

During the last few months there has been increasing criticism from certain quarters to the halaal certification scheme of ACJU (All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama). In Sri Lanka, most non-muslims have the impression that halaal is something only to do with animal slaughter. This is a misunderstanding of the Arabic word *halaal* which means ‘permitted’ and its opposite *haram* means ‘prohibited’. Halal and haram are universal terms that apply to all facets of life. However, we will use these terms only in relation to food products, meat products, cosmetics, personal care products, pharmaceuticals, food ingredients, and food contact materials. ACJU’s halaal certification process, besides monitoring abattoirs, also involves the scrutinizing of ingredients in food production facilities that do not deal with any slaughter and instead produce consumer items. Unfortunately, wrong figures are given and wrong accusations are made against ACJU, which has taken the shape of a disinformation and defamation campaign. This article is an attempt to try and dispel these false claims and present the facts and figures to the readers so that they may realize and understand the truth.

It should be understood that long before ACJU started issuing halaal certificates and/or stamping logos, the term halaal was freely abused by many. Anyone would print the word ‘halal’ in English or Arabic or may have his own logo printed, to claim that a particular item or outlet was halaal (permitted) for the Muslims. Muslims were confused as many instances of wrong explanations were given to define halaal by some restaurants or shopkeepers. The abuse was so much that one supermarket even had the halaal sign on pork, which was pointed out to the management by a disappointed customer. There were no news items or paper articles to condemn or highlight the abuse of this term so vital to a Muslim’s daily life. In fact, a religious right of the Muslims was being abused unchecked.

However, with time and the rejection by the consumer of the wrong explanation given for halaal by halaal claimers, many vendors were anxious to know from whom or where one could get their products certified halaal, both for local and for export purposes. Some vendors, perhaps in desperation, got certificates from local mosques, others got it from Muslim merchants and some got photocopies of halal certificates from overseas suppliers. One Muslim company had its own certificate issued with a photo of their chairman on it to give credibility and/or confidence to the consumers. All these were attempts to get the halaal conscious consumer to accept their product as genuine halaal. It was in this backdrop that ACJU (Council of Theologians), being the qualified body for Islamic matters, entered this field to help business establishments who wished to be genuinely halaal to receive a credible halaal certificate for their businesses and/or their products.

Initially two poultry processing firms approached ACJU to get their facility halaal certified. Thereafter, one of them wanted their value added products to be certified and then followed with their food outlet. Gradually the market took notice of this and ACJU was getting applications on a regular basis. It must be emphasized that the clients made inquiries and came seeking the certificate/logo. It must be noted that only after ACJU receives a ‘Letter of Intent’ to halaal certify a clients products/facility that any action regarding the halaal process is initiated.

Halaal Concept

Within Islam, a strong emphasis is placed on cleanliness, both spiritually and in the context of food and drink. For a food and drink product to be approved for consumption it must conform to the Islamic dietary laws. Halaal and haram are universal terms that apply to all facets of Muslim life and not only to food.

With regards to food and drink, Islamic scholars have laid down three guidelines.

1. Consumption must include only Halaal food and food products.
2. The food and food products must be obtained through halaal means.
3. The material in contact with the food or food products must not be harmful to health.

Halaal products are determined based on their purity and cleanliness and while the particular standards may have regional or other complexities, there are some primary instances of non-halaal, or haram products including:

- pork and all swine by-products
- animals that are not slaughtered according to halaal requirements

- animals that have died prior to slaughter (carrion)
- animals slaughtered in the name of anyone other than God.
- carnivorous animals or birds of prey
- insects beneficial to man (bees, etc) and harmful to man (centipede, scorpion, etc)
- blood and blood by-products
- alcohol and intoxicants
- derivatives of human origin (human hair, etc.)
- assumed halaal foods that have been contaminated by any of these haram products

The halaal certification process mainly focuses on the screening of ingredients in food production, which forms the bulk of the client base; presently the supervision of less than a dozen poultry abattoirs is the only animal processing activity that is supervised by ACJU. The screening of ingredients include even those items that are not required to be mentioned in the ingredient list but would render a food item 'haram' or non-halaal if included. One such ingredient is L-Cystine.

In one instance, when the application for certification of dough improver was received, it was noticed that it contained L-cystine (an amino acid) which was supplied by a company in China. Since this substance is most often obtained from human hair or duck feather and to a lesser extent from pig bristles and hooves, ACJU wanted a verification regarding the use of that particular ingredient. Since it could not be established that it was not from human hair, ACJU had to request for the ingredient to be obtained from an unambiguous source in order to certify the product. It was subsequently obtained from a supplier of synthetic and vegetarian sources. In this instance, the possibility of cannibalism by humans was avoided due to halaal screening, as this product is also used in the baking of the ordinary bread loaves.

The halaal program is a 100% voluntary program. However, ACJU is accused of forcing companies to get Halaal certificates. This is totally baseless and could be verified from any vendor who has been certified. On the contrary, ACJU initially declined to certify certain products that are by nature halaal (those that do not require processing) but had to issue certificates to help the clients to meet the demand of their buyers.

Regulation does not always require processing aids to be listed on the label if they are present in trace amounts. For example, apple juice is clarified with gelatin but is never mentioned on the apple juice label. Similarly, water is purified by passing through a bed of carbon. Bottled water goes through extensive processing, including purification, filtration, and sometimes mineral adjustment, chlorination, fluorination or ozone treatment, in order to make it safe for human consumption. During this process it may come in contact with chemical materials potentially derived from animals but that is not mentioned on the labels of bottled water. Furthermore, food-grade lubricants are used on machinery during the production of anything from bottled water to aluminum foil. Lubricants consist mainly of oils and could be from any source, vegetable, animal or synthetic. Lubricants used in manufacturing are not listed on food ingredient labels either. This is why even bottled water, not just food, needs to be halaal certified.

It is very disheartening to see websites and posters calling for boycott of halaal certified goods and it becomes worse when people start to pen articles without making any inquiries or verification from ACJU regarding matters concerning halaal. ACJU is always ready to meet and discuss with any person or group and explain to them matters regarding the subject. Grossly inflated figures regarding the fees charged are given which causes wrong impression in the minds of the people and amounts to a disinformation campaign with a view to deliberately mislead people.

Muslims are certainly not the only group who use certification processes to evaluate types of food or services. Nor are they the only group to charge companies a fee, if they wish to receive such certification, and display specific logos or symbols. Kosher certifiers also run certification programs that allow Jewish citizens to help ascertain if certain foods are proper and fit for them to eat. Halaal certification organizations, kosher certifiers also charge a fee for certification and for the privilege of displaying the kosher logo. Even the well-respected Heart Foundation Tick and SLS mark programs charge companies for the use of the symbol. In fact, a number of other interest groups run similar fee-based certification programs including HACCP, ISO, etc.

The Cost Factor

ACJU is accused of making colossal sums of money and also accused of diverting funds for wrong purposes. There could be nothing further from the truth in this matter. The surplus income of ACJU after deducting direct expenses per month is only about Rs 200,000. The policy of ACJU is to charge only a minimal fee which would be enough for the smooth operation of the halaal division. The fee charged is too negligible to be passed over to the consumer and does not justify

an increase in price of the product but is absorbed by the company which is amply compensated by increase in its profit due to increase in sales. The colossal figures mentioned in the hate posters and websites are only imaginary and there is no truth in it. Some examples given below of the fees levied against some of the highest paying companies will show how insignificant is the impact on the price of the products.

ABATTOIR SECTOR				Monthly	
		Avg. Birds (Per day)	Monthly (25 Days)	Halaal Cert. Fee	Cost per Chicken
Large	Scale	more than 20,000	500000	40,000.00	0.08
Medium	Scale	10,000-20,000	375000	30,000.00	0.08
Small	Scale	less than 10,000	250000	20,000.00	0.08

It may be noted that in each abattoir there is a monitor employed by ACJU who is paid a salary of @ Rs.20, 000.00 from the monthly payment received by ACJU. Besides this, there is a team of auditors who visit all the certified facilities, abattoirs and each restaurant outlet on a monthly basis to audit the facility for halaal conformation. From this table it can be seen that *the cost per bird (not per kilo) is not more than 0.08 cts.*

The added cost per item in the product sector (below) is even more trivial. From the information received from ACJU (table below), there are 8 companies which produce over 15 products and 17 companies produce over 35 products . If the cost charged by ACJU is divided by the number of products produced by a company and that in turn is divided by the number of units produced for just one product for a month, we get the figures given in the table below.

PRODUCT SECTOR

		Extra Cost for a unit if No. of Units Produced is				
TOP 25 COMPANIES		5000	10,000	20,000	100,000	1,000,000
		Cts.	Cts.	Cts.	Cts.	Cts.
1*		0.3774	0.1887	0.0943	0.0189	0.0019
2*		0.1293	0.0646	0.0323	0.0065	0.0006
3		0.0500	0.0250	0.0125	0.0025	0.0003
4		0.1933	0.0967	0.0483	0.0097	0.0010
5		0.1000	0.0500	0.0250	0.0050	0.0005
6		0.0600	0.0300	0.0150	0.0030	0.0003
7		0.0779	0.0389	0.0195	0.0039	0.0004
8		0.1000	0.0500	0.0250	0.0050	0.0005
9		0.0600	0.0300	0.0150	0.0030	0.0003
10		0.0357	0.0179	0.0089	0.0018	0.0002
11		0.1143	0.0571	0.0286	0.0057	0.0006
12		0.1000	0.0500	0.0250	0.0050	0.0005
13		0.0718	0.0359	0.0179	0.0036	0.0004
14		0.0600	0.0300	0.0150	0.0030	0.0003
15		0.1000	0.0500	0.0250	0.0050	0.0005
16						

Note

***Certification Fee Includes Full Time Monitor's Fee**

		0.0562	0.0281	0.0140	0.0028	0.0003
17		0.0900	0.0450	0.0225	0.0045	0.0005
18		0.1800	0.0900	0.0450	0.0090	0.0009
19		0.1000	0.0500	0.0250	0.0050	0.0005
20		0.1000	0.0500	0.0250	0.0050	0.0005
21		0.1000	0.0500	0.0250	0.0050	0.0005
22		0.0600	0.0300	0.0150	0.0030	0.0003
23		0.1800	0.0900	0.0450	0.0090	0.0009
24		0.1600	0.0800	0.0400	0.0080	0.0008
25		0.0850	0.0425	0.0213	0.0043	0.0004
26		0.0600	0.0300	0.0150	0.0030	0.0003

It may be noted that these are the top 25 companies that are certified in this category producing a variety of consumer goods ranging from bakery items, confectionary, meat products, dairy products, etc. If the production rate is as above just for one product, then the monthly fee divided by all the products put together will be even smaller. This obviously shows that the halaal certification fee is a negligible cost and does not constitute a burden on the producer and does not justify being transferred to the consumer. The cost for the smaller companies is even less. *A similar calculation of the numbers of the food premise sector (restaurants, etc) companies shows that an average of Rs. 139.96 is the cost for an outlet per day.* These figures show how small the impact of halaal certification charges is on a product.

Economic Benefits

The global halaal market is estimated at USD 2.3 trillion excluding Islamic banking - *F & B (67%), Pharmaceutical (22%), Personal Care and Cosmetics (10%). If we include service sectors for halaal market, the potential size of total market is astronomical. Halaal is a lucrative market with huge opportunities. Awareness and interest in halaal products worldwide has increased tremendously among Muslims and Non-Muslims as well. Consumer's views on halaal products are not only confined to religious viewpoint but the confidence that comes with the halaal branding as halaal stands for Healthy, Wholesome and Hygiene.

Sri Lanka is well positioned to take a fair slice of this market. Our government needs to take notice of this opportunity and use the advantage of our good relationship with the Muslim states to get maximum leverage. We already have an organized halaal scheme present in the country. Thailand which also started halaal certification almost at the same time as us has moved ahead by leaps and bounds, this is despite having to overcome a 'halaal negative'. A look at Thailand, which practices the same type of Buddhism as in Sri Lanka, with a similar size Muslim population and demographic distribution as the Muslim population in Sri Lanka, will show the potential for pecuniary benefits is tremendous. Following is an extract from a magazine which shows the income generated by Thailand and the far sighted government policy for halaal promotion.

"Thailand, a predominantly Buddhist country, is ranked fifth in terms of the global market for halal products with a market share of around 5.3 per cent (2009). Brazil tops the list (10.2 per cent), followed by the USA, India and Russia.

The new plan was developed by the Industry Ministry and the National Food Institute with input from the Central Islamic Committee of Thailand and calls for up to THB 5bn to be invested to raise export shipments of halal food – the term covers contents and preparation, as well as the slaughter of animals as prescribed by Muslim (Sharia) law – by 10 per cent each year of the plan, which runs from 2010 to 2014. The Government has clearly identified a growing niche market, as can be seen from the dramatic rise in halal exports, which were worth THB 5.19bn in 2008, an increase of 53.3 per cent from THB 3.38bn in 2007. In 2009, halal exports surged to THB 8.36bn. The potential for further growth is enormous. The Industry Ministry estimates that the market for halal food products is worth a staggering USD 635bn.

This year THB 264mn was earmarked to develop nine food production projects in five southern provinces as part of the Government's 'Thai Khem Khaeng' stimulus programme. Pattani, Yala, Naratiwat, Satun and Songkhla have been designated as production bases for halal products, for which the focus is on raw materials for halal food production, including livestock, fisheries, vegetables and fruit.

Despite the rosy news, there are several challenges that need to be met if the government is to meet its targets. Firstly, halal food standards have to be improved domestically and secondly, the profile of Thai halal food overseas, particularly in the Middle East, must be raised.”

Source: <http://businessreportthailand.com/thailand-halal-food-12193> - short article

A browse of the links given will show the pragmatic, proactive and far sighted policy of the Thai government. More information may be obtained from the links above and below which shows the commitment, determination and the achievement of Thai government.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68rI_I9W-yE - Thailand's Halaal Food Export (3.22 mts)

<http://www.acfs.go.th/halal/pdf/Halal%20Product.pdf> - for those interested in more information

The vision of ACJU is “To protect humanity from Haram (prohibited) consumption by certifying, monitoring and promoting local and international halaal products from our motherland to reach the entire globe within the guidelines of shariah (Islamic law) and internationally recognized standards in a professional and excellent manner. Further, to educate consumers by creating awareness of the halaal concept and to build a partnership between the consumers and All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama Division for Halaal Certification.”

The work of the Halaal Division is aimed at fulfilling this vision by getting more Sri Lankan establishments to become halaal compliant so that they may be able reach out to the global market and carve out a slice of the huge market for Sri Lanka. ACJU has kept the charges to a bare minimum so as to avoid any loading on the price, while not causing any hiccups to its operations, as has been shown above. It may be noted that so far the majority of companies that have been certified are non-muslim owned and they are reaping the benefits of the halaal certification. Similarly the top five halaal exporters in the world are also non-muslim countries. It is fervently hoped that our government will also take a cue from the Thai model and draw up plans and execute them on a priority basis to propel Sri Lankan halaal products to the world market. The increase in the ‘halaal conscious tourist’ traffic to our country is another aspect. We could see from the above mentioned facts that if proper focus and attention is given to the ‘halaal market’, Sri Lanka could easily attract a big portion of this segment if we do things in an appropriate manner.