

Branding halal

A photographic essay on global Muslim markets

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The market for halal products in ASEAN countries is today worth over US\$46 billion per annum (Liow 2009: 52n42), and worldwide US\$150 billion (Agriculture 2006). Historically, halal was ascertained close to the place of consumption, but with improved food processing technologies, and with increased migration and trade of products between distant regions, certification has become increasingly important to practising Muslims.

Perception of halal varies across Muslim groups. In the Middle East, halal is chiefly associated with meat and poultry, whereas in Southeast Asia 'all good and consumable products have to be halal' (Riaz 2003: 165). Interestingly, the concern over halal is more pronounced in some Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and Singapore than in much of the Middle East. The reasons for this are many, but the proliferation of halal in a country such as Malaysia for example cannot be divorced from the fact that over the past three decades the country has witnessed steady economic growth, the emergence of large groups of Muslim middle-class consumers and bureaucrats as well as centralized state incentives to strengthen halal production, trade, and consumption.

Formal certification was first introduced in Malaysia in 1974, in Singapore in 1978 and in Indonesia in 1994. In rapidly expanding markets for halal products, Malaysia and Singapore play an increasingly important role, and hold a special position as countries where the state, supported by Muslim agencies, certifies halal products, spaces (shops, factories and restaurants) as well as work processes in ways that are highly commercialized. In these two countries, and in shops all around the world, consumers can find food (Figs 6, 7, 12), beverages (Figs 9 & 10) carrying distinctive Malaysian and Singapore state halal-certified trustmarks. Halal is also spreading more broadly into care and health products (Figs 8, 11).

In Arabic, halal literally means 'permissible' or 'lawful'. Traditionally, it signifies 'pure food' with regard to meat in particular, and this is safeguarded by proper Islamic practice such as ritual slaughter and pork avoidance. Yet in today's globalized industry for food, biotechnology and care products, Muslims also increasingly avoid substances that may be contaminated with porcine residues or alcohol, such as gelatine, glycerine, emulsifiers, enzymes, flavours, and flavourings. It is also a distinction employed in Islamic banking, where interest-bearing investments or investments in companies engaged in haram (literally 'unlawful') activities are excluded from the category halal (Hassam & Mahlknecht 2011).

In Malaysia and Singapore, even paper/plastic labels and printing on food are problematized. Glue used for labels as well as edible printing and dyes used directly on food, may contain ingredients that are not permissible. These two states are meeting new challenges in developing standards for production, preparation, handling, storage and certification.

Halal trustmarks form part of a visual branding system indicating many products as safe to consume, as displayed commercially in advertisements, shops and restaurants. This photographic essay explores some of the visual properties of halal certification in Malaysia and Singapore. Halal represents, of course, but one among a range of food certifications operative worldwide, including: kosher, vegan, vegetarian, and organic certification. Beyond this, commonly non-GMO and MSG

status is also stated on foods, along with indications of possible contact at the site of production with the top eight allergens: milk, egg, wheat, soybean, fish, crustacean shellfish, peanuts and tree nuts. Such visual indicators, along with ingredients, tend to compete with one another on packaging. In areas of the world where halal-certified foods are not present, Muslims may well accept kosher or vegan foods.

Halal zones

Worldwide there are many halal-certification systems. By and large these are governed by Muslim agencies. However, in the case of Malaysia and Singapore, halal-certified products are traded globally through the efforts of two state halal certification bodies, namely of the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia – JAKIM) and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura – MUIS). These state agencies work in collaboration with Muslim groups and commercial companies to foster standards in Islamic practice.

In Malaysia and Singapore, halal is regulated in quite different contexts: Malaysia is a Muslim majority country in which Malay Muslims are a dominant political and ethnic group, whereas in Singapore, ethnic Chinese comprise the vast majority (who do, of course, have a predilection for pork) but they are surrounded by Muslim populations, including Indonesia, which offer large markets for their products.

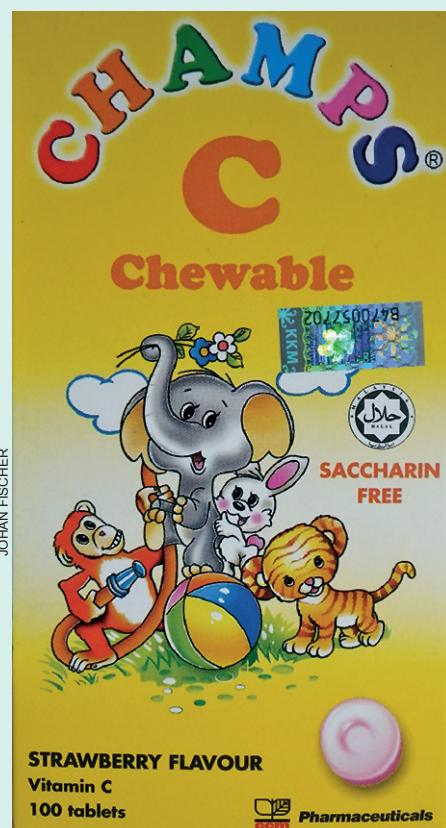
On 10 July 2012, the Indonesian government for the first time recognized the Malaysian halal trustmark, now permitting Malaysia to trade its halal products also in Indonesia (Yahya 2012). In this way, global markets for halal are gradually developing across borders into zones, inside and between which regulatory institutions and markets interact. If they do well, as in this case Malaysia, their zones will increase in size, reaching well across national borders.

Located within the high-growth Southeast Asian region, Malaysia's and Singapore's new governing practices clearly aim to address not just national but also global Islamic markets. The strategic location of these countries, and their favourable political, economic, legal and social infrastructure, helps to attract foreign investment, technology transfer, and international expertise. They use so-called 'zoning technologies' to carve out spaces to achieve strategic goals in relation to market forces (Ong 2006:7). The state in Malaysia and Singapore promotes a localized form of 'moderate' Islam compatible with global capitalism. Technology, standards, intellectual property rights, economy and government all converge to help sustain such zones.

Over the past three decades, the Malaysian and Singaporean states have effectively certified, standardized, and bureaucratized halal production, trade, and consumption. Standards and standardization helps underwrite the design and quality of products as well as the proper conduct of companies. These states have the power to impose sanctions on those companies that do not live up to standards. In controlling and regulating these standards these agencies also help structure the place of these products within the global order. By means of 'standardization' (Scott 1998) of production, trade, and consumption, legibility and simplicity is achieved in both the process of state halal certification, and also within markets.



Figs 1-5. The halal trustmarks of the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia – JAKIM) and the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura – MUIS). Other halal trustmarks: Indonesia, Philippines and Italy.



Captions to figures, from left to right and top to bottom:

Fig. 6. Shop in Malaysia, showing the separation between halal vs non-halal sections.

Fig. 7. Halal goods in a Singaporean supermarket.

Fig. 8. Colgate Plax from Malaysia.

Fig. 9. Nestlé Milo ad in Malaysia.

Fig. 10. Spritzer mineral water from Malaysia.

Fig. 11. Champs vitamin C tablets.

Fig. 12. Fairprice wholemeal bread packaging with, among other marks, the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore halal trustmark.



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Fig. 13. McDonald's in Malaysia.
Fig. 14. KFC in Singapore.
Fig. 15. Starbucks in Malaysia.
Fig. 16 (above right). Burger King in Singapore.

The standards are supported by compulsory legislation meant to enhance trust in the halal products. An example of this is the mandatory requirement that commercial companies must set up a Muslim halal committee to ensure not only the 'halalness' of products, but also to mitigate the risk of non-halal contamination (i.e. as a form of standardized Muslim risk management). Hence, such standards reinvent social norms and directives.

In Malaysia in particular, the state provides infrastructure for the manufacturing firms that operate in the region. The capability of state-regulated Islam to certify halal supports commercial companies but this means that they are torn between the desire for state certification on the one hand, and being subjected to 'Islamic' forms of disciplining, science, inspection, and control on the other.



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Halal trustmarks

In modern consumer cultures, 'most pictures, texts, motifs, labels, logos, trade names, designs, tunes and even some colors and scents are governed, if not controlled, by regimes of intellectual property' (Coombe 1998:6). The halal products discussed here are protected by property laws; that is, they are produced, marketed and certified as halal, while simultaneously subjected to copyrights, trademarks, publicity rights, and design patents. On many of these products the halal logo issued by JAKIM or MUIS is just one recognizable trademark among many.

Halal certification in the form of halal trustmarks has added a new legal dimension to the production and marketing of these products. Trademarks and halal trustmarks are both legal and institutional signs establishing and legitimating authoritative meanings in the public sphere. Consequently, the legal protection of halal forms creates new relations of power in contemporary cultural politics. In other words, as the law legitimizes new sources of cultural authority it also fixes its social meanings.

The certification of halal products and their labelling with halal trustmarks are essential in halal production, trade and regulation, because the 'halalness' of products is not easily verifiable: smell, texture, or taste cannot determine whether a product is halal or not. Hence, the visual aspects of halal trustmarks are vital. During my extended periods of fieldwork among religious authorities, commercial companies, shops, and restaurants, I have paid particular attention to the way in which halal trustmarks are, or should be, displayed in order to live up to legal/religious requirements.

A specific question in this respect is how commercial companies negotiate with the certifying bodies over the placement of trustmarks on products, production space, advertisements, certificates and websites. This form of 'logo logic' works by attaching political and moral messages to life-style brands and communicating these branded messages (Bennett & Lagos 2007:194).

Halal trustmarks on products are essential; this is where visual branding meets everyday consumer culture and practice. Halal is also ubiquitous in advertisements in the urban landscape (Fig. 9).

Shops and supermarkets/hypermarkets in particular, live up to the increasingly tight halal requirements, not only in terms of keeping halal/haram products separate, but also in the way in which more and more supermarkets in Singapore and Malaysia (Figs 6, 8) are designed according to halal requirements.

Fig. 17. ShinTokyo SuShi restaurants advertising halal sushi across countries in Southeast Asia, North Africa and the Middle East.

Fig. 18. A Chinese halal restaurant in Singapore.

Fig. 19. A Malaysian halal restaurant.

Based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Malaysia and Singapore, this article forms part of a research project entitled *Global halal zones: Islam, states and markets* that explores how global halal production, trade and regulation is taking place in the interface between Islam, states and markets.

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Many local Chinese restaurants in Chinese majority Singapore (Fig. 18) and Malay Muslim Malaysia (Fig. 19) are being halal-certified because they want to attract Muslim customers. Some establishments cease serving pork and alcohol and convert to halal status entirely. Similarly, large companies such as McDonald's (Fig. 13), KFC (Fig. 14), Starbucks (Fig. 15) and Burger King (Fig. 16) have become global leaders in halal through their attempts to thrive among Muslim consumers by demonstrating sensitivity to Muslim halal sensibilities.

Halal certification is entangled in evermore-complex webs of political, economic, religious, and national significance. The emergence, consolidation and expansion of halal certification in Malaysia and Singapore since the early 1970s is setting the pace for the commercialization of trustmarks, and the global visual branding of halal. ●

