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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.

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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.

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