Halal Markets in non-Muslim Secular Societies

Halal as Brand, Halal as Practice

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Abstract

The introduction to the special issue discusses the important aspects of the studies of Halal markets in non-Muslim countries and outlines the contributions of the special issue. It also provides a general theoretical outline to bring the articles of the issue together which also offers a starting point for further discussions about sociological and anthropological studies of Halal economies. The major focus within our discussion of halal practices and definitions of halal is on the moral and rational reasoning behind halal marketing and consumption. These questions open more space for further interpretation of halal in secular contexts.

Keywords

halal practices – halal – brand – halal markets – rationality vs morality

Introduction to the Special Issue

It is estimated that as of 2020 some 24,6% of the global population was Muslim, and one-fifth of this population (appx. 300 million) was living in non-Muslim majority countries (World Population Review 2020). That number is expected to increase – not withstanding certain lulls as in the current pandemic year of 2020 – due to the increasing mobility of populations linked to the globalization

of capital, as well as to refugee crises (Bowen 2004, Grillo 2004). That demographic development has occurred in step with the globalization of markets and gradual digitalization of marketing and economies, which have provided some unexpected challenges to producers and marketers of halal food products and services who want to satisfy the standards, requirements and demands of that growing international Muslim consumer group.

Muslims living in non-Muslim majority countries or secular state systems, face particular challenges in trying to adhere to the religious rules that govern food consumption, doing business and practicing their religion. The halal industry has become more relevant in their daily lives not only due to the importance of halal consumption as part of religious belief but also as part of identity politics among ethnic and religious communities. Both halal consumers and halal producers participate daily in the production of general meanings for halal and for halal as a lifestyle. Halal producers and authorities, on their side, participate in the process of defining the bargaining power and authority surrounding the definition of halal and access to the growing market in halal. As a result of these dynamic processes, 'halal' has become like a brand and is used to market food, cosmetics and other products. It is an effective marketing strategy because it appeals directly to Muslims, but also increasingly to non-Muslims who seek pure, fresh products. In this case 'halal' implies attributes similar to other labels that promise to guarantee quality and purity, such as Fair Trade, Bio or organic in the US and Europe, but with the additional appeal to prospective Muslim consumers that it satisfies Islamic norms and Islamic practices of halal. This dual function of 'halal' as a brand in the market and as an ideal of moral functions and qualities, however, raises an interesting contradiction that requires further investigation; to what degree does economic opportunity and profit-making contradict religiously-based moral imperatives stemming, in this case, from Shari'ah? At least at first glance, it would appear that there is some contradiction when 'halal' is deployed to encourage consumption. It is precisely this apparent contradiction that we tried to puzzle out during our 2019 workshop in Berlin where diverse participants presented various perspectives on the discussions about halal in non-Muslim and secular contexts.

This special issue is a result of the discussions we had during the international workshop we organized in May 2019. During these discussions some important issues concerning halal markets and practices were raised which we decided to advance further. Here, we enquire into the legal and religious aspects of halal markets in non-Muslim or secular legal contexts. In the countries where Muslims are a minority, the halal label matters in specific ways. In these countries it cannot be taken for granted that food and other services are

halal. This is in contrast to the situation in most Muslim majority countries of the Middle East where one expects halal goods and services as the norm (Bergeaud-Blackler et al. 2016). We have included the Muslim majority countries of the former Soviet Union in our scope of Muslim minority countries because here, too, one cannot assume a halal marketplace as the norm. In the post-Soviet context, one must account for the effects of seventy years of atheist ideology, the promotion of Russian cultural practices and a generalized Soviet secularism on the daily practices of food consumption and production. Indeed the secular systems of state services and infrastructure in the Caucasus and Central Asia predate the Soviets and were already established by the early nineteenth century from Russian imperial occupation of these regions.

Therefore in this issue we examine the interaction of the state's secular legal system with religious systems within the process of establishment and regulation of the norms of halal. This includes halal certification processes, norms of food production, service and delivery relations and the consumption patterns that are considered halal. We also consider how the market economy in each state, with its particular manifestations of a global economic model based on capitalist principles, intersects with the secular legal basis to develop and expand religious-economic markets, both domestically and internationally. The economic and legal incorporation of the religious needs of consumers in these modern secular economies does not go unnoticed by Muslims. As consumers and as believers, they raise other issues associated with halal: trust, religious authority, the ethics of branding halal, religious identity, social equality (when halal becomes a status marker), and finally the bureaucratization of Islam as it is manifest in the regulatory procedures of the halal market. At their widest, the issues associated with halal reach the dilemmas produced in the encounter between rational economic thinking and religious views about halal. Below we provide a synthetic overview of some of the most prominent themes which are central to the papers collected in this issue.

Halal as Label or Branding?

Wilson and Liu (2011: 28; see also 2010), citing Holt (2002 cited by Wilson and Liu 2011:28), reminded us that 'brands dictate tastes'. Brands serve as symbols of prestige and class belonging and they can result in monopolistic dynamics of market development, leading consumers to affiliate with certain social and status groups by choosing certain brands. These dynamics are signaled by Veblen's (1959) concept of conspicuous consumption. Conspicuous consumption refers to consumption practices, including knowledge about various

products and their use, qualities and meanings that are directed at making certain impressions. When brands are globalized, prestige categories travel beyond national boundaries having (often) the same effect as in the place where it first became popular. Brands also assume lives of their own, entering power games that change social and economic relations in various combinations within brand-based economies. Bourdieu (1984) provides another milestone in sociological thinking about the relations between taste and the (re) production of class.

Pink (2009) reminds us that the globalization of markets and capital has two sides. On the one hand, already global brands like Nestle or Coca Cola try to fit local tastes and culture better in order to win an increasing share of the global market. On the other hand, local producers try to fit into current trends of global consumerism to expand their reach (see also (Miller 1998a,b)). To some degree, markets in and of 'religious' goods and services (here, religious markets) exhibit similar patterns to those of any other market. Power, capital, competition, authority and popularization are the keywords for such a comparison. Halal markets have not been spared from the dynamics that have characterized the development of other global consumption patterns. Halal has its popularity among certain groups, as well as its more and less popular brands (i.e. certification labels). Style matters, as does the social consciousness it conveys (see Ewen 1976, 1999). New brands have generated and been generated by new definitions of halal too as a global halal economy has come into being (see also the contributions of the edited volume by Pink 2009). The growth of halal markets has even generated re-branding and subsidiary lines of popular global brands such as Turca Cola (Mutlu 2009), Halal Bavaria (alcohol-free beer in Malaysia), and Haribo halal.

Because the halal label indicates that a product satisfies Islamic norms for 'permissible' consumption, it is taken to imply attributes of quality, purity, ecological responsibility and social justice like Fair Trade, Bio and organic imply in the US and Europe. As a brand, however, halal is more than a principled rejection of excess, luxury and their attendant ills (see Frank 1997, 1999); it is also a distinct appeal to a religiously-grounded morality. This dual appeal to potential buyers as 'Muslims' and as consumers, however, raises an interesting contradiction between the rationality of making profits and the morality of following religious prescriptions (cf. Fourier 1998). Islamic teachings hold that some forms of economic opportunity and profit-making contradict religiously-based moral imperatives – but, in the contemporary context, which ones? Can a halal café serve halal food during the day and turn into a disco in the evening? Can a halal shop sell vodka? How can one delineate the boundary between religiously acceptable profit-making and profit-making that adheres

too much to market rationality? When one is doing business in the context of a non-Muslim majority country, the complexity of these questions is related to the dynamic processes of identity politics, religious belonging, economic challenges and cultural diversity of the new secular contexts.

In the dynamics of halal branding, therefore, we see many sociological processes at work. The expansion and diversification of neo-liberal market economies and the increasing consumption power of self-identifying Muslim consumers in non-Muslim countries is an economic face of the increased global attention to religion, its politicization and religious identities. Economic actors cannot brand halal alone, but rely on the secular and religious authorities and institutions, altering the balance between religion and the state, between consumption and belief and between law and morality. The question of trust and the outbreak of scandals show society realigning its norms and values. Branding alone does not ensure the successful institutionalization of halal in the market. Below we will try to further unpuzzle this doubt about halal in relation to identification, halal as practice and power of authority.

Halal Markets and Identity in non-Muslim Countries

As indicated above, halal is directly linked to questions about identity and culture particularly when considering halal consumption as well as production. The basic mechanism of identification through consumption has been recognized in the social sciences for many decades. That there is a link between food and identity has been qualitatively established across the academic literature (Fischler 1988; Poe 1999; Valentine 1999; Wilk 1999; Shields-Argeles 2004; Feffer 2005; Cwiertka 2006; Wilson 2006; Liu and Lin 2009; Rosenblum 2010; Counihan and Van Esterik 2013).

Even Weber showed how consumption was employed to represent belonging to status groups (Weber 1946: 193; cf. Campbell 1987). It is Veblen's (1959) 'conspicuous consumption', however, most tailored to describing social dynamics among 'new rich' that has dominated debates about class, modernity, identity and self-reflection at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Zukin and Maguire 2004), perhaps because it underwrites a fundamentally positive valuation of consumption that is well-aligned with the burgeoning and dominant market research and business development studies (Kettle 2019).

In the 1990s, consumption was still viewed largely from a more critical Marxist approach (which emphasized value), even as pro-modernization theorists tried to integrate a consideration of modern technologies, self-reflection and identities with the study of consumption (Giddens 1991; Warde 1994; but

compare Roseberry 1996). The 'consumption cultures' and 'mass consumption' appearing alongside twenty-first globalization, however, also support anti-consumption movements (Fox and Lears 1983). Even now, sociological studies that tie consumption with identification and group belonging along religious lines (as Weber did) are still scarce (Fischler 1988). Yet religious identity serves an important part of many people's self-identification and provides them with membership in, and a sense of belonging to, a group of great significance in current socio-political contexts.

Like other ethnic and religious minorities, but perhaps more obviously so, Muslims in non-Muslim-majority countries face the prospect of social exclusion. The long-term ghettoization of migrant communities of Muslim background in the West has been well documented in the scholarly works on inter-ethnic studies and migration (Chaddha and Wilson 2008; Jargowsky 1994; Lamont and Molnar 2001; Hirsch 2009). Minority status implies also that the group's needs are not well represented in the majority of a state's agendas, regulatory procedures or planning with regard to food and the provision of other basic material and social needs. These forms of exclusion are more poignantly felt now with the increase in xenophobic and right-wing movements.

In such contexts, halal markets in non-Muslim countries are not only about the satisfaction of 'basic needs' (i.e. they offer religiously permitted products and services), nor only about a brand-oriented consumer identity. These markets also offer spaces for identity politics, spaces for socialization and also safe spaces in which Muslims as minorities can practice openly their religion.

This dimension is most clear in the paper provided by Yana Pak. She details the transformation of solidarity groups in Kazakhstan which are known locally as *Sulaymanchi*. Pak shows how the 'Islamic economy' offers a new framework for socioeconomic organization and redistribution of wealth through the mobilization and valuation of private initiative and solidarity outside of the still-dominant secular networks of the country's political and economic elite. Yet even these new forms of socioeconomic organization contain a distinct admixture of Islamic values with Soviet-made norms of morality.

Halal Practices

However, the group-defining aspects of Muslim minorities appear in several contributions. Shaheed Tayob's contribution to this issue, for example, focuses on the very small Muslim minority in South Africa that makes up just 1% of the population. Tayob defines halal practices as discursive traditions following Asad's definition of Islam as discursive tradition. Tayob develops a detailed

argument about how the importance of trust-building practices in halal markets challenges the authenticity of halal certification when it is based on a technocratic model of halal's materiality. Tayob further argues that 'the practice of halal rooted in conceptions of trust, care, trade and reputation are not so simply removed in the process of halal certification, but neither is the process uniform across place and time.' Further he states that '[s]ectarian differences, market dynamics and contextual assessments by certification organizations remain important in understanding the practice of halal certification.'

Atalan-Helicke's paper also discusses the importance of a definition of halal beyond that of current certification schemes. In Turkey, she finds that the concept of *tayib* is invoked alongside that of halal. Consumers were concerned that animals are slaughtered properly, but they were more interested in being assured that the animal had lived well, and that both meat and plant foods were 'pure' and healthy. They were suspicious of genetically modified food. In this example, we see clearly how Muslim consumers are engaged in local-global and secular-religious debates simultaneously: A growing demand to label food with information about its quality and standards of production is a general global trend, connected to the changing environment and to discourses about global warming (see also Armanios and Ergene 2018: 191). Muslims everywhere engage increasingly with such global discourses on food through an Islamic lens – halal.

Regulation/Certification of Halal

A majority of the papers focus on questions of certification. The expansion of halal markets has led naturally to a multiplication of centers authorized to certify products as halal, but this expansion also entailed various games of power over Islam and within the Islamic market (Bonne and Verbeke 2008; Campbell, Murcott and MacKenzie 2011; Lever and Miele 2012). Halal certification in non-Muslim majority states is usually conducted by non-state agencies, however standards and procedures for certifying halal must also comply with state forms of certification for food safety (Atalan-Helicke 2015). Thus certification is entangled with other aspects of the state's relationship with religion(s), as well as its market regulations.

In the post-Soviet states there has been stark bureaucratization and centralization of the administration of Islam. The states seek strong control over the Islamic influence from Arab countries and over the politicization of Islam. Post-Soviet states are secular and still influenced by the atheist ideology of Soviet communism, but they have seen religious revival among their populations.

Currently, halal is an example also of the hybrid forms that Islamic practice has taken as traditional local practices and their Soviet-influenced forms have come together with post-Soviet Arabic influences.

Brylov, in his contribution to this issue, shows the details of power games played out within the process of administering and bureaucratizing Islam in Ukraine and how global institutions also enter those games. The bureaucratization of Islam has been generally observed everywhere Muslims live, with respect to the administration of Islam, as power and authority are expanded over Muslims and Muslim spaces (Tasar 2017; Müller and Steiner 2018).

Authority over the definition of halal is not only in the hands of the state, religious authorities and certifying agencies. This comes out in Nurçan Atalan-Helické's paper, as described above, when consumers demand that halal be also *tayib*. The theme is prominent too in the paper by Aisalkyn Botoeva. She explores narratives of doubt among pious Muslim entrepreneurs about the reliability of the certification agencies, and shows how, nevertheless, certifiers 'construct and maintain their authority within the broader Islamic economy'.

Nevertheless, there seems to be no doubt that the state is strengthened by the negotiations that create the systems for halal certification. The paper by Silvia Serrano deals with the rise of Russia's halal market through the scandals generated around them. Her paper is a case study of a scandal that erupted when certified halal meat products were found to contain pork DNA. Serrano shows how the scandal and its legal resolution in the courts reveal a pre-existing order (based in state authority and technocratic regulation) which was put to test, confirmed and strengthened.

So too the national state in China has remained the final arbiter of whether 'halal' has any place in local and national markets. Guangtian Ha shows that 'in the two decades from the late 1990s to the late 2010s, there was a critical transition in how halal food was marked in China and how the state as well as ordinary Muslims perceived these shifting signs.' The paper shows 'how the Chinese state both propagated the proliferation of *halal* signs but then began to view these same signs as evidence of the threat of an Islamic wave spreading across China, overriding earlier positive views as beacons of domestic economic prosperity among the ethnic minority population.' An older marking of products as *qingzhen* (clear and genuine) that had functioned more as a symbol of Muslim-ness than as a regulatory device, and that had denoted places as much as foods for the Muslim community (especially ethnic Hui), was removed and replaced with a certification and labeling scheme for 'halal'. The change, at local state initiative, imagined the possibilities for increased trade and tourism with the Muslim world – but this goal, which coincided with national-level interests in economic development soon diverged from

state concerns with security. Still, Ha argues that 'the current crackdown on Islam in China is as much about how Islam is to be visually represented as it is about concerns over sovereignty, ethnicity and religious dissent.'

In the end, these papers illustrate the complex web of social and legal norms and expectations in non-Muslim majority states that affect how halal requirements operate. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' process that enables halal observance in these secular states. Much depends on a given state's views of the stability of its own legal system and the role that minority groups, whether native or immigrant, play in that state. These papers also illustrate that halal practice is more than a straightforward legal or moral condition; in fact, commercial considerations have also affected how halal is practiced, even if those are unrecognized or reside in the background. Finally, many of the states examined by the authors in this special issue also have a distinct view of religion that colors how halal practices are conducted and experienced.

Communist doctrines concerning religion uniquely shape the way that many of the states observed here have responded to Muslim residents' desires for halal, and anyone who wants to understand halal in those parts of the world must factor in that political legacy. There is a big demand for a more systematic study of the field of halal markets from sociological and anthropological perspectives where the latter approach offers a great potential to understand the complexity of the same field. Growing numbers of Muslims living in non-Muslim or secular state contexts which directly contributed to the growing halal markets requires a more qualitative approach to unpuzzle dynamic and complex fields of religion, economy and power. The papers in this issue are an initial attempt to start this discussion and systematic enquiry into the field of global halal markets.

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