

Issues of Stunning in Halal Slaughtering



Examples of stunning equipment

One of the problems facing the global halal industry is the lack of recognition of a universal standard of halal practices. With diverse interpretations on what halal entails given regulatory pressure by the different halal certification bodies, the divisions hamper the growth and integration of halal practices into supply chain processes worldwide. Most pressing is the debate over the preferred method of slaughtering animals. The most prevalent technique is to stun an animal, typically by delivering an electric shock, before killing it.

Use of stunning have been obligated and written in the acts of meat-producing countries like the United States, Australia, New Zealand and the EU nations, most commonly on animal welfare grounds. But dissenting views on this practice hold that stunning animals renders the meat Haram. Such arguments question whether stunning allows sufficient blood-flow to meet Halal conditions.

Islamic Shariah law states that slaughter should be carried out with a single cut to the throat. For Halal, all flowing blood must be drained out of the carcass, and any animal that has been killed by strangling, or by a violent blow, is forbidden.

Scholars of fiqh, the people who understand, interpret and explain the Shariah, are more or less unanimous that the meat of stunned animals is Halal, with some qualifications. Amongst the the many fatwas supporting this, the argument is that it is permissible as long as the electric shock is not the cause of the animal's death (says a fatwa from the Council for Legal Verdicts at Dar al-Mustafa for Islamic Studies in Yemen).

The late Al-Hafiz Masri, who founded British Islam's first animal rights movement, argued that there was no Qur'anic prohibition on stunning animals. Furthermore he wrote that "[t]he main counsel of Islam in the slaughter of animals for food is to do it in the least painful manner... Failure to stun animals before slaughter causes them pain and suffering. Muslims should give serious thought to whether this is cruelty (Al-Muthiah). If so, then surely the meat from them is unlawful (Haram), or at least, undesirable to eat (Makruh)."

He cites the verdict of a special committee appointed by Al-Azhar University in Cairo to decide whether the meat of animals slaughtered after stunning was lawful. The committee consisted of representatives of the four acknowledged Schools of Thought in Islam, i.e. Shafii, Hanafi, Maliki and Hanbali. Their unanimous verdict (Fatwa) was that there were no religious objections on modern methods of slaughtering, as long as these methods are, to quote, "'shar' (Ahadd) and clean and do 'cause bleeding' (Museelah al-damm). If new means of slaughtering are more quick and sharp, their employment is a more desirable thing. It comes under the saying of the Prophet(s) 'God has ordered us to be kind to everything' (Inna'l-laha Kataba-'l-ihsan 'ala kulle Shay'in)."

The pre-eminent Muslim organization, the Muslim World League (Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami), supported the use of stunning by electric shock. In 1986 The MWL consisting of 55 Muslim theologians (Ulama), scientists and leaders from all over the world, held a joint meeting with the World Health Organization and made the the following 'Recommendation' about pre-slaughter stunning (No 3:1. WHO-EM/FOS/1-E, p. 8): "Pre-slaughter stunning by electric shock, if proven to lessen the animal's suffering, is lawful, provided that it is carried out with the weakest electric current that directly renders the animal unconscious, and that it neither leads to the animal's death nor renders its meat harmful to the consumer."

The Malaysian National Council of Islamic Affairs fatwa has outlined that electrical stunning was permissible as long as the shock was administered only to the head, the electrical current strength and duration to be controlled within fixed limits, and the process to be supervised by accredited Muslim staff.

With these statements and many more supporting fatwas, the conclusions are clear on this matter. The imperative at this juncture is for the worldwide Muslim community to unite and agree on a universal standard.