Southeast Asian CEO, Victor Sassoon, is as a franchisee officially not part of the management team in the US. There is a bifurcated upper management level. CBTL in Malaysia (except on Sabah) is a 100%-owned entity of Singapore. It is a subsidiary of Singapore. In practice, as in family firm, the Asian CEO also (unofficially) deals with issues of general company importance.

When the Sassoons took over Sunny Sassoon, the American CEO, had different options about financing growth plans. The cost of opening a 1,500 square foot outlet is US$300,000. The first option was to look for private funds\(^53\). There was mention of negotiations with investment bankers. The spin-off from the Asian operations of Coffee Bean was seen as promising. Another option was to count on the strength of the new issue market. Sassoon thought it would be possible to raise as much as US$200 million in an initial public offering (IPO). But these were talks only. Almost ten years later there has still not been a public offering. The latest plan was an


\(^{51}\) Interview Victor Sassoon. 1-3-2004.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.

\(^{53}\) Forbes. 26-5-2003. New York. We’re number three, we try harder.

194
The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf (CBTL)

IPO in 2006 but this did not materialise either. ‘There are lots of costs associated with going public, and right now we’re really concentrating on growing the business’.

Apparently the need for capital was not very urgent. There have been no reports of new financial backing from friends. There was enough capital to cover the costs of the expansion strategies. The need for extra capital was not an issue because of their franchising strategy. ‘Maybe in two, three years (2006-2007), when there is a certain amount of take over, make it worth to go public, we will be growing the next years at least 30-35% a year (...) when we need money, we don’t want to go public, we still have a lot of friends who want to invest’.

Franchising is still a relatively uncommon phenomenon in Asia. In the United States 60% of retail goods are sold through a franchise operation. One is tempted to conclude that there are still many franchise opportunities in the Asian region. To opt for a franchising strategy is favourable for both the franchisor and the franchisee. The franchisor does not have to finance the expansion of the firm and the franchisee receives a short-cut to business success. Compared with the failure rate of start-up businesses, franchises are relatively successful. 80% of ‘normal’ start-up businesses fail within five years, while in the same time-span 85% of franchises remain successful. Most commonly there is a once-off initial franchise fee to become a franchisee. When there is a middleman involved in closing a deal between a franchisee and the source, the initial franchise fee is higher. In the operational years 60% to 65% of the profit goes to the franchiser, but this seems to vary from one region or country to another.

The operator’s semi-ownership of the business is of critical importance. The franchisee stands somewhere between an owner and an operator of the business. The franchisee has to work in a standardised format. There are very strict, specified guidelines which leave hardly any space for personal creativity and adaptation. At the end of the franchise period the owner is entitled to take the business back. For Sassoon this was the reason for starting negotiations with Hyman to take over the business. He was afraid he could lose the franchise after the agreed period, and that his efforts to build up the business in Asia would come to nothing.

In CBTL’s early years Hyman’s idea was to open three to five outlets a year in the US. This was, he thought, the maximum that CBTL could manage. For the Sassoons there was a compelling reason to adopt a more energetic expansion strategy. Speciality coffee had become a booming business. According to the chief operating officer there was plenty of room to grow: ‘If anything, we think that the speciality tea and coffee is underserved’. CBTL considers the US as a speciality coffee market which still has great potential. In the United States alone the number of speciality coffee outlets rose from 500 in 1989 to 18,000 in 2004. The Sassoons opted for a relatively fast but still moderate rate of expansion. ‘We thought it was time to start leveraging the operations in California, to reach critical mass. We’re looking at this as building a legacy’.

---

54 Victor Sassoon quoted in: The Straits Times Singapore. 3-12-2000.
55 Interview Victor Sassoon. 1-3-2004.
57 The size of these fees has not been revealed.
CHAPTER 7

CBTL will never aim to become a Starbucks. Starbucks is already present in most of the Southeast and Asian countries, and has enormous resources. Starbucks’ number of outlets has grown from 2,800\textsuperscript{62} in the year 2000 to 7,000-8,000 outlets in 2005. Compared with Starbucks, CBTL is very small. CBTL has only 500 outlets (in 2007). The growth rate of Starbucks has never been something for them to emulate\textsuperscript{63}. The aim is to be the next major competitor ‘\textit{There might be a big gap. But we aim to be the no. 2}\textsuperscript{64}'. Up until now (2008) their US outlets are still in a few southern states only. The franchise strategy of CBTL is to let people approach them rather than to make active approaches to others\textsuperscript{65}. Every week interested parties want information about franchise opportunities. CBTL’s websites provide basic information.

7.7 Cross-Border Strategies and the J-factor

How does one find out whether or not a potential franchisee really is the right person for the job? The CBTL Asian managers have three points of focus when they assess a candidate for a franchise\textsuperscript{66}. One is that the franchisee needs to have adequate finances. Speciality coffee is not something new in Asian countries. There are no so-called early mover advantages so there might be some other players in the market who might possibly have to be outbid or out manoeuvred. The second is that the franchisee needs to have local contacts, because the most important key success factor is location. He needs to have access to prime locations because he knows the right people or because he owns some properties. The third is that he needs to have the entrepreneurial flair. The franchiser has to believe in the product. The right entrepreneurial spirit and conviction are important to make the brand a success. If someone is just looking to diversify into a new business, he may not be the right franchise partner.

CBTL’s strategy is to look at each country’s distinctive competitive situation. Take China, for example. China is big and CBTL’s resources are limited. CBTL is a privately owned business. Unlike Starbucks, CBTL does not have the resources to be everywhere. CBTL thought it would be wise to start with a franchise in the Shanghai area only. The franchisee negotiated a first option to start in the Beijing area as well. It is possible for new franchisees to apply when new regional markets in China emerge. A franchisee has to know the local market. He must be able to identify the customer’s profile. One is inclined to say that the large consumer population makes China a lucrative market, but this is not the case. Potential customers are a small part of the population only. The strategy of the China franchisee is to aim at the middle- and upper-class niche market. The problem in Shanghai is that location rentals are sky-high. The franchisee should have access to prime locations at relatively low costs. There are plenty of excellent locations but they are scarcely affordable. In the end, the sales have to cover the rental costs.

Location is therefore of crucial importance. In general, a CBTL outlet needs around 1000-1200 sq feet with an al-fresco possibility and a lifestyle element at the location. The Singaporean situation is very competitive. The shopping complexes are organised nowadays through unit

\textsuperscript{64} Interview Vincent Chang. 23-2-2005 and 11-3-2005.
\textsuperscript{65} Of course, pretending that they are not active in approaching others does not do justice to the idea of mediating. It is not one way traffic only. Being served with a smile, having a successful business meeting while drinking quality coffee in an outlet, listening to the right music at the right time, meeting someone interesting while having a Chicago Cheesecake - CBTL’s product incites the entrepreneurial opportunism and pragmatism of interested parties.
\textsuperscript{66} Interview with Vincent Chang. 23-2-2005 and 11-3-2005.
trusts or capital mall trusts which buy, sell and own the shopping complexes. These capital mall trusts have shareholders who want a return on their investments. The easiest way to raise yields is a general increase of the rents, but this policy hinders a good tenure mix in a mall. When a fashion brand tries to establish its name in the Singaporean market, this brand is willing to pay a high price for rental. After all, their flagship store should be in a top location. A speciality coffee chain is not able to compete with these fashion brands. CBTL is depending on its ability to supply a good tenure mix (which amount to supplemental value) to support the main (theme or lifestyle) focus of a mall. CBTL offers ‘third spaces’ in a mall, for which they don’t have to pay the same rent as the flagship stores of a mall. On top of that, CBTL is not automatically the first choice when it comes to a good tenure mix. CBTL is already an established brand. This might be a disadvantage. If a new mall is looking for a fresh new concept, it might not be interested in a CBTL outlet and might prefer newer food and beverages concepts.

It is important that there should be a lot of traffic at the location of the outlet, but the fact that lots of people are passing by does not automatically mean that they are all potential customers. If you are located in the midst of a MRT station plenty of people will be moving about. Still, there has to be a lifestyle element at the station, otherwise the location won’t work. Singapore has a population of only 3 million people. The domestic market has a limited supply of new complexes. The speciality coffee market is becoming saturated in Singapore. It has been a logical step to look for further cross-border expansion through direct foreign investment (DFI) or via international franchising. CBTL’s F&B philosophy is to serve quality and freshness. CBTL is not a fast food joint. The products which CBTL sells are premium products. Coffee and food are prepared on the spot, no matter if this means longer waiting times. There is no undercutting in price setting. The price points are at a premium level. The price is equal or slightly above Starbucks’ price points. In a mall setting CBTL has to compete with other lifestyle F&B providers. Other coffee chains are not the only competitors. After all, one Singapore dollar can be spent only once. A possible service sacrifice due to staffing problems may be a bottle-neck in opening new stores. Investments in education for a good workforce are important. The franchise concept is more complex than over-the-counter sales only. In the food and beverage industry, there are unwritten rules which one needs to follow closely, the details ranging from the quality of the food to staff problems and the daily maintenance of restaurant equipment. If you grow you expose yourself to the danger that your control will weaken, that quality will suffer and that unnecessary costs will accrue.

In 1999 CBTL invested US$10 million to expand CBTL (fully owned) in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Taiwan seemed to offer a good entry point into the new market. Later (in 2000) Taiwan and Hong Kong completely disappeared from the growth predictions. Taiwan had a very established coffee culture, but the rentals were too high. The rental-to-sales ratio was in excess of 50%. The shops were closed and transferred to partners who were interested in running them as franchisers, so there was a conversion from

---

67 It is not surprising that as a small city state Singapore has one of the highest proportions in the world of companies that franchise across borders. See: Monye, S.O. (1997).
68 The Straits Times Singapore. 5-9-1999.
70 Business Times Singapore. 22-6-2006.
company-owned stores to franchise stores. There were some investors who were interested initially, but they pulled out. The choice of the franchise partners proved wrong. In the end, they did not have the financial muscle to continue.

In 2000 CBTL announced a planned growth rate of thirty new outlets a year. This included plans for further expansion in California and the adjacent states of Nevada and Arizona and a possible venture in cities like Chicago and New York. The plan was to speed up expansion in California but also in Singapore, Malaysia and Korea. The number of outlets in Malaysia was expected to grow from 14 to 20. The number in Singapore was expected to double from 24 to 45-50. The turn-over within two years was expected to be over S$100 million. This estimate turned out to be too optimistic. The increase in the number of CBTL outlets in 2000 was from 32 to 36 outlets only. The same-store monthly sales growth was also modest. It stabilised at about 5% year-on-year. CBTL’s Victor Sassoon was cautious and warned of a saturation of the gourmet coffee market. It made sense to be conservative in their growth predictions for the speciality coffee market.

But this drawback was only temporary. In the years 2002 and 2003 CBTL had a growth rate of more than 30% with revenues up to US$110 million in 2003. CBTL was listed on the Business Journal’s list of Los Angeles’ 100 fastest growing private companies. In 2004 there were 130 CBTL stores in Southern California and another 130 outlets in Singapore, Malaysia and Korea. This was three times more than the number of stores which CBTL had had six years earlier, in 1998, when CBTL was still in the hands of the Hymans. The lack of reliable investors was hindering CBTL’s progress on the European market. CBTL had been looking for an entry point in Europe. It made business news headlines when CBTL’s master franchisee in England, the Jersey-based entrepreneur Mark Burby, sued the royal family of Brunei. The Brunei family had broken their business deal to financially back Burby’s UK CBTL launch. Burby started legal proceeding first in Singapore, where many of the business negotiations had been held. Later the proceedings were transferred to the British Virgin Islands because the Royal Family’s Smart Plus Investment Holdings was registered there. Burby still holds the UK franchise. It is not likely there will be another attempt to start up there. Burby considers the entry barriers as too high now. The opportunity has passed.

There are many factors which make a franchisee the right person to do the job, or that make the opening of a new outlet a success. Jewish connections are identifiable in CBTL’s business deals, but it would be a gross over-simplification to isolate this as a leading variable in, or explanatory factor for the way in which CBTL is conducting its businesses. Financial viability is the bottom line. In every mix you have the economies working for you. You have the economies of scale, the lowering of the infrastructure costs etc. Not just a simple thing as opening in a good location. And certainly it is not a question of who you know. Singapore is very transparent. The question is, what can I afford and what am I willing to pay.

---

74 Ibid.
76 http://www.infofranchise.co.uk/detail.cfm?idNotizia=6164&Idsezzone=2&strkey=ep last visited 24-8-2007. Some reports say Burby is a major shareholder in CBTL holdings. That is not the case. He is the master franchisee in the UK.
A CBTL franchisee is someone who is capable of effecting CBTL’s strategies. He must be able to meet the challenge and compete with the other competitors. Competition in the Singaporean speciality coffee market is fierce. Besides CBTL, there are many other choices like The Dome, Starbucks, Spinelli, The Coffee Club, Sarika’s Coffee, and the local coffee culture favourite, Kopitiam. Although the general impression is that the market for speciality coffee is growing, the expansion strategies of some of the players will cause others to draw back. The ‘growth imperative’ prescribes that physical growth helps to push up overall sales. Eventually this will happen at the expense of other smaller players. ‘(...) the coffee drinking population is growing, not shrinking. It just takes time to educate the consumer about speciality coffee. Besides, a nice coffee joint is also a place to be seen, unwind and meet with friends.’ A possible J-factor is just one of the many factors which might apply in one’s strategy. Whatever makes business sense, lah. You look at capabilities, even when you know someone then the Jewish background might be a plus. At the US that might a stronger factor. But look at the newer territories. The Middle East… (Laughs) the answer is no-lah. At the end of the day we are running this as a business (...) although there is a Jewish connection through the owners, they are also pragmatic people.

7.8 Coffee-Chains in Israel

CBTL was able to successfully launch their brand in Israel. Looking at the regional concentrations of their businesses, the first in the Southwest of the USA and the second in Southeast Asia, Israel is not en route. The easy explanation would be the (Jewish) family connections the Sassoons have with Israel. It would not have been very difficult for them to find the right franchisee. And this motive for opening there would also bring the third angle of the Diaspora triangle, that of the homeland, into this study. The franchise in Israel, however, is said to have not been any different from any other franchise. No Jewish factor was said to have been decisive at any point decisive. It is not so strange that their partners in Israel are Jewish, because Israel is a Jewish state. A precise track record was not available which would allow investigating this matter more closely as the Israeli franchise was not under the jurisdiction of the Asian operations. It was dealt with from the US.

It was necessary to look at CBTL business success in Israel from a different angle, which in concordance with complexity principles, is not CBTL’s success but the failure of CBTL’s main competitor, Starbucks. Investigating Starbucks’ entrepreneurial failure in Israel illustrates the difficulties entrepreneurs face in the retail business. Israeli like their ‘home grown’ espressos. Israel is a difficult market for speciality coffee to penetrate. Israel has a strong local coffee culture with coffee chains like Aroma, Arcaffee, Ilan’s and plenty of independent coffee shops. Together with Israel-based Delek, Starbucks opened a few outlets in Tel Aviv in a joint venture under the name of Shalom Coffee. It did not work out well. In the end Starbucks Corporation dissolved their joint venture operation. This caused a political commotion. The official announcement was that the decision to close was driven by ‘market challenges’. The venture was said to have suffered losses and Delek had not been able to find an investor to solve the problem, but ‘the public’ saw different reasons for the withdrawal.

Starbucks’ (Jewish) CEO Howard Schultz’ active participation in supporting Zionist activities was discussed on rumour sites on the internet. A spoof letter was put on the internet in which Schultz
thanked the Starbucks customers for helping him to raise money to sponsor pro-Israel projects\textsuperscript{80} and to help to wage the ‘War on Terror’ against anti-Semitic Muslim terrorism. Allegedly afraid of a backlash, Starbucks instantly dropped out of the Israel joint venture. Was it coincidence or not? Zionists in turn were upset because they thought Starbucks was succumbing to the boycott. Again via the internet they called for a boycott of Starbucks\textsuperscript{81}. The Anti Defamation League (ADL) came to Starbucks’ aid and investigated the issue. Their conclusion was that the closure was purely a business decision and that there was no evidence ‘that more nefarious considerations contributed to the decision’\textsuperscript{82}. Starbucks published a standard answer on their site, stating that Starbucks is a non-political organisation which does not support political causes\textsuperscript{83}.

This incident shows how any connection with Israel’s Zionist politics can have a backlash which might possibly hamper one’s business. Howard Schultz is Jewish, and he has shown his disapproval of (Palestinian) terrorist attacks. And of the many charities which Starbucks supports, there must undoubtedly be some that have Zionist sympathies. When these issues arise, the first line of defense is commonly to say that the CEO spoke as a private person, but by then the damage will already have been done. The internet is the wind which fans the fire.

Unlike Starbucks CBTL was able to open outlets in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Their kosher status was said to be instrumental in this, but there are more possible causes\textsuperscript{84}, including factors which may lead to business failure such as Starbucks had experienced. CBTL runs the same risk as Starbucks. Their regional splits between halal and kosher might be a logical business move to its CEOs but might raise eyebrows in Islamist and Jewish orthodox circles. Some remarks taken out of context and unwelcome questions might crop up. Is CBTL supporting Zionism just like Starbucks? Or is CBTL denying its Jewish background and is it too opportunistic in adapting to Muslim food laws? The internet provides ammunition. When ‘Googled\textsuperscript{85}’ you will find that CBTL’s CEO, Sunny Sassoon, as ‘a private person’, contributed US$5000 to the Republican National Committee\textsuperscript{86} which campaigned for Bush. He and his wife also donated to the Shoah foundation\textsuperscript{87} and the Chailife Jewish Family Service\textsuperscript{88}. Professionals who offer SERM solutions (Search Engine Reputation Management) would say that your actions as a private person are inseparable from your responsibilities as a CEO. Even donations to Jewish charities can be interpreted as politically meaningful.


\textsuperscript{81} http://www.inminds.com/boycott-starbucks.html last visited 12-8-2007


\textsuperscript{83} http://www.starbucks.com/aboutus/pressdesc.asp?id=681 last visited 12-8-2007

\textsuperscript{84} Another important actant, the cigarette, could be involved as well. CBTL (Israel) allows its customers to smoke in their outlets.

\textsuperscript{85} Google search has increasingly become a means to acquire instant information on a person. The Volkskrant 16-8-2007 reports on a research project conducted by Careerbuilder.com that 26% of the personnel managers interviewed google their candidates. The same article in the Volkskrant 16-8-2007 refers to a new company ReputationDefender.com that looks after your reputation on Google for a monthly contribution of 10 US$. For an extra US$30 they make sure that unwanted information does not show up again when googled.


\textsuperscript{88} http://www.jfsla.org/files/jfs_annreport.pdf last visited 12-8-2007. It is stated in this annual report that one of the main contributors to this organisation is the Jewish Federation that supports schoolchildren in Israel.
The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf (CBTL)

CBTL is proud to be the second biggest coffee retailing chain in the world. What is acceptable in the US might not be so in other parts in the world like the Straits or the Middle East. This means that in branding they have to be aware of sentiments which might have local effects. CBTL has to be careful to avoid negative association with Americanisation or/and Zionism. It is the internet as enactor that is unpredictable. Small causes can have big effects. Even a little note on the internet or a published thesis on the subject that says that what happened with Starbucks can happen to CBTL as well may be able to trigger an Islamist boycott of CBTL.\(^89\)

7.9 Anchorage in Singapore

Just like their biggest rival, Starbucks, which is now opening outlets in the Straits, CBTL’s policies remain focused on expansion. International expansion from Singapore into the wider Straits is a logical step. The potential growth markets are across borders in Malaysia and Indonesia. Victor Sassoon is convinced that only a few of the coffee chains will make it.\(^90\) ‘Small-time players will want to come in but the strength of the more established brands will kill them off.’\(^91\)

The growth pace in Singapore has slowed down. It is not so easy to determine if the speciality coffee market in Singapore is saturated. Some claim it is not yet. The coffee chains have easily conquered the tourist and local yuppie clientele but there still remains a much larger domestic market which is willing to be served. The larger domestic market consists, of course, of ordinary Singaporeans, popularly referred to as the ‘heartlanders’. They stick to the ordinary local brands like Kopitiam. At Kopitiam you can still get a decent cup of coffee for less than SS1. There’s a different ‘kick’ to the local coffee, and it doesn’t give me the headache I get from Starbucks’ concoction. Makes me wonder what it is they put in there! I also like just being able to go and sit down straight away, have my order taken and just say kopi, and be done with it, as opposed to lining up at the counter, studying the menu of twenty different ways to have your coffee, paying ten times more for it, and having a headache later. Perhaps the headache come from ordering from names like Caramel Macchiato, Frappucino, Espresso, Tazo Americano, Latte Mocha Cappuccino, with whipped cream please.\(^92\)

The preference for Kopitiam rather than Starbucks or CBTL has become an ideological matter. There is a weblog contribution with the title Starbucks, Coffee Bean and the Coffee Conglomerate versus Kopitiam. The idealisation of the Kopitiam coffee culture fits within a commodicised lifestyle nostalgia which regrets the loss of a specific Asian ‘simple lifestyle’ to the onslaught of the American corporate fast food culture.\(^93\) This same nostalgia is expressed in a Kopitiam website: ‘Take a walk back into the “good old days”, where you will have a chance to enjoy food and beverages prepared in the traditional way’.\(^94\) CBTL is not as American as Starbucks. This is also the branding strategy. ‘Although we are an American firm, we have tended to downplay that’. The American background is something which is not emphasised. ‘We never hide that we are American’, but it is also never stressed. Corporate identity is narrowed down to the products which are on offer: ‘You need to

---

\(^89\) Of course I am aware that my thesis might serve anti-Zionist and/or anti-Semitic forces. It is an ethical dilemma which has no solution. For me, the worst course of action would be to give in to possible threats from the intolerant.\(^90\) Victor Sassoon quoted in: Business Times Singapore. 26-6-2000.\(^91\) Mr. Lee. Executive director of Bonstar, Singapore’s Starbucks local licensee quoted in: Business Times Singapore. 26-6-2000.\(^92\) Weblog: http://www.20six.co.uk/zlanz/archive/2004/06/11/1libnkpb1k0it9.htm last visited 25-1-2006\(^93\) Khoo Gaik Cheng (2004) The Asian Male Spectacle in Glen Goei’s Film That’s the way I like it (a.k.a. Forever Fever). Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series No.26. June. Singapore: ARI National University of Singapore.\(^94\) http://www.killiney-kopitiam.com/profile1.html last visited 25-1-2006 It is an example of how one of the Kopitiam chains, Killiney’s Kopitiam, in Singapore is presenting itself on the internet

201
succeed on the basis of what you have, not who you are. The basics are good food, good location and ambiance.

Of course such a remark perfectly demonstrates the dilemma CBTL is in because in branding, contrary to what the operational manager says, ‘who you are’ is of the utmost importance.

It is difficult to balance on this tight rope. To avoid the risk of bad publicity means a constant awareness of undercurrents which deflect you from your objectives, which is to do business with the products you want to sell. They don’t come because you are an American concept, they don’t come because you are a foreign concept, and in some territories that might work against you. If you look at American concepts in the Middle East. That is not too popular. (laughs)

The competition among all players in the coffee speciality business is fierce. Up to a certain point new entrants in the market are still welcomed, with the idea that their presence will create a greater coffee-awareness. It makes the pie bigger. Although a point of market saturation for the growth of gourmet coffee is repeatedly predicted, these predictions have never held water.

Coffee business consultant Timothy Castle, co-author of the Great Coffee Book, would say that the speciality coffee market right now is all about identifying clear alternatives to Starbucks. If you can’t at least be as good as Starbucks, and demonstratively different, then there is no room for you in the market.

The introduction of CBTL in Singapore has been successful. Western consumer lifestyle goods are popular. Back in November 1996, when Victor Sassoon opened his first CBTL outlet in Singapore, the Singapore lifestyle media were keen to review this American-style novelty which included a glossary which provided a key to pronounce new coffee-culture words like macchiato, frappacino or cappuccino and gave an introduction to the specific choices one might make in choosing one’s favourite brew. The financial crisis which hit the region a year later in 1997 seems not to have had a decisively negative impact on CBTL’s growth in the last years of the Millennium. An (easy) explanation is that having a coffee at one of the downtown outlets is a relatively cheap alternative for Singaporeans to more expensive leisurely activities like dining out, shopping and travelling.

Another explanation is the 1997 crisis. Arch-rival Starbucks hesitated to proceed with their intended expansion in Southeast Asia. It gave CBTL a head start. CBTL could avoid being the second corner: ‘the brew to be no.2’.

The CEO of CBTL Singapore was also surprised by the

96 Ibid.
97 Business Times Singapore. 24-8 1996.
98 In economics, market saturation is a term used to describe a situation in which a product has become diffused within a market.
101 Ibid.
The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf (CBTL)

instant success of the brand In 2005 CBTL Singapore was still the only place where CBTL could keep ahead of Starbucks. In Singapore, CBTL became synonymous with success, not least because it was an international enterprise which is led by a Singaporean family. It was not surprising that in 2000 Sassoon was elected by the Singapore Tourism Board as Tourism Entrepreneur of the year because of his ‘(…) unwavering entrepreneurial spirit and for putting Singapore on the world food map. He has played a major role in bringing al-fresco coffee shops to our streetscape and making coffee drinking one of Singapore’s favourite pastimes. And what a difference this has made to our lifestyle’.

Crowned with laurels Sassoon revealed ‘his secret’. It was all about timing. The timing was perfect. But of course it was more than this. In his speech thanking the Tourism Board Sassoon stated that ‘this story is the result of many factors. Just like a great cup of coffee, it takes the right beans, right roast, right temperature, and most importantly the right people, to make it great’. And that is exactly what this case study has revealed. Many factors combined made CBTL successful, of which the ‘J-factor’ is just one. Success derives from one’s ability in what one does as an entrepreneur to identify within a wide array of fluids, networks and undercurrents, the opportunities and pitfalls for business, and from the ability to direct one’s skills in order to perform pragmatically and opportunistically at the right time and in the right place.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Starbucks Stores</th>
<th>Employees</th>
<th>Sales Million US$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>1301</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>1688</td>
<td>26,000</td>
<td>1,309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>2135</td>
<td>37,000</td>
<td>1,680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2735</td>
<td>41,600</td>
<td>2,100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


104 Timing in business invariably means a coordinated effort from a wide range of the organisation’s players; a series of orchestrated actions which, as often as not, transcend role, discipline, speciality, location, language, and country of origin. In: Burnett, J. (1997) Going for the gold. Management Decision. 35 (2) pp. 119-124.

8. Assessing the Jewish Diasporascape in the Straits: Jewish Business Networks

8.1 Introduction

In the preceding three chapters the contours of a networked Straits Jewish Diasporascape have been made visible. Collectives of people and things, the bits and pieces that go to make up a Straits Jewish Diasporascape, are opened up. The aim in this chapter is to make clear in what way Jewish ethno-religiosity, which has been labelled as the J-factor, coincides with or influences in the entrepreneurial practices of diamond traders, FJ Benjamin’s fashion business (FJB) and the coffee retail of the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf (CBTL). In the descriptions in the preceding three chapters, an insight is given as to how these (Jewish) businesses operate across borders in the Straits and in what way their entrepreneurial activities are facilitated or hampered by their ethno-religious affiliation. A combination of empirical research and secondary source analysis has been employed to provide track records of these businesses. The focus in these track records is not only on the Cartesian homo economicus, who as a by-product of positivism is the optimal informed person who acts rationally for his own gain and benefit. People seem to act more inconsistently or irrationally than Descartes would have wished for. Ethno-religious considerations would be such irrational influences which would hamper business optimisation. In the three cases described above the attention is directed to different interferences and reality possibilities than those that generally prevail in economics and business network studies with their organisational efficiency and profit maximisation laws, graphics and schemes. The three cases point to other possible, out of sight, silenced, alternative modes of ordering and interference which by way of this thesis, reflexively, make their presence felt.

The networked realities described in the three preceding chapters are the starting point for the assessment. How can one gain a clear insight into the different ways of crafting the boundaries between the different forces at work in these cases, and set them side by side? This chapter starts with a consideration of the actant. This discussion, yet again, deflects the analysis away from the Cartesian autonomous ego as the center of the social and material worlds. The idea is that a ‘de-personalised’ assessment such as this would produce a different perspective on the collectives investigated. The second section is about keeping control. The businesses in these three cases are all family firms. Conventional wisdom has been that every business aims for optimization, that optimization entails growth and the quest for economics of scale, which in turn entails making the transition from a family firm to being a professionally managed firm. In this transition it is possible that the family may lose control, a development which would significantly change the nature of the business networks involved. The second section of this chapter analyses how in these three cases the businesses have dealt with these changing networks and in what ways they have used resources that stem from their Diaspora networks. The third section is about the different ways in which change in the networks has been limited in these three cases, to ensure the continuing success of the businesses. The fourth section is about the effect on the businesses of the fact that they are situated in Singapore. Attention is directed to the different ways in which Singapore as the central node in the region has provided the necessary conditions for mobilising the businesses more broadly. The last section of this chapter focuses on the third node of the diaspora – Israel.
CHAPTER 8

8.2 The Actant

The concept of the actant emphasises the association between objects and people. Objects become arrays of relations. This section investigates the objects of trade, in particular the diamond, fashion brands and coffee trades, and analyses the ‘basic materialities’ in these trades. The world of fashion trades in fashion items. ‘Working with basic materials’ is a widely used phrase in the fashion world. Nevertheless, each fashion item is already an amalgam of different relational materialities. FJB has been engaged primarily in the retailing, licensing and wholesale distribution of middle- and high-end fashion apparel and accessories. FJB’s basics have been the brands that they agreed to represent. Coffee as the basic actant in the coffee retail business is easier to identify. Still, many other actants are involved in the coffee business. A focus on the actant has been most fruitful in the diamond trade. Following the diamond has directed the attention to ethno-religious influences that make the diamond business seemingly ‘Jewish’ controlled.

Drinking coffee at CBTL is conspicuous consumption. Through coffee you can become an aficionado, an anti-globalist, a decaf drinker or a ‘good Jew’ who drinks only kosher coffee. That makes drinking coffee at CBTL a social event. There is a clustering of actants involved that makes the CBTL brand the customer’s companion through which he is communicating. The ‘social feeling’ that is inextricably linked to drinking coffee is enhanced by a sophisticated level of ambient noise, cunning seating patterns, and carefully thought-out decoration. There is endless variation and differentiation in the practical, applied, ‘invented’ and politicised knowledge in ‘coffee culture’. That variation and differentiation reverberates in networked realities. Fair trade coffee guarantees a fair price for coffee. Pesticide-free ‘organic’ coffee guarantees ecological awareness in the process. Local brands stand for anti-globalist awareness. Kosher coffee represents a Jewish ethnic religious interference. The J-factor enters here. It represents an interference deriving from Jewish food laws. For CBTL that entails the adaption of its system. In CBTL’s operations these kosher adaptations are applied only in Southern California, where the Jewish clientele is considered large enough to warrant the extra effort. In the CBTL outlets in the Straits, paradoxically, Muslim food laws are observed.

Garment basics are too distant from the point where semiotics in fashion becomes meaningful\(^1\). Semiotics starts when the basics are already assembled into fashion items. FJB had always been a trading house rather than a manufacturer, and had therefore not been subject to pressure from those, for example, who question the use of cheap and flexible labour in the Far East. FJB only transformed brands within margins, and positioned these brands in ‘their’ Straits region. That is FJB’s expertise. FJB is capable of pulling strings to make the launching of a brand or a new retailing concept an event. When FJB started its own line in men’s shirts, Raoul, their children’s line, Paint 8, and their women’s line, ‘Odile’, their game became different. It was clear that they already knew how to sell a brand. Now they had to deal with basic materials, with designing and with manufacturing. It meant that they were exposed to a whole new scheme of interferences. FJB has to look for sources where these ‘excellent basics’ are provided and use them in their

\(^1\) That might be only partially true. It is possible to politicise abuses in the trade of some basic materials used in the fashion industry. Look, for instance, at the world market for cotton. The price of cotton on the world market is low. State subsidised cotton farmers in the USA export the cotton to India, whose domestic cotton belt is not able to compete with these low USA prices. At the same time, following WTO treaties, the Indian government is cutting their subsidies for their local cotton belt. Indian cotton farmers are therefore in trouble. The Indian cotton belt is now renamed ‘suicide belt’ because of the suicides committed by the Indian farmers who are not able to pay their debts. Volkskrant 19-6-2007.
branding. Due to the rapid and ever-changing tastes in fashion, the sources to draw their basic materials from change all the time as well. Any suggestion that interferences different than ‘the best quality for the best price’ are directive, most notably ethno-religious ones, is strongly denied.

FJB already has to understand and respond to a wide range of fashion business trends. That is what they are good at. They are constantly recreating their networks. They connect, disconnect, transform, assemble and embody their networks in a highly open and volatile system. FJB has been in the business of representing other brands long enough to know that the rewards for manufacturers are higher when their kind is cut out of the distribution line, and has therefore repositioned itself as a ‘brand behind the brands’. They have become manufacturers, but they have not yet said farewell to their position as a retailer representing other brands. Most of the world-wide brands are still based in fashion capitals like Milan, Paris and New York. Despite the development of time-space compression devices and techniques that make the reaping of a reward from a distance easier, there are still barriers and borders in particular regions that brands ‘from outside’ are not willing to cross, as a result of which FJB’s position in the Straits is still lucrative. Entrepreneurial spirit, courage and imagination are required to position their own brand in Europe and the US. It would be going against the current flows in the (global) system if they were to succeed in finding enough grit in their networks to effectuate a self-sustained growth of their own brand in Western fashion capitals. But nothing is certain. There might be an unforeseen tipping point in the system that will make it possible. That might even come about because of ethno-religious ‘coincidences’.

The system of diamond trade has evolved in a path dependent way. The pattern of this system was laid down towards the end of the 19th century. The diamond trade has remained a relatively closed shop because of the limited number of ‘parameters’ with which the diamond as an actant is evaluated. The artificially stable monetary value of the diamond has been instrumental in the emergence of this ‘locked-in’ system. In comparison with the fashion trade and coffee retail, there is only limited interaction with other actants in the diamond trade. Through the establishment over time of standards expressible in terms of the five Cs; Clarity, Colour, Carat, Cut and Certificate, everybody in the diamond trade speaks the same language. These five Cs make it possible to determine the ‘basic’ exchange value of a diamond. At the same time, as assessed by these five Cs, each diamond is unique. This value is still free from other possible Cs that add extrinsic (brand) meaning and value to a diamond. The diamond business and trade have remained remarkably free from organisational transformations common to most modern value-adding branding and marketing strategies and techniques. The trade has taken great care to keep the valuation of the diamond close to its ‘basic’ materiality to guarantee stable price setting. This was also possible because of the successful efforts of De Beers to control supply at the mines, and through their monopoly in the trade of rough diamonds. The stable price setting facilitated a credit system that allowed the diamond to crisscross borders and go through many hands before it reached its final destination. The stable price setting allows time for other dealer colleagues to find the right customers. With the prices were to fluctuate, the risks involved in giving stones on consignment for long periods would be too high, and would necessitate engaging in a contractual fuss that would undermine the low-cost ways in which agreements are made. But those days seem to be over. Streamlining policies, leakages on the supply side, and increasing competition from ‘outsiders’ necessitate organisational adaptations that undermine the traditional way in which this trade has been organised.

2 Follow these actants more systematically and consistently than has been done in this research would be a way of finding out whether or not the motto ‘the best quality for the best price’ really applies.
3 Diamonds, like gold, are useful as an alternative to money. Money is not supposed to have extrinsic value.
The claim in this section is that the basic actant plays its part in enacting the systems in which it moves in the coffee retailing, the fashion and the diamond trade. In other words, the way things work is partly designated by ‘the bean’, by the fashion item or by the diamond. This runs counter to the idea that these trades are all about the making of rational choices by individual entrepreneurs. But it has also become clear that one actant alone can never be the sole relational materiality that determines an ordering in a network. It is impossible to isolate a single actant in the world of fashion that is responsible for creating an order in the system. As a system the fashion trade is too open for that. The diamond trade, with the diamond as core actant, is the most closed system. The relatively closed way in which the diamond trade is organised, derives from a combination of the unique material character of the diamond, on the one hand and on the other hand the successful rejection of alternative modes of ordering. As core actant in the diamond trade, the diamond itself contributed in making this trade a closed system by shutting out possible interferences that would undermine a stable monetary valuation. This closed system is now at the verge of a bifurcation. That is particularly visible in the Straits, which is an outlier in the diamond trade system. In terms of open or closed systems, the world of speciality coffee is neither, as it has characteristics of both. It is a semi-closed system. The coffee trade is not controlled at the source by a cartel like the diamond trade. The franchising concept suits the world of speciality coffee. The basic actant coffee is allowed a variation, but within the limits that the franchisor considers as organisationally feasible.

The company story goes that Frank Benjamin’s fashion business career took off when he saw his brother, who had come back from a business trip to Hong Kong, wearing a Lanvin tie. The equivalent story for CBTL has to do with Victor Sassoon’s queuing at one of the CBTL outlets in LA and meeting Paula Abdul, who advised him to start CBTL in Singapore. For Weiss Shein & Co. the diamond business took off when they acquired a stake in the Abraham’s Liberty Cutting Works in South Africa. These moments are marked by the entrepreneurs as tipping points in their own systems. It gave them an important niche in their trades. But was it a coincidence that Frank Benjamin’s brother was in Hong Kong and that Victor Sassoon was queuing at a CBTL in LA? Or that Weiss, Shein & Co. acquired a South-African license? Do they have a sixth sense for business opportunities? The reason is more down to earth. These entrepreneurs not only have access to wider connected systems, they are also able to activate them. The connections that they make are not coincidental. Coincidence can exist only by the grace of limited probabilities. Entrepreneurs like Sassoon and Benjamin are able to make connections that ‘we’ would not have thought of or that lie beyond our reach and scope. These entrepreneurs touch, link up with and participate in diverging intersecting systems including what ‘we’ would consider as outliers. They are closer to schemes that organise a world that is movement driven, but not because they possess a single, primordial, racial, ethnic, religious or whatever ability or virtue. They act at an interface level connecting systems. They are able to make competitive combinations and have a greater sense of the divergent fluids that surround the systems in which they operate. That makes their range to connect wider and the speed with which they are able to connect higher. They act as adaptors of divergent systems, making these systems compatible. If not for that ‘unique’ moment at a queue at CBTL in Los Angeles or at Hong Kong airport, these systems would have been touched upon, connected and adapted at another moment, if not by them, then by other adaptors with the capacity of making coincidences less coincidental.
8.3 Keeping Control over the Family Business

CBTL, FJB and the firms in the diamond trade have all been or still are family firms. In classical economics and classic organisational studies the family firm is considered as backward⁴ and deaf to the compelling ‘growth’ and ‘efficiency’ imperatives that intensify competition and expand the market. In a ‘natural’ inclination to become successful a family firm is supposed to grow and develop limitlessly and structurally into a new stage: that of a firm that is professionally run by managers. There is no way to escape this straitjacket⁵. The family firm is seen as ineffective in organising its business in such a way as to minimize costs and maximize profits. Family firms’ performances are seen as lagging behind because of the adherence to the imperative of personal capitalism, for instance. The applicability of these ideas developed by classical economists and neo-liberal adherents is debatable. The track records of the firms that have been laid down in the preceding chapters show modes of ordering that coincide with, intervene in and undermine the authority of these ‘imperatives’. These alternative modes of ordering point to social-cultural dimensions such as the external relations of the firms and their embeddedness⁶ in networks of personal, ethno-religious and diasporic relationships.

In the three cases there was a strong (family) wish to keep control over the business. CBTL chose the route of franchising. Of course, CBTL took over what is called a proprietary advantage from the Hyman family. The system that Hyman had designed was unique to the franchisor. For the Sassoons it was an inviting prospect that this advantage could be put to use via franchising in foreign markets at only marginal or no costs. The risk in overseas expansion by franchising is smaller than that in company ownership⁷. When franchising, business failures like that in Taiwan, do not weigh too heavily on the capital situation of the firm. To establish additional company-owned outlets in a domestic market requires more capital. The expansion of their ‘domestic’ market was manageable (for the US operations in the US, and for the Asian operations in Malaysia and Singapore) and easy to monitor. Expansion occurs per outlet with knowledge being built up through experience and costs remaining manageable.

CBTL’s management never univocally declared their intended expansion rate. There was no plan about where this expansion should take place or how they would finance the desired growth. Their decisions depended on what was on offer. This ‘passive’ attitude is part of franchising strategies in general. International expansion by franchisors is usually pull driven rather than driven by a meaningful push strategy. Successful domestic franchisors speculate that they will attract the attention of foreign investors. Normally they are approached by these prospective

CHAPTER 8

franchisees. For CBTL this has meant that there have never been moments, so far, when CBTL has had to find alternative ways of raising capital to finance expansion. CBTL has stayed a family firm in which the family members have the most important management positions. The family has been able to keep a firm grip on their business and capital requirements have not undermined this grip. They seem satisfied with this situation. The growth and efficiency imperative have not affected them in terms of losing control. They choose to be No. 2, willfully lagging behind Starbucks.

An international business surrounding is more uncertain than a domestic one. Situations differ among nations. Maintaining control of a business geographically and culturally in a franchise system is thought to be risky. The more distant the franchisees are, the more difficult it is to obtain the information necessary to monitor franchisee behaviour. What is called ‘franchisee opportunism’ is therefore more likely to develop in an international expansionist surrounding than in domestic surroundings, where distance is a factor of lesser importance. The Sassoons dispersed family situation is mirrored in CBTL’s bifurcated management structure, with one part of the family in LA and the other in Singapore. That has made the Far East ‘close by’, and acting and controlling at a distance very easy. Basically CBTL’s franchising is a form of organisation in which associates can be effectively monitored and controlled without the need for substantial direct investment. Franchising has lengthened CBTL’s network. New mediators—the franchisees—are used to expand and sustain CBTL’s web of connections. At the end of this organising venture there is the prospect of reward, but that is not something that is easily realised. In this organisational form, ‘acting at a distance’ is conceived as labored, uncertain and contested and moves global reach away from ‘the flat, colonised surfaces of globalisation to the frictional lengthening of networks of remote control’.

When Frank Benjamin started his business, European and American fashion styles had no widespread followers in Southeast Asia yet. FJB’s strategy was to represent promising western brands in the region. Familial meritocracy in the succession was first applied when the three sons and daughter-in-law got managerial positions. A ‘teaching them humility first’ initiation ritual was held that legitimised this familial policy for the outside world. Later, in 2006, Frank’s younger brother Nash succeeded Frank as CEO. In the early days in the Straits it was possible to start a business without much capital, but informal capital alone was not enough when the need for capital became a constraint. Officially, until its initial public offering (IPO), FJB was a family firm, but in the transition to becoming a listed firm, some familial and wider Jewish institutional practices still intervened and helped to keep control of the firm. A firm, when listed, ought to be

---

9 Apart from, of course, when take-over capital was required. That was mostly organised by the silent partner and old business friend of the family, Severin Wunderman.
Jewish Business Networks

controlled by its shareholders and not by its directors. This boundary, which is considered meaningful in business practices, was blurred. As major shareholders, the FJB family remained pretty much in control. Gomez and Dieleman & Sachs’ description of interlocking ownership for Overseas Chinese businesses in Malaysia and Indonesia resembles the way in which FJB’s share majority was manipulated by hidden family ties. In either case the stock market was used, via IPO’s, to generate the necessary capital to grow, without the family’s losing control of the company. The necessary separation of decision management and decision control is under stress here. This could lead to an inefficient sharing of risks and a violation of the protection of the rights of minority shareholders.

De Beers manipulate growth prospects in the diamond trade. There is no growth imperative in the diamond trade. Diamond dealers have only small-scale businesses. Trust is institutionalized in the diamond trade, where the traders deal with diamonds worth millions of dollars. The system has produced a way of restricting and sanctioning untrustworthy behaviour. Traders always fear that someone is not trustworthy. The high prices of the diamonds make the one-time benefit for cheating lucrative, or at least more lucrative than the profits that one gains from cooperation. How, then is it possible that dealers hardly ever break the codes of conduct in this trade and run off with these diamonds? There are ‘other’ maximizing profits schemes at stake in the trade, and consequently there may different forms of ‘capital’ and costs. These forms of capital are assembled in alternative modes of ordering that distort the classical economic mode of the ordering of entrepreneurship. For instance, pragmatism, opportunism and performance coincide with the accumulation of ethno-religious ‘goods’ or orderings that concern good governance or ethics. Recent developments in the diamond trade have put stress on the system. The trade system has arrived at a point where change seems inevitable. The traders have to perform in order to survive in their trade. They have to adapt to new developments in the business that have undermined the way the dealers have conducted their business. De Beers’ Central Selling

14 Official figures of shareholders’ quotas are important because they demarcate the boundaries that exist between listed and unlisted (family) firms. In doing so they provide essential information for traders in the stock market. Important decisions, for instance, need support by 75% majority of the shareholders’ stake. A listed firm needs at least 25% of its capital to be in public hands. Basically an IPO involves the offering of part ownership of the company to the public by selling debt, which is most generally done by issuing stock. Capital is created for desired future acquisitions when, for instance, the (interest) cost of capital is considered too high or when company directors want to ‘cash out’.

15 The general conception of a family firm is an enterprise entirely owned and operated by a family. A definition should pragmatically include the three elements of kinship, ownership and control. Arnoldus, D. (2002: 20).


17 In the Salim group the holding is central in this matter. The Salim holding company was designed to control or influence other companies without taking full ownership and used pyramid systems and crossholdings to secure ownership over a number of companies, the so-called interlocking stock ownership. With largely minority money, the majority shareholder manages to maintain control. In: Dieleman, M. & W. Sachs (2005) The Salim Group: Oscillating between a Relationship-based and a Market-based Model. Working Paper Version July 2005.


21 Bourdieusans would mention social capital, symbolic capital and cultural capital as sorts of capital that would be more applicable to link to these costs.
CHAPTER 8

Organisation abandoned the old mode of organisation which kept the system as closed as possible. De Beers is no longer able to control the supply side which is why De Beers has opened up the system. De Beers has opened up its own De Beers shops at the retail end and is now competing with the dealers. Middlemen are cut out. De Beers is opting for a more diverse range of sight holders. The competitive spirit of other ethnic groups, like the Gujarati and the Chinese, is rewarded. New Israeli traders operating internationally are rewarded as sight holders as well.

Jewish dealers in Singapore are at a crossroad. One option is to go along with De Beers’ new policies of streamlining. This would mean making new investments. They would have to cut themselves out of the distribution line and open stores at the retail end or brand their own lines of jewelry. That would be a profoundly different way for them to perform as entrepreneurs. Instead of just trading the diamond they have to ‘market’ the diamond. They would need a local clientele, and that would require an anchorage in a region. Chinese apparently buy diamonds at Chinese stores and Indians at Indian stores. Buying a diamond is still different from drinking a cup of coffee at CBTL or buying apparel in a FJB store. It still matters from whom you are buying the diamond, and this immediately leads to the more conservative second option; to remain in the old system and specialise. This option is to survive at the top end of the business. At the top end there is still need for a specialist eye and for an extensive network in which trust is (still) the imperative.

In the three businesses there is no univocal response to the question how to keep control of the business. The fear to loose control is paramount in the FJB case. In matters of business expansion, or mergers, there was the possibility to exert the J-factor in order not to let the control of the business slip too easily from their hands. The Jewish critical mass in the Straits is however too small to suggest that this J-factor might be of decisive and enduring value in FJB’s businesses. The open character of the fashion business requires FJB not to rely on this J-factor (alone). A firm anchorage in the region seems to be of more importance. The control in the CBTL business is guaranteed by CBTL’s use of the franchising concept. This organisational model does not require extensive capital input which would possibly lead to a loss of control. The need for trustworthy relations, which in a ‘culturalist’ perspective would be met by J-factor like affiliations, is now met by an extensive and compelling set of franchise business regulations. Trustworthiness is enforced here. A lack of a Jewish critical mass in the Straits seems most pressing in the diamond trade. The absence of co-religionists who may act as disciplined trustworthy ‘submarines’ seems important here. But, then again, for the diamond dealers an adaptation would also mean a new way of conducting their business, with a local multi-ethnic clientele that would buy at their stores. This requires a strong local presence and anchorage which they lack.

8.4 Network Immutability and Mobility

The networks in the diamond trade have to be kept stable. A stable network - its immutability - is a prerequisite to ‘mobilising’ the diamond. The stability of the network has been guaranteed by the stable valuation of the diamond. Diversification through value-adding marketing techniques has long been shunned. That would interfere with the immutability of the network. The network and regional topologies intersect in such a way that the diamond, or rather the capital that is dressed up as diamonds, is able to flow freely from one place to another. The traders make the connections and take care of the mobilities. They move the diamonds in their trading space from one place of the globe to another. What about the other two spatial topologies; the fluid or ‘fire’
Jewish Business Networks

topology? How do these two other topologies manifest themselves in the diamond trade and how do they coincide with or interfere in the networked trade? In New York it is possible to make a distinction (as Richman did) between ‘long-term players’ and ‘diamond studded paupers’. The diamond trading space in the Straits is of course different from that in New York - the epicenter of the trade. Still, this distinction is of interest for the Straits as well. The distinction that Richman makes is based on the constraints these ‘long-term players’ and ‘diamond studded paupers’ supposedly experience through the development of reputations based on Jewish norms and values. ‘Long-term players’ are primarily dealers. They want to develop a profitable business that they hope to bequeath to their children. In order not to ruin the prospects of future business, they have to behave in a trustworthy way and avoid reputational damage. Long-term players have, so to speak, strong inter-generational incentives ‘to do the right thing’. This inter-generational argument is apparently (as Richman argues) not applicable to the second group - the ‘diamond studded paupers’. They are mainly brokers or cutters. They are mostly ultra-orthodox Jewish community members. Their main objective in their work is to get enough money to quit their business as soon as possible and devote their lives to studying the Torah. These cutters and brokers enter the trade through their ultra-orthodox community. They make sure that the diamonds are physically ‘mobilised’. They are the ‘submarines’. Both groups are disciplined to behave in a trustworthy way. Long-term players feel intergenerational family business responsibilities. The paupers are disciplined through Jewish orthodox community institutions that incite a strong desire to accumulate ‘religious capital’. It is here that according to Richman ethno-religiosity interferes in the diamond trade. Richman states that: ‘Orthodox Judaism is replete with concrete, identifiable community goods that have subtle hierarchies. Small distinctions can translate into either valued honors or disappointing slights, and the large number of religious goods offers community leaders a broad menu of punishment options with an assortment of severity, including distinctions that would go unnoticed or unappreciated by an outsider’. These subtle hierarchies and a menu of punishment options are also noticeable in the Singapore orthodox community. But the situation in Singapore is different from that in New York. In the Singaporean situation there are no Jewish ‘diamond studded paupers’ identifiable as the ‘submarines’ used by the diamond dealers to cross borders. This is done by non-Jews. In Richman’s scheme this does not make sense. Jewish laws ought to preside over these paupers. Richman takes an explanatory short-cut and argues that when it comes to disciplining community members other communities, like the Jains, cherish the same kind of disciplining institutions as Jews. Do Jains abide by Jewish rules here? Or do they exert their own Jain rules that happen to be similar to Jewish rules? Richman remains unclear here.

Nevertheless, there is an interesting question that derives from Richman’s argumentation. Was it because of a lack of a diamond ‘mobilising’ Jewish mass in the Straits that Jews have been losing ground in the Straits diamond trade? And was this lack of reliable ‘paupers’ the bottle-neck that

Richman’s article is one of the few articles on the diamond trade that tries to explain theoretically, how Jewish community institutions have created an advantage in the diamond trade. The article is suitable to use as a reference point in theorising the relation between Jewish ethno-religious institutions and economics in the diamond trade. His article also gives an overview of possible theoretical viewpoints. See: Richman, B.D (2005).

In fact this argument is rather under-explored in Richman’s article. The same is true for this study. Richman concludes, much too easily, that the disciplining forces in Jain ethno-religious institutions have to be similar to and run parallel to the Jewish ones. It would be worthwhile to dig deeper into this matter, especially in the Straits, and as a continuation of this research to explore how the different ethnicities in the diamond trade in the region intersect.
CHAPTER 8

prevented the expansion of their trade? In their hey-day, Weiss, Shein & Co. could afford to stay put, and let the clients come to them. Later they transported the diamonds via official delivery services like Brink or they carried the diamonds across borders on their own and dealt directly with other (also non-Jewish) traders. Following Richman’s line of reasoning, it would mean that there were simply not enough orthodox Jews available in the Straits to take care of building an extensive networked organisation. The lack of these ‘diamond studded paupers’ would explain why Jewish dealers in the Straits are not inclined to expand their businesses and prefer to keep small, and why they fail to adjust to new directions in the business. For the Jains that would be different. There would be plenty of these Jain ‘paupers’ available to mobilise the diamond in their networks in the Straits.

It is also strange that Richman should presume the existence of inter-generational responsibilities with ‘long-term players’ only, and incentives to accumulate religious goods with ‘paupers’ only. Again, Richman seems to be forcing his argument. Long-term players in the Straits diamond trade, for instance, via donations for the exploitation of the synagogue, accumulate ethno-religious capital as well. And in fact, all Jewish dealers in the Straits seem to try hard to discourage their offspring from succeeding them in their businesses. They don’t see a future for the business in the region. But more importantly, instead of succeeding them in this ‘stupid business’, as one of the dealers put it, the dealers urge them to learn a non-diamond related profession or to pursue higher education. They are supportive when their children want to move away from the Straits for education or to find a (Jewish) spouse. Finding a good Jewish match in the Straits is troublesome. There is more to inter-generational responsibility than just succession. Generally everyone wants the best for his children. That may even include keeping them away from the succession in their business. The distinction that Richman makes between pious Jews who devote their life to studying the Torah and the traders who pave the way for a successor in their businesses is coloured by schemes of predictable and disciplined behaviour common in economic theory. Complexity would be suspicious about the schemes with which Richman is making his case. The diamond trade in the Straits produces unpredictable and erratic forms of behaviour. These Straits outliers may be more than worthwhile to investigate. On the rim of the diamond-trade system, where these outliers reside, new orderings are enacted that would give the best insight in the working of the diamond trade system. Downplaying or ignoring these ‘insignificant’ variables may come back to hurt the theorist, like a boomerang, because ‘(…) that which was not predictable tends to occur anyway’. For the Jewish dealers this seems to be an erosion of their dominance in what used to be ‘their’ trade.

CBTL and FJB management do see the expansion of their business in terms of a legacy that they want to build. To build that legacy CBTL and FJB had to find a delicate balance between expansion and keeping control. CBTL’s choice to franchise was their solution to finding that balance. As a well designed and fixed brand, CBTL’s organisation has become a system on its own. The CBTL system involves an extensive procedural and organisational directory that makes the brand mobile within a relatively immutable (stable) network. New mediators - the actors and actants - are carefully selected to expand and sustain a web of connections over a greater distance. The choice for these new mediators, the franchisees, is heavily monitored. The franchisee is not allowed to make any changes to the product. He should not too stubbornly implement too many of his own ideas and disturb the immutability of the network. Everything


214
Jewish Business Networks

has already been carefully thoughtout. And that is what the franchisee is paying for. To make the system work, he just has to apply the guidelines and act according to the system’s prescriptions. Success is almost guaranteed. By making changes, for instance by allowing new items to be sold, by adapting levels of service, or by using his own choice of interior design, he would create connections and mediations which could not be adequately monitored by the franchisor. That would result in an unstable network and would make business success more unpredictable.

FJB’s network is the least stable of the three. New products, temporal variations, trends and the wide range of basic products involved, make it extremely difficult to create network stability in fashion networks. The fluxes are too overwhelming and the connections too complex. One year the fashion colours may be pastel green and purple, and the next year they may be bright red and blue. In one season the material is made of cotton, the next season it may be linen or silk; and these changes occur not only once a year, but at least twice a year. At moments of business accountability, in year-results for example, FJB presents a wide range of ‘causes’ that are said to have exerted negative or positive feedback and stressed FJB’s system. To name only a few: the unstable purchasing power of consumers because of fluctuating inflation rates, political unrest due to elections, health hazards like SARS, catastrophes like an earthquake, a tsunami or a volcanic eruption, the low rate of the dollar or the strong rate of the yen that make tourists come or stay away, mega events like the Olympics in Australia, and large-scale enterprises like the Singaporean integrated resorts and casinos at Marina Bayfront and Sentosa. These factors are presented to justify FJB’s actions and decisions. But, in fact, these are no more than ‘simple answers’ for complex matters. Explanations are too easily found in vague, ‘politically’ correct, presumed cause-and-effect relations. Nevertheless, these explanations are mostly accepted. Complexity would transmit a different message: ‘That what is complex cannot be pinned down. To pin it down is to lose it’.

FJB’s business practices allow for interventions that stem from ethno-religious considerations. Nevertheless, you would never hear an announcement that sluggish sales are the result of the concentration of Jewish holidays in a particular quarter, that took up much of the CEO’s time, or that a dear family member of the CEO’s family had passed away, which had given him much distress, and that saying Kadish had taken much of his time. The world of business abhors these kinds of messages. Business requires performance and control. In these moments of performance (for instance at presentations of year-end figures), potentialities are stressed and new directions are reformulated. Losses are glossed over as far as possible. The ordering in a network, the in-hereness is adjusted, reformulated and needs to be reassured. There is always an excessive and overwhelming set of undecided potentialities from which to choose. The flux of manifest absences is abundant. In moments of entrepreneurial decision these potentialities are crystallised into networked forms. These new forms give new directions to businesses and give the outside world at least the impression that the CEOs are in control.

---

28 Law, J. (2004: 144). This is from the point of view of the practices that claim to be rooted in economic sciences, like consultancy firms, the world of corporate finance or organisations that operate globally in the public domain, like the IMF, the World Bank, etc. that pretend that they have ready answers for everything, while clearly they do not. In fact, they deliver mere guesswork. Of course, it is always easy to be wise after the event. But when, over and over again, the conclusion is that what happened could not be predicted or foreseen and that reality once more is far more diffuse and complex than was assumed, why keep on pretending that there are formulas that provide ready answers? Apparently there are forces at work that compellingly urge the provision of quick and ready-made solutions for matters that are far more complex than they seem. And apparently there are other forces at work that see no harm in delivering these kinds of answers. Business science with its focus on the maximising of profit is not innocent
CBTL has seen two growth phases. The first took place when CBTL was investing in the brand directly. The results in that trial period were convincing. The brand obviously had potential. It had already acquired a cult status in the US and it became an instant hit in Singapore and Malaysia. The Straits is the Sassoons’ back yard, in which they know perfectly well how and with whom to do business. Their skills and knowledge of the region were put to use to make their enterprise work. Their direct investments paid off. Their successful track record in the US and Singapore was convincing and attracted entrepreneurs who sensed the potentialities of CBTL speciality coffee in other regions than the Straits too. The incentive to get a franchisee interested is rather unspectacular. Generally, the potential franchisee is just an entrepreneur who gets inspired and senses a short cut to success when having a cup of coffee in a CBTL outlet. But pointing to the inspiration, performance and vision of this single entrepreneur is one-dimensional. What should be clear by now is that there is more to it than the qualities of the individual entrepreneur who makes the decision to become a franchisee.

The second growth phase was CBTL’s expansion in the wider Southeast Asian area. Franchising was CBTL’s response to the growth imperative. The control in the firm was kept within the family. There was no need to take extensive capital risks any more. Expansion was not via substantial, direct investment any longer. By franchising they could safely expand the business and reap the benefits of the expansion at a relative significant (but manageable) distance. The regional distribution center of CBTL’s Asian branch is in Kuala Lumpur. The head offices are in Singapore. Only a handful of staff members in the Singapore office make the most important decisions. A large part of the daily activities of the managers at CBTL involves travelling. ‘Acting at a distance’ requires maintenance of the network. To keep the network immutable and mobile, it is necessary once in a while to have what Simmel calls the most direct and purest interaction, that of face-to-face interaction. These meetings are indispensable for guaranteeing the mobility of goods, services, personnel and products within their network. Eye-to-eye contact allows for a personal assessment of a wide range of factors which cannot be assessed via e-mail or other remote methods of communication. ‘What we see in the person is the lasting part of them, the history of their life and (...) the timeless dowry of nature’. These assessments are necessary to establish meaningful business connections and network stability.

CBTL’s Southeast Asian regional node, Singapore, is indispensable to facilitating face-to-face business meetings. In addition, the freshness of the products that CBTL serves requires geographical proximity. The distribution system has to guarantee the freshness of the products in the Asian outlets. This means that the products must be locally purchased. The Sassoon’s established diasporic family structure ensures a bifurcated management structure which makes it possible to have two regional ‘nodes’ (growth centers) in their business; one in the US and the current credit crisis makes that embarrassingly clear once more. For that matter, there is no better a champion for ideas developed in complexity science than the current credit crisis.

29 A possible franchisee is lured by giving him the right information at the right time. At the table, when he is drinking his coffee or having his cake, he is able to acquire the necessary details while his entrepreneurial spirits are up. So who is approached by whom? Even the researcher’s entrepreneurial spirit was motivated to consider a franchise in Amsterdam during an interview with the CBTL CEO. No eager entrepreneur who loves caffeine has been safe ever since from the researcher’s sensing a business opportunity. In recent years Amsterdam has seen an explosion of specialty coffee outlets. By now (2009), even Starbucks is making a move on the Dutch market.

30 Having the distribution centre in Malaysia rather than in Singapore saves money. The General Manager in Malaysia estimated the profit at 30%. Interview with Mrs. Karen Kok in Kuala Lumpur 30-6-2005.

Jewish Business Networks

other in Singapore. This bifurcated system in which CBTL operates its business mirrors the global dispersion of the Sassoon family. CBTL is organised around these two nodes. The extra node in Singapore makes acting at a distance in Southeast Asia, from the point of view of the mother company in the US, seem less complicated. Modern communications systems and the speed of air travel make co-presence almost instantly available. This has resulted in an extension of the CBTL network which is partly independent from the mother company’s network. Quality control and taking care of the franchisees in the Asian region are therefore easier tasks. The existence of this dual system of control facilitates the achievement of the overall objective in their wider, integrated, network, which is to keep the network as stable (immutable) as possible in order to let their business run as smoothly (mobile) as possible. Compared to the highly volatile FJB’s business, and the changing conditions in which the Straits diamond dealers have to conduct their businesses, the CBTL business at present is the most stable. This means that the Sassoons are able to keep their networks relatively free from obstructive and disruptive interferences.

8.5 Non-place Singapore and Straits Mobilities

Diamonds and border crossings are inseparable. Special services like Brink guarantee safe cross-border delivery, but safe delivery services require documentation, and documentation leaves traces which are not always wanted. A delivery takes paperwork and involves red tape, which slows down mobility and raises the costs. That is why dealers carry diamonds on them, or why they use ‘submarines’ to carry the diamonds for them. The diamond has always been a trading commodity that runs parallel to other trading commodities like gold or money. In periods of stress there is always value that needs to be mobilised. Diamonds are perfect for that purpose. The borders that most commonly come to mind in daily parlance are borders that demarcate nation states, but there are other borders that can be crossed; for instance, the border that divides an upper- and the underworld. The mobility of the diamond is not always meant to be overt. Other studies have indicated that there are considerable flows of diamonds ‘on the move’ across borders. This is not different in the Straits. This study shows that parts of these flows are kept from view in the Straits too. The dealers in Singapore would claim that this is relatively innocent, that the practice is necessary in order to evade taxes and protect competitive advantages. Singapore is said not to be the place where the ‘real’ underworld re-appears in the upper world. Restrictions, control and punishment are said to be too severe. Nevertheless Singapore is the node in the Straits where the diamond trade system shows its in-here presence. Singapore provides the ‘upper world’, the space into which networks have collapsed from the undertows, the fluids. Singapore is a place where (parts) of the flow of diamonds safely appear above the surface and where there is the opportunity to re-label, re-direct and revalue stones to counterbalance value that is transferred across borders. Their in–here presence is organised around a Diamond Exchange Center, trading houses, legislative procedures and reliable, global diamond transport-services.

Diamonds and laundering practices go hand in hand. The electronic transfer of money has become common in today’s world. Money launderers make numerous smokescreen transactions

32 A new node is opened in Dubai’s Al Quoz industrial area. The 2,000sq ft facility will cater to the operational and training needs of the entire Middle East region. The regional centre is also the UAE’s distribution hub.
33 Coffee, for instance, is packed, sealed and sent from the US, even when the coffee comes from Indonesia. Milk comes from Australia.
35 It would be a speculative to give concrete figures.
to hide their real intentions and the directions and values of transactions. The advantage for launderers, smugglers and the like is that the system of the price setting of diamonds is too complicated for outsiders to understand. It is generally only those involved in the trade who know how to value diamonds. One needs a specialist’s eye to be able to discover laundering. Without this specialist’s eye it is difficult to get involved successfully in this closed diamond trade. Customs officers understand that a considerable flow of diamonds slips past their borders, and the officials try to keep up with the knowledge and technology to improve their rate of detection of suspicious transactions. But a common customs officer has no clue whether or not the documentation which is given to him correctly represents the value of the diamonds in question. For individual customs officers it is tempting to use the knowledge of these border crossing activities for their own benefits. It is easy to get diamonds across borders. Metal detectors at the gates at an airport do not recognise diamonds. When diamonds cross borders, state services have the legitimate power to intervene. A nation-state wants its share of the value of the diamonds that cross its borders and tries to redirect that flow ideally for the benefit of its citizens. Nation-states want their interventions to become a legitimate part of this relatively autonomously operating diamond trading system. Bona fide dealers feel that, considering the small margins in the trade, a realistic rate of tax conducive to smooth mobility would be no more than 2% to 3% of the value of the diamond.

The diamond trade operates relatively autonomously in Belgium (in central node Antwerp). The state is unable to get a meaningful grip on the trade but is content with the existing state of affairs because even as things are the revenues are good. They do not wish to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs. A self-proclaimed self-cleansing ability (we-take-care-of-our-own mentality) is said to have prevented excesses within the diamond trade. The system in the wider Straits region is also operating relatively without interference, and there seems to be no convincing reason to interfere. The customs regulations seem to exist on paper only. Malaysia lifted its tax regulations for diamonds when it was clear that everybody was ignoring them. Indonesia still has regulations, but at exorbitant rates, and no one expects these regulations to be effective. The overall picture is that it is unproductive to strive for, claim or exert a grip on this diamond flow. Changes in the system and redirections of the flows seem to come from influences within the system. The Gujaratis have been able to intervene and contest Jewish dominance from within. Like moles, they have entrenched themselves in Antwerp, one of the central nodes of this globally integrated trade system. It is in Antwerp, too, that there is interference from Georgian Jews who use harsh violence in applying their strategies. Their methods may be different from those applied by the state apparatus but their objectives are the same. They want part of the flow of the diamonds being redirected in their favour.

The Jewish diamond traders stationed in Singapore apply a permeable identity when they cross borders to conduct their trade. In Antwerp or on 47th street in New York, they mingle and become one of the many Jewish dealers. When they do business in Indonesia or Malaysia they use their Singaporean, British or Romanian passports. Jewish identity is muted by these foreign

36 The banking system is a good example to where this assumption of self-regulation may lead.
37 Singapore customs issues a custom declaration form in which one agrees to obey the regulations that are put forward in the Kimberley process.
38 It is not clear whether or not these regulations have been revised or not. Same applies for Indonesia.
Jewish Business Networks

When they don’t want to take the risk of crossing borders they let others (the submarines) do the crossing, or they let their clients approach them in their safe haven, Singapore. This entrepreneurial arrogance was possible only in the heydays when Jewish dominance in the trade was uncontested and diamonds in the region were relatively scarce. Here fluid space and network space converge. Singapore facilitates and provides. It is an immobile ‘transfer point’ that facilitates mobility. It provides and has provided anchorages for some so that others can be on the move⁴⁰. Singapore is like a non-place of super-modernity⁴², a space ‘where people coexist or cohabit without living together’⁴³, and ‘within which peoples intermittently encounter each other’⁴⁴. That description is of course doing Singapore short. Singapore is also a place of social complexity and of complex material organisation. But more than in any other place in the Straits, this complexity is organised around ‘the boring, everyday, routine, but essential operations, processes, systems and technologies that enable global mobility to occur’⁴⁵. The Straits is at the rim of the global diamond trade system where connections are the least dense, and where other systems interfere. A Jain Diasporascape articulates with the Jewish-dominated locked-in global diamond trade system. This Jain involvement produces positive feedback loops that exacerbate the stresses in the diamond trade system. Together with changing policies emanating from the central nodes of the diamond trade system, it no longer seems possible to re-establish equilibrium. The consequence is that the closed diamond trade system is on the verge of a bifurcation.

As against the situation in the diamond trade, the in-here presence - or anchorage - of CBTL and FJB has multiple fixities. The Sassoons and Benjaminhs have become Singaporean citizens. Their in-here presence is materialised much more than the diamond traders’ in-here presence. Singaporean citizenship is relatively unquestioned and neutral. The Jewish faith is respected in Singapore, and one can get actively involved in Jewish religious life. The Sassoons and Benjamins are respected entrepreneurial families. The Straits is their backyard and they grew up with the mores of doing business in the area. They do not encounter negative sentiments when they do business in the Straits. They are even nostalgic about doing their business in a place like Indonesia. It takes more effort to juggle with unexpected developments in Indonesia in order to maintain and stabilise their network. It challenges their entrepreneurial skills.

To the outside world, FJB’s and CBTL’s CEOs downplay their Jewish identity. It is neither expressed nor denied but is kept muted. In time, they have learned how to deal with these matters. They make sure that they are not in a position where they have to explain issues of identity. They have lived in the area for generations and their social distance from their

---

40 Some nation states accept double nationalities, others don’t. Singapore does not accept a double nationality, neither do Indonesia and Malaysia.
45 See: Urry, J. & M. Sheller (2005). This is not to say that Singapore is satisfied with that position. To attract the right businesses and the right people, a global city has to be more than just a ‘transfer point’. For example, to attract a creative class a city should be a social space in which technology, talent and tolerance converge. A creative class would prefer a dynamic diverse cityscape in which different breeds of people live and work together. There should be space for the exchange of different opinions, ideas and plenty of room to accommodate face-to-face interaction, because that is what this creative class relies on in their work. See: Florida, R. (2002) The rise of the creative class. And how it’s transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life. New York: Basic Books.
surroundings, compared with expatriates in the diamond trade, is relatively small. Sometimes, far away from the Straits, in a more secure environment, their Jewish identity is more pronounced because it is relevant in the promotion of their business, or because of a compelling social and emotional urge. This is so in Southern California, where kosher food appeals to consumers who concern themselves with the quality of food and require it to comply with Jewish dietary laws. But expressing Jewish identity is not without risk. These expressions of Jewish identity might reverberate thousands of miles away in extensions of the network, producing a backlash that would be bad for business.

Both CBTL and FJB rely on the local market for their products. CBTL was able to show the master franchise in the US that they could handle the franchise in Singapore and that they had rightly assessed the business opportunities in Singapore. FJB would have liked things to have been different but most of their turn-over is still in Singapore. The first-generation FJB businessmen are more product-oriented. Their business orientation is mostly confined to the products they sell. They are deeply involved in insular Jewish communal life. The younger generation CBTL and FJB businessmen are more firmly based in Singapore. Unlike the older generation they have developed more diverse, everyday (weak) ties in the city. They served in the army, went to school or college and made friends outside their Jewish circle. This younger generation is looking for new ideas to develop their businesses towards the West and towards the Middle East, where Dubai is ‘booming’. Multi-concept lifestyle establishments like Niketown in New York, Levi’s in San Francisco or Armani’s flagship store in Milan serve as their examples. Their business dealings are more closely articulated with their guest-land Singapore. They are opinion leaders who look for new shopping concepts to invigorate Singapore’s shopping-scape and re-invent retail.

46 There is a development towards shopping centres that are also entertainment centres. ‘You go there to be entertained’. The Edge Singapore (2005) Week 2-8 May. Retail-tainment. Retail-tainment is seen as the future of shopping. For instance the Mall of the Emirates in snow-free Dubai has an eight storey ski-slope. Or (also in Dubai) The Garden is a theme mall that has seven courts, each court representing one of the seven continents of the world. These are the examples the new generation of Jewish retailers has in mind when they consider the future of retail in Singapore.

47 Singapore’s knowledge and skills have traditionally been in trading, but since the 1970s and 1980s Singapore has also constructed huge malls. The clustering of ‘temples of consumerism’ on Orchard Road caters for a vast number of shoppers, locally and from abroad. Singapore was able to demonstrate at that time a futuristic view of an ‘air-conditioned life-style’ in a tropical surrounding. See: George, C. (2000) Singapore: the air-conditioned nation: essays on the politics of comfort and control, 1990-2000. Singapore: Landmark Books. At that time this was still a novelty in the East. The shopping centre business has faced a vast influx of Japanese capital and mall development concepts from Japan. Ngee Ann City, also called Takashimaya, Sogo, Seiyu, Tokyo and Isetan are all Japanese-owned department stores. ‘They are bringing everything lock, stock and barrel out of Japan, including senior staff’ (Rafiq Jumabhoy, Managing director of Scotts Holdings, owner and manager of Scotts Shopping Centre in Singapore’s Orchard Road area quoted in: Business Times (Singapore) 8-5-1993). The opening of yet another Japanese landmark in the shopping streetscape of Singapore triggered an evaluation of Singapore’s shopping-scape identity. Singapore was not doing itself a favour in the global competition of city marketing with an amorphous international image, with big (Japanese) brand name stores that lack a local Singaporean flavour. However, this does not indicate that there is a ‘Japanisation’ of the city. Chua Beng Huat states that ‘Japan remains a foreign and hard-to-understand country in Singapore and is more so than many Western societies’ (…) ‘the ability of Japanese culture to penetrate in the daily life of Singaporeans is limited. Language barriers and the war history prevent this. That is different from the success of the American cultural influence on Singaporeans. American culture and products represent the “universal modern” which of course is easily adaptable because of its intrinsically non-ethnic, non-ecstatic and “unremarkably marked” or “unmarked” nature. In: Chua Beng Huat (2003) Life is not complete without shopping. Consumption culture in Singapore. Singapore: Singapore University Press. pp. 153-154.
The Singaporean Minister of Community Development, Youth and Sports Vivian Balakrishnan, urged retailers – SMEs – to be in the vanguard of innovations and create a total customer experience by housing retail and leisure activities under one roof so that Orchard Road shoppers could be in for a whole new shopping experience. New marketing techniques, knowledge of one’s consumers, and technological novelties like e-commerce have to be applied in order to create totally new shopping experiences. The integration of entertainment with shopping must give the consumer (who is quickly bored) new, out of the ordinary shopping experiences. FJB and CBTL are in the vanguard here. With its promotion of a lifestyle related to quality coffee, CBTL is engaged in what has been described as Starsbucks-isation, a ‘networked sociality’ that is based around places to meet. The CBTL outlets are the places to meet friends and business contacts. There are always people working or playing on their laptop, using the Wifi connection. FJB organises ‘extra-curricular activities’ in their ‘Inez’ store, or they integrate F&B with retail in MU shops. They have participated in the Integrated Resorts –with casinos. Frank Benjamin’s and Victor Sassoon’s election as tourism entrepreneurs of the year shows their concern with Singapore’s retail future and leaves no doubt that their contribution to help re-create Singapore’s retail future is highly valued. But most remarkable is the development of their private brands. It marks an identity shift from standing in between, as intermediaries or middlemen, to becoming central in

---

49. Frank Benjamin’s and Victor Sassoon’s election as tourism entrepreneurs of the year shows their concern with Singapore’s retail future and leaves no doubt that their contribution to help re-create Singapore’s retail future is highly valued. But most remarkable is the development of their private brands. It marks an identity shift from standing in between, as intermediaries or middlemen, to becoming central in

50. Explicitly urging SMEs to become innovative has been a break with general policies. Government Led Companies (GLCs) together with Multinational Corporations (MNCs) were seen as essential tools and pillars for economic development, regionalisation and globalisation of the domestic economy. But that focus came under fire. It was considered inadequate to cater for new directions in economical development. In the first two decades after independence in 1965, promoting SMEs was not considered as a viable option stimulating Singapore’s economy. That has made it difficult for SME-family firms, mostly Chinese types of businesses (and also Jewish family firm types of businesses) to flourish in Singapore compared, for instance, with Hong Kong and Taiwan. In: Partiban, D. (1998) Book Review. Asian Business Networks. Asia Pacific Journal of Management. 15 (2) pp. 287-289. Since 1965, and well into the eighties, Singapore enjoyed continuous high economic growth with GDP growth figures between 5% and 15%. As recommended by the Singapore Economic Development Board (EDB) growing consumerism in Singapore was stimulated by a ‘high wage’ policy. The annual increase of wages by 20% was seen as an indispensable measure to force through the transition of Singapore’s economy from being driven by cheap labour to growth in productivity through automation and mechanisation. In: Chan Chin Bock (2002) Heart Work. Stories of how EDB steered the Singapore Economy from 1961 into the 21st century. Singapore: Singapore Economic Development Board and EDB Society. pp. 185-186. Singapore’s policy has led to growing criticism concerning corporate governance. Singapore’s move towards a model of corporate ownership in which the government owns significant equity in private sector firms (GLCs), raised doubts about the accountability, management and monitoring of these government-owned companies. In: Phan, P.H. & T. Yoshikawa (2006).

49. The Edge Singapore (2005).

50. Public and semi-public spaces, like coffee outlets, bars, cafes, restaurants, pubs, clubs and shops, increasingly assimilate work and play in their design. Leisure places are designed to allow people to work and working places are designed to allow people to play. CBTL would have been proud if this had been called the CBTL-isation of Singapore.

51. Singapore has to re-position itself in the global competition of city branding and marketing. The casino debate in Singapore has been a remarkably open discussion on the pros and cons of letting the gambling industry gain a foothold in Singapore’s cityscape. The arguments against seem to have been made less trenchant by integrating the plans to build what were initially thought to be cesspools of vice into the plans to remake Singapore. The gambling industry was incorporated in the concept of integrated resorts (IR) with a package of control measures to minimise the social downside and to keep out criminal infiltration. None other than Lee Kuan Yew, the mastermind behind Singapore virtue’s of cleanliness, safety and efficiency, in his new position as minister mentor (MM), gave the go-ahead to the plans, but only after a lengthy discussion on the IRs: ‘I am anti gambling. As a child in primary school, I saw my father become a problem gambler for several years. I watched many quarrels between my father and mother’ (...) ‘To say “no” after worldwide publicity for a year, Singapore will be sending out the wrong signal, that we want to stay put, to remain the same old Singapore, a neat and tidy place with no chewing gum, no-smoking in air-conditioned places, no this, no that –not a fun place’; Lee Kuan Yew quoted in his speech in parliament in: The Straits Times 20-4-2005.

52. The Edge Singapore (2005).
CHAPTER 8

themselves. CBTL transplanted their businesses and products from the US to the Straits. This Jewish family firm operates close to the rifts where new consumer needs are created and where ‘Western’ products are branded. FJB has taken designer brands from fashion centers in the US and Europe and brought them to the East. FJB’s and CBTL’s moves suggest the new roles Asia may assume in realizing its potential in the 21st century. In these new roles these local Asian firms have developed into multinational firms, branding, expanding and bifurcating in the wider Asian area and in the West. In the diamond trade system in the Straits the Jewish part will evaporate, and (other) Asians – Jains - will assume their role.

8.6 The Homeland of Israel

Any ordering of a Jewish Diasporascape involves the homeland of Israel. In the case of the Jewish Diaspora there is no need to prove that there is a ‘homeland’ involvement. Israeli Jewish presence abroad is an absenced Other in Zionist politics. The enduring presence of Israelis abroad questions the tenability of Zionist ideology. Israel turns out to be not an immigration country only. There are emigration ‘leakages’. It puts Israel in a split. Zionist ideology proclaims that all Jews in the Diaspora should return to their homeland and free themselves from their ‘pitiful exilic existence’. No real Jewish life should be possible in the Diaspora. In that scenario emigration cannot be anything else but problematic. More than that, it would be immoral and a betrayal of Jewish life. And these emigrants are an issue in Israeli politics. They undermine national ideology. Of course, some of these emigrants are not emigrants in the classical sense. It might be more accurate to label them as Israeli expatriates. They work in Singapore but still consider Israel as their home. Yet, as has been put forward in the preceding chapters, not all of these expatriates intend to return ‘home’. Some of the diamond dealers have even turned their back on Erets Israel (the Jewish Land). Their Israeli nationality is seen as limiting the radius of their activities. For Israeli dealers, if they haven’t left Israel only temporarily to earn a living, it is an option to take out Singaporean citizenship and to make a living in Singapore. ‘Where I can make a living is my home’. But business is not the only thing that matters. To be a part of a social group is important as well. Singapore caters to that possibility. It is a convenient place to conduct their business from, but other places, like Australia or the US, seem more favourable for settling. These are places where their children tend to live, study or work.

There is an uneven distribution of Israelis in the Straits. Their number in Singapore is relatively large compared with Indonesia or Malaysia. In the Diaspora, in a host-land, they are generally difficult to recognise. They are ‘white, well-educated, employed, competent in the language of the host society, and highly integrated into its institutions’. That is also true for Singapore with its large expatriate population. A wide range of tactics have been applied to hide Israel’s moves within the Straits. Despite (or because) of these efforts Israel’s moves have been strictly monitored. Israeli presence

---

53 See for example the discussion on the Overseas Chinese Diaspora and the position of China as its denied ‘motherland’.
54 Gold mentions that 438,900 Israelis were living overseas between 1948 and 1992 and had not returned. In a way Israel has become a ‘normal’ country with normal migration figures where there is a stream of migrants coming in, but also where people choose to build up a future outside of their homeland. But this development undermines Zionism. It threatens the idea that there is no better place for a Jew to live than in Israel. See: Gold, S.J. (2002) The Israeli Diaspora. London and New York: Routledge. p. 5.
55 Interview Solomon Kunari 7-6-2005.
in the Straits has never been undisputed. Like the diasporic Jew, as a ‘catalyst other’ \(^{57}\), Israel bares the Straits’ soul and exposes its borders. But there is more than this mirroring capacity of Israel and ‘the Jew’. Israeli corporeal business presence in the Straits is irrefutable. Of the three cases presented, that is most obvious in the diamond trade. Tel Aviv has become one of the central nodes in the diamond trade. Any diamond trading city, including Singapore, is connected to Tel Aviv. But the voice of Israel is heard in the two other cases too: FJB and CBTL. The links with Israel in these two networked businesses are less paramount, but they still resonate in their wider social group \(^{58}\). Zionism has been leading people, materialities, capital, knowledge and skills ‘back home’ to Erets Israel. Once established, Israel had to connect with outside partners to survive as a nation-state. Looking eastwards has never been Israel’s first option. Israel’s orientation has traditionally been westwards, to the US and Europe, but that is changing. Asia is becoming more important than it was previously. For Israel Singapore is a central (Southeast Asian) regional node. Singapore offers what Israel needs in what are difficult backwaters for Israel to penetrate.

Israeli (Jewish) presence in the Straits also concerns other Jews in Singapore. Anti-Israel sentiments reflect on Jews as a group. For those who experience hatred, the difference between anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist or anti-Israel expressions is only technical. It hardly matters if you are bitten by a dog or a cat. Anti-Israel sentiments, incited by a broad dissemination of news of Middle East conflicts, mingle with pre-existing anti-Semitic or anti-Zionist sentiments. The focus in research has been on the origins of these sentiments. Where did it all start \(^{59}\)? The finger is pointed at colonialism, at Eastern scholars who are trained in the West, at Germans who introduced anti-Semitism during World War Two, at the Japanese who copied it from the Germans during World War Two and at Eastern scholars who trained in the Middle East and who introduced Middle Eastern anti-Semitic publications in the East. A more interesting line of research would be to find out why these sentiments seem more hurtful to some than to others. As against Israeli expatriates and other Jewish expatriates, Baghdadi Jews like Sassoon and the Benjamins are not so easily impressed by anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism or anti-Israel manifestations. They have an extensively networked presence in the Straits. Intimidation is avoided or is felt less \(^{60}\) and their anchorage in the Straits makes it possible for them to avert or obscure possible ‘scandals’.

Gans calls the conflation of anti-Zionism, anti-Semitism and criticism of Israel a fatal and dangerous (global) ‘triangle of hatred’ \(^{61}\). This gloally enacted ‘triangle of hatred’ is noticeable in the Straits as well. Those who are involved in (Islamist) politics seem to be able (which does not mean that they are willing) to nuance and reproduce the differences between anti-Israel, anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism in their Islamist repertoire \(^{62}\). It is difficult to expect ‘the man in the

---


\(^{58}\) For instance, the community is donating to Keren Hayesod, a worldwide Zionist organisation.

\(^{59}\) Nevertheless there are efforts to designate what the origins of anti-Semitism in the Straits are. Personal observations at the symposium and seminar: *Antisemitism Today: A Phenomenon of Globalisation?* 1-2 September 2005 held at the NIOD (Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie) and at Felix Meritis in Amsterdam. Organised by the NIOD and the VU.


\(^{62}\) That is confirmed in interviews with leading local Yogyakartan members of Hizbuttahrir (HTI) 2-1-2004, Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia (KAMMI) 11-1-2004, Jemaah Tabligh 7-1-2004, Majlis Mujahidin 15-3-2004, Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam (HMI) 21-12-2003. The focus in these interviews was on their interpretation of the
street’ to observe and apply these differences as well. In practice, these differences appear paper thin. Criticism of Israel has become equivalent to the criticism of Jews. ‘Die Israel-kritik schlägt um in Judenkritik, Judenfremdheit, und Judenfeindlichkeit’. Jews have become synonymous with Israel. Contemporary anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism have become fluids with global reach that manifest themselves in networked orderings. An Israeli networked reality in the Straits is one of denial, secrecy and therefore of contestation. The tactics to ‘mobilise’ networks is to keep the networks as immutable as possible. The way to do that is to suppress and keep contestation out of these orderings. That was easier in the ‘old days’, when secrets could remain secret. The compression of time-space and the instant access to information make this secrecy much harder to achieve. The topology of ‘fire’ has been brought forward as the spatiality in which (immobile but mutable) contested absenced ‘Others’ reside. These absenced ‘Others’ do not necessarily have to be ‘nearby’ as a direct result of glocal Straits presence-absence contestations. Seemingly far-away ‘incidents’ can have far-reaching consequences on the Straits Israeli-Jewish business practices.

The laborious oscillation between Israeli absence and presence and its effect on other Jews in the Straits invites one to think of ‘arrangements and gatherings of things - and accounts of the arrangement of those things - that could have been otherwise’. What this alternative ‘natural order’ in the Straits Jewish Diasporascape looks like should be more transparent by now. The three cases show a wide variety of Jewish cross-border business initiatives. Each business system has its own dynamics and in each business case study issues of Jewish affiliations are paramount. It is however reductionistic to state that there are clear ethno-religious modules in the separate systems that compellingly direct business dealings, let alone that they can be generalized to all the three systems. It is only in the diamond trade that the putting to use of ethno-religious affiliations has appeared as a system feature. But the explanatory value of this system feature has been put into perspective by also pointing to the actant (the diamond) itself and to the path dependent way that the diamond trade has evolved. In the FJB business the system dynamics are too fluxional and the orderings are too haphazardly and fragile to state that at any point Jewish affiliations have been systematically put to use. For CBTL’s business this applies as well. There is no clear cut Jewish affiliation module from which CBTL management have been drawing in their business dealings. This however does not mean that both FJB and CBTL have refrained from these kinds of affiliations. On the contrary, there are situations in which there is a meaningfull but seemingly coincidental use of Jewish ties. The excess value of a complexity approach is that it allows perceiving these kinds of coincidents as less coincidental. The idea in complexity that movement expresses how things are, dynamises a system and makes it possible to point to unobvious outliers and combinations which otherwise run the risk to disappear in the explanatory shortcuts of scientific reductionism. Another gain is that complexity has incited to depict a time-spatial metaphor – the Straits Jewish Diasporascape - with which a clearer understanding of Jewish

Koran with regard to pronouncements about Jews; the ways these pronouncements were directive in their dealings with Jews and/or Israelis; and what position they thought Indonesia should take up with regard to Israeli politics.


64 An illustrative incident happened in Holland while I was writing this chapter. Like an internet virus, the news spread that Aldi and Lidl, two Germany-based supermarket chains, had donated their 10-1-2009 turnover to Israel to show their solidarity with Israel in the Gaza war. Muslims in Holland got that message via e-mail or SMS. They were called on to boycott Lidl and Aldi and show solidarity with the Palestinian people. There are more boycott lists on the internet that blacklist European and American companies that have ties with Israel. In: de Volkskrant 13-1-2009. ‘Moslimboycot om Gaza’.

businesses cross border movements and the ordering efforts that surround their businesses has been provided. The next concluding remarks – chapter will in a more general way examine whether or not these gains are congruent with the goals formulated in the introduction.
9. Concluding Remarks

9.1 The Straits Jewish Diasporascape as a Dissipative System

As an actant this dissertation ‘embodies’ the enactment of a Straits Jewish Diasporascape. This diasporascape has the characteristics of a complex dissipative system. Anthropological fieldwork, historical research, analysis of secondary sources and the use of allegorical tales directed the attention to the processes that make Jews in the Straits present, absent and Other. In the preceding eight chapters the enactment of the Straits Jewish Diasporascape was laid down as the result of ordering accomplishments. In these orderings the attention has been directed not only to the business networks in which Jews take part. A Straits Jewish hinterland has also been depicted. The time-spatial ‘mapping’ of that dissipative system became an end in itself. In this system the components are not isolated from each other. If they were, this thesis (as actant) is the ‘living’ proof of the contrary and having connected the components. All components participate in one another’s production and transformation. The result is a mosaic of wideranging tales. They include the theorising of the diaspora in Complexity terms, the researcher’s methodological reflections, Israel’s secretive operations in the Straits, the mapping of Jewish Singapore, the Penang Jewish Cemetery, the Fontein family in Manado, diamonds, blood diamonds, kosher coffee, halal food, and fashion brands.

Showing serves knowing. In this thesis the author shows what he thinks it is worthwhile to know. The understanding of Jewish itineraries is important to counteracting the singularities which are taken for granted in the Straits. By ‘mapping’ the Straits Jewish Diasporascape as a dissipative system and by assessing the way in which meaningful boundaries in that scape are drawn, the temporalities and spatiality of a self-organising living system have become palpable. This system is sensitive to unexpected influences. It is relationally open and its ‘contextual excess’ directs to different understandings - a topography of reality possibilities - and not just the “probabilistic or ‘possibilistic’ understandings of events”. Complexity offers an alternative that transcends socio-historic divisions and dichotomies in the sciences. It allows for the semiotic enactment of a Jewish Diasporascape and urges one to think in differences. In this thesis, thinking in differences implies a willingness to think through the Jewish Other. The strategy in the dissertation has been to give, on the one hand, thick descriptions of Jewish sub-systems that shed a light on the issues that are raised, and on the other hand, by detecting differences and controversies to uncover the processes that include and exclude. When they are hidden from view it takes intuition to detect these processes of inclusion and exclusion. As shown in Chapter 3, the detection demanded extensive reflexive methodological reconsiderations. The temporal-spatial connections that are made in this thesis do not pretend to be complete. There is always incompleteness. Seemingly random data are generated in one line of investigation that seemingly do not have meaningful connections with the investigated ‘reality’ in the other line of investigation. This has been a way of showing that incompleteness. The idea and hope is that at least ‘the whole’ is informative and clarifying, and that the reader has taken in much along the way and has been motivated to raise questions that otherwise would never have been asked. The same goes for the researcher writing...


this thesis, who has learned a lot along the way, and hopes to have delivered an openness that gives potential to ‘the advent of anomalies or unexpected events’.

The central aim of this research is to determine how Jewish ethno-religious ties are put to use in their business practices. It was only in combination with the enactment of a Straits Jewish Diasporascape that this central objective could be reached in satisfying ways. A ‘new reality’ in which Jews do belong in the Straits was created. For this enactment, theoretical insights from complexity were needed to theorise the Diaspora in a novel way, and methodological considerations had to be assessed that participate in making Jews re-appear in the presumably non-Jewish Straits. A counter-reality has been enacted that neutralises an observed tendency and danger that Jews are allegorized away, even in scientific discourse. This enactment reveals ontological considerations. In determining epistemological directions, it demands that one be aware of the processes that construct realities. Realities are not taken for granted. That position allows for considerations to un-do, re-make or enact new realities. The enactment of a Jewish Diasporascape makes properties available that are denied or identified as an obstacle for the homogeneity of a singularised ‘for non-Jews only’ reality in the Straits. One could argue that spaces that have no room for a Jewish reality are antithetical to cosmopolitanism and religious pluralism, and that striving for a cosmopolitan or religious pluralist reality would be a worthwhile and rewarding cause.

The perspective that is taken in this dissertation, that pluralism has moral value, links up with an emerging reality that the world, both in time and space, is in a state of ‘instantaneous ubiquity’. It is becoming increasingly unsustainable to disconnect the ‘Other’. We live in a world where there are virtually no strangers any more. Everyone knows or is able to know of each other and the Other. This information has increasingly become instantly available. Voices speak in unison with silences. Ethics and morality prescribe when to speak, when to be silent and when to silence. The urge for silencing and creating the Other is part of the human condition. But when silencing is meant to disconnect and exclude the ‘Other’ with ideas that they are less than human, things become dangerous.

This urges us to develop an ‘informed’ morality which makes use of worldwide, instantly-available information and which acknowledges the lessons that are taught by history, because ‘we all know how these things begin –always with the Jews. But history has taught us again and again that it never ends with the Jews’. The Complexity schemes that are used in this thesis ironically and dangerously point to Jews who in this state of instantaneous ubiquity truly have become omnipresent. This state of the world ironically implies and underwrites the messages in anti-Semitic writings, that Jewish omnipresence is no fiction. This is potentially dangerous and might become dangerous when this is not placed in the ontological perspective that has been put

---

7 As social scientists who deal with Jewish ethno-religious based networks, we should be able to see through myths and legends concerning proclaimed ‘Jewish omnipresence’. Non-Jewish Western-educated scholars however still think twice before they enter a scientific debate that deals with this matter. They risk being accused of an overly philo-Semitic stance or on the contrary, fuelling and buoying up anti-Semitic sentiments. After all the essence of that debate (ethno-religious based networks) is the same as had been used in Western national socialist ideas about Jewish world hegemony.
Concluding remarks

forward in this thesis. It might take on a life of its own, reinforce anti-Semitic forces in their stance and provide them with ammunition to make racist, anti-Semitic claims.

Central in the networked reality of the Jewish business cases presented is the entrepreneurs’ decisions to optimising the immutable and mobile character of their networks. In order to keep the flows in their networks going, an optimal mobilisation of the diamonds, the coffee brand and the fashion brands had to be taken care of. The material and human entourage, the actants, in the networks had to be made immune to the temporal and spatial barriers that come from both the predictable and the unforeseen or unwanted sources which influence network mobilities. Perpetual motion is impossible. Because of entropy it is inevitable that networks reify, which inexorably fixes (the speed of) mobilities. This makes it a value judgement to say that rigid networks are stronger. On the contrary, and in line with an appreciation of a social reality that is movement driven and a critical (anti-) realism stance, an alternative value judgement would be to say that the less a network is interfered with, the stronger it is. It is not said that the interferences - and the reified networks that are built on these interferences - are favourable to the mobilities wished for.

Mobilities and transformations make sure that central nodes never stay the same for long. Transformation could mean adaptation, bifurcation or dissolution. The flows of diamonds in the diamond trade, the establishing of coffee outlets and the opening of fashion stores are sensitive to place. A natural gravitation in this self-organising system which has been labelled the Straits Diasporascape has directed these Jewish businesses to base themselves in Singapore. The temporal and spatial barriers that are put up in this city state are relatively low. The primacy of business in Singapore’s national policies allows for relatively easy mobilities. Of course there is no free flow. There are barriers, but these are necessary for the up-keep of an entourage that facilitates the mobilities in (business) networks. The costs of the up-keep are relatively low. Singapore is territorially small and has a small population. Singapore’s pro-business interventions are aimed at the creation of a relatively transparent, internationally oriented open-market economy. Culturally, it is as non-distinct as possible, with a high degree of tolerance towards the different communities. The technocratic policy practices and governmental organisational skills are near perfect. A proven dedication to facilitating the growth of wealth is what counts in Singapore. Voicing dissent is not encouraged. It makes Singapore the right base for Jewish businesses, preferred to all other possible sites in the Straits.

9.2 Modules, Rifts and Rims

A fruitful angle from which to look at Jewish businesses was also provided by concentrating on the core relational materialities in the three business practices. The focus on these actants provided a less ‘humanised’ insight into the degree of openness of the system. The network mobility showed a vulnerability to system change. Analysis of the cases has confirmed the general idea which network research has brought forward; that the more open a network is, the more it is vulnerable to unexpected changes. But this is just one of the multiple enigmas in network research. The enigmas in network research are still multiple. Another essential enigma points to

---

8 Singapore has around 4.5 million inhabitants on a total surface of not more than 700 square kilometres. Illustrative, is the local discussion on cultural identity in Singapore, in which former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew considers the emergence of a ‘real’ Singaporean culture -unlikely. The outcome he predicts is the mix or amalgam of different digital age influences. See at: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/singaporeheritage/message/4980 last visited 8-12-2006
an enduring tension between evolving hubs and modules and finding ways to reconcile ideas of scale-free networks and modularisation in networks. This sounds like nothing new. In a sense, it is the network version of the enduring struggle in the social sciences, reconciling chance and determinism and overcoming the actor-structure dilemma. It points to an in-betweenness, most commonly called “emergence” or “regularities of behavior” that somehow seem to transcend their own ingredients. Or it points to interactions in systems that appear, on the contrary, to be less ordered and rigid than expected. System effects here appear to be different from the effects that were expected from the implicit parts.

Will indeed this and other new network enigmas, as Barabasi claims, unfold in accordance with a ‘right’ theory of complexity? Thinking in networks is still in its infancy. As a non-linear form of analysis, Complexity stands on the shoulder of network theory. In the case of ‘emergence’ Barabasi points to a fuse in what he calls modular scale-free networks in which network clustering seems to follow strict power laws. One of these laws is that while a clustering coefficient is growing, the number of links a hub has with its parts decreases. Central nodes seem to have to protect themselves from ‘overheating’. An overload of connections might slow down network mobility. Organisationally, dealing with these links leaves room for thinking of ways in which parts of a system may or may not be allowed an autonomous development. How do systems respond to ‘overheating’ or overloads of connections? A natural system response is to organise overloads and make multitasking possible. The organisational reaction to an overload, for instance because of business expansion, is to modularise.

CBTL organised their business in a bifurcated structure allowing two hubs each with a relatively (family-related) autonomous operating CEO. CBTL’s modularisation response was to franchise, and the response proved to be effective. A well-thought-out and meticulous business manual is provided to the franchisees that allows for orderly hierarchical modularity. The centre is unburdened while the parts of the bifurcated system have, within franchiser-franchisee limits, permission to evolve relatively separately. In the diamond trade the efforts were to keep an overload of connections within limits. A growth imperative was absent. It was guaranteed by keeping the system as closed as possible that the system did not become too complex. Mobility was guaranteed by a credit system based on ethnicity. In FJB’s business, the most open of the three systems, modularisations proved difficult. Dealing in fashion allows for many interferences and overloads of connections in an extensive open scale-free network architecture which makes it very hard for the FJB business family to modularise. Their business history reads as a continuous organisational effort to modularise in effective ways in a complex dissipative system their businesses, while unexpected, non-linear events prevent them from doing so.

Change in complex dissipative systems does not necessarily require an agency that is seeking to arrange or re-arrange networks. Small causes in a system can have big effect. The effects of outliers in the countless iterative actions which knowledgeable agents produce (although they may lie ‘out of range’), might still be unpredicted, unforeseen, chaotic outcomes which causes change in the system. The focus on (outliers in) networks started when these kinds of convolutions in the structure of social networks were not considered as nontrivial any longer.

---

12 The ultimate contemporary example is of course the credit crisis.
Concluding remarks

Complexity would refuse to acknowledge that it is possible to bound a system. The Straits Jewish Diasporascape is not an isolated operating system. It would be a grand simplification of the situation in the Straits if only centripetal attractors\textsuperscript{13} were supposed to be at work in the Straits Jewish Diasporascape, with Singapore as the center and the rest of the Straits as its periphery. Global time-space compression effects, with informational and transport revolutions as distinct features, extend the reach and visibility of this scape beyond the Straits. The Straits region, which in this thesis has bounded the (glocal) Jewish Diasporascape, is not more than a useful allegory with which it was possible to make wider and multiple (including global) connections visible.

In this dissertation complexity has been articulated within Diaspora theory. What is the result of this articulation? In a way Diaspora theory might be considered as Complexity \textit{avant la lettre}. Diaspora theory with its ‘diaspora triangle’ already pointed in a modest way to non-linearity and multiplicity. The idea of the possibility of serving more kings, in terms of loyalty, is exemplified in Diaspora research. The reaction in contemporary societal discussions suggests that even this modest form of complexity is already too disturbing for many. Pluralism is resisted by one-track-minds. New vistas are vulnerable to the ‘slowness of the ontologically grounded’\textsuperscript{14}. The speed at which these glimmering new vistas are being produced might be too high. Diaspora research could be the fertile domain for the articulation of the ideas of complexity. This thesis is (hopefully) the ‘living’ proof of that. Diaspora studies already provide sources of insight into the nature of virtual multiplicities. The use of a diaspora triangle, however, has largely remained ‘flat’, confined to the use of the spatial topologies of network and region only. In terms of network research, modularisations were too easily assumed. The scale-free aspect in a scape has been undervalued. Network research in Diaspora studies remained grounded in Euclidian and Cartesian dispositions to determine networks which were encapsulated by culturalist, institutionalist, economic, historical, etc. claims. Complexity offers Diaspora research, including the study of diaspora groups like the Chinese or Indians, a way to look beyond these Cartesian and Euclidian dispositions. Complexity in Diaspora research urges the researcher to track contradictory tendencies, to detect hidden or suppressed realities, and to tap capacities that are not actualised\textsuperscript{15}. It re-directs attention to the spatial topologies of fluid and fire that deliver the mesh in networks and point to different temporaliities in a network. The networked cases show that the more mesh (or thickening) encapsulates a networked ordering, the more vulnerable it is to new orderings. Although on the verge of collapse, the Diamond trade has long been able to keep alternative orderings out of its system. The mesh that surrounds its orderings has been kept limited. FJB’s fashion business is the most vulnerable. CBTL, due to its franchising concept, lies in between.

The Diaspora triangle is not an explanatory model. Complexity does not offer models or solutions either. The enactment of the Straits Jewish Diasporascape is not a means of providing easy-to-determine cause and effect relations, or to determine generalities. A scape has been enacted and investigated where Jews happen to pose relevant problems. The veiled presence of Jews in the Straits points to rifts where concepts of Self and the Other emerge. Reality claims are made and empowered with a sense of urgency and importance. Complexity serves multiplicity by pointing at these rifts and by pointing at new reality possibilities. The making present of new networked realities produces chafes at these rifts. Each new reality produces (suppressed) multiple other realities. Chafes are produced because making present involves (involuntary or forced)

\textsuperscript{13} The emergence of patterning within a system stems from attractors.

\textsuperscript{14} For Urry the global fluid of cosmopolitanism redraws ‘\textit{the speed of the global and the slowness of the ontologically grounded}’.


\textsuperscript{15} Mackenzie, A. (2005: 51-52).
CHAPTER 9

making absent. These chafes may remain under the surface for a while, smouldering like a fire on a moor (as the immobile and mutable topology of fire) waiting to be ignited. Fluids that act as bellows have the potential to make these moor fires flare up and help produce new networked orderings.

Complexity also serves multiplicity by drawing attention to the rims of a system. Outliers at the rims in a system embody the small causes that might have big effects. These outliers may produce scandals. Bad news travels fast and is an important force that can make or break a system\textsuperscript{16}. In the Jewish Diasporascape, and more particularly for the businesses that Jews are involved in, potential scandals are abundantly available. The detection and exposure of their corporeal presence or their haram involvement in business practices is potentially ‘scandalous’. Their undesired presence is situated in ‘a fatal triangle of hatred’ and makes Jewish presence a source of contestation. In that triangle, anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism and criticism of Israel conflate. The rifts where these contestations and this silencing occur do not necessarily have to be situated with the outliers on the rims of a system. Rifts occur where systems overlap, converge and intertwine with other systems.

9.3 The J-factor

Do Jewish businessmen put their ethno-religious resources (the J-factor) to use in their business practices? This at first seemingly compelling question has become less crucial now. Findings in this thesis have pointed to the rift-positions Jews have, where systems collapse, bifurcate, dissolve, converge or overlap. One might argue that this is an old idea parading as a new one. Almost similar messages have been transmitted, for instance, in culturalist, institutionalist, economic or economic historical explanations which labelled Jews as brokers, middlemen or pariah entrepreneurs. What makes the answer to this question different in the language of Complexity? And more specifically, what points to a different understanding with the help of Complexity? The three cases show that to determine one explanatory J-factor only is reductionistic and would reduce the working of systems to a ‘culturalist’ level. Of course, ethno-religiosity is a factor, but it is not an all-encompassing decisive factor. It is just one of the many factors that are involved. Numerous decisions have to be made in businesses that go beyond the question of whether or not someone they are dealing with is or should be Jewish or not, or of whether or not these decisions are according to Jewish religious principles or not.

However, the three cases presented show that there are culturalist J-factor connections, but it is too ‘simple’ to assume that this J-factor is around every corner, connecting Jews. If the pressure to find answers is great, it is more than likely that you will find what you are looking for. The consequence might be that, as de Genestet has put it, ‘(...) much of what has been proven, turns out in the end not to be true, and much is forever true which still must be proven’\textsuperscript{17}. The line of investigation that has been applied in this thesis also points to J-factor connections. Inevitably, the mode of investigation was to look out for and detect these connections. But are they meaningful? One would probably answer that they are, but the actors involved would say no. That seems a

\textsuperscript{16} It is here that I follow Urry who defines mobility as the most important system force, as against Castells who points to access to networks.

\textsuperscript{17} Genestet, de P.A. (1869) \textit{De Dichtwerken van P.A. de Genestet}. Editie C.P. Thiele. Leekedichtjes. XXXVIII Van Heusde’s Spreuke. Amsterdam: Gebr. Kraay. ‘Veel wordt bewezen dat in den grond niet waar is. En veel is eeuwig waar, ofschoon ’t bewijs niet daar is’. Translated as: ‘after all, much of what has been proven, turns out in the end - not to be true, and much is forever true which still must be proven’.

232
Concluding remarks

paradox. To make this explanatory, structurationists, for instance, would point to a level below the discursive level, to that of an internalised subconscious self-silencing or habitus level in between agency and structure. Forces imposed by the institutions of culture, religion, ethnicity, would make oscillations between agency and structure possible. Complexity, on the other hand, argues that changes in systems occur without a determining agency. Post-structuralist in nature, Complexity helps to melt the J-factor's culturalist glacial undertow of habitus. Business decisions are made by Jews who happen to be – simultaneously and irreducibly - Singaporean, cosmopolitan, husbands, fathers, grandfathers, brothers, nephews, pious, Sephardic, of mixed blood, competitors, entrepreneurs, upper middle class, ex-convicts, Maecenas, MU-fans, etc. Complexity blames parochialism in the sciences on the strong identification of academics with their disciplines\(^{18}\), which has allowed for compartmentalisation in the sciences. Scientists tend to be incapable of seeing beyond the questions posed by their own discipline, which provide an all-purpose filter for everything\(^{19}\). That filter might be dangerous for any Diaspora group, and most notably for the Chinese and the Jewish because it is exactly in this following of 'single' explanations and allowing for 'simple' answers that Jewish (or Chinese) conspiracy theories find a breeding ground.

A mode of ordering that is intertwined with the pragmatic and opportunistic performative actions of the entrepreneur has long been dominant in business related studies. This mode of ordering is rooted in the rational choice theory of classical economics\(^{20}\). The entrepreneur is the cost-minimising, self-interested profit-seeking neo-liberal hero who interprets his enterprise through the rational choices that he is making. The dominance of this worldwide enterprise mode of ordering has kept alternative orderings out of sight. Explanatory shortcuts that are taken have been legitimising this hero's performance and his reaping of instant rewards, leaving interventions considered as not meaningful out of consideration. Science and its methods, centered on the Cartesian autonomous ego, have served this pragmatic and opportunistic mode of ordering. This has been fruitful for creating insight into the world of enterprise. However, it is questionable to what extent this focus has helped to unravel the powers that make systems change, let alone given insight into the ways to create a more sustainable world.

The ‘invention’ of a Straits Jewish Diasporascape has allowed for less-than-obvious engagement in a complex matter. The invention and investigation of this object of knowledge has allowed for the posing of different questions. An amorphous structure is replaced by a complex ‘hinterland’ (the word ‘context’ has been deliberately avoided throughout the dissertation) that allowed for variations and problems with new distinctions. The hope is that this thesis will make a difference, not as a new non-negotiable difference that draws on similar, reductive generalisations (and rhetoric), but as an event (actant) that has created unsuspected distinctions\(^{21}\), and that has put into variation what appears as a given\(^{22}\). The human is de-centered in Complexity, which leads analysis away from the Cartesian ego. The autonomous Cartesian ego is uneasy with the ‘end of certainty’ claims of Complexity and the redirection to multiplicity and non-linearity. When there is no necessary proportionality between the ‘causes’ and ‘effects’ of events or phenomena, intentional

\(^{18}\) This parochialism is, according to Sayer, often combined with the imperialist nature of disciplines; ‘they attempt to claim territories occupied by others as their own’. Sayer, A. (1999) ‘Long live postdisciplinary studies! Sociology and the curse of disciplinary parochialism/imperialism’. P. 2. British Sociological Association Conference. April. Glasgow.

\(^{19}\) Sayer, A. (1999: 2).

\(^{20}\) This is exaggerated. These questions occur in business science too, for instance in institutional economics, business history or economical history, where the focus is on the role of man-made financial and business institutions and the technology that shapes economic behaviour.


\(^{22}\) Ibid.
autonomous decision making loses its aura. Instead, with the design of a Straits Jewish Diasporascape, following a set of complexity theory principles, this thesis has opened up the potential for alternative understanding. In this understanding a J-factor, that which might be ‘forever true’, has not become prey to easy explanations. The deliverable here is the Straits Jewish Diasporascape, which is a new society-like entity that is testing boundaries but at the same time is populated by countless individual particles which are resolutely located and measurable in space and time. And the purpose of the thesis is to depict and enact this scape and to ‘distort into clarity’ this new emergent whole.

---

23 Genestet, de P. A. (1869).

24 Heidegger maintains that all entities, (...) have their being as movement into appearance. They may come from complete unknowness into knowness, or from distortion into clarity, or from forgottenness into remembrance'. See at: http://evans-experientialism.freewebspace.com/sheenan_heidys_philof_mind.htm last visited 14-5-2009.

Annexure I: List of interviews

Interviews
Douglas Benjamin - Manager FJBenjamin. Singapore. 11-5-20005. Interview on tape.
Frank Benjamin - CEO FJBenjamin. Singapore. 9-3-2005. Interview on tape.
Suresh Hathiaramani - Diamond dealer. 16-6-2005. Singapore. Interview on tape.
Maya Kadosh - Embassy of Israel. 30-3-2004. Informal.
Rueben Khash - Diamond dealer. 7-6-2005. Interview on tape.
Gil Kipper - Employee Filtration Company. Singapore. 8-6-2005. Interview on tape.
Alex Last - Entrepreneur. Singapore. 5-6-2005. Informal.
ANNEXURE I: List of interviews

Avishai Marbiah - Diamond dealer. 27-6-2005. Interview on tape.
Mohammad Redzuan Othman - Scientist. Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. National University of Malaysia. 30-7-2003. Informal.
Bruce Rosengarten - Ganenu Learning Center. Singapore. 7-6-2005. Interview on tape.
Linda Spiro - Diamond dealer. Jakarta. 18-12-2003

Interviews with local Yogyakartan leaders and members of:
Hizbuttahrir (HTI) 2-1-2004,
Kesaktuan Aksi Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia (KAMMI) 11-1-2004,
Jemaah Tabligh 7-1-2004,
Majlis Mujahidin 15-3-2004,
Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam (HMI) 21-12-2003.

The focus in these interviews was on their interpretation of Koran with regard to pronouncements about Jews. Leading question: In what way are these pronouncements directive...
in their dealings with Jews and/or Israeli and how they think Indonesia should take up position with regard to Israeli politics?

**Interviews Oral History Department National Archives of Singapore:**


*Singapore National Archives. Oral History Department. Interview Jacob Ballas. A000163/04 (1). Date of interview 6-12-1983.*

*Singapore National Archives. Oral History Department. Frederick Jacob Isaacs. A0000378. Date of interview 21-3-1985.*


De Joodse Diasporascape in de Straits. Een etnografische studie naar Joodse zakelijke netwerken over grenzen heen.

In een eerste verkenning voor deze studie naar het zakenleven in de Joodse Diaspora in Zuidoost Azië, en in het bijzonder die in Indonesië, Maleisië en Singapore, vielen een aantal zaken op die het duidelijk maakte dat een conventionele organisatie antropologische aanpak niet toereikend zou zijn.

Belangrijk was de constatering dat de onderzoekspopulatie niet ruim voor handen zou zijn. Joden zijn bijna afwezig in Indonesië en in Maleisië. Daar tegenover staat een relatief bloeiende gemeenschap in Singapore. De vorm van deze verspreiding, met centrale node Singapore, is niet toevallig. De onderzochte zakenpraktijken, die van modehuis FJ Benjamin (FJB), de koffieketen de Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf (CBTL) en die van diamanten handelaars, laten zien dat Singapore gebruikt wordt als centrale node om ook in Indonesië en Maleisië zaken te kunnen doen. Hun nadrukkelijke aanwezigheid in Singapore en hun afwezigheid in Indonesië en Maleisië hangt samen.

Een ander inzicht dat zich opdrong is dat, ondanks de fysieke afwezigheid van joden in Maleisië en Indonesië, in een ‘antisemitisme zonder joden’ discours, joden toch nadrukkelijk in regio aanwezig zijn. In dit discours wordt de hoedanigheid van joden om als de Ander te fungeren en als frame te dienen om heikele ontwikkelingen in een samenleving te kunnen duiden, uitgewerkt. Wat in het allegoriseren echter over het hoofd wordt gezien is dat joden zelf in dit discours worden weggeallegoriseerd. Er wordt geen rekening gehouden met bijvoorbeeld de transformerende werking die de allegorie als stijlfiguur kan hebben op de aan- of afwezigheid van de Joodse zakenwereld.

Deze ambivalente positie van de joodse gemeenschap en het joodse zakenleven in deze regio wijst op een bijzondere en complexe situatie. In eerste instantie leek een - populairst in Diaspora studies - multi-lokale benadering, waarin wordt uitgegaan van veelvuldige grensoverschrijdingen, voor de hand te liggen. Maar, het verklarende kader van de klassieke diaspora driehoek (de relatie tussen de diaspora groep, gastland en moederland) bleek niet toereikend. Dit kader is niet in staat om de multi-dimensionale tijd ruimtelijke complexiteit van en de fluïde oscillaties tussen joodse aan- en afwezigheid te kunnen duiden. Daarom is aansluiting gezocht bij de inzichten die in het complexiteitsdenken zijn uitgewerkt. Het complexiteitsdenken is geschraagd op inzichten over netwerken en probeert met de analyse van netwerken complexe menselijke systemen te doorgronden. Het complexiteitsdenken en diaspora studies zijn nooit eerder in een uitgebreide studie aan elkaar gekoppeld. Het proefschrift is daarom in het eerste deel (hoofdstuk twee en drie) gewijd aan de beantwoording van de vraag hoe de theoretische inzichten van het complexiteitsdenken kunnen worden toegepast op onderzoek naar zakelijke Joodse Diaspora netwerken, en de vraag hoe methodologisch dit onderzoek handen en voeten kan krijgen.

Daartoe is de zogenaamde Straits Jewish Diasporascape ontwikkeld dat een multi-temporeel en multi-spatieel kader biedt. De spatiële regionale topologie de Straits – in deze studie vastgelegd als de waterwegen rond Maleisië, Singapore en Indonesië, met aan deze waterwegen gelegen havensteden als Singapore, Melakka, Penang, Surabaya en Jakarta - biedt een voor Joden dynamische culturele ruimte dat als ruimtelijke afbakening beter is toegurust om complexe patronen in de Joodse Diaspora in deze contreien op hun waarde te kunnen schatten. Beter ook
ANNEXURE II: Summary in Dutch

dan wanneer dat zou worden gedaan aan de hand van de relevante natiestaten, of de oude koloniale ruimtes.

Het was belangrijk om methodologisch niet alleen te kijken hoe de duidelijk aanwezige Joodse netwerken onderzocht konden worden, maar ook hoe de afwezigheid en het elusieve van Joodse netwerken kon worden onderzocht. Daartoe is gebruik gemaakt van een door semiotiek geïnspireerde method assemblage. Met method assemblage wordt een (verborgen) realiteit gedetecteerd, die tegelijkertijd door deze detectie wordt versterkt. Een realiteit wordt als realiteit gezien omdat andere mogelijke realiteiten worden ontkend, genegeerd of over het hoofd gezien. Een uitgangspunt in de Semiotiek van différance wordt hierdoor in het netwerkenkijken gebracht. Dit veronderstelt een kritische houding ten opzichte van bestaande realiteiten (netwerken). Het spoort aan om naar de achterkant van werkelijkheden (netwerken) te kijken. Tegelijkertijd biedt het de mogelijkheid om een andere, heldere, en misschien meer rechtvaardige realiteit te genereren. Zoals die in deze dissertatie met het beschrijven en vastleggen van de Straits Jewish Diasporascape wordt uitgewerkt, en met drie netwerk casussen nader en preciezer wordt ingevuld.

In hoofdstuk vier wordt in deze Straits’ Joodse culturele ruimte daartoe historiserend een hinterland vastgelegd waarin zoveel mogelijk aan de hand van getraceerde sporen, de meest in het oog springende fluids, na regio en netwerken de derde spatiële topologie, aan de orde komen. Dit hinterland geeft in tijd en ruimte een contextueel kader, maar is nadrukkelijk niet bedoeld als een structuur waarmee in de later beschreven casussen, met een verklarende theorie, individueel handelen en kwesties van oorzaak en gevolg kunnen worden vastgesteld. Een hinterland is namelijk nooit compleet. Net als de in het hinterland naar voren gebrachte allegorische vertellingen zoals over de familie Fontein en de begraafplaats in Penang. Het zou een oneindig groot hoofdstuk moeten worden, waar met een breed scala aan bijvoorbeeld biografieën en familie hiens een temporele en ruimtelijke dimensie aan de Diasporascape gegeven dient te worden. Daarin moet duidelijk worden welke de voor de Joodse diaspora en haar zakenleven in een Joods diasporascape de belangrijkste fluids zijn die de ‘fundamenten’ zijn waarop genetwerkte organisaties zijn gebouwd. Het kan niet anders zijn dat dit slechts gedeeltelijk lukt. De onderkenning hiervan verlegt de noodzaak om tot een compleet hinterland te komen naar het werken aan een zo informerend mogelijk hinterland, waarbij het duidelijk moge zijn dat de onderzoeker een belangrijke stem heeft om in dat hinterland de voor hem relevante zaken aan de orde te stellen. In het onderzoek klinkt het belang door dat de onderzoeker hecht aan waardenpluralisme.

Het eerste en tweede deel van de onderzoeksvraag spoort aan tot onderzoek naar hoe het Joodse zakenleven in de Straits opereert en hoe daarbij Joods etnisch-religieuze affiliaties (de J-factor) een rol spelen. Het resultaat van de eerdere theoretische en methodologische uitwerking resoneert in de beantwoording van deze twee vragen door. Er is geprobeerd gehoor te geven aan de complexiteits opbroop om zo uitgebreid mogelijk netwerkcasussen te ontwikkelen. In deze casussen is speciaal aandacht gegeven aan de belangrijkste actanten, ofwel de relationele materialiteiten, in de verschillende zakenpraktijken: voor de diamanthandelaren de diamant, voor CBTL koffie, en voor FJB de mode-attributen Dit om duidelijk te maken dat een praktijk zich ook kan voegen naar de beperkingen of mogelijkheden die een materialiteit een netwerk oplegt. Vooral voor de diamanthandel gaf dat een interessant perspectief. Het blijkt dat door een beperkte commodificering in de diamanthandel organisationele variaties beperkt zijn gebleven. De waardebepaling van de diamant geschiedt vooral nog aan de hand van een overzichtelijke reeks grootheden: de vier C’s (earat, cut, colour, clarity). Door het uitbannen van mogelijke
Annexure II: Summary in Dutch

Andere netwerkverstoringen (vanuit fluids die hun invloed doen laten gelden met netwerkinterventies) is de handel relatief gesloten kunnen blijven waardoor ook een historisch gegroeide dominantie van de joodse groep relatief lang kon worden vastgehouden. Bij CBTL zien we dat netwerkverstoring binnen de perken wordt gehouden door de toepassing van de franchising organisatie formule. De invloed van een joodse factor bij CBTL kan worden teruggevonden in het spatiële bifurcatiepatroon van de onderneming. Die weerspiegelt de verspreiding van de Sassoons als familie. De controle op afstand van hun franchisers wordt mogelijk gemaakt door dat de twee broers die het familiebedrijf hebben opgericht, relatief onafhankelijk van elkaar in een eigen regio kunnen opereren. Door het franchising concept wordt hun product – specialiteit koffie- relatief gevrijwaard van interventies die CBTL’s netwerkorganisatie kunnen verstoorren. Het grilligst zijn de netwerkpatronen in FJB’s organisatie. Mode is iets ongrijpbaars, en dientengevolge zijn er veelvuldig netwerkinterventies. Toch bleek het ook bij FJB mogelijk om ethno-religieuze interveniërende factoren (de J-factor) te onderkennen. Die ligt besloten in de relatief centrale positie die ondernemers als FJ Benjamin hebben in de – in de Straits- kleine joodse gemeenschap. Met de trustfondsen, die door rijke (overleden) leden van de gemeenschap zijn ingesteld, zijn er mogelijkheden om, bijvoorbeeld met de aandelenportfolio’s, belangen in een beursgenoteerde onderneming als FJB te manipuleren.

De vierde spatiële topologie, die in dit proefschrift wordt uitgewerkt, is de ‘fire’ topologie. Fire wijst op het onverwachte, de veraf liggende oorzaken die voor de ondernemingen grote gevolgen kunnen hebben. Een systeem realiteit op een plek kan divergeren en contesteren met die op een andere plek. Als die systemen samen komen, of als in een enkel systeem een relatief geïsoleerd deel haar kracht opeens laat gelden, kan dat grote gevolgen hebben voor de netwerken van een onderneming. Internet speelt hier een steeds grotere rol in. Voor de Joodse ondernemingen, die voor een belangrijk deel hun zaken doen in Islamitische landen, levert dat problemen op. Vooral als het bedrijf een band heeft met ‘het moederland’ van de Joodse Diaspora, Israël. Antisemitisme, anti-zionisme en anti-Israelgevoels kunnen dan samenkomen en de bedrijfsvoering ondernemen. Ondernemers die van oudsher in deze regio actief zijn, zoals de Benjamins (FJB) en de Sassoons (CBTL), kunnen beter met dit krachten (mijten)veld overweg dan relatief nieuwe bijvoorbeeld Israëlische - ondernemers. In al de drie casussen komt direct of indirect Israël als belanghebbende naar voren. Bijvoorbeeld in de organisatie van een joods leven in samenwerking met de andere joodse groepen. Israël is als jonge natie staat, in weerswil van het zionistische ideaal dat de diaspora oproep om terug te keren uit haar ballingschap, juist actief buiten haar grenzen op zoek naar waarde- en betekenisvolle (diaspora) allianties om haar bestaansrecht te doen laten gelden. Diaspora als concept blijft ook in systeemdenken waardevol omdat het wijst op meervoudige en complexe relaties. Met de uitgangspunten van het complexiteitsdenken wordt de zogenaamde Diaspora driehoek - de relatie tussen diasporagroep, het gastland en het moederland Israël – verregaand gedynamiseerd.

De spatiële topologie, ‘fire’, is van belang om het tegen elkaar aan schuren van de verschillende systemen en de verschillende netwerkrealiteiten die conflicteren te duiden en lokaliseren. In die zin biedt dit ‘fire’ concept de mogelijkheid om voor het systeemdenken een adaptatie te geven van een oude invulling van ideeën die over joden als brokers, middleman of paria-entrepreneur bestaan. Het Joodse zakenleven in de Straits zou dan opereren aan de randen en bij de breukpunten van elkaar overlappende systemen. Ze zouden opereren bij systemen die met elkaar in botsing zijn en zich splitsen, of in systemen waarin een realiteit is gecreëerd dat een andere realiteit veronachtzaamt, verwerpt of onderdrukt. Een bedrijf als FJB participeert volop in haar directe gastland Singapore, maar heeft wel altijd handelswaar gehad dat de verschillen in
modesmaak tussen twee verschillende werelden uitbaatte. CBTL komt met een voor de regio vernieuwend Amerikaans koffie concept. De diamanthandel kwam met handelswaar dat wereldwijd een –anonieme- verplaatsing van kapitaal mogelijk maakte. Dat levert ‘vuur’ op, waar men mee om moet kunnen gaan, maar het levert ook kansen op. *Fire* is een topologische ruimte waar zakelijke mogelijkheden zich bij uitstek aandienen. Waarin het belangrijk is dat men weet heeft van de tegen elkaar aan schurende werkelijkheden, waar het belangrijk is toegang te hebben tot netwerken die in de verschillende systemen opereren, en waar niet in een enkelvoudige - dominante - realiteit wordt geleefd, waardoor een sensitiviteit voor de *fluids* die netwerken ‘wegspoelen’ belangrijk blijft. Daardoor is het mogelijk voor het Joodse zakenleven in de Straits om - makkelijker - de verbindingen te leggen tussen en in systemen waar ‘anderen’ (nog) niet toe in staat zijn. Zeker, daarbij wordt ook gebruik gemaakt van ethno-religieuze mogelijkheden. Ook van de derde ruimte in de Diaspora driehoek, Israël. Maar het is niet gezegd dat dit op essentialistische, culturele, religieuze, institutionele, of politiek historische wijze, al dan niet op een ‘habitus’ –achtige discursief niveau, bepalend kan zijn. Dat is niet aan de orde en zou gezien wat in het voorgaande is gesteld reductionistisch zijn. Zeker met de eindeloze variatie die met het vaststellen van een zich altijd veranderend en vluchtig, dissipatief systeem als de *Straits Jewish Diasporascape* naar voren is gebracht, en die de ijzige onderstroom van het habitus concept heeft moeten doen latent ontduoien.
Annexure III: Indonesian Muslim ‘Yahudi’ References


Annexure IV: Family Tree Fontein

Genealogy of the Fontein family:

Markus Fontein (1850-1931) x Alida Wijnberg (1847-1936) Winschoten
8 Children

Oldest son (1) Abraham Fontein (1875 Winschoten-1945 internment camp Semarang) x Antje Rohring 1876 Manado – 1942 Batavia. Antje Rohring was first married to Delenius and had already two sons who were adopted by Abraham Fontein:

Children Antje Rohring x Delenius
(1) Johan Adolf Fontein (1900 Manado - 1985 Dordrecht)
(2) Henk Fontein (1902 Manado - 1971 Westerveld)

Children Abraham Fontein x Antje Rohring
(3) Alfred Jacob Fontein (1904 Manado-1945 Aceh) x Margeretha Anies
(4) Rosa Alida Fontein (1906 Manado-1998 Den Haag) x Evert D’Huy
(5) Engelina Leentje Fontein (1911 Manado -1960 Naarden) x Selmon Emanuel Shabracq
(6) Maurits Wolf (Pinkie Pim) Fontein (1913 Manado- 1990 Hengelo) x Helen Giselle -first marriage x Louise Magdeleena (Saerang) –second marriage
(7) Rosa Leentje Fontein (Manado 1912- 1940 Batavia) x Dolf Leunissen

Son (3) Afred Jacob Fontein x Margeratha Anies had three children. After Alfred Jacob Fontein was killed in Aceh in a prison camp Margeretha Anies remarried to Hasan Ali and had two children.
(1) Abraham Fontein 1935 Manado-lives in Surabaya
(2) John Maurits Fontein 1936 Manado - still lives in Manado
(3) Antje Rosalin Fontein 1939 - lives in Surabaya.

Children with Hasan Ali
(4) Marie Alida (Muslim) Manado
(5) Lien Steen (Muslim) Palu

Son (2) John Maurits Fontein together with Roosje Paseki (1949 Minahasa) have 4 sons and one daughter: Oral (1) and Abraham (3) and Zusanne are converted to Judaism.
(1) Oral Robert Fontein ( Yehuda Ben Yochannan) Manado 1960
(2) Billy Alfredo Yefta Fontein Manado 1961
(3) Abraham Alfrits Fontein Surabaya 1963
(4) Johan Maurits Fontein 1965 Surabaya (deceased)
(5) Zusanne Ade Irma Fontein Manado 1966

The oldest son (1) Oral Fontein x Kho Mey Lan have five children with colorful names like
(1) Golda Meir Fontein (1986)
(2) Abraham Lincoln Fontein (1988)
(3) Tirza Gabriel Fontein (1990)
(4) Billy (Ruben Simeon Ben Yehuda) Fontein (1992)
References


Aksoy, A. & K. Robins (n.d.) Banal Transnationalism: The Difference that Television Makes. WPTC-02-08.


References


References


References


References


References


References


250
References


References


References


References


254
References


References


References


References


References


References


References


*Year report 2004 FJ Benjamin Holdings Ltd.*


References

Internet sites

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/gorontalomaju2020/message18276 last visited 11-6-2008
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/tasik/messages/4331 and 4332. Last visited 4-4-2008.
http://ishitech.co.il Israel High-Tech & Investment Reports. A monthly report covering News and Investment opportunities. Publisher: Joseph Morgenstern.
http://travelvideo.tv/news/more.php?id=3886_0_1_0_M103 First ever El Al Israel Airlines flight to land in Indonesia brings Tsunami Relief. Last visited 3-7-2005.
http://www.20six.co.uk/zlanz/archive/2004/06/11/1jbnkpb1k019.htm last visited 25-1-2006.
http://www.cpf.gov.sg/cpf_info last visited 3-3-2006
http://www.ishitech.co.il Israel High-Tech & Investment Report.
http://www.sfdonline.org/LinkPages/Linkfolders/02Pf/glc_100202.html#former_senior_mil last visited 15-11-2006.
http://www.vertexisrael.co.il last visited 31-3-2008.
References

Newspapers and magazines

Business Times Singapore. 16-4-1993. FJ Benjamin seeking help in regional drive.
Business Times Singapore. 16-7-1996.
Business Times Singapore. 24-8-1996
Business Times Singapore. 30-10-1996. FJB given CPF trustee stock status as it launches IPO.
Business Times Singapore. 9-11-1996. FJ Benjamin taken up fully.
Business Times Singapore. 9-11-1996. FJ Benjamin’s 50m share IPO fully subscribed.
Business Times Singapore. 20-3-1997. FJB chief loves the challenge of taking risks.
Business Times Singapore. 25-3-1997. FJ Benjamin’s profit fall: Were analysts too bullish on IPO?
Business Times Singapore. 1-4-1998. FJ Benjamin slips into red with $18m interim loss.
Business Times Singapore. 2-5-1998. FJ Benjamin: Outlook still bleak but all is not lost.
Business Times Singapore. 26-3-1999. FJ Benjamin cuts losses by 27% to 13.4m.
Business Times Singapore. 1-3-2000. FJB Man U megastore to cost $4.5m.
Business Times Singapore. 26-6-2000
Business Times Singapore. 22-3-2001. FJ Benjamin to sell HQ for 31.8m
Business Times Singapore. 30-6-2001. FJ Benjamin suspends its shares.
Business Times Singapore. 4-7-2001. Royal Clicks plans $64m acquisition of FJ Benjamin.
Business Times Singapore. 31-7-2001. Royal Clicks, FJ Benjamin call off merger plans.
Business Times Singapore. 7-8-2001. FJB team up to give Man-U café a lift.
Business Times Singapore. 28-11-2003. Institutions take up 31% of Bright Orient offer.
Business Times Singapore. 7-8-2004. What’s in; Shop.
Business Times Singapore 1-6-2005.

De Vrijdagavond (1924) 1 (1).
De Vrijdagavond (1925) 2 (31).


264
References


Fikiran 8-7-1932


Forbes 26-5-2003. New York. We’re number three, we try harder

Haaretz 16-7-2004.


Kompas (1999) 5-12.
Kompas (1999) 7-11,


NRC Handelsblad 19-11-2006.
NRC Handelsblad 24-3-2001.

NWO (2008) NWO Complexity; Outline of the NWO strategic theme Dynamics of complex systems. The Hague: NWO.


South China Morning Post. 14-11-1999 Hong Kong. 7-Eleven is the pace-setter in the franchise market. Clara Li finds out how to get a share.


Tejehaja Siang 1-2-1912.
Tejehaja Siang 15-3-1911.
Tejehaja Siang 15-5-1912.
References


The Jakarta Post 18-12-2000.
The Jakarta Post 31/10/2003.


The New Straits Times Singapore. 31-7-2001. FJ Benjamin, Royal Clicks call off merger.


The Straits Times Singapore. 16-1-1997. I’m going to be big. No bull.
The Straits Times Singapore. 18-6-1999. FJ Benjamin signs on Man United.
The Straits Times Singapore. 5-9-1999.
The Straits Times Singapore. 9-4-2000. Man U shops scores.
The Straits Times Singapore. 12-9-2000. Black is this year’s colour for retailer FJ Benjamin.
The Straits Times Singapore. 3-12-2000. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings Limited
The Straits Times Singapore. 13-12-2000.
The Straits Times Singapore. 4-7-2001. FJ Benjamin and Royal Clicks to tie the knot.
The Straits Times Singapore. 9-7-2001. FJ Benjamin enters merger ‘for survival’.
The Straits Times Singapore. 16-7-2001. Royal Clicks and FJ Benjamin announce merger plan.
The Straits Times Singapore. 28-11-2003. FJ Benjamin buys 1.6% stake in Bright Orient.
The Straits Times Singapore. 21-1-2004. From Mao to haute couture.
The Straits Times Singapore. 1-4-2004.
The Straits Times Singapore. 8-4-2004. Life! Fashion.
The Straits Times Singapore. 20-4-2005.
The Straits Times Interactive 18-12-2006. Israel’s high-tech, hungry dreams.
References

The Sunday Times Singapore. 27-02-2005.

Tjehaja Siang 1/1/1910
Tjehaja Siang 1/2/1910
Tjehaja Siang 15/4/2/1911.

Trouw, 1-10-2008

Volkskrant 16-8-2007.
Volkskrant 12-9-2007. Wat mag je nog wel eten?


Symposium and seminar Antisemitism Today: A Phenomenon of Globalisation? 1-2 September 2005 held at the NIOD (Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie) and at Felix Meritis in Amsterdam. Organised by the NIOD and the VU.

Dissertation Series

• B. Vis, (2008), *Biting the Bullet or Steering Clear? Politics of (Not-) Unpopular Welfare State Reform in Advanced Capitalist Democracies.* Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, isbn 978 90 9022715 3.
• Z. van der Wal (2008), *Value Solidity. Differences, Similarities and Conflicts between the Organizational Values of Government and Business.* Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, isbn 978 90 9022991 1.
• K. Lasthuizen (2008), *Leading to Integrity. Empirical Research into the Effects of Leadership on Ethics and Integrity.* Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, isbn 978 90 813277 1 8.
• L.C. Horn (2009), *The Transformation of Corporate Governance Regulation in the European Union.* Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, isbn 978 90 9023813 5.
• B.E. Büscher (2009), *Struggles over Consensus, Anti-Politics and Marketing.* Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.
• H.M. Koolma (2009), *Verhalen en Prestaties, een Onderzoek naar het Gedrag van Woningcorporaties.* Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, isbn 978 90 8659 273 9.
• J.J. van Wijk (2009), Moving beyond Heroes and Winners. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, isbn 978 90 8659 285 2

• H.A. Binnema (2009), How Parties Change. EU Integration and the Flexible Response of Political Parties. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, isbn 978 90 8659 309 5


• G. van Koningsbruggen (2009), Processing and Acceptance of Threatening Health Information: the Effects of Self-Affirmation. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

• D. van Bergen (2009), Suicidal Behaviour of Migrant Women in the Netherlands. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

• J. Perry (2009), Goodwill Hunting: Accounting and the Global Regulation of Economic Ideas. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

• A. Linden (2009), Besmet. Levenslopen en Motieven van Extreem-Rechtse Activisten in Nederland. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.


• A. Vliegenthart (2009), Transnational Actors and Corporate Governance Regulation in Postsocialist Europe. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.


• A. van Essen (2009). Seeking a Balance: The Emergence of New Public Management in Health Care Regulation. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, isbn 978 90 8659349 1


EXPECTED


• M. Hellendoorn (2010). *Opkomst en Neergang van het Kostwinnaarschapssysteem*. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, isbn 978 90 9025065 6

• E. Ersanilli (2010). *Comparing Integration. Host culture adoption and ethnic retention among Turkish immigrants and their descendents in France, Germany and the Netherlands*. Vrije Universiteit van Amsterdam, isbn 978 90 5335 250 2

