

Halal Food, Identity, and Authority in Japan

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Halal food is a growing outbound and inbound market for the Japanese. Muslim countries represent 16% or one-fourth of the market worldwide, worth 547 billion US dollars a year. This is indeed very appealing and attractive for Japanese companies to export their products. Having said that, halal food has yet to be discovered by the majority of the Japanese. It is becoming a prevalent discourse among Japanese business practitioners, and the Japanese should be well prepared for this immense potential.

Apart from the export market, the demand for halal food inside Japan is also amazingly booming. With the increase of Muslim tourists per year, approximately 500,000 mainly from Indonesia and Malaysia, and with the incoming Olympic games in 2020, with an estimated 7,000 Muslim athletes and 1.5 million Muslim tourists, this should be a salient concern for the Japanese. Halal food is rising not only by means of tourism, but also there is an accrued demand from Japanese Muslim citizens and residents. No official data exists on Muslims in Japan, but some sources say there could be around 100,000 Muslims, mostly permanent residents, students, and expatriates.

Based on these internal and external factors, halal certificate bodies in Japan have been mushrooming in the last five years. Some claim there are 100 to 200 halal “certifiers,” including consultancies, promotional and marketing corporations, mosques, imams, and even individual Muslims. However, this number seems to be exaggerated. According to some, there are 20 to 25 halal certificate bodies. In fact, what I found during my research in Japan is that less than 10 are active in issuing halal certificates for a diverse variety of categories. Accordingly, halal-certified products are progressively going up. To date, inside Japan, there are more than 200 halal-certified raw materials, 100 halal-certified products distributed, 150 halal-certified restaurants, and around ten or so halal-certified hotels. Looking at this halal food phenomenon in Japan drives me to think more closely of the relationship among food, identity, and authority.

Food and Identity

In cultural studies, food reflects identity, either personal identity or group or even national identity. French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755–1822) once said, “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.” This indicates that the food that you eat will define your identity and thus the food that a nation eats will define a national identity. When you hear the word “pizza,” you think immediately of Italy, “burger” of the United States because people love eating fast food and it is part of the American national identity. Here in

Japan sushi or sashimi, miso soup, soy sauce, *wagyu* (Japanese beef), and tempura are part of the Japanese national identity.

Food and identity are intertwined. Food becomes an identity of a country. Food plays an important role in shaping our identity. Food becomes one of the keys of culture to structure our identities. In food, we find commonalities, such as equality, solidarity, and humanity. In food, people are equal because everybody is entitled to participate in defining, contributing, and working for food. Everybody is equal before food.

In food, we find a very truly basic human relationship: solidarity. In food, people find humanity, a very essence of life: to eat. We find a philosophy of life in food. Also, what we eat conveys to others a message about our beliefs and religions. There are some motives behind why we avoid eating some foods for health reasons, social needs, cultural exigencies, to religious norms and teachings. This is actually what is happening when it pertains to halal food.

Muslims exclude pork and its derivatives and alcoholic beverages in their diet. Many Japanese dishes contain either pork or alcoholic derivatives and here is a pivotal concern. Is it possible not to use pork or alcoholic ingredients in Japanese cuisine? Could Japanese adapt and tolerate a new “entry” in their food to face a new demand? Would it change Japanese identity? In the Japanese public sphere nowadays there is obviously an ongoing process and evolution in *washoku*. Japanese food is determined by external influences. The process of externalization and internalization in Japanese food culture is part of identity-making. In fact, there is more commitment, engagement, and responsibility in the Japanese society where Muslims reside. In the meantime, there is a deepening awareness and understanding of their Islamic identity and part of Islamic identity is halal food consumption.

Japanese society is in a new identity fabrication and forging process through food. What we are experiencing and what we are observing nowadays is a cultural and tradition negotiation process between “real and pure” Japanese foods and the “incoming” Japanese foods. The Japanese always succeed in this process. For instance, Japanese food has been adopting and adapting for the last 20 years in the world. When it comes to the Muslim world, Japanese food was able to adapt to the host country culture, tradition, and beliefs. Japanese food in Indonesia becomes halal Japanese food. As a matter of fact, food has accordingly played an urgent and fundamental part in religion and religion helped to define a new type of Japanese food. This creates much social meaning in the relationship between food and religion in the Indonesian context through Japanese food. So, it is more than possible to bring back this adaptation from abroad to the original country. If it succeeds in the largest Muslim country, then it should also succeed in the country of origin: Japan. This will result in food innovation. There will be a shift away from a Japanese *washoku* to a halal Japanese *washoku*.

Food and Authority

When this identity process has finished, which and whose authority will decide if this is halal or not? Now we are dealing with a fundamental aspect in Islam, namely authority. In Islam, full authority belongs to God, *Allah subhanahu wa taala*, and God alone decided which are halal and not in the Quran. This authority was delegated to the prophet Muhammad who explained more broadly about what halal is and listed a category and criterias about halal in his sayings and traditions (hadith and Sunnah). Based on these Islamic fundamental sources, halal is largely discussed to find answers on many halal questions, but which authority can discuss this? Who has that authority to interpret and decide which one is halal or not?

Some ulama (religious scholars) have discussed the meaning of “*uwlil amri minkum*” (“those in charge among you”) in the Quran al-Nisâ’/4:59. A number of Quranic interpreters (*mufasssir*) have said, “The meaning could be *sahâbat* (Prophet’s companion) *umarâ’* (military commander), *fuqahâ’* and *ulamâ’* (religious scholar), and *wulât* (actual rulers of the Muslim community).” Based on this information, ulama and government have the authority to decide halal and next to issue a halal certificate. However, Japan is not a majority-Muslim country and neither can the Japanese government regulate or intervene in religious matters as it is against article 20 of the Japanese Constitution of 1947.

Unfortunately, there does not exist a Japanese council ulama in Japan and broadly speaking there might be no ulama (in a strict sense) in Japan. So, who has the authority to decide halal and to issue a halal certificate? This is a real issue in Japan. Muslim communities, Islamic organizations, professionals, and mosques have tried to create halal organizations that issue halal certificates. In reality, what is happening is messy and chaotic, with tensions within those halal organizations. This situation not only gives a negative image of Islam, but also makes Muslim communities or Japanese business practitioners confused on halal matters. In fact, those halal organizations are simply contesting for authority. Each halal organization claims it is more authoritative than the others.

Active halal certificate organizations in Japan are difficult to be united to create a single halal certificate body for a number of reasons. Three major important obstacles are worth mentioning here. **First**, between active halal organizations, there exists an ethnic division between Japanese and non-Japanese. Halal organizations led by a “native” Japanese think the issue of Islam in Japan should be carefully determined and it would be only under the responsibility of the Japanese themselves and not arranged and managed by non-Japanese (citizens or permanent residents from different ethnicities and countries), such as Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankans, or Malaysians. For non-Japanese, they feel it is part of Muslim obligation to control halal food and to issue halal certificates. This Muslim obligation is a main duty in *dakwah* (prolezytation) to spread Islam in Japan. This is because Japan as a non-Muslim country has no single authority, as in a majority-Muslim country, such as Indonesia, Egypt, or Saudi Arabia.

The second obstacle is that interpretations on Islam among those in halal organizations is different. Some halal associations argue that the model of Islam which should be represented in Japan is moderate Islam. This group defends what I define as a “Japanese Islam” that is a fusion of the essence of Islamic teachings and Japanese culture and traditions. In other words, Japanese Islam is to embrace Islam as a personal religious belief and to make Islam a source of inspiration, a source of norms, values and ethics for social, political, and economic life, but at the same time to respect and to adhere to Japanese culture and tradition. The interpretation of Islam is in a Japanese cultural wrapping that is appropriate to Japan. Other halal associations are supposedly defending “rigorous Islam” which is an Islamic interpretation that is too literal and very much influenced by their country’s cultural background, either Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or Arab, for social life and cultural activities.

Finally, **the third obstacle** is that the standards of each halal organization vary from one to another, with different attitudes and orientations towards halal itself. One group is *dakwah*-based and believes that Islamic proselytizing and community service should take first place. Meanwhile, the other is a business-based organization that is profit-oriented. One group has “strict” and “severe” standards to issue a halal certificate and other a “soft” and “negotiable” one regarding halal standards. These three obstacles are at least what I discovered on halal problems in Japan.

Some halal associations have proposed a solution. The first step should be a general meeting among active and “big” halal organizations to create one halal consortium. Definitely, each organization still exists with its own structure, but they work together and only the members of this halal consortium could issue a certificate. If they could come to a common platform, the issue of authority will be solved in the next step, which is they should create a Japanese council of ulama. The halal consortium will act only as a sponsor and supporter and they will not sit in that council of ulama. This council of ulama consists of Japanese religious scholars and imams and invited ulama from abroad such as from Indonesia and Malaysia. This council of ulama would be composed, for instance, of five ulama and would work to set the Sharia standards of the halal certification process. The halal consortium will back up scientific matters. If this could happen, then there will be a single authority in Japan regarding halal certificates.

I sincerely believe that Japanese multiculturalism has paved the way for giving a halal food industry more success. When people come to Japan it is to taste the real traditional Japanese food or *washoku*; and when it deals with Muslims, they will surely eat halal Japanese food. This potential huge market will be much more successful in the near future, provided it gets support at least by one authority and one halal consortium. This is an alternative solution and will help resolve the halal issues in Japan.

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