

Revealing the Non-Muslim Kopitiam and the Awarded Halal Signage

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Abstract: The growth of Kopitiam is mushrooming as it provides simple yet, fast meals in accordance to the vibrant lifestyle of today's society. As the financial commitment to operate the Kopitiam is high compared to ordinary restaurants or other eating outlets, most are dominated by the non-Muslims who venture the Kopitiam business to cater the needs of the muslim customers. The signage of Halal is then becoming the focus point among the Muslims. This study is about the understanding and practice of non-Muslim Kopitiam operators regarding Halal signage in one densely populated town in Terengganu. The study involves stakeholders of the thence Kopitiam. The study is qualitative in nature, involving six non-Muslim Kopitiam operators in interview sessions. The findings reveal that the operators have good understanding and practice of running Kopitiam regarding the Halal signage awarded to them. All non-Muslim operators understand the concept of Halal to be applied in their Kopitiam. The practice is fully utilised because the respondents run their business within Muslim-Malay population. Besides, the operators hire Muslim workers and the cooking activity for the Kopitiam is solely done at the Kopitiam itself.

Key words: Kopitiam, Halal, non-Muslim, operators, Muslims, Kopitiam

INTRODUCTION

The religion of Islam was brought in and spread in Malaysia (then known as Tanah Melayu), since, the 7th BC. Historians hypothesize that Islam in Malaysia came from Middle East; some said it came from China and India. (Shafaei and Mohamed, 2015). Since, then, it has amassed a huge number of devout observers and now Islam is recognized as the official religion of the country.

The religion encompasses many areas of life as its believers adopt the guidelines laid out by the religion as a way of life. In the aspect of eating, Islam has set a few rules to be understood and practiced. On average, one man will consume 70 000 meals or 60 tons of food in his lifetime (Saifuddin *et al.*, 2001). As food is a necessity for the continuation of life, Islam posits several guiding principles dictated in the ayah in Al-Quran and through Hadith disseminated by the prophet. For instance:

“Eat and drink and be not extravagant, extreme, Allah does not love the people transgress” (Al-Araf)

The above verse teaches human to eat and drink but never waste in extravagance for Allah dislike those who

are wasteful. Hence, one should eat sparingly. This is further elaborated through the Hadith advised by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH):

“No man fills a container worst than his stomach. A few morsels that keep his back upright are sufficient for him. If he has to, then he should keep one-third for food, one-third for drink and one-third for his breathing” (At-Tirmidhi)

The message underlying his advice is one of moderation as a good Muslim should always exercise self-restrain and not fall for gluttony as underlined by the Quran and Hadith.

Food in Islam is closely tied to the concept of “Halal”. “Halal” literally means permissible or lawful. Under the Sharia law, there are criteria that must be fulfilled for the food to be deemed as “Halal” in regards to what type of food is allowed and its preparation process. Various religious bodies around the world are in charge of issuing Halal food certification as an official acknowledgement that the food produced complies with the Islamic standard. The dominant single organisation which issued the Halal certification in Malaysia is recognized by the government of the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia (JAKIM) and state Islamic Religious Department

(JAIN) (Hashim *et al.*, 2009) or State Islamic Religious Council (MAIN) (Harlida and Alias, 2014). In order for products to be marketed in the country such application may be made to JAIN while the products marketed to international or national application must be made to JAKIM (2005). Malaysian Halal certificate issued by JAKIM is recognised worldwide and is one of the internationally trusted Halal logos (Ahmad and Zulzaidi, 2012) because it has a strong industrial, manufacturing and marketing of Halal products, strong relationships with the country's trade in the world and has garnered firm support from the government (Badrudin *et al.*, 2012).

In Malaysia, the provisions of the legislation, policies and standards outlined in question is based on the principles of the Halal concept contained in the Quran and Sunnah, according to the views of muslim scholars who are venerated (Ahmad and Zulzaidi, 2012). Among the legal aspects relating to Halal in Malaysia is the Trade Descriptions Act 2011 and the Food Act 1983 (Harlida and Alias, 2014).

In addition to Islam, many other religions also forbid certain foods or have specific requirements related to food. There are Jewish, Islamic, Hindu and Buddha dietary laws. Food has always been the subject of taboos and obligations. Which food we prefer and what we consider fit for (human) consumption differs depending on the place and time we live and the faith we adhere to. Religious dietary laws are important to observant Jewish and muslim populations, although, not all the faithful comply with the religious dietary laws.

According to Havinga, Jewish dietary laws (Kashrut) determine which foods are fit for consumption by observant Jews (Kosher). It is a complex and extensive system with many detailed prescriptions concerning the production, preparation and consumption of food. The prescriptions are laid down in Jewish biblical and rabbinical sources. Kosher laws deal predominantly with three issues: prohibited foods (e.g., pork, shellfish and rabbit), prescriptions for religious slaughter (Shechita) and the prohibition on preparing and consuming dairy products and meat together. In addition, there are numerous prescriptions dealing with special issues such as wine and grape juice, cooking equipment and passover. Ruminants and fowl must be slaughtered by a specially trained religious slaughterer (Shochet) using a special knife. Prior to the slaughter, the shochet makes a blessing. The animal is not stunned. Slaughtered animals are inspected for visible defects by rabbinically trained inspectors, particularly the lungs. Red meat and poultry have to be soaked and salted to remove all the blood. JAKIM on 'Muslim food' or food 'covered Halal' or 'Kosher' is also seen not clearly highlighted its differences. The criteria that need to be taken into consideration are:

- All information shall consist of the ingredients are consumed or used by Muslims and not mixed with any material that is not lawful to eat or which unclean
- All equipment used for preparation, processing manufacturing or the like shall not contain or be free of objects that are unclean. Its handling including transport, storage, serving and similar shall not come into contact or close proximity with things that are forbidden

The rapid growth of the Halal industry in Malaysia has led to the development of the Kosher laws in this country. Trade Descriptions Act 2011, the Trade Descriptions (Certification and Marking of Halal) 2011, the Trade Descriptions (Definition of Halal) 2011 and Rules of the Trade Descriptions (Fi Certification and Marking of Halal) 2011 streamline the laws relating to Halal in Malaysia. In addition, there are a number of laws that indirectly contains provisions relating to Halal such as the Food Act 1983 and Food Regulations 1985, the (FAO., 1953; Saifuddeen, 2006; LGD., 1976). Laws local authority (CAP., 1999) as well as the Syari'ah Criminal Offences Act.

There are several guidelines for Halal food. Within the Islamic religion, a strong emphasis is placed on cleanliness-both spiritually and in the context of food and drink. For a food and drink product to be approved for consumption it must conform to the Islamic dietary laws as specified in the Quran, the saying of Prophet Muhammad his Sunnah (tradition) and in Fiqh (understanding) of the Islamic Jurists. The Quran has numerous injunctions instructing Muslims to choose and consume good wholesome foodstuffs. In the selection of food and drink, Islam has laid down three very important guidelines, namely:

Whether the consumption of the foodstuff is prohibited by Allah. Whether the foodstuff is obtained through Halal or Haram means. Whether or not the material is harmful to health (<http://www.isnahalal.ca.pdf>)

As an example, any pig product is considered Haram because the material itself is Haram. Additionally, beef from an animal that has not been slaughtered according to Islamic rites would still be considered Haram. To determine the Halal-Haram status of the foodstuffs and other material, Islam has laid general guidelines on this matter. Amongst the concerns are all raw materials and ingredients used must be Halal and naturally Halal animals such as cattle, goats, etc., must be slaughtered according to Islamic rites, the rituals specify that the act must be performed by a mentally sound muslim, to sever the blood

and respiratory channels of the animal, using a sharp cutting tool such as knife (Wahab and Azhar, 2014). Food operators which run Halal food, Kopitiam owners for instance need to refer to JAKIM from time to time to get the right information pertaining the matter. One of the most important aspects is providing a Halal vegetarian entrée using legumes as an alternative to meat dishes and reading the labels carefully and regularly when purchasing food as ingredients can change without notice (Tieman and Ghazali, 2014) and added that as food traditions and dietary habits are affected by religion and culture, the Halal food operators need to ask the participations or group leader if anyone has special dietary needs. Apart from that they to display the Halal certification symbol, food ingredient label or Halal store receipt.

Problem statement: The popularity of Kopitiam in Malaysia increases as it provides simple, yet, fast meals in accordance to the vibrant lifestyle of today's society. As the monetary fund to operate the Kopitiam is high compared to ordinary restaurants or other eating outlets, most are dominated by the non-Muslims. This group also ventures the Kopitiam business to cater the needs of the muslim customers. The signage of Halal is then becoming an issue among the Muslims customers despite the certification awarded. As it is given to the non-Muslim operators, the next question is to see how far they understanding and practice the rules and regulation pertaining the Halal signage.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data collection was done in the month of February, 2016 in within a district on the East Coast of Malaysia. Seven restaurateurs from six restaurants were interviewed for the study. Each of them are key decision maker, owner and manager their restaurants except for one pair who jointly own and operate one restaurant. The interviews were done on the premises of the restaurants and were completed within half an hour. Simultaneously, a separate study (currently unpublished) was conducted by gathering feedback from patrons in the form of questionnaires. The main focus was to establish the level of understanding the owners had on the Halal concept and how they implemented practices to ensure the food they are serving is Halal. To ensure that the restaurateurs were comfortable with answering questions closely related with their business practices there was no fixed set of questions. Rather, questions were posed to them in a manner which the interviewer felt was most appropriate given the circumstances and understanding of the restaurateurs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We list down excerpts of interviews with restaurateurs and two sections.

Understanding of the Halal concept

Respondent A, male 78 years old, 42 years in operation:

“I do know that the Halal Food Authority has come up with the criteria and standards for Halal food based on Islamic Shari'ah. Being in the food business for so long, I have made it a point to familiarize myself with the terms used and practices for the benefit of my customers. Many customers have kept coming back because they have confidence that the food we serve to them is in fact Halal”

“I have started my Kopitiam since, early 1970's. Those days my clients the fishermen and paddy farmers. My Kopitiam has become like a club for them. I learn a lot the compliances of Halal. I know the right sharp knife to slaughter the chicken performed by them at the back of my Kopitiam”

The core counsel of Islam in slaughtering for food is to ensure it in the minimum hurting way. Islamic laws or Syariah on the handling of animals be it chicken, cow or goats, plus the technique of slaughter are based in all conscience on “the spirit” of consideration, benevolence and kindness”

Respondent B, female 63 years old, 5 years in operation:

Although, I am new to the business, my family has been in the food industry for many years. I have seen that even back then they were very particular to keep the preparation of food Halal as our customers are very sensitive with pork as well as with the cleanliness of the food preparation”.

Respondent C, male 60 years old, 21 years in operation:

“Halal to me means being good and pure. I know that the direct translation means permissible and what Shari'ah defines Halal to be but very basically to me it means being pure: food that has been declared good for human consumption by the authorities”

“As for me, I really studied the concept of Halal before asking it from JAKIM, before I started my Halal Kopitiam. The understanding somehow is not permanent because it is something new to me. Hence, I refer the Halal concept to my staff who are mostly Muslims. Believe me, even they are cleaner and cooks but their knowledge on Halal is superb”

Respondent D, male 57 years old, 10 years in operation:

“All dead or decaying animals are haram. For meat to be Halal, the animal must be alive and healthy at the time of slaughter. Also, a Muslim must be the one who is performing the slaughter. He must use a sharp blade which slices through the neck of the animal. This is the standard that my muslim friends set and I have no problem complied with these. As a business owner, I am happy when my customers are happy”

“I know my customers would not welcome the idea of using the cooking utensils for something which is not Halal. That’s why I always make sure the cooking activities are done at the premises just for the Halal food served. JAKIM has given me the guide lines in preparing the Halal food. My customers are my good friends. They help me a lot understanding the Halal concept which make me feel not alienated at all with the idea”

Respondent E, male 57 years old, 7 years in operation:

“I was growing up in this place since my birth. I went to Malay school and mix a lot with Malay friends. Even I am a Buddhist, Islam has been a part of my life. Nothing strange or new about the belief. As I am a vegan, I do not consume alcohol. In order to serve Halal foods, I must really know the concept by heart. I would say the nature helps me a lot understand the meaning of Halal”

“I understand that Muslims regard some things as “najis” or unclean. To them meat that is not slaughtered in the correct way is unclean and so is alcohol, pork and excrements. I admit I do not know the reasons on why they regard these things are unclean with the exception of course but I still respect their beliefs and practices. I think it is a good thing”

Respondent F, males 55 and 59 years old, 3 years in operation:

“When we first decided to open this Kopitiam, we understood that many of our customers would want to eat Halal food and so we had to prepare food which is acceptable to them. We contacted the authorities and they gave us the information we needed about Halal practices. I can say that this has paid off. Look for yourself. We serve many people from different background here and they like our food”

“Islam is actually a bit liberal, it is just the people make it complicated. The more I learn about Halal food, the more I realise it is not a burden at all. It is actually having its own advantages to the users or customers”

“I am IT ardent I would say. The IT knowledge enables me to browse a lot of Halal issues. There is a also a link to JAKIM and some other related bodies which I can communicate. Such knowledge gives me more confidence to serve Halal food. In deed, we are planning to open few Halal Kopitiam chains soon”

Initiatives undertaken to comply with Halal practices
Respondent A, Male, 78 years old, 42 years in operation:

“Here is it easy to get Halal products. Since, we buy meat and other ingredients from Muslims I am confident that the food here is Halal right from the start. Occasionally, customers do ask if the food is prepared in a Halal way and I am able to reassure them that it is”

“I am having no problem with JAKIM and they are always helpful. From time to time, they would come for enforcement and I don’t see that as a hindrance. For me, it is an opportunity to clear things that are unclear regarding Halal matters because they are the right persons to delegate questions”

Respondent B, Female, 63 years old, 5 years in operation:

“I would say JAKIM is the best organisation to comply the Halal certification. Thumb up to the country that enables to come with such a good body liaising with Halal certification. I am lucky too because with this advancement in technology I start to google in the net. There are a lot of information I can get within the subject”

Respondent C, male 60 years old, 21 years in operation:

“I don’t carry out spot-checks on my suppliers to guarantee that the food is Halal. But we have been doing business for a long time and I trust them. I have Muslims working for me too and I’m sure they will alert me if something was not right”

Respondent D, male 57 years old, 10 years in operation:

“Everything we serve is Halal-completely Halal. We don’t serve alcohol here. I myself don’t drink for health reasons. I only want to give customers the best food, so, they will remember my shop and come back in the future”

“As all of my staff are Malay Muslims, I would always refer to them about the Halal food that we serve. Living in a Malay muslim community is an advantage too for me as a Kopitiam owner. The understanding of such community helps me a lot to serve Halal food in line with the Islamic law. Now, I know what lies behind the word clean and najis in line with syariah. Cleanliness in Islam doesn’t mean the stuff is literally free from dirt. It is more than that”

Respondent E, male 57 years old, 7 years in operation:

“I am particular about ensuring all of our food is Halal. The meat, the ingredients and even up to the utensils here. I can confidently say that everything is Halal and free from “najis”. We have obtained Halal certification from JAKIM so we have to maintain the certification by keeping our practices”

Respondent F, males 55 and 59 years old, 3 years in operation:

“We think that it would be beneficial if more restaurant owners take up courses to better understand the Halal food industry. They can simply search the internet for all the necessary information. Malaysia has a huge number of Muslims and we all know how much we Malaysian love our food. Maybe the authorities could start engaging restaurants to promote Halal food as well”

“I strictly adhere the Halal certificate given by JAKIM. There are cases customers ask us to serve non Halal menu in private functions with a high price. Yet, I refuse. My clients come to my shop because of they trust me and the genuinely of the Halal certification awarded to my Kopitiam. I would never betray that trust”

“I was abroad so a lot with my muslim friends and we definitely went after the Halal food. I would say JAKIM is the best when it comes to Halal food. The government must promote the idea of Halal food through JAKIM to countries which are still seeking for the right direction authorizing Halal certificate. For me, JAKIM and Halal are synonymous”

CONCLUSION

The results from the study have shown that the implementation and certification of the Halal industry in Malaysia is among the perfect and well in this region. It therefore can be a good example and bench mark among the muslim bodies that intend to impose the Halal certification for the food operators. This issue not only affects only muslim community but also the attention of adherents of other religions because food manufacturers in Malaysia consist of multiracial establishments. Muslims food needs to be Kosher, beginning with process of preparation of raw materials, manufacturing processes, storage, food, manufacturing, packaging and transportation. The government is also concerned with the issue of Halal food as it affects community in Malaysia. Thus in order to achieve that goal, the government has made Malaysia a Halal food (Halal hub) worldwide (Rahman *et al.*, 2013).

The findings also reveal that the operators have good understanding and practice of running Kopitiams regarding the Halal signage awarded to them. All non-Muslim operators understand the concept of Halal to be applied in their Kopitiams. The practice is fully utilised because the respondents run their business within

Muslim-Malay population. Besides, most of the workers who assist are from the Malay community making the Halal signage given is undisputable.

The government somehow needs to improve the system especially getting the involvements from the Halal food operators by giving them better understanding and practicing to operate the Halal food to the society. They need to respond to the feedbacks from the society upon the services given by the Halal food operators. The officers from JAKIM must have more active roles approaching the mentioned operators for the mutual understanding between both parties.

In addition, assessing and addressing the issues regarding the source of production of Halal products, no matter they come from muslim operators or not, is not a rudimentary need anymore, especially with the growing numbers of Halal food operations.

The moves of the non-Muslim operators to run Halal food for their muslim counterparts can be seen as a good platform to reduce the gap of ideology and beliefs between the two. By encouraging more non-Muslim Halal food operators to venture into such business, it can create a better understanding among the people and it is a way that contributes to a better religious tolerance among the nations. Prior to this, JAKIM must play more vital role to disseminate information to non-Muslim Halal food operators about the understanding and significance of Halal food products. Besides, the work to promote and certify Halal food must be done intensively in establishing Halal food as safe, secure and quality food products.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study also shows the challenges faced by the country like Malaysia in the establishment of the Halal industry that deals with certain rules and initiatives primarily in giving awareness to employers and users including the Muslim or non-Muslim societies. In addition, the strength of the Halal industry in Malaysia indirectly should serve as an example for other countries in adapting the Halal concept in the food industries. Malaysia therefore needs to implement proactive step to develop and produce high-quality and competitive Halal food. This can be achieved if the Halal operators: Muslims or non-Muslims have good understanding and practice to carry their responsibility towards making the country as halal hub.

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