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Review

Halal food, certification and halal tourism: Insights from Malaysia and Singapore

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses issues of halal food and its role in halal tourism with specific reference to Malaysia and Singapore which have majority and minority Muslim populations respectively. Sections devoted to the halal tourism market and the nature of halal food in general, incorporating matters of regulation, are followed by an account of conditions pertaining to halal food and certification in the two destinations. Attention given to the availability of halal food in tourism promotion of the countries is then considered, revealing a shared interest as well as some differences related to wider circumstances. Finally, directions for further research are suggested.

Contents

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with selected aspects of halal food and its importance for Muslim tourists. After a brief account of the halal tourism market worldwide and the place occupied by halal food, the defining characteristics of the latter are discussed together with the challenges of regulation. Approaches to certification adopted in the popular tourist destinations of Malaysia and Singapore, South East Asian countries with a majority and minority Muslim population respectively, are then considered before analysis of the part played by halal food in their tourism product development and marketing. Contrasts are observed linked to differences as tourist venues and conditions prevailing more widely, but the two states highlight the availability of halal food as a critical dimension of Muslim tourist-friendliness. The study is exploratory and findings are based on analysis of secondary data, employing a case study approach. Avenues for future research are identified in order to further enhance knowledge and understanding of the significance of halal food as a component of halal tourism.

2. The halal tourism market

There are definitional ambiguities about the phrases halal tourism and Islamic tourism (Hamza, Chouhoud, & Tantawi, 2012; Neveu, 2010), frequently used interchangeably, but they commonly refer to travel undertaken by Muslims who seek to adhere to the faith's principles and practises when away from home (Carboni, Perelli, & Sistu, 2014; Henderson, 2009). The hajj pilgrimage is one of the pillars of Islam and millions enter Saudi Arabia to complete it and engage in religiously-inspired travel known as umrah (Eickeleman & Piscatori, 1990). Motivations underlying other journeys are not necessarily spiritual, yet there is a desire to behave in a manner deemed permissible, or halal, in accordance with sharia law derived primarily from interpretations of the holy book of the Quran and the Sunnah or life, actions and teachings of the Prophet Mohammed recorded in the books of the Hadith. Terms such as halal tourism, however, imply a uniformity

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which may be misleading. Levels of religiosity and willingness to overlook Islamic strictures will vary across and within Muslim communities (Mukhtar & Butt, 2012; Zamani-Farahani & Musa, 2012). There are also practical realities to deal with when travelling which may make it difficult to maintain everyday routines encompassing prayer and dietary regimes.

Nevertheless, the world's Muslim population overall is large and growing with an estimated 1.6 billion in 2010 which is projected to reach 2.2 billion by 2030 or 26.4% of the global total (Pew Research, 2011). Muslims are recognised as a powerful commercial force generally (Halal Focus, 2015a) and by the tourism and hospitality industry specifically, calculated to generate US$140 billion for the latter in 2013 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2014). Markets are relatively young and increasingly affluent and popular leisure destinations include Malaysia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) followed by Singapore, Russia, China, France, Thailand and Italy (DinarStandard, 2013). The number of specialist travel agents and tour operators is expanding, together with attempts at implementing the concept of sharia-compliant accommodation (Henderson, 2010a; The Star, 2014), and mainstream companies such as Kuoni are exploring opportunities (TTG Asia, 2015). Appreciation of distinctive characteristics and preferences is thus essential and the consumption of authorised foodstuffs is a key consideration (Regenstein, Choudry, & Regenstein, 2003). Another noteworthy feature of the Muslim diet is during the holy month of Ramadan when food and liquids are foregone in daylight hours in fasting broken by the meal of Iftar, commonly a banquet (Stephenson, 2014).

Dietary rules clearly have implications for Muslim tourists and service providers, especially in places where Islam is not the main religion. Even within the Muslim world, there are variations in the strictness of Islamic law enforcement; countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey and the UAE are comparatively relaxed and strive to accommodate both Muslim and non-Muslim guests (Henderson, 2008). Research into the significance attached to halal food by Muslim tourists is limited (Bon & Hussain, 2010; Wan Hassan & Hall, 2003), but surveys which have been conducted indicate that it is a priority and often anxiety (Halal Focus, 2013; Poon & Yong, 2011) as it is for Muslim residents (Battour, Ismail, & Battor, 2011; Nasir & Pereira, 2008). The tourism industry at destinations which aspire to attract these markets is thus advised to acquire familiarity with Muslim food habits, alongside other customs and norms, and seek to ensure proper provision (Battour et al., 2011; Weidenfeld & Ron, 2008). Satisfying Muslim consumers is, however, complicated by the special qualities of halal food which are explained below.

3. Halal food

Within the context of food and drink, halal and haram describe respectively that which can and cannot be consumed by Muslims as stipulated in the Quran and the Prophet's sayings and determined by legal experts. Bonne and Verbeke (2008, p. 38) cite four verses of the Quran related to the topic, one of which from the fifth chapter states 'Forbidden unto you (for food) are: carrion and blood and swine flesh, and that which hath been dedicated unto any other than Allah, and the strangled, and the dead through beating, and the dead through falling from a height, and that hath been killed by the goring of horns, and the devoured of wild beasts saving that which ye make lawful and that which hath been immolated to idols. And that ye swear by the divining arrows. This is an abomination'. Interpretations have been necessary over time and contemporary advice about what is haram and halal incorporates chemical substances, food additives and genetically modified foodstuffs (Department of Islamic Development, 2015a). There is a third category, sometimes known as syubhah, referring to things which are doubtful or suspect and therefore to be avoided (Marzuki, Hall, & Ballantine, 2012). At the same time, infringements of rules may be condoned when there is no alternative and intention to transgress. The Quran says that 'whoever is driven to necessity, not desiring nor exceeding the limit, then surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful' (Bonne and Verbeke, 2008, p. 38).

The whole food chain is covered by the halal concept which is applied to the form, origin and processing of edible goods. Utensils, equipment and machinery must be cleansed according to Islamic law and untainted by contact with haram materials. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), with 57 member countries, devotes over 50 pages of a report to relevant guidelines (OIC, 2009) and meat is the subject of particular attention. Prerequisites for halal slaughtering are the 'severing of the jugular veins, carotid arteries and windpipes by a razor-sharp blade in a single swipe, but without decapitation; the pronouncing of tasmiyah (speaking the name of God with the phrase 'bismillahi allahu akbar' upon each animal at the time of slaughter); and the draining of all flowing blood from the carcass'. Interest in animal welfare is said to be expressed by the Prophet's calls on the killer to 'slaughter well. Let each of you sharpen his blade so to spare suffering to the animal' (Harvey, 2010, p. 11).

While an outcome of religious dictates, halal food is a substantial and thriving business in which several multinational companies are active (Business Monitor International, 2015a; Euromonitor International, 2014a). However, the absence of standardisation causes problems for the global halal food industry and its customers, whether tourists or residents (Euromonitor International, 2012). There has been discussion about modifying the HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) principles incorporated into the ISO22000 FSMS international food safety and quality standard (Dahlan, 2013; Riaz, 2009) and the OIC established a Standards and Metrology Institute for Islamic Countries in 2010 in a bid to formulate universally recognised criteria, but any authorisation is carried out at national level. The result is variations and sometimes competition amongst certifying agencies which is illustrated by the situation in the UK. The Halal Food Authority (HFA) and Halal Monitory Committee (HMC) operate voluntary schemes related to meat which diverge on critical points of animal stunning and machine slaughter (Harvey, 2010). Disagreement was apparent in the dispute over Kentucky Fried Chicken's experiment with HFA-accredited poultry which was criticised as non-halal by the HMC and left many observers, both Muslims and non-Muslims, confused (BBC, 2009). Countries with a more unified approach would appear to be advantaged in inspiring confidence amongst Muslims and the examples of Malaysia and Singapore are examined in the next section.

4. Halal food in Malaysia and Singapore

Halal food provision in Malaysia and Singapore is an outcome of the ethnic mixes of the two societies. Around 67.4% of Malaysia's population of 28.3 million are Malay Muslims and Islam is the republic's official religion. There are concerns about erosion of the constitutional right to religious freedom (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, 2015), but other faiths such as Christianity and Buddhism are followed. While Singapore is usually considered secular, the constitution allows for the practise of religions which do not contravene public order, health and morality laws (Thio, 2009). Malay Muslims were Singapore's original inhabitants and now constitute around 13% of the island's 3.3 million nationals. The principal other groups in both states are Chinese who make up 74.2% of Singapore's population and 24.6% of Malaysia's and Indians who account for 9.1% and 7.3% of the respective citizenry (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2014; Government of Malaysia, 2015). Harmonious multiculturalism is central to formal depictions of the countries communicated to audiences of tourists and residents and often manifested in celebrations of diverse food cultures. Actual and latent tensions between majority and minority communities should not be overlooked, however, with fears that the former are privileged at the expense of the latter and issues of race allied to religion are very sensitive.

Malaysia professes to be the only country in the world with a halal food certification strategy supported fully by government (HDC, 2015) and has ambitions to be a global centre. Official involvement commenced in 1974 and a Halal Industry Development Corporation (HDC) was founded in 2006. The Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM) certifies food and personal care products for local and export markets while the State Islamic Department (Jabatan Agama Islam Negeri) and State Islamic Council (Majlis Agama Islam Negeri) issue certificates for domestic markets only. JAKIM also recognises certification bodies overseas and 73 from 33 countries had been approved by 2014 (JAKIM, 2014). Halal food must meet the standard MS1500: 2009 prepared by the Department of Standardisation under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation. Another standard (MS 2400) applies to the transportation of goods, warehousing and retailing and forms part of a Halal Assurance Management System (Department of Islamic Development, undated). A Malaysian Halal Directory lists 17 certified food and beverage manufacturing companies, 235 food premises where food and beverage business is conducted, 2141 consumer products, 6 slaughter houses and the food and beverage operations of 422 hotels and resorts (Halal Malaysia, 2015; Samori & Sabtu, 2014). The certification process includes a site audit and monitoring and success enables public display of a formal halal logo.

The Majlis Ugama Islam (MUIS) or Islamic Religious Council of Singapore was established as a statutory body in 1968 with the role of advising the President on Islamic affairs and has dealt with halal certification since 1978. It sanctions foreign schemes and runs a Halal Quality Management System (HalMQ) which embraces the food supply chain from sourcing through storage and production to logistics and sales and marketing. There are seven certification types for eating establishments; endorsements (imported, exported or re-exported products issued with halal certificates); food preparation areas; poultry abattoirs; products; storage facilities; and whole plants. Over 2600 premises in total had been certified by 2013, an online process involving inspection and auditing. These can advertise the certification mark and feature in the Singapore Halal Directory (MUIS, 2015). A distinction is made between hotels with a halal certified restaurant which do not sell alcohol and those where alcohol can be consumed and which serve food from a halal certified kitchen (CrescentRating, 2015). There are strict criteria for eating establishments (MUIS, undated) which mirror those operational in Malaysia (Department of Islamic Development, 2015b) and obtaining certification could be a daunting and costly exercise for some ventures. Enforcement too is a challenge for authorities, especially when legislation is lacking. Schemes are open to abuse and there are legal ambiguities about consumer protection from fraud, at least in Malaysia (Halim & Ahmad, 2014).

Irrespective of any inherent weaknesses, regulatory mechanisms in Singapore and Malaysia have been rated highly for their rigour in an international comparison (Latif, Zainalabidin, Juwaidah, Amin, & Ismail, 2014). In turn, they have commercial benefits for food-related companies pursuing sales domestically. McDonald's in Singapore, for example, reported a marked increase in sales after it received certification (Lada, Tanakinjal, & Amin, 2009) for outlets which now number 120. The accreditations are accepted internationally in key markets, opening up new opportunities abroad, and possible returns account for the backing of government trade agencies such as SPRING Singapore (2011). There is also awareness of the value to the tourism and hospitality industry which is able to reassure Muslim guests (Marzuki et al., 2012). It is further claimed that the extension of halal menus in Singapore has 'helped to foster social interaction between individuals from diverse racial, cultural and religious backgrounds' (MUIS, 2015) and thereby contributed to the nation building agenda. The assertion is debatable and food can still be a divisive issue, but tolerance is evident in public dining behaviour and venues epitomised by widely patronised traditional hawker centres and more modern food courts with their assortment of ethnic cuisines (Nasir & Pereira, 2008). Enthusiasm for hawker food is shared by Malaysians of all religions (Amrul, Nurul, & Chua, 2014; Pang & Poh, 2008) and may be a marker of national identity which transcends other loyalties, raising interesting questions for consideration elsewhere about the wider meanings of food in multi-ethnic societies.

5. Promoting halal tourism and halal food in Malaysia and Singapore

Both Malaysia and Singapore are prominent international tourist centres and recorded 25.72 and 15.6 million arrivals and receipts of RM65.44 (US$18.2) billion and S$23.5 (US$17.5) billion respectively in 2013 (STB, 2014a; Tourism Malaysia, 2015a). The statistics exclude the many Malaysian citizens arriving into Singapore by land, across a road bridge and very busy causeway carrying road and rail traffic. An estimated 177.4 million domestic trips were made in Malaysia in 2012 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2013) whereas Singapore's small size and stock of natural and cultural heritage resources constrain leisure and business tourism at home. Details about religion are not captured in the tourism statistics, but Table 1 contains information about foreign visitors who are nationals of OIC member countries and likely to be Muslims, albeit not exclusively. Although omitting Muslims of other nationalities, the table indicates the scale of inbound flows which appear to be greatly exceeded by non-Muslim movements.

Nevertheless, prevailing socio-cultural and religious conditions in the two countries allow them to be positioned as congenial for Muslims. There is an Islamic Tourism Centre within Malaysia's National Tourism Organisation which boasts of the capacity to perfectly meet the needs of Muslim travellers while officials assert that Singapore has an 'innate capability' to cater to their lifestyle (The Straits Times, 2014). Particular target markets are relatively high spending Middle Eastern tourists who are expected to grow at an above average rate in the decade ahead (Business Monitor International, 2015b and 2015c). More tourists are also likely from Indonesia, home to the greatest share (13%) of the world's Muslims (Pew Research, 2011), as an outcome of the economic development there and which is occurring across the region (Shiraishi & Phongpaichit, 2008). It should, however, be recalled that South East Asian Muslims have not traditionally ascribed to the more conservative versions of Islam pursued in parts of the Middle East and tourist motivations and expectations may differ accordingly.

Everyday life in Singapore is clearly less orientated towards Islam (Henderson, 2010b) and Malaysia has been more active in its marketing (Timothy & Iverson, 2006), securing some success (Battour, Battor, & Ismail, 2012). The capital of Kuala Lumpur is especially popular amongst Arabs and is perceived as a desirable honeymoon destination (Ibrahim, Zahari, Sulaiman, Othman, & Jusoff, 2009). Relaxation of visa regulations for OIC members is under discussion, but the focus is more on wealthy Arabian Gulf residents rather than those from less developed states with large, but poor, populations. Business travel is also being

Table 1
International arrivals into Malaysia and Singapore by OIC country of nationality 2013.

Country	Malaysia	Singapore
Bangladesh	134,663	119,337
Brunei Darussalam	1,238,871	64,129
Egypt	21,053	5113
Indonesia	2,548,021	3,112,414
Iran	78,316	13,532
Iraq	27,869	NA
Kazakhstan	19,840	NA
Kuwait	NA	8482
Malaysia	–	1,030,824
Oman	26,601	NA
Pakistan	81,397	24,984
Saudi Arabia	94,986	14,790
Turkey	12,775	21,726
UAE	19,830	17,761
Uzbekistan	11,591	NA
Total arrivals (all countries)	25,720,000	15,600,000

Sources: STB (2014a); Tourism Malaysia (2015a).

stimulated by government endeavours to turn Malaysia into a major hub for Islamic banking and finance (Business Monitor International, 2015b). Internet sites are dedicated to users from Brunei, Indonesia, Turkey, the UAE, Iran and Saudi Arabia; the latter two offer a choice of Arabic and English languages (Tourism Malaysia, 2015b). The 'mature and advanced halal industry' and widespread availability of formally certified halal restaurants are showcased, alongside prayer facilities. There are links to the aforementioned Halal Directory and lists of 'Muslim-friendly' travel agencies, airlines, hotels and resorts, souvenirs and attractions (Islamic Tourism Centre of Malaysia, 2015). Less space is given over to the topic in Singapore's advertising, but visitors are promised access to halal food from the numerous MUIS-accredited outlets and over 70 mosques for prayers. There are signs of greater provision for Muslims by hotels, tourist attractions and tour operators which are illustrated by halal kitchens, prayer rooms and Arabic speaking staff (Chang, 2011). Commercial interest in the Muslim market is additionally reflected in the foundation of a company named CrescentRating which provides research, consultancy and training in the area. Its latest initiative is a mobile application, with English and Arabic interfaces whereby information can be exchanged about halal restaurants in Singapore and worldwide (Halal Focus, 2015b).

At the same time, the significance of the Muslim markets and priority allocated to them should not be over-stated and the two destinations promote themselves in many other ways to a diversity of tourists (Euromonitor International, 2014b,c). Indeed, there is no mention of Islamic tourism in the STB's latest annual report which also reviews achievements over the past 50 years (STB, 2014b). A strategic analysis of Malaysian travellers contains only one reference to Muslim religious sensitivities about halal food and praying facilities (STB, 2014c), concentrating on more secular predilections. The Board's online materials tend to present expressions of Malay identity as a colourful attraction for visitors curious about Singapore's multicultural heritage and, although there are Indonesian and Malaysian websites, there is none in Arabic (STB, 2015). Even on the dedicated Malaysian sites, the emphasis is frequently on shopping and amenities and amusements unrelated to religion (Tourism Malaysia, 2015b). Current tourist profiles and commercial imperatives imply that Muslims are likely to remain one group of visitors amongst many of other or no religious affiliation. While certain aspects of the visitor experience may be unaffected by religion, the combination of Muslims and non-Muslims can pose dilemmas for tourism industries which have to balance divergent and sometimes conflicting demands (Henderson, 2003; Zamani-Farahini & Henderson, 2010).

6. Conclusion

All travellers are compelled to eat and it is a matter of great consequence to many. Dining options can be central to the selection of a vacation destination, evident in various manifestations of food tourism (Chaney & Ryan, 2012; Horng & Tsai, 2010), and national and local cuisines are commonly utilised in place branding in a bid to help establish a distinct and appealing identity (Lin, 2009). Food can also incite worry (Cohen & Avieli, 2004) and religious obligations add to anxieties (Dugan, 1994). The influence of religion is demonstrated by the role allotted to halal food in Islamic tourism, although the instance has exceptional qualities because of the strictness and scope of the dietary rules. The cases of Malaysia and Singapore suggest that destinations with majority and sizeable minority Muslim communities have a competitive advantage regarding halal food for tourists which is likely to be strengthened if relatively robust and trusted certification schemes are in place. However, more empirical data is required before authoritative conclusions can be derived. Topics for research include the relative importance of halal food as a travel motivator and element of destination choice and underlying determinants; the extent to which Muslim tourists are prepared to accept haram food; attitudes of business compared to leisure travellers; contrasts amongst nationalities; and industry awareness of the halal concept and willingness to pursue certification. The receptivity of non-Muslims to halal food may also be worthy of examination as well as issues about the sharing of dining space by Muslims and non-Muslim tourists. The existing and projected size of the Muslim population and its increased propensity to travel, together with the need to foster better relations between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities, make these important questions which cannot be ignored by academics and practitioners.

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