HALAL FOOD AND IDENTITY

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Abstraksi: Studi ini menjelaskan makna sosiologis makanan halal bagi mahasiswa muslim yang belajar di Inggris. Fokus utama adalah bagaimana mahasiswa internasional muslim mendefinisikan, mengidentifikasi dan memakan makanan halal. Dengan melakukan wawancara mendalam terhadap 12 partisipan, studi ini menemukan bahwa mahasiswa mendefenisikan makanan halal dengan batasan yang berbeda-beda. Terdapat tiga kategori makanan yang ada dalam kosmologi mahasiswa muslim dan kelompok di luarnya, yaitu; makanan halal, makanan non-halal, dan makanan untuk vegetarian. Identitas subjektif dan kelompok terbentuk bukan berdasarkan siapa yang memakan apa (halal atau non-halal), tetapi berdasarkan batasan atau defenisi halal yang dimiliki dan diacu bersama. Dalam konteks ini, makanan untuk vegetarian berfungsi sebagai jembatan bagi kelompok yang memiliki batasan yang berbeda-beda mengenai makanan yang ideal.

Kata kunci: defenisi makanan halal, identitas subyektif, dan identitas kelompok

INTRODUCTION

The concept of halal for Muslims is usually referred to as the permitted, allowed, lawful food based on Islamic definition (The Muslims Food Board, 2006). Sociologically, the meaning signified by this concept can be interpreted differently in different social, cultural, economical and political circumstances. From a sociological perspective, eating is seen as not merely about the nutritional significance of food for the human body. Eating is defined by the meanings and values attached to it (Atkinson, 1983; Caplan, 1997).

Several sociological studies of food have focused on the process of preparing food, on table manners and how people select and choose the appropriate food for their everyday consumption. Attention has been given to people of different ages, gender and educational background as reviewed by Mennel, Murcott and van Otterloo (1992: 54-60). Other studies have also uncovered the relationship between food and class (Crotty and Germov, 2004), food and ageing (McIntosh and Kubena, 2004) as well as the meaning of food among vegetarians (Twigg, 1979, 1983) and among people with diabetes (Cohn, 1997).

Studies on food in Britain have also revealed the social significance of food for immigrants. For example, Bradby (1997) shows the significance of cultural background in the way British-Punjabi women define the appropriate food. One study by Harbottle (1997) reveals that besides offering economic opportunities for Iranian immigrants in the period of the 1980s, food was also important in disguising their identity from what they perceived as discrimination in Britain. However, little is mentioned about the meaning of eating halal food among Muslims in this country. This study is to explore how those who accept the dietary belief of Muslim identify and choose the appropriate food for their consumption.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concepts of the ‘omnivore’s paradox’ and the role of the culinary system within a particular society are two important aspects of Fischler’s analysis of food and identity. The omnivore’s paradox refers to: “Two contradictory characteristics entail equally contradictory consequences; hence the omnivore’s paradox. On the one hand, needing variety, the omnivore is inclined towards diversification, innovation, exploration and change, which can be vital to its survival; but on the other hand, it has to be careful, mistrustful, ‘conservative’ in its eating: any new, unknown food is a potential danger” (Fischler, 1988: 278).

According to Fischler, it is in the culinary system, through group cuisine, that the paradox is resolved. Important in this process is
incorporation. Fischler defines this ‘as the act of sending food across the frontier between the world and the self, between ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ human body’. Throughout this process, identifying food is necessary because the inability to do so will prohibit the incorporation of food into the human body. As Fischler argues, it is through the process of incorporation that humans control the body, the mind and therefore, the identity (1988: 279-280).

In any society, the culinary system defines what it is edible or appropriate to eat. This is attached to and a part of a worldview, a cosmology. He says, ‘Foodstuff classified as both edible and right to eat are then subject to rules of propriety and context’ (1988: 284). The identity of the individual is defined through the process of incorporating appropriate and edible foods, while group identity is therefore formatted in relation to the ‘otherness’, by referring to other people as the eaters of different kind of food.

Different from Fischler, Lupton (1996) begins her analysis with the idea that bodily experience and physical feeling are culturally and socially constructed. People’s response to food is shaped by their interaction with others. Therefore, individuals understand ‘themselves, their bodies and their relationship to food and eating’ through a number of ways, such as popular culture, medical and public health texts and the individual’s food preference and habits; as well as the individual’s ‘non- or pre-discursive experience’ (1996: 12-13).

Lupton shows that the meaning of food is conflicting, changing and contradictory. For example, the symbolic meaning of both good food and bad food shift from one dimension to another. Good food refers to ‘the emotion of pride, comfort and love and with feelings of warmth, contentment and security’. However, it also symbolizes frustration, anger and authority. Similar contradictory images are obvious in the meaning of bad food. On one hand, it is seen as related to illness, disease and revulsion. On the other hand, it is a source of pleasure. The individual’s response to these images is also shifting from self-control to self-indulgence and vice versa (1996: 154-155). She defines this as a part of subjectivity, not identity. As Lupton expresses it:

‘Subjectivity is a less rigid term than identity, as it incorporates the understanding that the self, or more accurately, selves, are highly changeable and contextual, albeit within certain limits imposed by the culture in which an individual lives, including power relations, social institutions and hegemonic discourses’ (Lupton 1996: 13).

For Lupton, food can be a source of pleasure as well as self-indulgence. Dietary habits are instrumental in establishing and symbolizing control over one’s body.

While Lupton’s analysis about the subjective meaning of food is based on food preference, the symbolic significance of food avoidance can be generated from studies on the meaning of meat for vegetarians (Twigg, 1979; 1983).

Based on her hierarchy of food, Twigg constructs how vegans define the meaning of meat in opposition to the dominant value of food. The dominant ideology of food culture values meat at the top of the food hierarchy. It symbolizes qualities of strength, aggression, passion and sexuality. However, these are only acceptable when they are cooked, because the cooked meat signifies incorporating animality into humanity. On the contrary, vegetarians value meat in the opposite way. Red meat is the first level of food which needs to be avoided, followed by white meat and fish. Twigg explains this as ‘eating down the hierarchy away from the ambivalent animal power’ (1983: 27). This symbolizes the ability to exercise self-restraint in controlling one’s passion for one’s rationality, spirituality and morality (1979: 20).

Further study, by Willetts, uncovers the fact that there are diverse ways among vegetarians of defining the most edible foods for their consumption and that food choice for vegetarians is a fundamental component for their individual and cultural identity. Willetts also reveals that the absence of meat in their diet cannot be seen as the basic identification of their identity because the vegetarians have their own way to define and enact their own identities (1997: 128).

Another study by Harris (1986) stresses the historical explanation referring to the scarcity of certain sources of food in a particular society. Harris explains the rationale for pork avoidance
among Muslims and Jews is due to the environmental conditions which made pig husbandry impossible around the time that the prohibition was enacted. Although perhaps Harris’ explanation is influential in rationalising the original reasons for food avoidance among Muslims, unfortunately he does not explain why this avoidance exists in many other different environments. Apart from this, his explanation excludes the rationality of avoiding pork from the perspective of those who hold this dietary belief.

Bridging the gap, based on their studies in China, Gillete (2005) and Cesáro (2002) show that food is a marker for group identity. Cesáro (2002) argues, within the Muslim community of Uyghur and their relationship with the majority group (the Han), that groups’ identities within this context are not only concerning pork avoidance and haram food but also inseparable from the whole ‘food culture’ which includes the two groups (2002: 59). According to Cesáro, both the Uyghurs and Han:

“regard food as a fundamental aspect of their identity both in terms of categories of inclusion and exclusion, defined by (the manipulation of) taboos and dietary prescriptions, and as distinctive feature of which they are proud. Thereby utmost hospitality is usually expressed by treating one’s guests to what is considered quintessential Uyghur food” (Cesáro, 2002: 23).

Cesáro also demonstrates the significance of this Muslim food in marking the relation between the Uyghur and the Han. The Uyghur food is seen by Cesáro as the benchmark for inserting the hospitality, the good relationship between both groups.

In her study, Gillette (2005) sees food identification as an important activity in eating among a Muslim community in China. The basic definition for the appropriate food is termed as gingzhen which refers to suitable foods based on the Islamic standard. For the Hui, gingzhen mean ‘particularly clean’ and also ‘clean and sanitary’. Food which is not gingzhen is ‘dirty’ and not suitable for the Hui. According to Gillette, this includes ‘pork, alcohol, blood, and animals that have not been slaughtered in the Islamic fashion’ (2005; 109). The Hui avoids everything which is not gingzhen. This is shown by activities such as scrutinizing the label on instant noodles; eating in a place which displays a gingzhen sign; avoiding any food which is not prepared by Muslims; and the avoidance of eating and drinking from cups or plates which are assumed have been in contact with anything related to pork or residue of pork.

However, according to Gillette, gingzhen with regard to Western food is defined differently. Besides not containing pork, western food conveys images of ‘progress, scientific knowledge and prosperity’ (p.116). With regard to this, Gillette sees the function of Western food as a potential bridge for group identities between the Han and Hui. As Gillette says:

“If food was the most important factor that kept Hui separate from Han, then the consumption of Western, mass produced food diminished the differences between Hui and Han, particularly for children” (Gillette, 2005: 120).

Both Cesáro and Gillette’s studies contextualize food as the marker of identity within the transition from traditional to modern China and both recognize that food is important in the process of negotiating boundaries between the two groups. Identifying food within a particular category leads to assigning one’s identity within and between particular groups. The analysis raises questions. What happens when individuals enter a different culture of eating, will they maintain their definition of the edible food constructed in their culinary system or will they adopt the new one within the new cosmology of food? How do they define the meaning of food choices? And how does this relate to their identity? In one of his articles, Fischler mentions a Muslim Pakistani who faced ‘a strictly cultural difficulty of identification and classification’. According to Fischler, ‘the unknown food is suspected of belonging to a category of substance defined as impure and taboo in the culture of the subject, which he has learned to recognize as such’ (1988: 283).
Considering these issues, this study seeks to answer the question: how do international Muslim students define, identify and eat halal food in Britain?

THE RESEARCH STRATEGY

This study applies a qualitative approach. I adopt Kvale’s idea that a qualitative research interview is a construction site for knowledge (Kvale, 1996: 11). In-depth interview was employed because it potentially reveals ‘the unknown in the apparently familiar’ about the subject of the investigation (Flick et al, 2004:5).

The interviews took place between June and September 2006 in Canterbury, United Kingdom. Participants for this study were international Muslims students from Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Turkey and Afghanistan. Using snowball sampling (Gobo, 2004:449), students with a similar dietary belief were identified. The numbers of participants in this study were decided on the basis of the idea of saturation1 (Rubin and Rubin, 1995: 73)

Interviewings were conducted in English, Bahasa Indonesia and Malay. Out of twelve interviews, two (with the Turkey and Afghanistan students) were conducted in English; one in Bahasa Indonesia, two in Malay and the rest in English with sometimes using Malay for particular words or concepts. Using a dictaphone, I recorded the interviews and the duration varied from a minimum of 33 minutes to a maximum of 73.

I applied thematic analysis for analysing the data (Gomm, 2004; Rithcie et al (2003). With a thematic analysis, the researcher formulates themes based on the whole data from interviews and then builds a framework and based on this, compares and contrasts the cases. In order to avoid this potential pitfall of my analysis, I checked my findings by asking four of my participants with reference to my tentative explanation. Based on their feedback, I looked through my data again and refined my description and explanation.

FINDINGS

Defining Halal2 Food

Pork is mentioned as the most prohibited food; it is clearly defined as not-halal. Therefore, the most commonly acceptable definition of halal is ‘pork-free’ foods. Besides referring to the Islamic rationality of food restriction, all students give other justification for their avoidance of pork. For one thing, pork is perceived as a dirty, scary, and disgusting animal. The rationale for not eating pork is based on the way pigs behave or the environment wherein this animal lives. As a female student rationalizes her refusal to eat pork as follows:

"(It is) because pork is the worst animal... because pork when he is hungry or she is hungry, they eat their children, their babies. At the same time they eat... I am sorry... their shit. So, in their blood, they’re not clean. They eat their shit back... I will never think of eating pork. It makes me... if I eat it I think that it makes me more like a scary person” (WS_20003)

Another way to rationalize pork avoidance is by referring to a scientific explanation: pork is categorized as a risky animal. Pork is believed may cause health related problems for those who consume it. As one student argues:

“But also there have been some scientific studies which have proven that er... actually pigs are actually quite... err... susceptible to disease and that... err... that they can transmit disease to humans very easily... humans can catch a lot of diseases from pigs because genetically they’re very close to us, which makes the transmission of virus is easy..” (WS_20004).

Food consisting of any chemical substance formulated from pork is also considered not-halal. The most quoted example of such substances is pork oil and bovine

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1 Based on Glasser and Strauss (1967), data is saturated when an interview with a new subject is no longer adding new information (in Rubin and Rubin, 1995:73).

2 Based on the Islamic conception of food, halal food is defined as food whose sources and preparation meet the Islamic standard of the appropriate food. Outside the category of halal are foods such as pork, un-slaughtered animal, alcohol, and blood, to name but a few. Muslims are not allowed to eat these.
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Students who perceived these as not-halal will avoid eating any product related to the substances.

Another definition of not-halal with regard to pork is based on the image of food itself. For example, some students consider a particular food is not-halal when it is placed or served close to or is presumed to be in contact with pork. This underlies the conception that food served or prepared using similar kitchen utensils for pork is not-halal. A female student describes her attempt to make sure her cooking utensils are separated from her flatmate’s:

“I have all my dishes separated from pork. I’ve never cooked with the pork dish, I’ve never eaten.. I have.. started from knife and what... pressure cooker. Everything is my own, I bought it... because I don’t want to eat in their... in their... err... dishes and... or their cooking utensils). I have everything on my own. I have my separate place, room. And they respect that. They never touch (it)” (WS_20003).

The second definition of halal is conceptualized around the idea of whether or not meat is provided through the slaughtering process. Most of the students perceive animal slaughtering as the most appropriate way of killing animals. The most important reason is because slaughtering is believed to be the quickest way of killing; it is the best way to prevent the animal from suffering. Another reason is that the blood drained from the animal as the consequence of the process is believed to make the meat more hygienic than the other possible ways. Meat from an un-slaughtered animal is considered to be a part of the dead animal; hence, it has lost its value as food.

For some students, foods containing meat are considered halal only when the meat was produced from animals slaughtered by Muslims in the Islamic way. The indication of this is the certification of halal produced by the Islamic authority. Therefore, any product of meat without a halal certificate is not regarded as halal. When the halal certificate is not found on a food product, it is very important for those who share this definition to make sure that there are no animal substances in any food they eat.

However, the consideration of animal welfare leads to another definition of halal. This definition is beyond the act of slaughtering itself. As a female student says,

“...to me, animal welfare is an important issue and other people when they stress the halal, they just stress not the way the animal slaughtered. They don’t care about how the animal is treated. And I’ve seen some of the ways of those animals, for example chicken, which is suppose to be slaughtered (for) halal meat, but the way the chickens were treated is so cruel. The chickens were suffering. To me, that’s not-halal. To me, if you do that then automatically the meat is not-halal. No matter how you slaughter it, because the animal is, you know, you allow it to suffer. You haven’t tried to lessen the suffering... the cruelty. So, to me, if there is a different method, the modern method or western method which can decrease the animal’s suffering and taking into account the animal welfare, to me that’s more important than the way the animal is slaughtered. But that’s... that’s just me” (WS_20004).

As far as animal welfare is concerned, her definition allows her to accept the non-Islamic way of killing animals. Halal meat, in her terms, is meat produced in the most appropriate possible way that reduces animal suffering.

The above views about what is considered halal provide the basic rule for students in this study to identify the appropriate food for their consumption. It is used as the framework to identify food in terms of whether or not it consists of pork; whether or not food contains the substance of un-slaughtered chicken, lamb or beef; and whether or not these are slaughtered by Muslims in the Islamic way.

Identifying and locating halal food

The most conventional way to identify whether or not a particular food is halal is by scrutinizing the halal certificate or label on each food product. However, in Britain, foods with such label are rare. When such label is
unavailable, students identify the halal food by using any obtainable information to differentiate between what is halal and not-halal. Muslims consumers can find their way easily either by identifying the ethnic origin of the seller and the menu which shows the availability of food choices which are halal in terms of their definitions. As a male student says,

“First of all, we buy food in a shop which has the sign of halal. We have to believe they sell halal food because they are supposed to do so; the sellers are Muslims, they won’t (sell and) eat otherwise” (WS_20002).

However, not all students trust this marker. A female student expresses her disappointment when she found out that a restaurant she visited regularly did not meet her criteria of halal. She describes her feelings referring to this experience:

“...I saw, my husband saw, near to the kebab, there was ham. They cooked it close to each other. My husband asked the seller, ‘What is that?’ referring to the ham. He just laughed. So, he just claimed it was halal but he was not really concerned about it. If he was, he would have separated (the ham and the kebab). Perhaps, he sold the ham to meet the demands of other consumers. However, he is supposed to understand that we bought halal from him because we thought he sold one. If we had known (of what he did), we would have bought from another restaurant. Moreover, it was sad because he was Muslim himself, but he did not do what was expected of him. If he had been a British man, we would understand because perhaps he wouldn’t have known” (WS_200011).

However, there is another way of dealing with this problem. A male student explains the way he accepts the rarity of shops and restaurants selling the halal food simply by scrutinizing or asking for information about the menu. For him, the halal food in this situation is food without pork or meat. As he says:

“I personally believe that fish fillet is halal, the source is halal, the fish... It doesn’t... it wasn’t beef or chicken. So, some students assume how they make the preparation of the meal, what kind of tools they use... if it is the same plate they use with the non-halal food, but think about how we live in UK. Basically, all food is mixed with the non-halal food. I try to do the best, I mean... If you go to MacDonald’s, you don’t have to eat meat. You try to find the fish fillet, the first thing is... anything that is sea food or something vegetarian” (WS_200013/ WS_200014/ WS_200015).

Identifying food from the smell is another way of avoiding the not-halal one. As a student describes the way she identifies pork from its smell:

“So if you find the smell of pork, you will understand. I use my nose more than my tongue, it means I smell all the time. It’s very bad habit, really... really bad. It’s rude if I do it, in my culture it’s very bad. But trust me; I do it everywhere I eat if I am not sure of the meat” (WS_20003).

Another male student trusts his feeling of ‘weirdness’ as an indication that the food he has is not-halal. As he describes:

“Basically you look carefully at the (served) food; you know this is vegetable, this is meat, okay. Nothing red stuff (is) here, you know. If you eat then... if you feel weird before you eat, (but) you still eat (it).... If you feel weird, you have to ask questions to your self, why? What kind of food is this?” (WS_200013/ WS_200014/ WS_200015).

When foods are packaged, the way of identifying the halal ones becomes more complicated. The information concerning the ingredients becomes the most important indicators to avoid not-halal in order to find the halal food. Given the rarity of halal labels in
supermarkets, the basic problem is not how to find the halal food, but how to avoid the not-halal one. The lists of ingredients on food packaging sometimes reveal the necessary information regarding the nutrients as well as the food composition and even details of the chemical terms. For students whose definition of halal is in terms of ‘no-pork’ food, the simplest way of doing this is by scanning the food package. As a female student described:

“I don’t check the ingredients in detail, but I just scan the package to see whether there is any meat in it and what kind of meat it is…. So….if it’s pork I avoid it. Like..er….for example if I want to buy mm a….sandwich… I check what filling the sandwich has.in it, if ham or something like it, I don’t buy it. Er…if it has bacon or whatever, obviously I don’t buy it” (WS_20004).

Such identification is enough to avoid pork. However, for those whose concern is about avoiding pork and un-slaughtered animals, food identification involves other criteria. First of all, food must be free from pork and any substance related to pork. Secondly, it has to be free from anything related to un-slaughtered animals. The following quotation shows how this substance is a source of concern:

“For food, the most important thing is (to avoid) food which contains substances like pork bones which is called bovine, bovine gelatine. The non-bovine one is... if I am not mistaken, from cow. It is called carcass... It is usually in supplements, vitamins. Here, it (the bovine gelatine) is common. But, in places like Morrison, you can find ones that are gelatine free. Although there is no label halal, I bought that one; it’s gelatine free, so I suppose, we can consume it” (WS_20006).

In situations when not all food packaging offers detailed information, the best way to deal with this is by choosing the ‘suitable for vegetarian’ one. It is considered safe because it is free from animal substance. However, for some students, even vegetarian foods are sometimes not-halal because they contain alcohol. Therefore, it is also necessary to scrutinize the ingredients of vegetarian food. Failure to identify this could pose the risk of eating a non-halal substance. As a male student describes,

“A few days ago, at the label vegetarian... Sometimes you buy, you look at it more or less, it says vegetarian but you didn’t realise wine is there. Cider is apple juice, (isn’t it)? Cider vinegar, you can (consume it) because it is from apple juice, you know. But spirit, you know it’s from methane...you can not drink (it)” (WS_200012A).

The above cases demonstrate the importance of students’ definitions of halal with relation to the way they identify the halal food. The identifying process is possible only when the food package has the necessary information in terms of what is considered as halal and not-halal. At the same time, the students have to possess the necessary information to guide them identifying the halal and not-halal ingredients.

Looking for halal foods is closely related to looking for the latest information regarding what substance is listed as not-halal. Downloading from a website is one way of finding such information. Other students take notes from a trustworthy source about the chemical terms of substances related to pork and un-slaughtered animals.

The importance of ‘procedures of food identification’ for ‘the construction of eater’s identity’ is central in Fischler’s analysis of food, self and identity. One important concept for this is the process of ‘incorporation’. As Fischler says, “To incorporate a food is, in both real and imaginary terms, to incorporate all or some of its properties: we become what we eat” (1988; 277). Controlling incorporation is a basis for controlling one’s body and mind; hence, controlling one’s identity. Within this process, identifying food becomes necessary because ‘if we do not know what we eat, how can we know what we are?’ (Fichler, 1988:282). For the students in this study, their success in identifying halal food is a reflection of their ability to control the process of ‘incorporation’ of food into their body. Eating is controlled through their abilities to find food consistent with their definition of halal.
Tension in Eating

Eating halal food for students in this study can be divided based on two different social settings. The first refers to eating when students are alone or within their families; and secondly, when eating takes place in social occasions such as parties, conferences or seminars. However, in both situations, there are tensions in eating when students have to tolerate what is prohibited according to their definition of halal. This requires the process of negotiating eating in terms of a subjective definition and the actual eating itself.

In private, eating pork accidentally is caused by the failure to identify the source of food. The reason is different when students are in social occasions. As a student describes his experience,

"And if... you know, if they have meat for me and I don’t want to offend them... or... you know, and I have no choice, than I would... I would eat it. Yeah... it’s happened before. People had offered me and didn’t know. After that, I told them, ‘You know, well... normally I don’t eat pork’ (WS_20004)"

In this case, eating pork is not a matter of breaking the rule; it is a way of coping with a situation wherein one cannot avoid pork. She reconciles this by accepting her action:

“I tasted pork before... I know what the taste is like if I accidentally eat it. I would probably know that it’s pork. But because I’ve already have the foods and already eaten it, to me it’s more about a sin to waste the food... so I just eat it anyway and finish it because, you know... God always said it’s a sin to waste food and if you are hungry and you need to eat... you know... you can’t avoid pork, then go ahead and eat it. So, that’s what I do” (WS_20004)

For students who define halal food under the category of ‘no pork and no un-slaughtered animal’, eating involves more than an effort to know ‘what to eat’ and ‘where to get what to eat’. When they cannot find the halal label or certificate, they need to discover the exact content and sometimes the process of food production. In actual eating, there were sometimes ‘unavoidable circumstances’ wherein eating was no longer under personal control even when it took place in private. A male student explains his experience when he had to buy and cook meat produced through un-slaughtered process. He rationalizes his eating the food as follows:

“Once, it was after I knew about halal food in Chatham, I bought the un-slaughtered meat because it was not in my schedule to go there. There was no meat left at home, we were to have a guest” (WS_20002).

The student found a way to overcome his tension, as he explains:

“I ate just a little bit of it (the meat). I said Bismillah. That’s it. I said bismillah twice; first for it (the un-slaughtered meat), then for the eating” (WS_20002).

For him, by saying ‘Bismillah3’, the broken rule was fixed: not only the act of eating the not-halal food was justified; moreover, food is transformed from the unacceptable to the acceptable substance.

Similarly, having been invited by a friend, another student found himself in a situation where he was served food which was not halal in terms of his definition. He describes his experience:

“So, basically my friend, (he) is Muslim, and he cooked us a chicken, he made us a meal. So, you know... because he is our friend, you know. We don’t question him. So, after we finished eating, and at that point that, I mean... I and my (other) friend... We don’t tell him about it but we feel something wrong. So, we open the fridge... Oh, he bought it from Tesco. I don’t judge him but he is one of the people who don’t care about it. He served it, so basically... I feel guilty about it...because I didn’t ask. But, if (I) asked him... err... basically... I don’t know... I try

3 This means ‘In the name of The God, the most beneficent and the most merciful’
For this student, the tension is resolved by ignoring the source of the food. He defines his situation as ‘a necessity to eat’: he was in circumstances where he had to respect his friend. The tension in eating was soothed in the name of friendship.

In another case, a female student, chooses vegetarian food when invited by a British friend to eat in an Italian restaurant. Based on her definition of halal, the restaurant was not a place she would choose for eating. She found herself in a very difficult situation, and she knew her friend did, too. They ordered vegetarian food, but still it worried her. She was thinking about the kitchen utensils for preparing her food, she believed the same utensils were used for other customers. However, she overcame this tension: “Because I respected her and she respected me; she invited me. I came. As the host, she understood, she ate the vegetarian food as well” (WS_20006).

This student allowed herself to negotiate the tension. She eased her definition by eating the vegetarian food although she knew the process of preparing her food was not in line with her definition of halal.

For students living with their family, the attempt to control their children’s dietary beliefs can be a source of tension. For example, a female student tries to make sure her family eats halal food only; she buys meat from the halal butchery in other city; and she scrutinizes the ingredients on food packaging in detail. She also encourages her children to eat ‘home made food’, providing them with a packed lunch for their school dinner. However, still she describes her anxiety:

“In school dinner... Sometimes my children eat without checking; they eat chicken and chips because their friends eat that. I am concerned, but they are children. Their friends offer

4 He explain this, ‘And it’s quite rude for ask the neighbour or the people or the host about the source of the food’.

In another example, a male student and his wife provide their children with anything they need to eat including their own snacks from halal sources only. He is also communicating with other parents, informing them about his children’ dietary rules:

“They are quite concerned about, they know about the vegetarian, but they don’t know about Muslims, you know. They know we eat vegetarian, they give you food they consider vegetarian. But some times it’s very difficult, sometimes, the chocolate, the cake, are difficult to resist. But, you stick on saying that if it is chocolate you don’t eat, but you don’t know whatever they do” (WS-200012A).

These two cases illustrate how tensions can arise for parents attempting to prevent their children from eating not-halal food. Both students overcome this by easing their definition. They accept their children’s limitations in following their dietary belief by allowing them to eat vegetarian food.

Fischler identifies the increased anxiety or insecurity about food. Within this context, his attention is directed to the disturbed identity related to the identification of food and construction or sanctioning of the subject’s identity. He sees the emergence of re-equilibrium in individual and collective demand and reaction for and towards re-identification such as food labelling, listing of ingredients, purity and quality of food product, diet, vegetarianism, to name but a few (1988: 289-291).

The identifiable food then becomes very important for Fischler’s analysis of modern identity within the industrialized society. He sees food identification as being more difficult due to several conditions: namely, the increased number of people consuming unknown food; the unknown process of preparation; the individualization of food choice in eating habits; the reducing of the sensory character of food into appearance and signs; and finally, the increasing
power of food technology in reconstituting the content, flavour and the appearance of food.

For students in this study, tension is resulted from eating non-halal food in contradiction to their definition of halal. On the one hand, this is due to the failure in identifying both the not-halal and the halal food. On the other hand, it is conditioned by the presence of others. However, the tension was resolved by a process of negotiating the subjective meaning of halal, mostly accompanied by accepting food for vegetarians. This is because vegetarian food is perceived as the most acceptable and safest when halal food is unavailable. There are two reasons for this. First, vegetarian food does not contain any substance of meat. Secondly, in the case of product packaging, it is possible to trace particular substances by scanning the list of ingredients. As the result, there are three categories of foods for students, namely halal, not-halal and vegetarian food.

The rationality of looking for the halal food

As defining, identifying and eating the halal food vary, the rationality for looking for halal food differs as well. For students who shared definition of halal refers to hygiene and animal welfare, the rationality of eating halal food is related to these factors. As a female student explains,

“It’s just... because I don’t want to make my religion as the excuse. I don’t like to say, you know, just because Islam says ‘no’ so I don’t do it. God gives you a brain to think so you have to think about the reason why. And, for me, you know... the main reason I don’t eat pork is really because I don’t feel like I want pork, I just don’t feel I need it. The reason for that is probably because my upbringing. Because I was brought up not eating pork. So I don’t feel like I need it. But if I had to, you know, I would. Especially I think, with the way, you know, in west one, in the developed world, the way... the process is in a very high standard of hygiene, health and the safety... I’m not so worried about the health implications” (WS_20004).

The role of socialization is also mentioned by some students as the reason for avoiding particular food. One of them realizes that she cannot break away from the influence of her cultural background. As she explains:

“It’s because I grew up in a Muslim country... And I grew up in a Muslim environment. We are not exposed to pork. So... I guess when you grow up and you don’t... you’re not exposed to it, er... you know... eventually you grow up not interested in it” (WS_20007/WS_20008).

However, for some others, looking for halal food is closely related to their spiritual being. Eating halal food is a part of their ritual as Muslims. For them, identifying what to eat is a part of the attempt to maintain bodily and spiritual purity:

“It’s like cleansing... I mean anything goes to your body, you don’t want to be contaminated... your blood, so because whatever religious rite, we shalat, berwudhu, you know... We are afraid is not going to be accepted by God. So... It’s a part of a parcel, (it is) also ibadah” (WS_1200012A).

Therefore, being a Muslim is the only reason for avoiding what they perceive as not halal. Accepting without question is a part of their commitment to be a good follower of their faith. A female student says,

“Don’t question it. Just follow it” (WS_200012B).

Or as another student describes,

“I eat err... all kinds of food that I think that I am allowed and I think good for my health. I told you I am Muslim. I should do it. No other reason. No other excuse. I don’t want an excuse to break up on this limitation” (WS_20003).

At some extent, it is important to take account of Lupton’s emotional aspect of food for the rationality of eating among students in this study. The idea of emotional or unconscious preference by Lupton is relevant here. Adopting the idea of habitus developed by Bourdieu, the
unconscious preference of food is the individual’s unthinking action because it is ‘the product of acculturation and a part of the habits of everyday life’. Therefore, Lupton defines subjectivity as resulting ‘through discourse in interaction with embodied experience, the sense, the memory, habit and the unconscious’ (1996:155). The existence of the dietary regimen, the prevailing of rationality and ascetic discourse, is a solution for re-establishing certainties. It controls one’s anxiety regarding food.

However, whilst Lupton explains the different response to food based on food preference, this study is based on both food avoidance and preference. Furthermore in Lupton’s, eating is a strategy for controlling the individual’s hedonism and release. For students in this study, eating is related to a process of making sure that food belongs to particular category, ‘the halal’ one.

**DISCUSSION**

That food is an arena where groups draw obvious boundaries between themselves is shown by Cesáro (2002) and Gillette (2005). Both Gillette and Cesáro regard food and eating as the marker of group identity between Hui and Han (in Gillette’s); Uyghurs and Han (in Cesáro). Based on what is described by Gillette, there are similar features but yet there are striking differences between the way the Hui identify foods which do not belong to qingzhen and the way the students in this study identify halal, non-halal, and vegetarian food. For the Hui, the non-qingzhen does not include western food while for the students in this study; vegetarian food is placed outside the boundary of the not-halal. Western food is neutral for the Hui, vegetarian food is safe for the students; therefore they are acceptable.

The next question then is, why is that? The rationality lies in the symbolic meaning of western food for the Hui, and the meaning of vegetarian food for the students. Gillette sees three factors by which the Hui accept western food: ‘they were not made with pork; they were perceived to be western; and they were the product of industrial production techniques that did not involve the extensive use of the hands’ (2005: 112). For the Muslim students, the vegetarian food is safe because it does not contain meat or the residue of meat.

However, in contrast to Gillette (and also Cesáro), my findings show that ‘the other groups’ does not entirely signify Muslim or non-Muslim food. Based on the different definitions of halal, ‘the other groups’ refers to the others who do not share the same meaning of halal, regardless of their similar ethnic backgrounds. In this way, the different definition of halal is established and at the same time accommodated by the possibility of sharing the third category of food, the vegetarian.

The subject’s identity is formulated in relation to the ability to adapt and to control one’s eating habit within particular circumstances. While eating is situated in the private sphere, alone or among family, eating is controlled through the ability to find the necessary information about food. Within this context, eating the not-halal food accidentally is caused by failure to identify food. Moreover, when eating took place in social occasions, controlling food may cause tensions among students. These arise from students’ attempt to eat in terms of halal and the necessity to eat what is available in the presence of others. These were resolved through the process of negotiating the definitions of halal.

**CONCLUSION**

International Muslim students in this study originally came from countries where the majority of the population is Muslim. Within these countries, for example, in Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei, the production and distribution of foods are regulated in terms of halal. Foods are formally acceptable to and consumable by Muslims after they have been certified as halal by the Islamic Board. Presumably, eating, in terms of halal, in the countries of origin was not a major issue for these students. It is only when they arrived in foreign countries, that they became more conscious about halal food. For some students in this study, looking for halal food is looking for food which meets their standard of hygiene when at the same time avoiding the unfamiliar food. Eating halal food for some others is unseparable from their social upbringing in their country of origins. For others, halal food is also believed as the appropriate food
for the body as a contrivance in order to present the proper self in the relationship with God. Eating is a part of following ‘the rule’ in order to become ‘a good Muslim’.

It is worth noting that this study is within the context of Britain, a country with a different culinary system of food from their country of origin. All of my participants identify themselves as Muslims and accept the dietary belief of halal food. However, although their conceptions of halal are closely related to the Qur’anic conception of the appropriate food for Muslims, their subjective definitions of halal are varied. Therefore, their definition of halal in this study is not to be taken as identical with the Quranic version of halal. It is their definition of halal which I have tried to capture and then to understand in order to make sense of the way in which they identify and eat during their studies in Britain.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


