

Halal Sanitised: Health and Science in a Globalised Religious Market

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This article examines the sanitisation of halal in the modern scientific world, that is, how Malays in London understand and practise halal as part of modern discourses of meat/stunning, health, nutrition, purity, food scares, science and excess. From being an Islamic injunction in the Koran and the Sunna, halal both evokes and is evoked by a whole range of discourses. In other words, this article captures how halal sits uneasily in and between a plethora of powerful scientific, religious and political discourses that often overlap.

Introduction

This article deals with the sanitisation of halal in the modern scientific world, that is, how Malay middle-class Muslims as a diasporic group living in London understand and practise halal as part of modern discourses of meat/stunning, health, nutrition, purity, food scares, science as well as excess. This exploration entails an analysis of expanding halal markets with halal being transformed into a question and concern with genetically modified (GM) products, for example.

In contemporary London halal is no longer an expression of esoteric forms of production, trade, and consumption; it is part of a huge and expanding globalised market. A Canadian government study reveals that the global halal trade annually amounts to \$150 billion, and it is growing among the world's approximately 1.3 billion Muslims (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada 2006).

I consider halal to be part of what has been conceptualised as a globalised religious market, that is, rules and understandings for the attainment of salvation 'have become important commodities in an expanding religious market that transcends international boundaries.' (Lee 1993: 36). More specifically, the global proliferation of halal is advertised as religious needs that fulfill private desires such as piety, purity and health – all intimately linked to the 'market for identities' (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 11).

The central focus in this article is Malays' interpretations of how these transformations influence their everyday practices of halal in the local context. From being an Islamic injunction halal now evokes and is evoked by a whole range of discourses. In other words, I capture how halal sits uneasily in and between a plethora of powerful scientific, religious

and political discourses that often overlap. I take seriously Caplan's (1997: 30) call for investigating...

... the way in which people make sense of the huge varieties of information coming to them, especially about the relation between diet and health. [...] Food, eating and diet are part of an arena of contestation and struggle not only over availability, quantity and quality, but also over meaning and representation.

Thus far, scholarly attention to halal in Britain has, for the most part, focused on conflicts over the provision of halal in schools (Abbas 2005), the politics of religious slaughter (Bergeaud-Blackler, 2007; Charlton and Kaye, 1985; Kaye, 1993), and the marketing of halal meat (Ahmed 2008). In many parts of London, such as Finsbury Park, Edgware Road, and Whitechapel Road, halal is a distinctive presence on signs and in butcher shops and restaurants. Lately, more and more types of halal-certified products are appearing in supermarkets such as Tesco and ASDA.

The methodology for this study was ethnographic, that is, I spent an extended period of time on research in London, and I committed to adapt to this environment and to develop a sensitivity to the people I was learning from. Starting in 2005, I visited London on several occasions. The extended period of fieldwork in London took place from July to December 2006, with one shorter stay in the spring of 2007. The initial stage of the research in London was quantitative in method and outlook. Informants were selected on the basis of a survey that covered 100 mainly Malay respondents. The design of the survey primarily served to map migration trajectories, broader halal consumption patterns, as well as the informants' understanding and practice of divergent types of halal certification in London. On the basis of the survey, 14 Malay informants were selected for interviewing and participant observation. Moreover, a number of background interviews and participant observations were carried out with halal producers and traders, Islamic organisations and food authorities.

The fieldwork for this study can be said to be a multi-sited ethnography involving Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, and London. Thus, my methodology rests on an intention to 'follow the people' (Marcus 1995: 106). It leads me to focus on descriptions of Malays who migrated from Kuala Lumpur to London and their migration narratives, with special emphasis on understandings and practices of halal in these two locations. Before

starting my extended period of fieldwork in London, I conducted fieldwork for one month in Kuala Lumpur. The aim of this fieldwork was to capture powerful discourses of halal in urban Malaysia, especially Malaysia's vision to export its national model of state regulated halal. Secondly, the Malaysian state has a vision of and commitment to promote halal and this specifically identifies London as a centre for halal production, trade and consumption. Globally, Malaysia is a leading country in halal production, certification, trade and consumption.

The main motive for focusing on Malays in multiethnic London is that Malays hold a special position with regard to halal. In Malaysia the state has standardised, certified, and institutionalised halal since the 1980s. Thus, state institutions regulate the proliferation of halal and concentrate certification in the realm of the state. The proliferation of halal in Malaysia cannot be divorced from developments in the country over the past three decades, including its steady economic growth, Islamic revivalism or *dakwah* (lit. invitation to salvation) gaining impetus in the 1970s, the emergence of large groups of Malay Muslim middle-class consumers, and centralised state incentives that attempt to strengthen halal production, trade, and consumption. In order for local and foreign producers and traders to enter the halal market it is necessary to obtain state halal certification and a particular halal logo issued by the state. This logo signifies that factories or shops comply with state guidelines on halal.

London is home to a substantial number of Malays and Malaysian political and religious organisations. The focus on Malay halal consumption in London allows me to offer comparisons to my previous research on halal and consumption among Malays in Malaysia. In other words, I explore hitherto insufficient theoretisations of diasporas with regard to powerful linkages between 'intellectual creativity, diasporic quotidian culture, subjective consciousness, and political action' (Werbner 2000: 5), as well as 'the relation between aesthetic production, economic links, and political agendas' (Werbner 2000: 17).

Halal Transformed

Halal literally means 'lawful' or 'permitted.' The Koran and the Sunna exhort Muslims to eat the good and lawful food God has provided for them, but a number of conditions and prohibitions obtain. Muslims are expressly forbidden from consuming carrion, spurning

blood, pork, and foods that have been consecrated to any being other than God himself. These substances are haram and thus forbidden.

The lawfulness of meat depends on how it is obtained. Ritual slaughtering entails that the animal is killed in God's name by making a fatal incision across the throat. In this process, blood should be drained as fully as possible. Another significant Islamic prohibition relates to wine and any other alcoholic drink or substance; all such are haram in any quantity or substance (Denny 2006: 279). However, divergences between jurists of the different schools of Islamic jurisprudence (Hanafi, Maliki, Hanbali and Shafi'i, which is the school of thought dominant in Malaysia) on halal understanding and practice exist.

In addition to halal and haram, doubtful things should, under normal circumstances, be avoided, that is, there is a gray area between clearly lawful and unlawful (Riaz and Chaudry 2004: 6–7). The doubtful or questionable is expressed in the word *mashbooh* (Riaz and Chaudry, 2004: 7), which can be evoked by divergences in religious scholars' opinions or the suspicion of undetermined or prohibited ingredients in a commodity. Hence, far more abstract, individual, and fuzzy aspects of context and handling are involved in determining the halalness of a product. To determine whether foodstuff is halal or haram 'depends on its nature, how it is processed, and how it is obtained' (Riaz and Chaudry 2004: 14).

Muslim dietary rules have assumed new significance in the 20th century as some Muslims strive to demonstrate how such rules conform to modern reason and the findings of scientific research. Another common theme in the revival and renewal of these dietary rules seems to be the search for alternatives to what is seen to be Western values, ideologies, and lifestyles. These reevaluations of requirements and prohibitions are prominent, firstly, in postcolonial Islamic cultures such as Malaysia that was once a British colony, and, secondly, among diaspora groups for whom halal can serve as a symbolic focal point for Islamic movements and identities (Esposito 1995: 376).

My exploration of the Malay Muslim diaspora in London elaborates and continues a study of what I have called *Proper Islamic Consumption* in Malaysia (Fischer 2007; 2008a; 2008b). Building on 10 months of anthropological fieldwork in suburban Malaysia from 2001 to 2002, in this study I argued that the more cultures of consumption assert themselves, the more controversies over what Islam is, or ought to be, are intensifying.

As new consumer practices emerge, they give rise to new discursive fields within which the meaning of Islam and Islamic practice are being debated. One key effect of these transformations is the deepening and widening concern for halal commodities among Malay Muslims that I label *halalisation*. Halalisation signifies a major preoccupation with the proliferation of the concept of halal in a multitude of commodified forms. Out of halalisation have emerged new forms of Malay aesthetic communities based on different taste preferences in various middle-class fractions. This proliferation of halalisation has incited a range of elaborate ideas of the boundaries and authenticity of halal purity versus haram impurity. This present study explores halal from a multi-sited perspective that follows middle-class Malays from Malaysia to Britain and traces the global circulation of halal commodities.

The Malays constitute the largest and fastest growing section of the middle class in Malaysia and are the object of both commercial interests and current debates over the shape and meaning of Islam. In the 1970s, the state launched the NEP (New Economic Policy) to improve the economic and social situation of the Malays. The NEP entailed a number of benefits for the Malays and other indigenous groups such as increased ownership of production and preferential quotas in the educational system. The number and proportion of Malays engaged in the modern sector of the economy rose significantly as a product of these policies. Ideologically, the overall objective was to produce an educated, entrepreneurial, shareholding, mobile and globally oriented Malay middle class, which the state elite views as a necessary prerequisite for economic, national and social cohesion. My informants in this study belong to this group of middle-class Malays.

Halal understanding and practice are of particular significance in the Malay middle class as it is within this intermediate group that the question of what constitutes proper Islamic practice or legitimate taste (Bourdieu 1984:60) is most imperative. For Bourdieu (1984:55) social class is a practised set of values. In Bourdieu's seminal work *Distinction* (1984) consumption holds a special position. For Bourdieu (1984: 2) consumption including that of food works as 'communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code.' These points will be clear in the ethnography below.

In the modern food industry, a number of Muslim requirements have taken effect—e.g., an injunction to avoid any substances that might be contaminated with porcine residues or alcohol, such as gelatine, glycerine, emulsifiers, enzymes, flavours, and flavourings (Riaz and Chaudry 2004: 22–25). As an example of this, the heading of an article in the *Guardian* (October 26, 2006) read ‘Something Fishy in Your Pasta?’ The article demonstrated that in some cases gelatine, among other ingredients, is ‘sneaked’ into a variety of foods. The problem in certifying food and other products with regard to these substances is that they are extremely difficult to discover.

Apparently, a growing number of Muslim consumers are concerned with not only traditional halal food requirements but also contamination from haram sources in products such as toiletries and medication. Moreover, for some Muslims halal sensibilities necessitate that halal products be produced by Muslims only, and this type of production must be kept strictly separate from non-halal.

The halalness of products is not easily verifiable: smell, texture, and taste cannot determine whether or not a product is halal. Consequently, understandings of halal commodities tend to hinge on the context of their everyday handling, rather than their intrinsic properties. The main point is that the effects of commodities on people and contexts depend on how the tension between its imputed properties and its handling (either mitigating or amplifying these) are played out. In this respect, ideas and practices of halal and haram are essential. In other words, the nature (intrinsic qualities), processing (production method and context), and manner of acquisition (the morality or immorality of handling and origin) of commodities all determine whether they are classified as halal, haram, or indeterminable. In halal narratives among my informants the issues of health and science were prominent and it is to these narratives I will now turn.

Meat and Stunning

My survey shows that among Malay respondents it is meat most of all that is subjected to fastidiousness, that is, meat is the primary type of halal commodity in spite of the way in which halal proliferates into other types of products as well as services and handling. At the same time, the survey indicates that the vast majority of respondents, but by no means all, are against stunning. In my discussions concerning meat with informants, it was clear

that meat is a natural part of proper and well-earned meals eaten on a daily basis. Meat appears to be endowed with both a positive image as prestigious and vital nutrition and simultaneously has a contrary image as dangerously immoral and potentially unhealthy (Fiddes 1991: 2). In the eyes of my informants meat is synonymous with ‘real’ food eaten on a daily basis, but at the same time it is mostly particular types of meat that are considered problematic with respect to halal.

As halal proliferates in the material world and in discourse it is increasingly difficult for informants such as Yusof and Altaf to navigate this confusing global market. The informant Yusof is a man in his 20s. He is married to Altaf who is about the same age and the couple moved from Kuala Lumpur to London in 1998 to study and they now both work in the financial sector. The couple normally shops for groceries in a local co-op near their home in Walthamstow and in Asda (a British supermarket chain that retails both food and merchandise) and Tesco (a UK-based international grocery and merchandising retail chain. Tesco is the largest British retailer by both global sales and domestic market share). Yusof and Altaf consider themselves relatively ‘relaxed’ about halal and they practise the ‘benefit of the doubt’ with regard to halal. Altaf articulates this feeling in the following way: ‘As long as you don’t know it’s alright.’ The logic here is that the powerful halal discourses that are commercial, religious, patriotic and moral in nature demands that Muslim consumers cannot simply assume that their food is halal and that certainty in the form of certification, for example, is required as a standard.

At the same time, meat shopping and eating is conditioned by more mundane considerations such as price and taste. My informant Yasir is a single man in his 20s. He came to London in 2001 from Kuala Lumpur to study and he is also a Student Councilor with an Islamic student organisation. Yasir normally shops for groceries in the Asda supermarket and a local grocery store for halal. He is mainly concerned with halal in red meat, chicken and intestines. Yasir eats meat on a daily basis, but because meat is more expensive in London compared to Malaysia he would go for chicken in London because it is more affordable.

In Altaf’s account halal meat is important because it contains a lot of protein. By far, informants would prefer fresh meat to frozen meat and overwhelmingly halal is associated with fresh and not frozen meat. Siti is 21 years old. She moved from Kuala Lumpur to

London to study economics at University College London. Siti normally shops for groceries in Tesco. She tries to find halal meat, drinks and intestines in places such as Bloomsbury Halal Food Store, which is a smaller shop specialising in halal meat, but it also sells vegetables, drinks and spices. Siti ate more meat when she was in Malaysia because it was all halal, she explains. In this type of narrative halal in London is seen as unreliable, but not to such an extent that Siti avoids eating meat to become a vegetarian.

In Malaysia the state halal discourse is clearly such that the stunning of animals prior to slaughter is unwanted. Ahmad is a single man of 30 and has lived in London since 1995. He moved there from Kuala Lumpur to study and now works as an architect. He normally shops for groceries in the supermarket Sainsbury's (the third largest chain of supermarkets in the UK), a corner store, the Chinese supermarket Wing Yip located in North London and the Portobello Road Market in West London. Ahmad is against stunning arguing that this point is premised on 'religion' in Malaysia that entails that animals are slaughtered in a certain way.

Another informant Udzir is a single man in his 50s who left Malaysia in the 1970s to study engineering in Singapore. Since then he has travelled extensively in many parts of Asia and Europe and now he lives permanently in London where he works for engineering companies. Udzir normally shops for groceries in Sainsbury's, Tesco and halal butchers around the inner-city area Earl's Court. Udzir is against stunning. He was appalled when watching a documentary that showed animals stunned by electrocution in a butcher's shop, whereas ritual slaughter without slaughter ensures both the proper Islamic way and draining the blood that removes bacteria that can cause diseases in humans. Some Muslims believe that the stunning of animals makes it impossible or difficult to drain the blood fully.

The informant Azmi is a 29 year old man and he lives with his wife and their child in London. He moved to Britain in 1996 to study accountancy and he now works as an accountant. Azmi normally shops for groceries in Tesco and Asda hypermarkets. He is not clear about the question of stunning. So far, no discussion or study on the subject has been able to convince him to decide for or against stunning. He adds that this is not a discussion that surfaces normally in the Malaysian media, here stunning are a naturalised and nationalised halal practice.

Sharifah is a woman in her 20s who moved to London in 2005 to do her post-graduate studies in international marketing. At the same time, Sharifah works part time with insurance. Normally, she shops for groceries in London's China Town, for example, in Loon Fung and Loon Moon markets, but she also goes to supermarkets such as Sainsbury's and local halal butchers. Likewise, stunning is a major issue for Sharifah, but she is confused about the variety of technical stunning methods, electrical, for example. With regard to halal, the question of stunning proves to be highly controversial with religious demands on the one hand and animal rights groups on the other.

On several occasions I had the opportunity to discuss halal with a Malay Imam, Mascud, who has lived in London with his family since 2002. Mascud can be seen as a kind of an Islamic bureaucrat in a diasporic context. Mascud makes clear that within Islam scholars, groups and organisations disagree about this issue. Slaughter in accordance with Islamic law has been permitted in the UK.

Halal Food Authority (HFA) (www.halalfoodauthority.co.uk) is an organisation set up in 1994 to certify halal meat. HFA acknowledges stunning while another similar organisation Halal Monitoring Committee (HMC) is against the stunning of animals before slaughter. This point contributes to making these two organisations competitors with overlapping interests and claims for authority in the halal market in the UK. This study shows that meat is an essential type of food in the lives of my informants, but it is also meat that is subjected to a range of sentiments and scares personal, national and global in scope. In spite of the point that meat is considered 'natural' and 'real' food it also has a contrary image as dangerously immoral and potentially unhealthy among middle-class Malays in London. Thus, halal meat not only evokes questions of proper religious practice it also relates to broader questions of the role of health and science in everyday food consumption.

Is Halal Healthier?

Powerful discourses promote halal as healthy and pure in an age of food scares and uncertainty. In the book *Food and Technological Progress. An Islamic Perspective* by a Malaysian publisher, the authors make the case that with regard to halal concern about health and well-being are central to prohibition (Chawk and Ayan 2006: 74). Another

book on halal published in Malaysia argues that ‘Healthy nutrition means having a balanced diet, in order to maintain the balance that Allah has established in all matters’ (Consumers Association of Penang 2006: 14). Running through much of this type of discourse is the notion that ‘food is literally transformed and becomes *part of* the human body.’ (Lien 2004: 6).

In his study *Food, Morals and Meaning* (2000), Coveney argues convincingly that for modern consumers ‘nutrition’ functions as both a scientific as well as a spiritual/ethical discipline. In Coveney’s exploration of current attitudes to food the ambiguities are that ‘the pleasures we derive from food are also the sources of anxieties around eating. [...] anxieties about our appetite for food have given and continue to give rise to concerns about the very moral fabric of society.’ (Coveney 2000: xiii). Modern consumers are constantly subjected to warnings and admonitions. Such concerns are normally ‘couched in terms of our health, especially in terms of the scientific, calculated understanding of food that we recognise as the field of nutrition.’ (Coveney 2000: xiii). In this type of optic ‘nutrition’ becomes ‘a technology of power [...] that produces new and ever more specific subjectivities for individuals and populations.’ (Coveney 2000: 104) However, ‘Positions of dissent around nutrition serve as reminders that discourses always intersect with, amplify and resist other discourses. As such, discourses open up ethical positions for subjects that may be both complementary and confliction.’ (Coveney 2000: 106). The question I address below is how my informants, firstly, articulate nutrition and health, and, secondly, the extent to which halal understanding and practice relates to these wider issues.

All my informants were clear about what they consider healthy/unhealthy types of food whereas the question of whether halal is healthier compared to non-halal is far more contested and infused with confusion and uncertainty. The informant Dania is a 21-year-old single woman. She moved from Kuala Lumpur to London in 2005 to study economics at University College London. Dania normally shops for groceries in Tesco. She tries to find halal meat, drinks and intestines in places such as Bloomsbury Halal Food Store. Dania, for one, is clear on the point that ritual slaughter draining the blood makes meat healthier and that this is backed by scientific evidence she finds on the Internet.

The informant Ahmad distinguishes between healthy food as that which is fresh and has just come out of the shop on the one hand and junk food, ‘quick lunch’ and ‘microwave’ food on the other hand.

Yasir along with other informants refers to an argument he came across ‘somewhere’ that pigs are more prone to carry a range of diseases and parasites. What is more, pigs are said to live in ‘slums’ making them unclean. For Yasir pig avoidance makes your diet healthier whereas the draining of blood during ritual slaughter does not add to this health effect. To Azmi processed food in supermarkets is unhealthy because of chemicals, oils and fats and this is particularly pronounced in a British context where food production is seen to be highly industrialised. Even though Azmi is clear about the harmfulness of these substances he would often eat this kind of food anyway in his sometimes stressed life in London. On the contrary, Azmi together with my other informants consider vegetables and fruit essentially healthy. When it comes to the question of whether halal is healthier Azmi is confused. Encouraging the researcher to look into the matter more closely he says that

This is another perhaps interesting question for you that we would like to find out about because a lot of Muslims they believe in the goodness of halal meat from a religious point of view, but the scientific approach hasn’t been covered. For example pork, we avoid it, we know that Jewish people avoid it, but there are not many mainstream scientific opinions to say whether it is good or bad. I personally would like to know more about that. Some Imam says that if you do ritual slaughter the blood goes out, which is better for your health, but that is what the Imam says, we don’t know. So I would like to hear more scientific explanations behind it.

This call for a scientific substantiation behind halal as a healthy alternative evokes the problem of religious institutions such as the Malaysian state, HFA and HMC that claim authority in an expanding religious market. In the eyes of Azmi, just because some Imams or *ustaz* (religious teachers) contend that halal is healthier these claims must undergo some form of scientific verification. Hence, religious discourse and authority are not in themselves enough to convince skeptical Muslim consumers such as Azmi who tells me that he is quite ‘open minded’ about halal, but at the same time he needs scientific evidence to be convinced about the relationship between halal and health.

These sentiments are similar to those of the informant Preety. Preety is a single woman in her early 20s. She moved to London in 2005 to study and she also works for a phone company. Normally Preety shops for groceries in supermarkets such as Tesco, Sainsbury's, Waitrose (a UK supermarket that is often considered up market) and Green Valley (a delicatessen). She refers to a number of studies claiming that halal is healthier, but these studies have not convinced her. However, she does believe that if an animal is not being slaughtered properly and the blood drained as fully as possible the dried blood can actually 'mutate' with human blood and cause diseases. She concludes that 'So I am not sure how far it is true, but all the reasons in Islam can be backed up by scientific evidence and even in the Old Testament pork was banned for health reasons.'

The informant Izura is a single woman in her 20s. She moved from Kuala Lumpur to London in 2005 to start her education at the London School of Economics. She normally shops for halal meat in Somerfield supermarket (a chain of smaller supermarkets) and local halal butchers. Izura is quite confident that halal is healthier and she explains that halal regulations came into existence because draining the blood, for example, is healthy as it cleans out 'germs'. Based on information from articles on the Internet, magazines and newspapers Dania is certain that halal actually is healthier. As it is the case in many of these narratives, Dania refers to anecdotal evidence combined with the information she is able to gather herself, mostly on the Internet. Such narratives tend to circle around health as one of the main reasons behind food taboos in Judaism and Islam, but these are being sanitised, that is, they are being subjected to demands for verification and substantiation that are not necessarily of a religious nature.

Like all other informants, the couple Yusof and Altaf is clear about that too much fat, oil and sugar are not good for one's health. Yusof believes that halal is healthier because it is a way of killing an animal that ensures that the meat is fresh. Pork avoidance is essentially about the 'bad' bacteria in pigs.

Many informants are quite unsure and confused about the claim that halal is healthier. However, these informants often articulate that the quality of halal meat is good because it is 'fresh' due to the method of slaughtering. The freshness of food is idealised as something that is intrinsic to halal (avoidance of carrion) on the one hand and freshness (healthy and traceable) on the other.

The informant Firdaus is a 29-year-old man who moved from Kuala Lumpur to London in 1994 to finish his schooling as a medical doctor and he is now doing his postgraduate studies. Firdaus normally buys his groceries in Sainsbury's and a local corner shop where he also buys his halal meat that is his main concern, but he also tries to avoid lard in ice cream and chocolate. Firdaus does not think halal is healthier, but he was told that the taste of halal meat is better because the blood has been drained. This point adds to the fact that often halal is seen as a kind of quality or standard that relates to taste, smell and texture that is not directly linked to halal as food taboo or religious injunction. In general, informants are not capable of a direct comparison between halal and non-halal as they claim that they are not aware of having eaten non-halal food.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Mascud, believes that halal is healthier. He lists the following reasons: the method of slaughtering emphasising that the animal should not be stunned and the draining of the blood removes diseases, halal is a religious injunction put in place by God and it is not open to human interpretation: 'Maybe halal is healthy, but we don't know the real reason and take it as a test, a trial from God.'

To sum up, the issue of whether halal is healthier or not is contested among middle-class Malays in London. In most cases, the above discussions pertain to meat and not so much other commodities. Hence, these Malays do not uncritically accept the powerful discourses that claim halal to be healthy and pure in an age of food scares and it is to that aspect I will not turn.

Islamic Food Scares

The powerful discourse on halal links this form of modern food taboo and food security. An example of this is the excerpt from the book *Food and Technological Progress. An Islamic Perspective*:

Obviously, the primary issue that is touched upon in the Muslim world with respect to food security is ensuring that the food supply is *halal*. Food is a sensitive issue in a Muslim community. As such, concern in ensuring that the food supply to a Muslim community is permissible from the eyes of Islamic *shariah* is justified. (Sallah and Sobrian 2006: X)

A chapter in the same book argues that with respect to food security from an 'Islamic perspective' globalisation together with the advances in biotechnology increase the num-

ber of ethical questions posed (Norwawi 2006: 8). Thus, with intensified trade and importation of food as well as nutritional and scientific knowledge, food is becoming less and less ‘natural’ and ‘less and less of a benchmark of the simple and the traditional. [...] the cultivation of food calls into question our very notions of nature and purity.’ (Wallace 1998: 3). However, increased concerns over food security contradict the fact that modern food in many ways is far more pure compared to previous centuries (Burnett 1966: 279). Ironically, ‘food safety concerns have increased among the general public as well as among industry and government spokespersons. [...] Food safety [...] is always *both* a natural and a social process’ (Busch 2004: 171). Among middle-class families in London, for example, food scares such as BSE ‘epitomise not only all that is wrong with modern food production methods, but also mistrust of both government and scientists’ (Caplan 2000: 199). The question I will now address is to what extent food scare discourses condition the halal understanding and practices of my informants.

Ahmad acknowledges that food scares affect his food consumption ‘a little bit.’ Azmi remembers mad cows disease and bird flu and the anxiety these diseases caused, but this does not in any significant way change his food habits. In fact, Azmi is more concerned about the affordability of halal in London that makes him wonder about whether the meat has undergone proper halal slaughter and certification. The relatively low price of halal makes it unlikely that halal meat is ‘free range’ which Azmi considers to be healthier.

Yasir makes clear that Muslims believe halal is essential because food becomes part of your body and it stays on. However, these concerns about food and body are largely unaffected by food scares in Malaysia and Britain and they are not in any significant ways expressed through particular halal understandings and practice. In the eyes of Yasir, the reason for this is that Muslims consider salmonella, for example, to be dangerous mainly in a non-Muslim, Western and industrialised production context. However, Yasir along with most other informants is not really conscious of the way in which the Malaysian state and government tries to promote halal as pure in an age in where food scares are exposed locally, nationally and globally on a daily basis.

Izura recalls that when there was an outbreak of bird flu in Malaysia her mother banned chicken eating to ‘guard’ the family. Even though Mascud is very much aware of food scares in the media he is relatively unconcerned and he does not in any way link this to

halal food consumption. More generally, food scares have not changed his eating habits. These sentiments are similar to those of most informants. Udzir, for one, he argues that when the mad cows' disease hit the UK he simply placed extra trust in the meat bought in halal butchers, but in general food scares do not in any significant way change his food consumption. Dania would avoid chicken 'for a while' during the bird flu scare, but not in the long run. Similarly Yusof and Altaf explain that food scares are a type of condition 'You have to live with.' To sum up, all my informants were well aware about food scares, but this awareness did not in any systematic way change their (halal) food habits.

Science, E-numbers and GM

The more halal proliferates as a globalised religious market, the more 'scientific' modes and methods of production and traceability become important for producers, traders and consumers. The increased focus on such methods to verify commodities as halal based on 'science' constantly expands the requirements to cover new types of commodities and practice, including cosmetics, pharmaceuticals and hygiene products. Science in a variety of forms is a significant topic in my discussion with informants. A central question, for example, is why and to what extent informants avoid Genetically Modified (GM) foods. My survey shows that among respondents two equally large groups of modern Muslim consumers would avoid and/or buy GM respectively.

The problem in much discourse about science and halal is that science is both seen as part of the solution to achieving more reliable and verifiable conditions for the production of halal on the one hand, and on the other science constantly modifies a range of foods types that cannot clearly be understood as halal because of chemical reactions, for example, in the production process. Hence, these products are often seen to be 'artificial' or 'unnatural'.

Modern citizens as consumers in a 'technological society' such as the UK expect and are expected to be informed and updated about 'the possible consequences of eating fats, sugars or GM foods, and the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of exercise and diets.' (Berry 2001: 4). The question is how halal fits into a whole range of modern scientific processes and discourses. 'Technical sciences that we have allowed to proliferate may not be able to deliver the best moral rules we wish to live by.', Tambiah writes

(1990: 151).

All my informants agree that in principle a product cannot possibly be halal if it contains even extremely low quantities of questionable content, gelatin or alcohol, for example. Ahmad, for one, warns that even the smallest quantity of pork would make a product non-halal. In general informants would agree that scientific methods and technologies are needed in order to control that production processes would live up to religious standards. An important question in this respect is knowledge about E-numbers, that is, number codes for food additives that are usually found on food labels throughout the European Union. As an example, Ahmad along with other informants are fastidious about E-47, a form of synthetic fat that can be of animal, and, thus, porcine, origin. Quite a lot of energy is put into finding, reading and evaluating these E-numbers among my informants. Even when halal products are certified with a visible logo informants are not always sure about the certifiers' knowledge of or intentions in connection with halal. On the contrary, shopping was quite unproblematic in Malaysia where the state, at least symbolically and rhetorically, protects Muslim consumers by sanitising halal in the interfaces between science and religion.

Azmi calls for more common sense in the idealisation of science in halal. He feels that subjecting halal to ever increasing scientific modes of understanding and practice is a slippery slope that causes more confusion than certainty. Thus, scientific standards based on moral and commercial interests condition everyday eating and shopping: 'Where do you draw the line?', he asks and adds that idealising halal at the 'atomic' level is excessive and that it displaces common sense as everyday guidance. Azmi is 'aware' of the issue of GM, but 'I'm just not too concerned. I couldn't be bothered. I think in the future I would like to be more careful about this, but right now my priorities are more about work than health although I know it's bad.'

In much the same way as we saw it above, Firdaus does not think that halal is or should be a 'scientific' question, but rather something that should be 'learned' or internalised as a form of cultural or religious knowledge.

Other informants, Yasir for example, do not believe common sense is sufficient to determine the halalness of a product with regard to E-numbers or extremely low quantities of doubtful contents. Yasir relies more on the rulings of Islamic scholars from the European

Fatwa Council on E-numbers, ingredients and substances that may change form under production processes. He stresses that science in modern halal plays a major role for the purity and health of the body.

In the case of medication, Muslims can be more 'flexible' Sharifah explains because it 'benefits' you. If you cannot find halal in a country you are allowed to be flexible, but as discourse intensifies along with increasing availability in a country such as Britain more and more focus is put on being fastidious. Similarly, Mascud during his four-year stay in London had pills prescribed and he is concerned that these may contain doubtful gelatin. However, some Islamic scholars, he explains, argue that such medication does not necessarily have to be halal because it is not 'original', but a highly industrialised product that serves a benevolent purpose. He agrees with most informants that science is important in halal, but that honesty in this market should be the moral driving force. Dania supports this argument in saying that if a form of medication can save your life you should take it uncritically.

With regard to E-numbers Preety argues that it has become more complex to determine the contents in products that are not meat-based such as chocolate. In the eyes of Udzir the artificiality, particularly regarding GM food, of such products makes them 'impure' and indeterminable. Siti supports this argument. Ahmad tries to avoid GM food for 'health reasons'. Her mother told him that sometimes chickens were injected with hormones and he now tries to avoid these.

To Izura the food market has been pluralised so that as a modern consumer in London you have an extreme variety of food available from many countries and this makes it possible to avoid GM without missing any desired types of food. However, as a modern Muslim consumer you have to be skilled to navigate and practise this complex market. Sharifah shares the same sentiment looking at labels whether a product was GM or not. Dania's argument for not buying GM is that it is 'unhealthy', but she finds that GM is not easy to steer clear of in London without taking the trouble to look carefully at labels. Avoiding GM in Kuala Lumpur was easier because it is not so widespread, Dania contends.

When discussing the issue of halal and science with Yusof and Altaf many of the above issues came together:

YUSOF: You want information about gelatin, in biscuits, for example, but you have to know what to look for. Studies show that when meat is transformed into gelatin there is a change in the chemical elements and it is no longer identifiable with pork. Some say it's then all right and others that it's not.

ALTAF: We know that it's all right if it's fish gelatin in marshmallows, for example. E-numbers that derive from animals' people say you have to be very careful about. My mom is very careful about that.

YUSOF: Adding to that, my sister studied in Warwick for three years, and she goes through that process as well looking at E-numbers.

ALTAF: Her community is sort of very, very strict and you know there is a lot of information being circulated, consumer guides and the Internet. Sometimes they say that this or that company supports what's happening in Palestine or they would avoid other companies because there is a rumor that the food contains this animal product. They use information to avoid certain kinds of foods. There are also views around about being careful about utensils that have been in contact with pork. We are not very convinced about all that, we just try to avoid pork and buy ritually slaughtered meat.

YUSOF: We had this conversation with our friends yesterday about that we don't really know where the meat comes from, halal butchers or Tesco. Our friends are very strict making sure that their food is good.

ALTAF: Actually, in the last few months there has been these issues about meat from Holland that was injected with pork...

This exchange together with the previous discussions pinpoint a number of issues. The tendency among these Malays is that while meat is the primary type of commodity the question of determining gelatin and other substances and how they may transform in an increasing range of products such as chocolate or biscuits is becoming more pertinent. Another issue is that fastidious Malays develop skills to look for these substances in more and more products. Increased awareness among some Muslims makes it increasingly important to situate your personal/group fastidiousness/flexibility in relation to the perceived understanding and practice of the other, for example family members or friends. The narratives about halal and science above tend to circle around rumors or alleged 'scientific' evidence circulated on the Internet in particular and thus in a variety of rumors that in general express fastidiousness about modern forms of halal. Few of my informants would openly, as we have seen, critique this heightened awareness. Halal sits uneasily between discourses and practices of health, religion and taste. Ironically, in much of this science is both seen as part of the solution (traceability and control) to achieve more reliable and verifiable conditions for the production of halal on the one hand and on the other science constantly modifies a range of foods types that cannot clearly be understood as

halal because of chemical reactions, for example, in the production process.¹ Hence, these products are often seen to be problematic ('artificial' or 'unnatural'). These discussions evoke the point that for modern consumers 'nutrition' often works as both a scientific as well as a spiritual/ethical discipline in which the correct and proper ways of behaving in relation to eating figures prominently. Consequently, modern dietary and religious discourses are suffused with ethical and spiritual problems. Malays in London are exposed to such discourses that attempt to discipline consumption, patrol and push the borders between taxonomical entities such as edible/inedible in a globalised religious market. The effects of these entangled discourses on everyday Malay Muslim consumption seem to be reinforced in a diasporic context. While halal in Malaysia is ubiquitous in production, trade and consumption, some informants find that halal is fragmented and unreliable in London, whereas others seem to enjoy escaping halal as a form of modern religious disciplining in Malaysia.

When Halal Is Excessive

As halal proliferates an important question is when/if halal becomes excessive. In this section I explore the extent to which halal can be considered excessive in the eyes of my informants. The majority of these Malays convey that halal fastidiousness/flexibility is a personal question. However, this articulation of individualised consumer choices emerges in the midst of often moralistic ideas and discourses about halal as a religious duty that is not open to interpretation or mitigation.

The book *Halal Haram. A Guide by Consumers Association of Penang* (2006) discussed above published by the Consumers Association of Penang in Malaysia in many ways reflects the deepening and widening proliferation of halal that has been taking place in Malaysia. One effect of this is to expand halal into non-food commodities such as crockery that allegedly can contain crushed pigs bones.

Ahmad finds this proposition 'ridiculous' along with the increased focus on proper storage, transport and handling. Firdaus supports these sentiments. As already discussed, Azmi thinks that these trends are 'pragmatic' and not religious because the market for halal is seen to be 'untapped' and highly profitable in the powerful state and corporate discourses on halal. Azmi, who describes himself as flexible and relaxed about halal, sees

no religious point in the constant expansion of halal as a religious market that entails elaborate and disciplining forms of religious morality. For example he would not personally buy the halal chocolate bar (www.ummahfoods.com) that entered the UK market in 2006. At the same time, Azmi is aware that many of his Muslim friends would be interested in such as product. However, he does recognise that Malaysia has an edge in the market and that halal should be fully commercialised. In other words, as long as there is a personal demand driven by religious devotion halal is a lucrative business with opportunities Malaysia should not miss. Azmi wonders why there has not been any real debate about ways in which halal can be seen to become excessive or overly commercialised effecting moralism and forms of Islamic materialism as a shallow display of religion that will tell you little about inner devotion.

For Yasir eating from crockery that could contain crushed bones from pigs actually was a real concern as was wearing pig leather. Sharifah, for one, agrees about these points relating to leather. In effect, consumers should at least be made aware of what crockery contained or it should ideally be certified or labeled as halal if it lived up to a predefined standard. Much the same would go for handling, storage and traceability that should receive much more focus. Similarly, to Altaf leather from pigs is completely unacceptable and she tells me that if a Muslim touches this he or she has to wash in a certain way. Like most other informants Altaf agrees that halal is open to potential commercialisation and that she would appreciate it if leather were clearly marked with a type of logo. Often salespersons in shops cannot help in this respect. ‘There is a big market for clarity’, she explains.

Sharifah argues that in a way halal is boundless and could in principle expand into innumerable products and services, but she stresses that it is still the decision of the single consumer to desire or buy these products. Often informants would evoke the state regulated halal market in Malaysia in opposition to London where many products are considered indeterminable. These ambiguities and doubts invite a desire for institutionalised halalness that is comparable to that of Malaysia. Mascud noticed the new chocolate bar from Ummah Foods that entered the market and it was now one of his favourites. In his view, any product should ideally be halal unless otherwise stated, including crockery.

Consequently, he suggests labeling haram products as that instead of putting a great effort into labeling more and more products as halal.

In general, there is considerable confusion about how to understand and practise halal as proper or excessive. Siti explains that she is not very fastidious about halal in hair shampoo, for example, but when shopping in Kuala Lumpur she would definitely choose a halal certified shampoo against one that was not halal certified. As one can expect producers and traders in markets that have a sizeable population of Muslims are aware of this. In a supermarket in urban Malaysia in May 2009 I found seven local and international brands of toothpaste that were all halal certified.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, discourses of health, science, religion, political visions, patriotism and excess all meet in the proliferation of halal as an emerging religious market. In their everyday lives in London the vision to globalise halal seemed distant and was often overshadowed by more mundane concerns. However, middle-class Malays in London directly or indirectly acknowledge that the global proliferation of halal is somehow connected to future prospects of a modern Malay Muslim Diaspora emerging in the interfaces between Islam, the Malaysian state and business. Some informants would complain about the lacking availability of halal in their workplaces or educational institutions, but never did this lead to social isolation or extreme fastidiousness. All this is expressive of a Diaspora group that adapts to and pragmatically reflects on everyday life in London. In other words, halal understanding and practice are not necessarily stressed in a diasporic context as many previous studies have indicated. At the same time, these Malays are highly aware of halal as a form of legitimate taste, that is, the consumption of halal works as communication or knowledge about the central issues discussed in this article.

Many Malays in London claim that halal is not really about religion, but mainly about politics and business. However, my study shows that morality is always somehow evoked when discussing halal as a modern form of food taboo. Izura, who can be said to belong to a more fastidious register of Malays, makes clear that 'For me halal shows how concerned you are being a Muslim, if you are just being a Muslim by name, but not practising it, so you are the one who should answer to God afterwards.' Sharifah expresses the

same ideas, namely that ‘You can say that generally speaking the person that is concerned about halal is more religious in anything.’ In opposition to these sentiments, Preety points out that

I don’t think halal is a good way to judge a person, not at all; it is not even an indicator. You can be a practising Muslim, but you could do other things, which would hurt other people. If they want to be a good Muslim they don’t need to show it. Only God knows.

This form of contestation also runs through many of the above discussions of halal understanding and practice in the interfaces between science, health, nutrition, food scares and excess.

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Biographical Sketch

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ⁱ For a more elaborate discussion of the relationship between religion, science and markets see Fischer (2008c)