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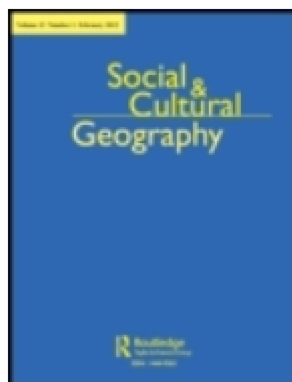

Blood, Body and Belonging: The geographies of halal food consumption in the UK

Journal:	*Social and Cultural Geography*
Manuscript ID	RSCG-2018-0183.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original Paper
Keywords:	Abjection, Belonging, Halal Food, Identitiy, Muslims, Animal ethics

Abstract:	This article presents a framework for understanding how 'halal' food consumption is understood, practiced and experienced by British Muslims through an empirical study in Birmingham (UK). There are emerging bodies of literature in geography that analyse food/animal ethics and work recognising the increasing importance of the halal food industry (Miele 2016). However, there is also a need to understand how ethical and theological concerns translate when scaled down to individual food choices and experiences of Muslims, as they negotiate food consumption as a minority group. Accordingly, this paper utilises qualitative data from an in-depth study to develop a framework for understanding halal food consumption from the perspective of British Muslims. Utilising conceptual literature on food/animal ethics (Elder et al 2003, Miele 2016), abjection (Douglas, 1966; Kristeva, 1982) and belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006) it draws evidence into three corresponding sections: (i) Blood - the ethics of religious slaughter processes; (ii) Body - the embodied responses to 'clean' and 'impure' food, and (iii) Belonging - integral connections between halal food and notions of belonging. The paper concludes by suggesting that this framework is a helpful starting point from which to understand the ways in which halal food consumption scales down from abstraction to practice, from ethics to embodied experience.

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1. Introduction

For geographers, the importance of food goes beyond physical and biological realms, and is recognised as having deep sociological and political meaning (Buller, 2013; Jackson et al, 2009; Waitt 2014). The consumption and avoidance of foods takes place within an array of affective social and political entanglements, and it is from within these complex entanglements that we construct boundaries of self and other, identity and belonging.

It is significant then, that the phenomenon of the religious food controversy is becoming an increasingly regular occurrence in European countries. In February of 2014 halal and kosher food was banned in Denmark (Fischer, 2014). In February 2016 the Netherlands banned the export of halal and kosher foods (Lewis, 2016). In France, a number of controversies have arisen around the sale of halal food, from the media discourse following the commercial sale of 'halal hamburgers' (see Wright & Annes, 2013) to the campaign by conservative groups and politicians to ensure no alternatives to pork are provided for school meals (Chrisafis, 2015). In the United Kingdom in 2014, a number of leading British tabloid and broadsheet newspapers ran a series of articles on their front-pages with grave concerns about the nature of the food which was being fed to British citizens at restaurants in the UK. Provocative headlines such as 'Halal Secret of Pizza Express' (The Sun, 2014) together with the cumulative effect of a number of articles on the alleged covert and insidious halal food content in chain restaurants led to what has been since described as 'halal hysteria' (see Stephenson, 2014; Ali and Whitham 2018).

In the context of a rapidly expanding market for halal food globally (Miele, 2016), these controversies demonstrate that in Western and predominantly non-Muslim countries such as the UK, food ethics is becoming a location for the contestation of cultural and identity politics, a phenomenon that has been termed 'gastropolitics' (Appadurai, 1981). However, from a scholarly perspective, these debates also expose significant gaps in academic knowledge. There is a need for greater research into how broad, global debates around food ethics and religious practice scale down and are translated into individual everyday behaviour: how debates and decisions about what to eat become actualised by Muslims themselves. This analysis will then allow us to understand the heterogenous understandings of religious food consumption, rather than regarding 'halal' as a singular, essentialised Muslim food choice. Moreover, the ways in which eating halal shapes everyday behaviour and constructs processes of identity and exclusion of minority populations is also under-researched – we need to consider *why* religious consumption matters, and the degree to which it matters for Muslim minorities. It is specifically in this area that our paper makes its contribution.

As this paper will show, the fundamental meanings, understandings and regulations that construct notions of 'halal' are not singular but are themselves hotly contested among Muslims. Furthermore, halal food practice and understanding are constructed through the intertwining strands of theology, the emotional and affective responses to food, and the politics of belonging. Through data gathered from in-depth interviews with British Muslims together with secondary data analysis on halal food certification, this paper explores both the motivations for eating halal food and its contested meaning, to arrive at a framework for understanding halal practices in their multiplicities and nuances, and in relation to Muslim identities. The paper begins with an analysis of literature on halal food ethics, the construction of food purity/abjection binaries (Douglas 1966; Kristeva 1982), and the relationship between food and notions of belonging (Antonsich 2010; Yuval-Davis 2006). The paper's empirical

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findings are split into three sections corresponding to data analysis. The first, 'Blood' examines the understandings of 'halal' in relation to the ethics of animal slaughter. The second, 'Body' focusses on the embodied responses of participants to food, which allows us to reflect the strength of its importance for identity construction. The third section, 'Belonging' discusses how the consumption of halal food by participants is related to their sense of belonging, and can be a means of everyday exclusion. We conclude by discussing the interrelationships between these considerations, and by suggesting that religious food controversies relating to Muslim or indeed Jewish minorities are best analysed using a framework that captures the multi-dimensional nature of religious food consumption.

2.1 Halal Ethics and Slaughter in Context

Within critical human geographies, non-human or animal geographies have emerged as an active area of research in recent years (cf. Buller, 2016; Hovorka, 2017; Hovorka, 2018). The emergence of this paradigm stems in large part to an ethical and moral reawakening in relation to non-human subjectivities (Barnett, 2012; Butler, 2006). Drawing on feminist, anarchist and intersectional approaches, the paradigm has offered crucial interrogation of human activities in relation to the physical and discursive treatments of non-human animals. There has been much focus on discourses of environmental ethics and animal rights, particularly as they relate to the industrialised food system (Buller, 2013; Emel et al, 2002). This scholarship and advancement of animal rights is important to acknowledge but must also be contextualised in relation to sociological and cultural studies in which animals and their meat play a role in the social construction of human culture, as well as their power to shape human identities (Emel et al, 2002).

Indeed, as Elder et al (1998) have argued, society has routinely utilised the nature of human-animal relationships to consecrate normative cultural practices and distinguish them from that of social out-groups. They remind us that the norms of animal practice are far from universal, and that migrants, by transferring 'place-based' practices outside of their *spatial* boundaries are drawn as transgressors of *cultural* boundaries (1998, p. 184). The ethical contradictions of dominant groups are normalised, and transgressors are noted for their 'strangeness', and their choices and practices are interrogated. This societal codification lends itself to constructing notions of 'savage' and 'primitive' groups, based on their otherness. Elder et al (1998, p. 192) go further to suggest that there is an explicitly postcolonial interpretation we can apply to this codification. Societal objections to halal and kosher meat are rarely framed around de-facto animal agencies and rights in the fundamental sense, but to highlight divergent human practices. Through these codifications, minority groups are left open to being excluded through racist discourses which foreground divergent cultural practice.

This brings us to the subject of Islamic slaughter and the concept of what Muslims commonly refer to as 'keeping halal' or maintaining a halal lifestyle. Islam is considered by many of its adherents to be a holistic 'way of life', a set of principles and obligations that shape everyday activities beyond the most obvious forms of worship. For Muslims who follow the most literal readings of Islamic texts, Islamic laws (sometimes referred to as Shari'ah) apply to everyday acts, which include eating (Adams, 2011). The Arabic word 'halal' describes something which is lawful or permissible and as such, halal dietary laws dictate what Muslims are permitted to consume. Correspondingly, foods which are prohibited are said to be *haram* (Adams, 2011; Mukherjee, 2014). For theologians, the primary sources of Islamic dietary laws are the Quran, and the Sunna (traditions) and the Hadith (sayings) of the Prophet

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Mohammed (Fischer, 2005). Within religious texts and discourses, halal food is considered variously to be pure, clean and safe (Zannierah Syed Marzuki et al, 2012).

A key plank of halal dietary law which is practiced almost universally among Muslims is an abstention from pork. Scholars of religion suggest that pork is considered by Muslims to be a carrier of pathogens and harmful bacteria. A second key plank is avoidance of intoxicants which are thought to be harmful to one's physical and spiritual wellbeing (Adams, 2011; Albashi, 2013; Fischer, 2005; Hassan & Hall, 2004). However, defining halal beyond this is more problematic than it initially seems. Halal dietary laws are constructed through religious texts to prescribe how permitted animals should be slaughtered, but as this paper will go on to show, the precise nature of the recommended method of slaughter can be subject to internal debate within Islam and between Muslims. Three requirements considered key for most Muslims are that the animal must be slaughtered by someone of Abrahamic faith, that this person must invoke God's name at the time of slaughter, and the method of slaughter must be throat-cutting which also drains blood from the animal, resulting in a quick death for the animal. The ethics of treatment of animals is stated by Islamic theologians to be one of the primary reasons for this requirement and this method of slaughter is considered by Muslims to be the most humane. It is consistent with the Islamic belief that animals should not suffer unnecessarily either before or during slaughter (Campbell, 2011; Mukherjee, 2014; Regenstein et al 2003; Van Waarden, 2006).

However, academic research comparing halal and similar kosher techniques does not suggest that religious slaughter is less painful than contemporary normative practices in Europe, which involve 'stunning' an animal via an electric bolt. Research by veterinary organisations is generally consistent in advocating pre-stunning of animals before slaughter to reduce animals' suffering by minimising the time it takes for animals to be rendered unconscious (FVW, 2002 cited in Bergeaud-Blackler, 2007; FAWC, 2003).

At this point animal ethics collide with cultural and religious rights, as the European Union, despite providing regulations on animal welfare in relation to slaughter, provides exemptions for religious slaughter (EC Directive, 1993). These exemptions allow for animals to be killed without necessarily being rendered unconscious beforehand. Many EU member states including the UK have transposed the religious slaughter exemption directive into national laws and regulations, but other European states have not allowed for any such exemption (Bergeaud-Blackler, 2007). To complicate matters further, despite these exemptions, a significant percentage of halal meat across Europe and 84% in the UK is from animals which have nonetheless been pre-stunned (FSA, 2015). This fact and the varying standards of halal accreditation agencies means that the label of 'halal' holds no real indication of whether an animal has or has not been stunned before being killed. Bergeaud-Blackler (2007) acknowledges that theological debates persist over whether the flesh of an animal that was stunned before being killed would be considered halal. Concurrently there has also been a competition between halal certification bodies promoting what they believe to be 'authentic' halal foods (Lever & Miele, 2012 p. 529).

Animal rights are often the stated reason for opposition to halal foods, yet two points are important to bear in mind. The first is that public and political controversies over the treatment of animals have very heavily focussed on religious slaughter rather than other aspects of wellbeing of animals, indicating that the politics of race and identity contribute to these debates. In Orientalist discourses

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Islam is frequently denigrated as being a retrograde religion (Allen, 2010; Said, 1979), and this reinforces suggestions that its adherents support barbaric slaughter methods, relative to a more 'civilised' European method of slaughter (Mukherjee, 2014; Lever, 2018). Indeed, it is through such cultural signifiers that Muslims living as minorities can be racialised. Secondly it is important to note that the majority of halal meat produced in the UK is in any case pre-stunned, reducing significantly the welfare difference between halal and non-halal (or haram) foods. These factors indicate then, that to understand the motivations and the full spectrum of meaning attached to halal food consumption, we need to look beyond simply animal ethics and towards questions of identity.

2.2 From Abjection to Belonging

To explore how identity is related to food practices we must consider the ways in which the materialities of food products can help construct bounded notions of 'self' and 'other'. Within geography, Sibley (1995) used object relations theory to suggest that young children's formative experiences help them to distinguish between the self/other, and to identify external objects of potential danger. Unfamiliar smells and tastes become perceived as potentially dangerous 'others' and Sibley suggests that this creation of difference lays the psychological groundwork for fear of unfamiliar otherness in later stages of life. Indeed, this notion can be related to the concept of identity explained by Stuart Hall (1992), in which identity itself can be understood as the relationship an individual develops between their internal and external worlds. Within this analysis, objects such as food become significant, as their very purpose is to be able to cross the boundary of self-hood, to become ingested, digested and embodied (Goody, 1982).

A related body of anthropological literature which specifically addresses food taboos (Douglas, 1966; Kristeva, 1982) can advance our understanding of the role food plays in identity construction. Mary Douglas' (1966) work is of relevance as it originally set out the ways in which religious lifestyles and rituals had become a performance through which notions of 'clean' and 'unclean' foods could be socially constructed. Whereas Durkheim (1912) had previously discussed taboos as forms of social control, Douglas explored the nature of taboos within the paradigm of purity/danger, asserting that 'dirt' can be described as matter 'out of place' (Douglas, 1966. p. 41). Disavowing the notion that dietary laws had a basis in primitive understandings of health, instead Douglas affirmed that these laws were based on social constructions of uncleanness and purity, and intimately connected to the construction of communal *identity*. For Douglas (1966), these constructions are part of the bounded and boundaried fabric of everyday life in which practices and indeed rituals concretise the notion of what it is to live within a particular 'society'.

The most intimate boundary of all is the body itself (1966, p. 116), whose skin can be characterised as a border, the openings of which can be understood as having the potential to be polluted or defiled. One of the most pertinent aspects of Douglas' work, for this paper, is that it is not merely embodied objects such as food which can be the cause of defilement. Ideas and symbols can also affect our psyche so as to provoke us to distinguish once more between 'self' and 'other' (also see Rouse & Hoskins, 2004). This notion resonates with our study, for it is not any inherent material polluting property of food that renders it forbidden, but the spiritual or cultural meaning or desecration that it is understood to entail. Furthermore, our regulation of the body in this way defines what is internal and external, and these notions are operationalised through dietary law to cast out the net of identity, but also to mark out its boundaries.

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Kristeva (1982) advances Mary Douglas' work, similarly suggesting that food taboos are a means through which pollution is understood as inherently embodied – and that food taboos work to give salience to constructions of religious 'purity'. Kristeva's theory offers a developmental and psychological account of how pollution or dirt is socially encountered and understood. Crucially, Kristeva elucidates on the *processes* that work to mark out the boundaries of purity and danger by advancing the notions of disgust through her theorisation of the 'abject'. For Kristieva (1982), the feelings and reactions of disgust and revulsion is the embodied process through which demarcations between purity and danger, self and other are routinely experienced. Kristeva calls this response 'abjection'. Kristeva observes that an encounter with an object which challenges the boundaries of human biology can confer either fear or *jouissance* (Kristeva, 1982, p. 35). It is this potential response which lends food its inherent viscerality (Probyn, 2000, p. 1), and which gives the act of eating such salience. Abjection therefore shares an ontological kinship with notions of affect, by allowing us to explore the confrontation or interaction with an object, as an experience located at a moment before a rational deliberation or judgement can be formed. Rouse and Hoskins (2004, p. 232) describe this experience as one which is 'pre-cultural'. Within geography too, Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2010, 2008) also attribute food with visceral qualities which are then crucial to shaping identity and selfhood. They also construe this viscerality as inherently political, arguing that food choices are constructed through moral knowledge and are also trained through complex networks of governance and through the proliferation of compounding social norms (2008, p. 468-469). In contrast to the more dualist readings of Kristeva and Douglas, they also emphasise the fluid nature of those identities in relation to encounters with visceral realms (Hayes Conroy & Hayes Conroy, 2010).

The anthropological notions of purity and abjection offer insight into constructions of sacred or forbidden experiences. However, the focus on the pre-emptive, the impulsive, if utilised as a sole framing, risks representing food aversions as irrational taboos, so ingrained as to be outside of the control of any subject. In such a reading, religious food choices would also be in danger of being represented as 'primitive' impediments to secular belongings. Whereas constructs of purity and abjection tend to focus on aversion to food and boundary-making, less room is left to explore the possibilities of shared rituals, practices and communal eating that confer belonging. Moreover, this approach in isolation is also prone to overlooking the feelings of spiritual fulfilment and religious integrity which emanate from 'keeping halal', which is important to our study. Furthermore, food aversions and choices do not exist independently of socio-political contexts, in which religion and secularity are frames through which Muslims are routinely represented. For these reasons we also need to understand halal food consumption in the context of belonging and its politics (Yuval-Davis 2006, Antonsich, 2010).

Belonging has been conceptualised as combining two elements: the emotional entanglements with place and space on one hand, and the politics of boundary-making that are enacted by actors of power on the other (Yuval Davis, 2006). The former of these distinctions provoke discussions on the nature of place attachment in giving the sense that feels 'at home'. Antonsich (2010, p. 647) describes this as *place-belongingness* and suggests that cultural factors including the social and material provision for populations to lead fulfilling lives form part of what gives us this sense of emotional belonging, pertaining to feeling 'at home'. The *politics* of belonging interrogates those junctures at which the demarcations of belonging are constructed: when laws, services, provisions or political rhetoric begin to draw out populations who do and who do not belong. The politics of belonging has been neatly described by Crowley (1999, p. 30) as the 'dirty work of boundary maintenance'. Suffice to say that

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these distinctions bleed into each other somewhat, as the feelings of being at home are strengthened or weakened according to shifts in the politics of belonging.

On an individual level, being able to practice one's core faith identity through halal food consumption allows for Muslims to have confidence in their spiritual and bodily integrity, their sense of self. Dietary rules when followed by a group can also be potent constructions which enhance a sense of togetherness (Meyer-Rochow, 2009). For societies and diasporas, practices and rituals can allow for members to share in the warmth and acceptance of feeling 'at home'. Longhurst et al (2009) represents one of the very few sociological studies exploring the importance of food in relation to belonging among migrants, including those from Muslim countries. The study richly details the ways in which rituals of cooking, and the sensory depth of cooking and eating practices allows for diasporal connections of belonging to be performed. Similarly, Duruz (2002), in a study of a beachside Australian suburb, recounts through the memories of participants how food culture and practices are crucial to form narratives of belonging for women. Longhurst et al (2009, p. 209) specifically mention the way in which Muslims face challenges due to a lack of understanding in relation to their food habits. Antonsich (2010) in the construction of a framework for understanding belonging also recognises the importance of the materiality of food consumption and production as key facets of generating a sense of 'home' – and this is relevant on a personal and communal scale.

Food consumption and its ethics are also increasingly and inevitably couched within debates of secularity and the *politics* of belonging. Through science and ethics, European societies seek to arrive at a method of 'ethical slaughter', in tune with 'civilised' liberal values (Smith, 2002). Implicit claims to civilisation maintain a strong dichotomy of 'self' and 'other' by mobilising liberal notions of progress. However, these liberal notions are also racialised in contemporary liberal society. The dichotomies between self/other are then conflated with civilised/barbarian or European/non-European (Elias, 2010; Todorov 2010). The analysis by Elder et al (1998) dovetails with this discourse, and as Mukherjee (2014) has suggested, constructions of civilised and uncivilised slaughter methods and food consumption are constructed over societal layers of Orientalism. The politics of belonging thus plays out through attitudes to food production and consumption, and as the study will show, Muslims can be acutely aware of this politics around halal food, and the potential for exclusion it creates.

This observation returns us to the point made in the introduction about halal food controversies routinely being used or even manufactured to 'other' Muslim minorities in the West. We see from the literature analysis that it is not possible to separate out the specificities of halal food ethics from the emotive, identity-constructing power of food. Nor can halal food consumption in places such as the UK be unpicked without the wider socio-political context being acknowledged. This context is one in which Muslim minorities rely on halal provisions to lead spiritually fulfilling lives, whilst also encountering discourses which threaten the very availability of those provisions. A singular theoretical frame cannot capture all these dimensions of halal consumption politics concurrently, but this review of literature on halal food ethics, purity and abjection, and belonging allow us to consider the important strands of theology, emotion and belonging that shape halal food consumption, when we scale down to the ways in which individual Muslims make food choices.

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3. Methodology

The research project draws upon the expertise of the two authors, each of whom have extensive experience of ethnographic research on Muslim identities (Isakjee, 2013; 2016) and food geographies (Carroll, 2012; Carroll and Fahy 2015), during which issues around halal food have been encountered. The paper is based upon primary data collection involving twelve in-depth interviews with Muslim residents of Birmingham (UK), together with desk-based research used to triangulate data and clarify assertions, particularly on slaughter practices in the UK and issues related to the work of food accreditation agencies. Birmingham is one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse cities in the UK and has one of the highest proportions of Muslim population of any British city at almost 22% (Birmingham City Council, 2013). Previous work on Muslim identities in the UK asserts their sheer diversity of ethnic origin, Islamic beliefs (depending on different theological traditions) and socio-economic statuses (Bowen, 2014) as well as the diversity of lived experiences which are intersected too by gender and migration history (Siraj, 2016).

The aim of this research project was not to provide a representative sample of Muslim opinion, but to gain an understanding of the depth and diversity of Muslim experiences and beliefs in relation to halal food and explore the conceptual entanglements within these practices. For this reason, we utilised a maximum-diversity sampling strategy to understand the variability of experiences, attitudes and practices (Sandelowski, 1995). Participants were recruited through email invitations to a range of Muslim organisations and societies in Birmingham as well as recruitment through Muslim-specific events taking place in the city. The interview sample contained residents from ten different ethnic backgrounds (Indian, Pakistani, Afghani, Brunei, Bulgarian, Indonesian, Turkish, White British, Bulgarian, Yemeni) from a broad range of age-ranges (22-60), with six individuals who had lived in the UK for at least 20 years, and six who had arrived more recently. The interview sample contained Muslims who identify as Sunni and Shia, and one participant who was self-identified as culturally Muslim without being religiously practicing.

Semi-structured interviews were designed for the project. Questions probed the relative importance of halal when choosing foods; why eating halal may have been important for participants; personal understandings of the meaning and signifiers of halal food; barriers or challenges to halal food consumption; and how participants may have perceived or experienced inclusion or exclusion as a halal consumer. Questions were also asked pertaining to the everyday experiences, the practicalities and difficulties associated with 'keeping halal', encouraging narratives that might allow participants to elucidate upon their emotional engagement with halal food. The interviews were conducted between March and June 2014. They were recorded using a digital audio recording device and were later transcribed verbatim to allow for open-content analysis. All participants either spoke English as a first language or were proficient in English as an additional language.

4. Analysis

4.1 Blood: Halal Food Ethics and Slaughter

The data analysis begins to reveal the diverse ways in which halal food ethics scales down to personal attitudes, as theology and ethics is translated into everyday understanding and practice. As the earlier sections have suggested, two crucial misunderstandings around halal slaughter are common. The first is that halal slaughter of animals is understood uniformly among Muslims, and the second is that mode

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of animal slaughter is the only issue on which understandings halal food vary. The data collected in this research project challenges both these notions, with substantial evidence of very different understandings of what constitutes halal food, and with participants explaining how choosing to eat halal goes far beyond the ethics of the specific slaughter process. Nonetheless, this analysis begins by exploring views on the halal slaughter process. As previously established, most Muslims understand in the most basic terms that halal slaughter involves the recital of the name of God, followed by a swift, clean cut of an animal's throat (Mukherjee, 2014). Ostensibly the prayer recital may be perceived as an uncomplicated precondition, but there is a tension between what the prayer may symbolise in ideal circumstances, and the more mechanical reality of factory farming. The recital of a prayer was recognised by all participants as a ritual part of the construction of halal meat:

Maria *You have to pray on something before you kill the animal…*

Zohra *So the important words are bismillah (in the name of God). When you cut, for example, the cow's head, before it is cut, you say this.*

However even this simple ritual can be problematic when one considers the automated processes of factory farming, particularly in relation to chickens slaughtered by assembly line blades (see Miele 2016). This form of industrial farming and slaughter is prevalent with the production of halal meat, as it is with non-halal meat production. Two participants raised this issue unprompted, coming to differing conclusions:

Mukhtar *For the mass-production of halal chickens, for example, in a factory, there has to be a quick turn-around of chickens being slaughtered because of demand and there isn't enough time to slaughter by hand, so machines do this, and also instead of people saying the prayer, it is played. I am sure in Islamic countries, they ask advice from [Islamic scholars] so I'm sure they have been advised to do this, so I am not concerned about this, especially in a Muslim country.*

Daniel *Well, from what I have heard from some of these places is that the prayer is sometimes on a recording; this is pointless. If that is being done then it is people trying to circumvent halal.*

Even on the point of prayer recital then, the socially constructed and contested nature of halal food is evident. Mukhtar's deeper knowledge of the impact of modern farming methods contrasts with the looser understanding of Daniel. There is some limited verbal resistance demonstrated by Daniel, to the industrial processes that threaten the *religious* moral economy of food production (Jackson et al, 2009) – but also no easy way of ascertaining if the halal chicken in question was killed over verbal or recorded prayer. Moving to the method of slaughter itself there are further differences of opinion among Muslim participants on the very act of killing the animal. As discussed previously, UK regulations require animals to be stunned before being killed – yet there are exceptions made on religious grounds for Muslims and Jews. A majority of the participants for this research described their belief that halal meat should not be stunned – as they also expressed the opinion that this was ultimately more humane:

Khadija *You do have 'halal' that says stunned, but I do not think that that is counted as halal.*

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Mukhtar *Everybody will define it differently. For me, it has to done in the proper halal way, in an Islamic way, so the animal has to be alive and conscious whilst you are slaughtering it; that is my opinion.*

This opinion however was not universally accepted:

Ahmad *The way I was informed about it was that stunning can potentially kill an animal. Therefore as long as stunning the animal does not kill it, for example if you go hunting and you shoot an animal, as long as you don't kill it, and then you slaughter it properly, that is considered halal.*

Hanna *From what I have read and what I know, in halal meat, animals are stunned first and then slaughtered, to lessen the pain that they go through. I have read that it is accepted that most Muslim butchers stun the animal and then slaughter it.*

The varied opinions on stunning of animals before slaughter are highly significant for several reasons. Firstly, the primary justification for opposition to halal and kosher slaughter methods in Europe is connected to the notion that these religious slaughter methods disallow for animals to be stunned via electric bolt before slaughter. However, both the data for this project and broader research on this matter show the issue to be far more complex in the context of halal meat production. Recent research shows that 84% of halal meat produced in the UK is from stunned livestock (FSA, 2015). This means that there is little material difference in the slaughter methods between most halal meats and non-halal meats. Yet the public outcry over the sale of such halal food without labelling, demonstrates how religious practice is rich and entangled with processes of identity (Peek, 2005) and these meanings can be mobilised to form support or opposition to those practices. We also begin to understand from the interviews that in the UK, opinions on stunning are prone to vary considerably – that there is no set standard of what halal slaughter entails. The data echoes findings by an industry survey in England which similarly found a variety of different understandings of what constituted 'halal' with respect to stunned or un-stunned meat (AHDB 2010).

This diversity of opinion is also intrinsically linked to another set of politics on halal accreditation agencies, which are crucial mechanisms through which food choices can be governed or directed. Our secondary research found a number of halal accreditation agencies which also have different standards of certification. In our research, respondents routinely mentioned the HMC (Halal Monitoring Committee) and the HFA (Halal Food Authority), the former which requires animals to be non-stunned for accreditation, the latter which does not:

Dawud *What is more important is if there is a HMC certificate, then you have more confidence, as on the website you can find out who the people are and they have their own inspection procedure and that gives you more confidence*

Khadija *I think that HFA is being disputed [distrusted] as they stun before killing the animal*

However, trust in accreditation schemes also varied wildly between participants, supporting findings from longstanding ethnographic work with Muslims in Birmingham. Some participants also demonstrated some uncertainty as to their understanding of certification, with for example one claiming that the Nandos and KFC outlets with halal chicken were certified by the HMC, when our research showed this was not the case. As Miele et al (2005) have shown, the variations in theological understandings of certification can allow space for third party certification schemes to differentiate

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themselves as part of the food supply chain. One interesting observation from the data is that the respondents born in the UK who are second or third generation tended to have a greater awareness of the differences between various accreditation schemes than those who were not born in Britain. British-born Muslims tended to be more conscious of the politics of food slaughter and were generally more suspicious of 'halal' labels, and reluctant to accept the status of that food at face value.

Positionality is also worth considering here – some participants may feel inclined towards emphasising their ethical considerations in an interview situation, when their consumption patterns might fall short of their own ethical ideals (Hobson, 2003). Two participants mentioned that in certain situations (such as when one participant was in Bulgaria, where she was born), they would not be able to source halal food and would eat meat regardless. It would be wrong to suppose that Muslims in Britain subscribe to a set of religiously inspired principles and then adhere to them with uniform consistency. Instead, practices are more varied and fluid. Two further participants also demonstrate this variation, asserting that the category of halal is, in isolation, not enough to make food ethical:

Aylin *I think that halal is very narrow, because we are focussing on just meat. When I am buying food, in general terms, I would mainly focus on organic aspect and the fair-trade aspect. But if it is meat, I would say halal is not the main thing.*

Daniel *I am now more inclined to buy things that are free-range and organic because if the animal is raised in that kind of way, you expect that the animal would be taken to a place where the slaughter is going to be merciful.*

Daniel and two other participants mentioned another Arabic word, 'tayyib', the literal meaning of which is 'clean' or 'pure'. For Daniel, Ahmad and Amira there is an even higher standard than merely halal that should be a goal, though they may not adhere to it all the time. This standard includes considerations of animal welfare and slaughter, or indeed on fair trade, which go beyond what they would see as the minimum standards of halal. By incorporating both these considerations, these participants' ethical and religious practices bleed through the constructed boundary of religious/secular (Gökarıksel, 2008). However, for most participants, their understanding of 'correct' halal slaughter practices related to what they believed was the most humane way of killing animals for food. The scientific literature casts doubt on beliefs that not stunning is less painful for the animals in question (FVW, 2002 cited in Bergeaud-Blackler, 2007; FAWC, 2003). However, participants who understood halal meat as only being acceptable from animals which had not been stunned also asserted their opinion that the traditional method excluding stunning was the most humane. In this way the subjectivities that underpin both the theology behind halal food, and the ethics of animal welfare and slaughter are considered, negotiated and reconciled differently by individual Muslims:

Ahmad *When it comes to meat, I think that halal meat by its very nature is ethical, is environmentally safe, is all those kind of things, in theory, and thus I think that the standards for halal meat - and I may be being a bit romantic about it - are very high and very good.*

Mukhtar *We have our own way of slaughtering: the halal way. It is not like we throw the knife anywhere you like, it has to be slaughtered in the correct way. We believe it (halal slaughter) is less painful for the animal then doing it in any other way.*

Halal food consumption therefore is at the intersection of both religious beliefs, and a concern for animal ethics and welfare. It is dependent on the availability of knowledge that may flesh out the

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3 precise practice of slaughter for any given meat product. As food labels rarely clarify this information, it is also dependent on trust of halal accreditation agencies which seek to reassure Muslim consumers, whilst having different standards between themselves for halal meat production. However, it is not just the cold consideration of philosophy, ethics and religious edict which shapes religious food consumption. Many of our respondents made connections between the halal status of food as an indicator of its cleanliness and purity, and its inherent goodness for the body, in ways which spoke to the *strength* of importance for them to consume 'authentic' halal. It is within this frame that we understand how food is implicated in everyday inclusion or exclusion for Muslims. It is therefore essential to go beyond apparently rational or intellectual appraisals of meat and understand the powerful emotional and embodied forces that also shape the way Muslims may choose to eat.

4.2 Body: Halal Purity and Abjection

As Gökarıksel (2008, p. 670) reminds us, religion is not confined to exterior physical spaces: instead religious space can be constructed within the body itself. Mary Douglas' work on Purity and Danger emphasised the socially constructed nature of impure food, and as the literature review demonstrated, Kristeva (1982) has carried forward some of the underlying themes to propose the notion of abjection: disgust and repulsion which functions to preserve the integrity of one's identity. These literatures can be used to contextualise the similar importance and strength of feeling that many Muslim consumers of meat have, in relation to consuming only that which is halal. Ethical thought generates its own set of affects, feelings and discursive realities (Latham and McCormack, cited in Hayes Conroy & Hayes Conroy, 2008). We can make connections between theological and ethical considerations in the previous section with the embodied responses that underpin the consumption of food. As proposed by Douglas (1966), we begin by acknowledging that it is through the demarcation of unethical or haram food being impure that we can understand those responses. Indeed, religious thought routinely positions piety as being cleansing:

Khadija *I think that many Muslims do regard it as cleaner meat. So even though they do not practice their religion in other regards, this is something that they just do as it is not hard to adhere to.*

The notion of halal meat being cleaner and purer was mentioned by several participants. Others similarly described halal meat as materially of better quality. Together with the notion of 'you are what you eat', which was expressed by three of our participants, there are two assumptions which underlie these narratives. The first relates to the method of slaughter; the food being halal would alter the very materiality of the resulting meat. As the animal passes through the assembly line or abattoir gate, between the obligatory prayer and the ritual method of slaughter, the meat is understood by some participants to become purer in materiality and meaning. This understanding serves as a reminder that both the *sensing* of foods and *making sense* of foods (i.e. symbolic meaning) is important to consider when we think about the ethical behaviours related to eating (Evans & Miele, 2012 p. 311). The second assumption from the participants which underlie narratives of halal food purity is that the consumption of this 'cleaner' meat is healthier and beneficial for the body and indeed the spirit. This second point is also expressed clearly in interviews from the opposite angle which mention the consequences of consuming non-halal food. It is from these set of narratives that we can gauge the *strength* of feeling with regards to the consumption of halal. All but two of the respondents, when asked about these consequences, provided rich demonstrations of the emotive power and strength of the abjective impulse upon consumption. The following extract is particularly evocative:

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Ahmad *To be honest, I just remember that I hated the smell of bacon [in school]; I just hated the smell of it. Even when you go past a stand in town, or a place selling hot dogs, the smell of it…aargh! Non-halal chicken and beef smell the same as halal, wherever you go. It's just bacon; bacon had a distinct smell for me and I don't know if others feel the same way, but for me, I hated the smell of it. [Interviewer: Does that remain with you? Is that something that you still sense when you smell bacon?] Yeah, even now. There is a guy, just before you get to the Bull Ring (shopping centre), and he has been there forever, and he is always barbecuing or grilling some bacon and the waft….argh. I have to circumvent to get away from the steam…I just hate the smell of it.*

For some Muslims, the strength of embodied reaction against foods considered haram can be strong enough to prevent them eating pork or non-halal meat, even if they are non-practicing and have no theological convictions in relation to Islamic dietary law. Khadija went beyond speaking about her own practices and relationship with halal food to speaking more broadly about halal food consumption:

Khadija *I think that you will find that most Muslims, no matter whether they are practicing or not, whether they read their five daily prayers, most choose to eat halal. It is culturally embedded to eat halal. You adhere to God's commands by eating halal and that is also one way of calling yourself a Muslim...I think that many Muslims do regard it as cleaner meat.*

Khadija thereby highlights the cultural embededdness of halal food consumption, but her broader observation that Muslims always regard halal meat as 'cleaner' is not universally true for all Muslims. Once again it is important to acknowledge the diversity of experiences and attitudes of Muslims from different cultural and theological backgrounds. Take the following two participants on the same subject:

Aylin *I didn't feel particularly disgusted by it (accidentally eating pork)… I didn't feel like I needed to vomit or go into a rage. I just accepted that it was a mistake and then you move on.*

Hanna *I have had many Christian or atheist friends and colleagues who have eaten pork at my table and for me it is no problem at all; it is just meat and I know that it is prohibited for me.*

At this point we can start linking abjection to identity in a more direct way. It is interesting to note that the two participants quoted above are from Turkey and Bulgaria, respectively. Hanna, originally from Bulgaria, goes on to say that because she is someone who converted to Islam, she was not only accustomed to being around non-halal meat including pork, but also consumed it. Moreover she continues to not eat halal when visiting relatives in Bulgaria, as obtaining halal food there is practically difficult. For Hanna, her interpretation of her faith allows her to forego halal consumption if she is unable to source halal food easily. Reflecting research on local food consumers which found that food consumption choices are dependent on social and spatial context (Carroll and Fahy, 2015; Waitt, 2014), her behaviour shifts over time and space. It shifts through the development of her ethical and behavioural frameworks as she becomes a Muslim, and then as she travels between the multicultural landscape of the UK to Bulgaria. Her performative identity is similarly spatially shifting in a way which is unique to her circumstances as an immigrant in the UK. As a convert to Islam, her actions and practices which Winchester (2008, p. 1753) describes as being directed towards being a 'good Muslim'

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are fluid according to temporal and spatial constraints. Drawing on this example, we can re-emphasise here the lack of generalisability of Muslim behaviour and practices in relation to food. It demonstrates how these adjustments of consumption patterns allow for participants to participate fully in communal and social activities of eating without feeling undue guilt. But it also takes halal consumption back to the issue of identity. For other participants the more intense and negative emotions associated with haram food do indeed create spaces of discomfort, to an extent that might be invisible to those not familiar with Islamic dietary laws:

Amira *Yes, I hate smells in the market of frying sausages and also the beer, which is worse! I can't stand the smell of alcohol. I have to go to company meetings and everyone is knocking it back and you have to avoid the spittle [sic]. I detest it.*

In this instance, we can see how the abjective impulses and emotions associated with haram or forbidden food can also construct abjective spatialities. Sites for consumption of for example, alcohol, might be interpreted as spaces of exclusion (Valentine et al, 2010). Furthermore, in being tied to identity, abjection is intrinsically tied not just to the micro-scale of the body, but also to place. Having considered the role of ethics and the role of embodied impulses tied to beliefs, we must also consider how the politics of belonging and of identity shape choices around halal consumption.

4.3 Belonging: halal food and exclusion

As we have seen from the analysis to this point, questions of identity percolate through the ethics of animal slaughter and halal food consumption or food avoidance. Halal food consumption is certainly important for the intricate processes of construction of self-hood. However, it is also tied very tangibly with issues of space and place, and it is intrinsically connected to questions of belonging. We can return to Antonsich's (2010) categorisation of cultural factors which are important locations of belonging, and these include the very availability of halal food. The overall consensus was that the accessibility of halal food in Britain generally and in the Birmingham area especially was very good. Due to the high proportion of Muslims in Birmingham, there is a wide availability of halal meat, and various neighbourhoods in Birmingham have become focal points for halal food and entertainment offerings (Isakjee, 2016, p. 345) This stands in contrast to the lack of availability of halal food options in less diverse areas in the UK and elsewhere in Europe:

Zohra *I think that Birmingham is a place where I can find a halal take-away really easily, for example, in Selly Oak there are many restaurants which serve halal food. It is easier to find halal places in Birmingham, compared to other cities in the UK. We have a sushi restaurant in the city centre, and soy sauce is served there. However, if they see a Muslim enter, then they will always provide a halal soy sauce. It is something that makes us more confident in eating there. The halal soy sauce is not alcoholic.*

Mukhtar *Yes, I have been to many European countries, where there isn't a large Muslim population, or many facilities for Muslims…and it is difficult to find halal food; this has actually forced some people to leave their country. I dealt with Afghan families who moved from Holland and Norway because of these restrictions; they did not want to live there and wanted to come to the UK. It is hard for Muslims living in countries where they find it hard to find what they need.*

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The importance of place and belonging in the above participant transcripts are self-evident. The contrasting experiences are developed in other sections of these interviews in which inclusionary or exclusionary scenarios are described in relation to the availability of halal food. Participants speak about the positive experiences of having halal food provided in hospitals, or for their children in schools in Birmingham. These provisions are far from mundane; participants describe how the stress of overnight hospital stays is at least in part alleviated by not having to source food from outside the hospital. Yet at the same time several participants were also very keen to indicate that they did not expect all their needs to be catered for and two expressed gratitude towards the state for these provisions quite explicitly. Reflecting on this, it is important to remember that Muslims are keenly aware of polemics in the right-wing press which seek to draw Muslims as not just a dangerous minority, but a demanding one (Allen and Isakjee, 2015). Governmental discourses too on cohesion and integration increasingly place the responsibilities of migrants and minority groups over the relatively rights-based logics of multiculturalism (see Kundnanai, 2012). It may be that participants are subsequently keen to emphasise their virtues as unproblematic migrants or minorities, whilst simultaneously appreciating that the availability of halal food can be important to a sense of belonging and citizenship:

Mukhtar *In providing me with halal, it makes me a better citizen and a better member of the Muslim community; it is positive to have this, I think. If you make a barrier so that you cannot fulfil the needs of your citizens, it is like you are excluding them and this is negative. It makes me happy that we have all these facilities in providing halal; I need to have this.*

Experiences recounted by participants of not being sufficiently catered for in both an institutional and a more social setting were similarly framed. Ahmad viewed the mistaken serving of a non-halal meal (which had been presented as halal) to a largely Muslim attendance at a government event as being an honest mistake but neglectful of the attendees' sensitivities. Khadija lamented the lack of consideration of colleagues for always arranging work parties to be held in pubs, an environment in which she found it difficult to avoid the abjective smells and effects of alcohol. But once again, participants clearly did not expect wholesale cultural change to suit their needs but instead wished for a regard for their consumption practices. Such regard would indicate a respect for their diverse needs, an acceptance of the varied nature of British society, and a greater degree of inclusion and sense of belonging. As Mohammadi et al (2007), Siddiqui (2007) and Vertovec (1994) among others have found, in cities with significant numbers of Muslim residents or service users, halal food is one of the key areas in which Muslims work with government to ensure appropriate provisions. With researchers increasingly exploring the effects of food subsistence programmes in developed countries for vulnerable people such as asylum seekers or low-income households, the impact culturally and nutritionally for Muslim residents is worthy of consideration (Manandhar, 2006).

However, our interviews revealed a further, more direct way in which the politics of belonging is relevant to halal food consumers, and that is the very threat of halal food itself being banned. All participants elaborated upon this fear, several unprompted by the interviewers. Participants were acutely aware of rhetoric around the selling of halal meat 'by stealth', as well as the banning of halal slaughter methods in some Northern European countries:

Aylin *[On the halal meat ban in Denmark] My initial reaction is that it is wrong, because ultimately we are excluding people. We have really strong religious beliefs, and halal*

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meat is very important to them… I think that this is a way to exclude Muslims, so I can say that this is wrong...Really, it is hard to get everything you want, every product suitable for our religious requirements or personal requirements in this capitalist system we live in, and the modern world we live in. Because, we can't produce our own, so we have to be flexible.

Amira *[Halal Food] has already been banned in Northern Europe and so it is about protecting us from that. It is blatant discrimination, they think that halal meat is another form of 'Muslims taking over' our culture and way of life and so they have to stop it.*

As the above quotes indicate, Muslims have a strong appreciation for the ways in which the politics of belonging are overtly intertwined with the subject of halal food. Most have noticed the ways in which halal food discourses take place in the popular press, in a way which allows for racist narratives to gain social traction. Especially when one considers the everyday ethical considerations that underlie the food consumption patterns of most of our participants, they see campaigns against halal food as fundamentally Islamophobic. Indeed, Amira connects it to other forms of Islamophobia and racism, in which Islam is routinely characterised as barbaric and uncivilised (Allen, 2010; Todorov, 2010). The observations by Elder et al (1998) that food ethics can be used to potentially 'other' minority groups is consciously understood by Amira and other participants.

What this demonstrates is that the subject of halal food has a multi-scalar and multi-dimensional relevance. Spaces of the body, spaces of home or neighbourhood are sites upon which and through which halal food's consumptions and contestations take place. But the problematic popular discourses associated with halal consumption which can tend towards Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism, also lend halal food geopolitical salience.

5. Conclusion: Understanding halal food geographies

This paper has provided a framework as a starting point from which to consider the practice of consuming halal food, for Muslim minorities in the UK and elsewhere. As we scale down from theology and ethics and explore the experience of making everyday decisions with respect to food choice, it becomes clear that halal food consumption is a complex practice, but with distinct dimensions that we can draw attention to, to aid understanding. The ethical and theological debates, embodied experience and politics of belonging all shape halal food consumption for our participants. These dimensions bleed into each other and overlap; theological beliefs and ethical claims re-construct halal-slaughtered meat so that its material properties are interpreted afresh – and this has embodied effects. Furthermore, individual experiences of food consumption take place under a socio-political context which implicates the issue of halal in debates around Muslim belonging in the UK (Isakjee, 2016).

The paper has drawn our attention to importance of three dimensions of halal food consumption in particular. Firstly, the theological and ethical constructions of halal, which have been shown to have very divergent understanding between individuals. Within this dimension there is much insight to be gained from scholars of and research into human/non-human relationships and connectivities (Elder et al 1999; Emel et al, 2012), but it is also important to consider the theological specificities of halal food understandings. As the work of Miele (2016) and Lever and Fischer (2018) is helping us to

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understand, and as our participants have demonstrated, there are debates on the very physical and technological nature of the slaughter process and implications.

Secondly, we need to consider the embodied dimension of 'keeping halal', the very processes and practices of eating which have the performative strength to make halal food consumption integral to the sense of being and religious integrity of some of our participants. An understanding of halal consumption must make space for this embodied experiential dimension. This paper has used the work of Douglas (1966) and Kristeva (1982) to understand those responses, and the exclusions that can be felt and experienced as a result of them. The location of the body can act as a starting point for explorations of feelings of comfort or displacement, attachment and rejection to halal or non-halal food. It is partly through these encounters that belonging of Muslims as minorities is shaped in everyday life, as observers of halal consumption interact with spaces and objects which induce responses of attachment and security – or aversion. These feelings directly relate to our third dimension – that of belonging and its politics. As our study demonstrated, halal food availability has an impact on where Muslim minorities can make their home, and thus implicated in feelings of belonging. But this also needs to be understood in the context of the politics of belonging (Yuval Davis, 2006), as press campaigns or government policies to limit or ban ritual slaughter can feed into a more longstanding set of political and historical discourses, which work to mark out Muslim populations as uncivilised, unethical and outside of European norms. It is important to reiterate that this project has taken place in a socio-political context which seems hegemonic discourses build anxieties, fears and fantasies about the place of Muslim citizens in the 'Western World' (Ali and Whitham 2018). These fears and fantasies routinely evoke the 'strangeness' of the British Muslim citizens, their beliefs and their practises essentialised.

Of course, issues of identity percolate through these three dimensions of halal food geographies: identity is constructed through ethics, beliefs, shared practices, material encounters and within distinct socio-political contexts. Notions of secularity and religiosity collide and bleed into each other in the construction of the moral economy of animal slaughter. We cannot take for granted singular notions of what constitutes 'halal food' but instead we can understand keeping halal as set of fluid practices which also have political resonance. Indeed, for those Muslims who seek to 'keep halal', certainties with regards to the material and spiritual origin of meat is hard to ascertain. What we can be more certain about however, is that far from operating without ethical regard, Muslim minorities in the UK are routinely negotiating through the tricky ethics of meat consumption as part of everyday life, in ways which are significant for their sense of belonging.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Dr Phil Jones for helping me to explore literature on abjection. Many thanks too to Dr Kathy Burrell for feedback on drafts. Sincere thanks to the reviewers for helping to make this article more robust, and to Dr John Horton and Michael Murphy for assisting us with seeing this article through to publication,

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