

Distancing Animal Death

Welfare, sustainability and slaughter in the British halal meat industry

Hibba Mazhary, PhD student

hibba.mazhary@ouce.ox.ac.uk

Context

In the next few decades, demand for meat and other animal products is projected to double (Miele, 2016), which raises many questions about ethical consumption. With the sheer scale of halal consumption in particular, the halal meat industry is an insightful angle from which to explore animal consumption. The global halal meat market is worth \$150 billion a year and is fast growing (Bergeaud-Blackler, 2007), whilst Muslims in the UK consume 20% of the country's lamb (EBLEX, 2013), despite constituting less than 5% of the population. In the context of a British parliamentary debate to ban non-stun religious slaughter and periodic sensationalist media headlines on halal meat, this topic is highly prominent in the UK context.. This poster outlines an ongoing PhD project.

Research Questions

To what extent are producers and consumers in the British halal meat industry motivated by animal welfare?

What is the relationship between halal meat consumption and intimacy with animal death?

What are the UK policy implications of the halal-welfare nexus?

These research questions are at the intersection of debates in animal geographies, food geographies, geographies of religion, animal ethics, religious studies, and anthropology.

Research Methods

Mixed-methods supply chain ethnography



FARM

Interviews with producers and retailers as well as participant observation at the different farm sites.



SHOP

Textual and visual analysis of the promotional material, branding and packaging of major halal retailers and products.



ABATTOIR

Abattoir visits, participant observation and field diary notes on the experience of slaughter in these locations. Interviews with slaughter-people.



FORK

Focus groups with British Muslim consumers. Online survey incorporating both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

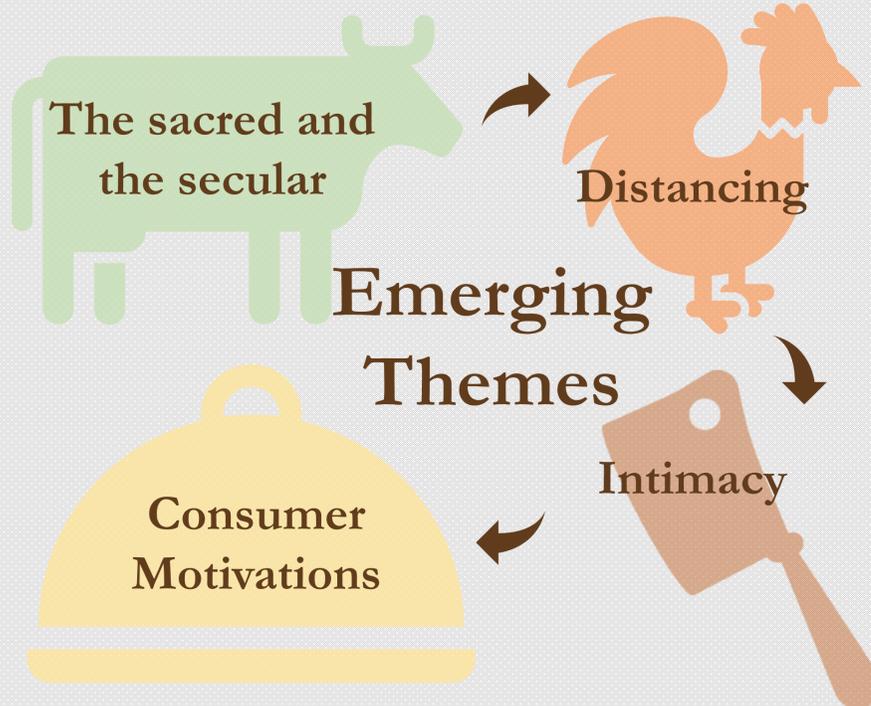
This is also a site of conflict; gastronomy is increasingly a site at which conflict between the sacred and the secular occurs; disputes regarding religion, secularisation, animal rights and morality are increasingly being "waged on the terrain of beef, chicken, lamb and veal" (Mukherjee, 2014: 25).

Mukherjee (2014) writes that halal slaughter represents the new encroachment of religious authority into the traditionally secularised domain of food, however anxiety about the spiritual dimension of foods has long permeated food consumption. There is currently no UK national standard for halal meat, and Bergeaud-Blackler (2015) suggests that states are unwilling to set one up as they do not want to embody "this ultimate role of controller" concerning a religious issue.

This study uses several categories of distancing from animal death. The first category is absolute distancing in terms of physical separation. Literature in animal geographies and ethics has explored in depth how humans are physically distanced from animal death. Serpell (1986) notes how abattoirs are often in isolated rural locations, hidden from consumers' eyes.

Another category is mediated distancing, which involves more than physical separation. Figuratively, every effort is made to disconnect the animal from the food product, and to make the animal absent from the act of food consumption. Concealment of animal death operates through a set of broader practices such as the arrangement of animal foods in shops and everyday vocabulary relating to food.

Scholars in religious studies have observed that the secular and sacred are becoming increasingly blurred. Ritual slaughter and meat consumption exemplify how the sacred is branching out into "unofficially sacred" spaces such as abattoirs, butchers and supermarkets. Similarly, Mukherjee (2014) points to how mainstream fast-food corporations such as McDonald's and KFC are beginning to offer halal-certified products.



The third category, performative distancing, refers to how slaughter is done, such as how the carcass is killed and prepared. In her ethnographic work on French abattoirs, Vialles (1994) observes how each worker performs one operation on an assembly line, hence diffusing the responsibility for the death of the animal. This may differ in the context of halal slaughter, where the religious dietary code specifies that the animal must be killed by one neck incision.

Ethical consumption is driven by many factors, such as aesthetic appreciation, animal welfare, price and religious laws. These factors interact in complex ways; they can be contradictory, such as when lower welfare standards produce subjectively more tender, flavoursome meats, although Evans and Miele (2012) argue that these factors can be realigned if consumers develop a higher aesthetic appreciation for ethical meat and begin to dislike the taste of unethical foods.

The conventional meat industry seeks to avoid intimacy with animal death. Evans and Miele (2012) posit that it is this disconnection with death that facilitates and normalises eating animals. Therefore, if there was more visibility which exposed the conditions of death of farm animals, this may have an impact on consumers' meat consumption and concern for animal welfare.

Food habits and consumption choices are both personal and embodied, and as such food can 'tell stories' (Cook *et al.* 2004) and is laden with socio-cultural meaning. It is therefore difficult to determine the motivations of consumers and to effect behavioural change in food choices. Ethical decision-making is rarely a matter of rational assessment, but consumption is rather an emotional and more-than-rational experience (Evans and Miele, 2012).

Intimacy with animal death could valorise animal death rather than reduce it. Parry (2009) observes an emerging trend in contemporary gastronomic culture of not only the acknowledgement, but also the romanticisation of slaughter. There is a need to further understand the relationship between intimacy and consumption. There is a gap in examining this relationship specifically with reference to the halal slaughter process.

References

- Bergeaud-Blackler, F. (2007) New challenges for Islamic ritual slaughter: a European perspective. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 33(6): 965-80.
- Bergeaud-Blackler, F. (2015) The halal certification market in Europe and the world: a first panorama. In: Bergeaud-Blackler, F., Fischer, J. and Lever, J. (eds) *Halal Matters: Islam, Politics and Markets in Global Perspective*, Routledge, London, 105-126.
- Blecha, J. and Davis, A. (2014) Distance, proximity, and freedom: Identifying conflicting priorities regarding urban backyard slaughter. *Geoforum*, 57: 67-77.
- Cook, L. *et al.* (2004) Follow the thing: papaya. *Antipode*, 36(4): 642-664.
- EBLEX. (2013) *The Halal meat market: Specialist supply chain structures and consumption purchase and consumption profiles in England*. Ebles, Kenilworth.
- Evans, A. B. and Miele, M. (2012) Between food and flesh: how animals are made to matter (and not matter) within food consumption practices. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 30(2): 298-314.
- Miele, M. (2016) Killing animals for food: how science, religion and technologies affect the public debate about religious slaughter. *Food Ethics* 1(1): 47-60.
- Mukherjee, R. S. (2014) Global Halal: Meat, Money, and Religion. *Religions*, 5: 22-75.
- Parry, J. (2009) Oryx and Crane and the New Nostalgia for Meat. *Society and Animals*, 17: 241-256.
- Serpell, J. (1986) *In the Company of Animals. A Study of Human-Animal Relationships*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Vialles, N. (1994) *Animal to Edible*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.