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A Literature Review with Focus on Asia

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Nur Atmaca

Abstract

Halal forms a core and essential requirement of Islamic belief which sets rules for everyday Muslim lives. Halal, accordingly, addresses various difficulties and complexities, for instance in view of diverse halal governance and policy practices along with cultural differences in the Muslim world. The halal market occupies a unique position in global markets and trade, recording constant growth and following various standards and certifications. In this context, the paper discusses the state-of-the-art literature on halal in (South-)East Asia. The number of studies and publications on halal in Southeast Asia shows there has been a surge in the writing on this topic in recent years. Southeast Asian nations like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore embraced halal in a more expansive perspective, going far beyond the sector of food. In Muslim minority China, studies concentrate on the socio-political aspect of the halal concept. Generally, scholars examine halal from an economic and market viewpoint in Asia. In the last decades, however, socio-cultural discussions on the halal concept have expanded in the literature that investigates the region.

Keywords: Halal, Asia, literature review, halal food

Introduction

Halal is an Arabic word which means permitted and regulates habits and choices of Muslims in accordance with a set of rules which were told firstly in the Quran (revealed by God), then in Hadiths (Prophet's sayings), and lastly in the Sunnah (transferred observations of companions of the Prophet). As a religious requirement, Halal has existed for centuries, but it has been debated intensively in recent years. For an increasing number of Muslims worldwide, it has gained momentum. The market has grown in a significant way, in particular the halal food market shows an increasing scope across the world. In the literature, halal is an interdisciplinary subject of study because of its various areas of application in Muslims' lives. For instance, halal food and drink, Islamic finance and animal slaughtering methods are frequently studied, and long-lasting debates compare to new trends such as cosmetics, tourism, fashion, medical and pharma industries. Therefore, new fields have brought new perspectives to the halal issue, with business and management studies leading the discourse. Some works are related to politics, governance, and ethical questions. In this broad context that touches upon numerous dimensions of individuals' daily life and the corporate world alike, various studies have been conducted about halal supply and retail chains, operational structure, marketing, and logistics.

The absence of a central authority and standards for halal governance is considered a major challenge for the halal market (Kurth and Glasbergen 2016). There is no global or regional umbrella organization/institution for halal certification (Riaz and Chaudry 2004). Because of its constantly expanding market, companies tend to take this growth as an opportunity in the framework of free market approach. On the other hand, halal refers to Muslims' identity; therefore, it has become a controversial issue, particularly in places or societies where Muslims are minorities. Moreover, the scope and implementation of halal principles need to be modified in accordance with current developments in the sectors. However, except for general values and norms, Muslims have not agreed on a common ground and that is why the designation halal has no global and unified verification system. Nevertheless, there are leading organizations in different regions and especially in Asian countries. The latter enjoy cross-regional reputation in the business of halal certification.

Halal as a field of study

Studies on halal have embraced both qualitative and quantitative methods, including market studies based on surveys, and country or region-based analyses. Empirical studies include focus group works such as investigating a small number of Muslim consumers' attitudes towards Halal product purchasing, a selected group's awareness about Halal products and the role of

religiosity in consumer behaviour and so on, and (predominantly ethnographic and social scientific) fieldwork in selected countries.

This review article aims to introduce some of the most current studies on halal issues in Asia. Due to the wide range of works that can hardly be captured here exhaustively, the review concentrates on studies from 2015 to today. These are investigated to reflect a state-of-the-art in contemporary halal, research. 15 peer reviewed articles have been selected for this purpose. Although in recent years scholars increasingly discussed halal issues in China, the literature shows that discussions are particularly vivid in Malaysia and Indonesia, where halal market competition is relatively stronger than in other regions. Malaysia developed halal standards as a result of a long-term economic strategy in the 1990s and invested heavily in halal production in terms of scientific infrastructure (labs, expertise etc.), technology, know-how, and especially, development of standards. That being diagnosed, it can be understood from studies conducted in the region that halal issues have complex dynamics even though standardization and certification practices developed by Southeast Asian countries form the most adopted internationally.

Research methods

Ethno-religious diversity occupies a significant part of the discussion. This is particularly so when the research refers to non-Muslim and Muslim minority countries in the region and examines policies and approaches towards halal in those countries. The selected articles for this review show that halal issues have been studied from various approaches such as food and religious slaughtering, tourism, law, finance, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals etc. Many works address the process of certification, standardization, and labelling. In general, Asian countries have significant cases to contribute to the halal discourse both regionally and globally.

Halal food is a daily practice, and for its investigation, researchers usually embrace the (in-depth) interview method by selecting a focus group. Depending on the research objective, the target group are usually either Muslim or non-Muslim people – and sometimes both, e.g., in comparative studies. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used, and data are collected from content analysis, structured and semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews as well as surveys for the processing of aggregated data. In qualitative research, interviews and focus group methods are the most common techniques of data collection. Based on the data interpretation and observation, the aim of the research is bringing forth “new concepts and theories” (Haradhan 2018). In addition, qualitative studies usually include intensive and often multi-sited fieldwork (Haradhan 2018). Three of the selected studies in this review build on intensive fieldwork in selected local environments to understand the dynamics of the halal issue

(Erie 2018; Fischer 2018; Liu 2018). Others are based on numerical data. Quantitative research aims to establish external validity of its inferences that allow for generalizations, hence specific techniques of data collection and processing are employed. Data analysis includes definition, interpretation and inspecting causal relationships between variables (Mertler 2016). Numerous quantitative studies are targeted to facilitate the marketing of halal products (e.g., by analysing consumption preferences) or address issues of trade and finance.

Halal in Asia

On a global scale, the perceptions of halal differ from region to region. In the Middle East, halal is primarily linked to food – eating meat or poultry – while it is associated with all sorts of consumption goods from cosmetics and food to pharmaceuticals and fashion items in Muslim majority countries in Southeast Asia (Alserhan 2011). In this context, as a Muslim majority country and a popular tourist destination, Indonesia has improved its facilities in accordance with Islamic rules (availability of prayer rooms, halal restaurants etc.) and become remarkably attractive for Muslims who seek halal friendly holiday options. Halal tourism does not only target Muslims from other countries but also local tourists (Jaelani 2017). However, the promotional activities for fostering halal tourism are still inadequate according to Suradin (2018), partly due to the appeal of places such as Egypt or Turkey where more historical and cultural Islamic heritage sites are plenty. Competing with such "established" destinations, Southeast Asian countries still have to catch up in marketing and sightseeing attractions. Jia and Chaozhi's (2020) study on China shows how halal tourism is handled in a predominantly non-Muslim destination where only halal food is provided in accordance with Islamic rules. Other practices of halal are not available or catered to there. Enlarging the scope of halal supply is much easier and oftentimes actively endorsed, encouraged, and promoted by state authorities or governments in Asia's Muslim majority countries.

Apart from the Muslim majority countries, halal issues are also discussed in primarily non-Muslim states of the region. Singapore, China, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka yielded a number of halal initiatives in areas where the Muslim population forms an important minority. Singapore, for instance, has implemented quite a broad scale of halal policies compared to other non-Muslim countries. As Fischer (2018) argues, because of Singapore's "standardized economy" the usage of the halal food is very strictly regulated. Singapore has a local standardization authority called MUIS (*Majlis Ugama Islam Singapore* – Islamic Religious Council of Singapore) (Fischer 2018). This council regulates and organizes halal standards and certification procedures in the country.

Halal regulation in Singapore

Fischer (2018) also focuses on the visual aspect of halal and how it is interpreted by examining the logos that are stamped on the products. He offers an interesting methodological approach by combination ethnographic and archival work. Selecting the Singaporean newspaper, *The Straits Times*, he tracks the halal news published in this gazette. His approach allows for tracing the transformation of logos and certification processes in Singapore since the 1990s until today. The visual appearance of logos is of particular relevance in a country where signage is an important cultural feature (Fischer 2018). Photographs of halal logos taken during his fieldwork in Singapore inform a chronological content analysis on how halal became standardized and regulated. He found that halal certification and the usage of logos provided by MUIS speak of a strong audit mechanism. Most importantly, halal is nationalized and standardized, which helps in the proliferation of Singaporean halal certification and logo standards on the global halal market. Muslim minorities in Singapore worked efficiently to establish this audit system. While Singapore seems to avoid confusion about halal logos in the country by a strict limitation to one single version, Shafiq et al. (2015) argue that in Malaysia, the lack of a unified halal logo creates confusion among customers. Knowledge and confidence of consumers are important in the process of implementing the use of logos. But confidence fades when too many logos circulate. Findings thus point to the necessity of creating "one standardized logo".

Food preferences

The empirical research of Abu-Hussin et al. (2016) examined Singaporean Muslims' food preferences from the perspective of consumer behaviour. The authors chose a quantitative method to measure what kind of factors influence Muslims' purchase behaviour toward halal food. Addressing the aspect of consumer behaviour is a commonly referred to approach, especially for examining food and personal care consumption (Abu-Hussin et al. 2016; Arsil et al. 2018). In addition, as Hong et al. mention in their study of Chinese Muslims' demands for halal personal care products, religiosity is not a tangible or measurable concept, but it can be derived from observing Muslim consumption behaviour (Hong et al. 2020). Arsil et al. (2018) point out that the consumption decisions of Muslims arise from religious values rather than functionality of the product. According to data collected in Malaysia and Indonesia, Muslims find halal food more secure and suitable for the observation of Islamic values than non-halal food.

Muslims in China

Muslim minorities in China also seek halal products and the literature on this issue has been increasing. Recently China pursues a suppression policy towards Muslim minorities, especially

against the Uyghur population in Xinjiang. The Chinese government considers many Uyghur Muslims religious extremists. Uyghurs, however, are not the only Muslim minority group in China. Next to them, Hui Muslims are also one of the biggest Muslim populations in the People's Republic. Both refer to different ethnicities. According to Liu et al. (2018), Hui Muslims are seen as "most Sinicized, as religiously moderate and ethnically closer to the Han Chinese population" (p.7). Nevertheless, there has been a general aggressive attitude towards Muslim minorities regardless of ethnicity, materializing, for instance, in the ban halal logos in Arabic letters and other Islamic symbols in restaurants. Allegedly, they are symbols of a foreign culture (Wyatt 2019). Since food is one of the prime expressions of the halal concept, halal restaurant initiatives are rising in China so that the logo and symbol issue has become ever more controversial in the Chinese public. According to Liu et al., eating halal food can mark Muslims as not likely to integrate in the Chinese nation and rejecting the dominant culture (Liu et al. 2018).

Erie (2018) focuses on the compatibility of Shari'a law with (secular) state law - oftentimes a taboo topic for secular states. He refers to an "anthropology of taboo" and argues that currently, Islamophobia can be observed not only in political discourses but in law as well. In that sense, halal debates "help explain the dynamics of interpreting Islam and sharia" (Erie 2018, 393). Erie's article examines the concept of Shari'a and its relevance for Hui Muslims in China. He evaluates it with ethnographic methods and raises attention for halal debates' reflexive dynamics in China as a secular non-Muslim state. Halal food regulations are framed in the notion of food safety in China – rather than being referred to as a specific religious requirement. Since the concept of halal is based on Shari'a law, framing the issue of halal food in legal terms appears to be unconducive to the commitment to a secular state order. Halal symbols and Arabic letters are seen as reflection of a different culture. Therefore, Hui Muslims invented a Chinese symbol called *Gingzhen* (meaning pure and true) and use this symbol not only for halal food but for all halal requirements (Erie 2018). Erie argues that regardless of whether Shari'a law is seen as a threat to the secular state and law or not, inevitably, the legal discourse on halal regulations effects continuous transformations in state-society relations.

Comparative studies

Apart from single case studies, there are some comparative analyses in the literature in which different Asian countries are examined in view of their approach to halal. For instance, Dube et al. (2016) compare the halal certification system as a resource for the internationalization of local companies in Malaysia and the Philippines. Halal certification is the only way to show the verification of products and hence provides an opportunity for companies to trade their

products globally. Since Malaysia has already developed halal standardisation to a high degree, products certified by Malaysian authorities have more or easier access to the market compared to those from other countries in the region. Local companies which produce or sell halal products are struggling to grow their businesses not only internationally but domestically as well. Therefore, achieving a common (and ideally unified) system of halal certification that could be used on a global scale remains one of the biggest challenges for the world-wide halal market.

Rising anti-halal campaigns in some countries in which especially Muslims are minorities have social and economic effects. In Sri Lanka, ethno-religious discrimination and anti-halal campaigns of the dominant Sinhala-Buddhist culture have increased tensions in recent years (Hewege and Perera 2020; Yusoff and Sarjoon 2017). Apart from public life, economic activities of Muslims in the country have been targeted. Halal labelling (such as logo usage) has been banned in the country due to strong pressure from the dominant Buddhist civil society. Also, socio-cultural complexities in the country influence supply chain business, as Yusoff and Sarjoon (2017) reveal in their contribution to the Journal *Religion*. In Hewege and Prera's (2020) analysis, supply chain issues are addressed from a social cultural *cum* religious perspective. By embracing Gramsci's concept of hegemony, the authors apply a different yet fresh perspective on supply chain business.

Halal is also an interesting subject for law studies, since it is ultimately linked with the topic of Shari'a law. Furthermore, the development of international trade rules connects to the legal dimension of global halal business; regulations to standardise the legally based designation of halal and non-halal have to be in accordance with modern necessities and compliances to become accepted by a majority of traders as well as consumers. Yet global halal trade is a tricky topic in international trade regulation. Long and complex rules such as those in the WTO meet with religious rules which hitherto have not reached any global consensus, neither in the field of certification nor of standardisation. This prevents companies from exporting their products since every country's import and export processes work differently. As Limenta et al. (2017) argue, simplifying these processes would be beneficial for the companies that produce halal goods as well as for the customers who seek halal products. In that sense, the literature discussed here offers significant insights that nurture further scientific analysis and at the same time provides valuable information for applied knowledge.

Conclusion

Academic discussions on halal have increased in the last couple of decades. The issue has multiple sides and has aroused interest not only in the humanities and social sciences but also

in food science, biotechnology, vet studies, law, and economics – to name but a few. When one looks at the literature on halal in Asia, investigations provide comprehensive theoretical and methodological approaches. This review captured the state of the art of halal research on Asia. The time frame was limited, i.e. I have looked at selected studies published between 2015 to 2021. One of the main observations is that food is the most frequently addressed issue in halal studies. Not only has it the highest economic value in the market, but also food and identity have become integrated components of a "sense of collective belonging". Also, it has been a symbol to distinguish oneself from others and determines the belonging to a group or culture. In addition, debates on religious slaughtering are another site of the halal food issue, but due to the relative absence of publications in selected years, this review has not included the slaughtering discussion.

Halal food is a primary service and product that Muslims are demanding in non-Muslim countries – halal cosmetics, tourism or finance ranging closely behind it. In recent years, halal food has become more accessible in parallel with market growth; however, it still forms a target for Islamophobic discourses and policies. The most current example is Chinese attitudes against Muslim minorities, although halal initiatives are extant and controlled by the central government. There has been a significant rise in the literature regarding halal food in China. Studies embrace both socio-cultural and consumer perspectives and apply methods of empirical social science. Halal implementation in a broader sense besides food can be observed in various Asian countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. While authorities the Muslim majority countries Malaysia and Indonesia have actively responded to society's halal requirements in different fields from cosmetics to tourism, Singapore proves to be a strong policy-making actor in the regulation of halal practices, too. Compared to other non-Muslim majority countries in the region, Singapore's approach is remarkable and presumably to a large extent economically driven. In general, based on the literature review, the discussion of Halal in Asia is addressed from a market perspective in most cases. However, socio-cultural and identity debates have also considerably increased, particularly in case studies of non-Muslim countries of the region.

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Nur Atmaca is a PhD student at Humboldt University of Berlin, Institute of Asian and African Studies. Her dissertation focuses on the governance of Halal standardization activities in the Southeast Asian region. She studied international relations in her bachelor and master studies in Turkey and Sweden. Her areas of interest include the topics such as Islam and politics, governance, Islamic law, religion, and consumption.