



HALAL FOOD AND TOURISM IN HO CHI MINH CITY

Phan Anh Tu, Ph.D

Center for Theoretical and Applied Culturology University of Social Sciences and Humanities

| Received: 09.08.2023 | Accepted: 11.08.2023 | Published: 17.08.2023

*Corresponding author: Phan Anh Tu, Ph.D

Center for Theoretical and Applied Culturology University of Social Sciences and Humanities

Abstract

According to Population Census and Houses Investigation the Year of 2019 and a study conducted by a Vietnamese research group, an estimated 10,499 Cham Muslim men are reported to pray regularly at the 14 mosques and one surau (prayer hall) distributed across Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) (Vietnam General Statistics Office, 2020a, 2014; Han, Tuan, 2020, p.105). This statistic indicates the needs of the Muslim community in this bustling Vietnamese city. It also demonstrates Muslim locals' budding role in the HCMC tourism industry as the city can potentially market itself as one of Southeast Asia's top destinations for Muslim tourism.

Halal food is one of the most important needs for Muslims and thus plays a crucial role for halal tourism worldwide. Firstly, this paper looks at locally-made halal food products which are available in convenience services, and/or supermarkets in the city. Later, it will examine the involvement of the local Muslim community in the manufacturing process of these goods and a survey of consumers' feedback regarding locally-made goods. The cultural aspects of the local Muslim community in food processing of halal products; a survey of visitors' feedback when consuming locally-made halal products are also include. The paper also argues that the halal lifestyle from abroad may influence halal cuisines in HCMC. Lastly, the policies of the local authorities will be briefed in the halal tourist development strategy in HCM.

Keywords: Halal food, tourism, Muslims, community, Ho Chi Minh City.

Introduction

The Cham is one of the 54 recorded ethnic community groups in Vietnam, who has been currently living in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan Provinces (Central Vietnam) and Binh Phuoc, Tay Ninh, Tra Vinh, An Giang Provinces and Ho Chi Minh City (the South of Vietnam). Brahmanism and Bani are the major religions, which the Cham settling in Central Vietnam has practiced. However, in early 1960s, Islam was spread in to the Cham in the Central Vietnam where the Muslim community have gradually formed (Han, Tuan, 2020, p.105; Luan, 1974, p.39). Difference to the religious diversities of the Cham in Central Vietnam, the Cham in the South of Vietnam have followed a unique religion that is Islam.

The Muslim community in Ho Chi Minh City are largely made up of the Cham migrations from An Giang Province from the early 20th century. The Cham Muslims are known to be well-versed in trade. Their expertise has led them to bridge connections between Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City in present-day) and Chau Doc (An Giang Province). Based on their commercial dynamics, the Cham

Muslims have formed a riverine trade network from the cities to isolated villages in South Vietnam to Cambodia.

Methodology

The anthropological approach and Quantity Research Method has been applied to complete the articles, in which field notes, the survey was conducted via observation and participation, in-depth-interviews, oral interviews, photo taken, audio recordings and autographs was also added. Moreover, the theory of religious and cultural studies are used to research the relationship between Islamic practise and culinary culture of the Muslim in Ho Chi Minh City and An Giang Province. The fieldwork was carried out within a week of July 2021 in An Giang Province and three days tour in September 2021 for the area of Ho Chi Minh City on which the author interviewed 10 selected people who are enterprise, restaurants and food stall owners. It provides essential materials for the arguments of halal food via the records of varying view of non-Muslim and Muslim themselves.

Settlements of the Muslim community in Ho Chi Minh

According to the survey conducted in An Phu, Tan Chau, Phu Tan and Chau Phu Districts where parts of the An Giang Province are. The Cham Muslim villages are located along riverbanks and mosques are also built at the heart of residential areas. From An Giang Province, the Cham Muslims trend to move to Saigon where is considered as an important focal point for them to earn living. The thriving trading and labour market in Saigon attracted the Cham Muslims, kick starting an immigration wave. Since then, the residential areas of the Cham Muslims in Saigon can be found in District 1, District 6, District 8 and Phu Nhuan District. There are currently, 15 Cham Muslim residential areas in Ho Chi Minh City. At each area, the Cham Muslims have formed gathering points along the roadsides, mosque (*masjid*) or *surau* is erected in the locations where is convenience for the faiths who come to pray (Han, editor, 2005, p.10).

By the time, the Cham migrated to Saigon, a handful Muslim-Malays and Indians had already settled during the colonial era. These foreign Muslims quickly intermingled with the Cham Muslims, which formed into the varying groups of Muslim community in Saigon. The Muslim community in Saigon started a convergent process between the Vietnamese Muslims and outside ones. In addition, intermarriages are a way to unify the different ethnic groups of the same-shared faith. Many of the Muslims in Ho Chi Minh City today are the Viet (the majority ethnic group) and the ethnic Chinese, who have converted to Islam.

Depending in my survey in Ho Chi Minh City, the religious conversion of the Viet and the ethnic Chinese often occur due to marriages between non-Muslims to Muslims while some others convert while studying or working abroad in Muslim countries. The remaining few intellectuals who have done individual research and found the faith essential to their everyday life, converted as well. The rising numbers of Muslims has resulted in a multi-ethnic Muslim community in Ho Chi Minh City. These numbers indicate the crucial position of Muslims in the spiritual life of Vietnamese people today and in the future, especially in the urban areas.

Halal Food Sources in Ho Chi Minh City

Ho Chi Minh City's population and housing census in 2019 show that there are 10,499 Cham Muslims, accounting for 2.24% of the city's population (General Statistics Office, 2020a, 2014). The presence of the Cham Muslims in Ho Chi Minh City plays an important role for forming the mosques that call *chùa Chăm* in Vietnamese language (means Cham pagoda). However, the earliest mosques were built by Malay and Indian merchants, which are identified as the historical and cultural sites to present to the heritage diversities of the city. Currently, the city has fourteen mosques and one *surau*. Masjid Al Rahim (located at 45, Nam Ky Khoi Nghia Street, District 01) was built by Malay Muslims in 1885. The previous structure was demolished to make way for a new one. Another mosque, Masjid Jamin Al Muslimin (also known as Dong Du Mosque) was founded by Indian Muslims in 1935. The former is also known as the "international mosque" due to its popularity amongst expats and diplomats who come from Muslim countries often come to pray on Friday every week.

The strong presence of the Muslim community in Ho Chi Minh City has led to the birth of a halal food industry. Within the residential area of Cham Muslims, halal eateries are common and

they are often centralised around the mosques, as it is a convenient location for both local Muslims and visitors. There are numerous famous eateries in the city enjoyed by both Muslims and non-Muslims such as Musa stall on Nguyen Tri Phuong Street, District 5. In ensuring that halal criteria are fulfilled, the food is prepared by Muslim cooks.

Halal food sources in Ho Chi Minh City are either unofficially recognised by the community as halal or through certifications from Muslim organisations. The former is found to be the most common method of recognition. For instance, when a Muslim opens a stall in a highly populated Muslim area, fellow believers would lend support by patronising their business. In this case, they do not require halal certification as their religious background serves as proof that food is prepared in a halal compliant way. This is common for small businesses that are limited to one area.

Large-scale businesses that market goods and services to Muslims in Vietnam and abroad are obligated to receive halal certification from the Representative Board of the Muslim Community. Applying for a certificate requires an official dispatch attached with a list of items that will be sold to the Representative Board of the Muslim Community in Ho Chi Minh City or An Giang Province. Upon receiving the documents, the Representative Board will set up an evaluation committee that is in charge of inspecting and issuing halal certificates for the products registered by the enterprise.

Currently, companies and enterprises in Vietnam use the model of halal recognition because they often have favourable conditions to approach the Representative Board. As a result, most of their proposed products are recognised halal after the production process and Muslim labour force is checked¹. Enterprises in Ho Chi Minh City and An Giang Province often accept this type of halal certificate. For example, ANAS Enterprise, which specialises in the production of beef sausages (*that call tung-lò-mò in Cham language and lap xưởng bò in Vietnamese*), received its halal certification from the Representative Board of the Muslim Community in An Giang Province. This allows the company to sell products to local Vietnamese Muslims. Recently, Saigon Trading Corporation (SATRA) opened a food store called Satrafoods Halal, the first large-scale halal food hub in District 5, Ho Chi Minh City. The store carries 300 halal products including ready-to-cook meals.

However, the halal certificates issued by the Representative Board are valid within the country only and not in others. As such, ANAS Enterprise has not been able to export beef sausages (*tung-lò-mò*) to the Malaysian markets despite being a Muslim-owned business that exclusively employs Muslims. Mohamad S, owner of ANAS confirmed that the halal certificate issued by the Representative Board of the local Muslim community is only valid for domestic consumption. As for exporting abroad, it is necessary to have a certificate of halal certification from an organisation or a representative office that is recognised by the Islamic world.² Mohamad, additionally, he found that Malaysians share the closest cultural and culinary relationship to the Cham Muslims. Mohamad

¹ According to Interview Minutes, Mr. Mohamad S. owns ANAS Enterprise in Phum Soai Hamlet, Chau Phong Commune, Tan Chau Town, An Giang Province, at 10:00 am, July 20th, 2021

² According to Interview Minutes, Mr. Mohamad S. owns ANAS Enterprise in Phum Soai hamlet Chau Phong commune, Tan Chau town, An Giang province, at 10:00 am, July 20th, 2021.

also believes that Malaysians often support the Cham Muslims as what he has seen in An Giang Province when Malaysian tourists buy the Cham's local products. Recently, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has recognised beef sausages (*tung-lò-mò*) as a One Country One Priority Product (OCOP)³ product of An Giang Province and recently supported a project to upgrade the product packaging as well. Although *tung-lò-mò* is well-known in Vietnam, there are future plans to promote the product to the Malaysian market. Mohamad explained there are many Malaysian tourists who buy his products when traveling to Ho Chi Minh City and An Giang province. He has also sent samples to Malaysian food traders to evaluate and consider his product for distribution there. He recognises that in order to export to Malaysia, his goods would require an international halal certificate.⁴

The brand of *tung-lò-mò* (beef sausage) is a popular Vietnamese delicacy in the current. In the Vietnamese market is currently dominating consumers' tastes. The local government of An Giang province championed ANAS Enterprise's decision to register its trademark and promote products at tourism events in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Through advertising, ANAS hopes that *tung-lò-mò* will be associated with Cham Muslims making them indispensable gifts for tourists that visit Cham villages in Chau Phong and Chau Giang communes. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has issued certificate for the product quality, *tung-lò-mò*, and the merits for ANAS Enterprises.

The religious background of business owners in Vietnam is not the main criteria when certifying halal products such as in Muslim majority countries like Malaysia. Acquiring an international halal certificate for products made in Vietnam is the ambition of many businesses. In fact, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development encourages domestic enterprises to actively approach and export their goods to Muslim majority markets.

Since 2019, there has been several international conferences held in Vietnam such as "Halal Market in Southeast Asia-South Pacific: Potential and Opportunities" held on 20 November 2021. A conference titled "Global Market of Halal Food and Opportunities for Vietnam" was held on 30 November 2020, the Conference on Promoting International Cooperation to Develop Vietnam's Halal Industry held on 28 June 2022. These conferences attest to the extremely important role of the halal industry for Vietnam's economic development. However, they should do production standards need to meet the halal standards as these countries regulate. It has prompted some businesses to develop the strategy for product upgrading. If their products are exported to the markets of Muslim countries, it will be assessed as a new success in the economic field for Vietnam.

³ One Commune One Product (OCOP) is a national program that seeks to facilitate the development of regional agricultural specialties and rural tourism. The program is managed by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development aims to empower local communities for sustainable social and economic welfare development, protect the environment and preserve tradition.

⁴ According to Interview Minutes, Mr. Mohamad S. owns ANAS Enterprise in Phum Soai hamlet Chau Phong commune, Tan Chau town, An Giang province, at 10:00 am, July 20th, 2021.

Halal food and tourist market in Ho Chi Minh City

To realize Malaysia is a new market that can contribute to Vietnamese economic tourist development, since 2012, Vietnam National Administration of Tourism (VNAT) composed the scheme, *Promoting and Attracting Malaysian Tourists to Vietnam in the period 2012 – 2015* that was approved and deployed by Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism 2012). In addition, the VNAT also evaluated the market for Muslim tourists has become active in the late 2020s and Malaysian tourist is in top ten Asian tourists who came to visit Vietnam with 407,574 Malaysian tourist in 2016 and 295,517 Malaysian tourist in the early eight months of 2017⁵. According to statistics of the Department of Tourism in Ho Chi Minh City, by January 2020, Vietnam had welcomed 50,000 Islamic visitors, a 5.5 times increase over the previous year (General Statistics Office, 2020a). The rise of Malaysian tourists has led to the formation of trading streets for the Muslims in Ho Chi Minh City. The main highlight is the night market on Nguyen An Ninh Street, District 1. Due to the large concentration of Malaysian tourists and the appeal of services for Muslims, the market street is currently known as Malaysian Street (*Phố Mã Lai in Vietnamese*). Tourists, however, get to know it by another name, Saigon Halal Street where they can easily find Vietnamese dishes prepared by Muslims. Malaysian Street is an area targeted towards foreigners, hence the prices tend to be higher than other popular markets patronised by local Muslims.

Vietnamese enterprises have quickly seized the opportunity to produce goods for Muslim tourists. As such, certain companies have labelled their products with halal logos for profit. There are instances where certain food products contain pork derivatives and yet, carry the halal logo as a case of culinary product produced by a food company in Tien Giang Province. The Representative Board of Muslim community in Ho Chi Minh City has issued several warnings regarding the existence of these products⁶. Local Muslims tend to avoid such products but Muslim tourists might be less aware.

Muslim tourists may also find that some restaurants claim to be halal even though they do not adhere to halal food preparation standards. The lack of awareness and carelessness can be traced to two reasons. First, businesses are profit-driven and may push business ethics aside. Second, due to limited religious and cultural knowledge amongst the business owners, they might assume that pork is the only prohibited ingredient. Otherwise, other dishes are safe for Muslims to consume.

Interviews were conducted with five non-Muslim restaurant and stall owners in District 1 of Ho Chi Minh City to gain a better understanding behind their perception of halal food. All five agreed that a dish is halal when it does not contain pork. They claim that

⁵ According to the article, *Đẩy mạnh thu hút thị trường khách du lịch Malaysia đến TP. Hồ Chí Minh* (Increasing to attract Malaysian tourists to Ho Chi Minh City), <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/post/24805>

⁶ According to the article, *Trả lời thắc mắc bạn đọc: thị trường Halal tại Việt Nam* (answer the questions that the readers to be interested in: the market of Halal product in Vietnam), <http://chanlyislam.net/home/tra-loi-thac-mac-ban-doc-ky-ba-thi-truong-san-pham-halal-tai-viet-nam-534/>

their restaurants or eateries are able to prepare halal dishes because they have removed all pork derivatives, using only beef, fish or chicken. They also confirm that in trading, they respect Muslims, if a Muslim asks them to provide food; they will cook by their own kitchen appliances. As their view, it makes the dish purified so that Muslims do not wrongly commit their religion when they enjoy the meals.⁷ These understandings are also the common view of the Vietnamese regarding halal food. Most Vietnamese assume that a Muslim simply needs to worship Allah, pray five times a day and avoid pork at all costs⁸.

However, there are profit-driven companies that intentionally label their goods as halal to deceive Muslim customers. Most of the time, they manage to escape the scrutiny of authorities. They are only hindered when the Representative Board of the Muslim community make investigations and report to relevant authorities. Unfortunately, this might be a lengthy process and Muslim tourists may have already mistakenly purchase these inauthentic halal products. A judge (*hakim*) in HCMC, Mohamad V explained that many companies in Vietnam do not have linear procedures or guidelines to process food according to halal standards. Local Muslims may be aware but tourists may not be. He expressed worry regarding the situation as it takes a long time to stop these companies.⁹ The challenges in the food market of Ho Chi Minh City can be seen as an excellent opportunity for Muslim restaurants to promote their brands. Halal restaurants claim they are the real places to serve halal dishes. For example, a restaurant in HCMC promoted as follows: "We understand that some F&B owners claim their establishments are halal when they are not. Only through a grassroots effort can Muslims improve the halal assurance of the Halal sector in HCMC"¹⁰

GoHALALVietnam is an online platform that aims to promote restaurants that sell authentic halal food that also assist tourists and foreign Muslims to find halal product and the halal groceries-produced-enterprises in Vietnam. The website stated that there are over 50 halal restaurants listed in Saigon in 2010. However, according to GoHALALVietnam, HCMC currently has 18 restaurants that are halal.¹¹

Conclusion

The Muslim community in Ho Chi Minh City originated from the Cham immigrants but in the process of development, Islam has added more faiths who are the Viet (Kinh), the ethnic Chinese, and some from inter-married families. All have created a multi-ethnic

⁷ According to Interview Minutes, a group of restaurants and meal stall owners in District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, from 15th to 20th September 2021.

⁸ According to Interview Minutes, a group of restaurants and meal stall owners in District 1, Ho Chi Minh City, from 15th to 20th September 2021

⁹ According to Interview Minutes, Mr Mohamad V. is the Hakim to take charge of Tan Buu mosque, residing in Co Giang Street ward 02 Phu Nhuan District Ho Chi Minh City, at 9:00 am, July 15th, 2022.

¹⁰ According to the link <https://gohalalvietnam.com/halal>. Someone restaurants confirmed: "We serve 100% Halal Food".

¹¹ According to the link <https://gohalalvietnam.com/halal>. The list of 18 restaurants the website posted to set up their halal standards and attract others to join.

Muslim community that flexibly integrates into urban society in Ho Chi Minh City. Existed in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and religious urban society, the Muslims must strive to preserve the spiritual values of Islam and adapt to a society when they are a minority only. It can be said that the Muslims have overcome all adversities to become a community of moral qualities praised by both people and press itself in Ho Chi Minh City. To maintain existence in Ho Chi Minh City, halal food is an important part of Muslim life. Due to Vietnam's economic and social context, halal food sources will be limited from the producing to the product. Since then, the Muslims in Ho Chi Minh City have produced or processed their halal dishes and sold them to the market as a professional business model. Therefore, halal food produced by Muslims will be self-recognized by the community or certified by the Representative Board of Muslim Community in Ho Chi Minh City at a higher level.

Facing the attraction of Vietnam's tourism market, Muslim tourists are daily increasing. Ho Chi Minh City has become a crucial connection with Muslim tourists. Since then, the Muslim quarters has formed in the heart of the city, also known as Malaysian Streets. The culinary trade methods for Muslim tourists have also become diverse, complex and sensitive. Foods that are not halal standards or pretend to be halal been brought to the market. They stem from a simple understanding of Islam by the merchants or are intentionally for the sake of profit. In such circumstances, the Representative Board of the Muslim community in Ho Chi Minh City take charge of their religious responsibility and closely control the variety of halal products on the market. Their timely warnings helped the Muslim community in Ho Chi Minh City to identify the fake foods and warns the international Muslim community. Besides, the complexity of the halal food market in Ho Chi Minh City has become a great opportunity for Muslim restaurants and food services to promote their brands to the tourist market in Vietnam.

"This research is funded by Vietnam National University HoChiMinh city (VNU-HCM) under grant number C2021-18b-08".

Reference

1. Abu, Azizah 2010, "Thị trường sản phẩm Halal tại Việt Nam? (How is the market of Halal products in Vietnam?)", <http://chanlyislam.net/home/tra-loi-thac-mac-ban-doc-ky-ba-thi-truong-san-pham-halal-tai-viet-nam-534/>
2. Cabaton, Antonie (1907), *Les Chams Musulmans de l'Indochine Francaise*, Revue du Monde Musulman 2.
3. General Statistics Office (2020a). *Population Census and Houses Investigation the Year of 2009 - Migration and Urbanism: The Reality, Trend and Differences*.
4. General Statistics Office (2020b). *Population Census and Houses Investigation the Year of 2009: Overall Result*.
5. Han, P.V (2005), *Đời sống Văn hóa và Xã hội người Chăm thành phố Hồ Chí Minh*, (chủ biên) (*The Cham Culture and Society in Ho Chi Minh City*) (editor). NXB. Văn hóa Dân tộc (Van hoa dan toc Publischer).
6. Han, P.V, Tuan, N.T (2019), "Người Chăm ở Nam Bộ trong phát triển Văn hóa hiện nay (the Cham People in the Southern Region in Present Cultural Developmeng)",

Tap chí Nghiên cứu Dân tộc học (Journal of Ethnic Minorities Research), volumes 8, issue 4), tr.97-105.

7. Han, P.V, Tuan, N.T (2020), “Cham Muslims People in Ho Chi Minh City Today”, *Journal of Ethnic Minorities Research*, Volumes 9, Issue 1, p. 105-112.
8. Hanna, A.C (1931), *The Chams of French Indo-China*, The Moslem World.
9. Hickey, Gerald Cannon (1982), *Sons of the Mountains: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands to 1954*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
10. Luan, N.V (1974), *Người Chăm Hồi giáo ở miền Tây Nam phần (The Cham Muslims in West Part of Southern Vietnam)*, Tủ sách biên khảo, Bộ Văn hóa giáo dục và Thanh niên.
11. Phuong, Lam 2017, “Đẩy mạnh thu hút thị trường khách du lịch Malaysia đến TP. Hồ Chí Minh (Increasing to attract Malaysian tourists to Ho Chi Minh City)”, <https://vietnamtourism.gov.vn/post/24805>
12. Rambo, Lewis R. (1999), “*Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change*”, *Social Compass* No. 46(3), tr.259-271.
13. Vietnam National Administration of Tourism 2012, *Đẩy mạnh thu hút khách du lịch Malaysia đến Việt Nam giai đoạn 2012 – 2015 (Promoting and Attracting Malaysian Tourists to Vietnam in the period 2012 – 2015)*: Hanoi, 56 pages

Interviews

1. Mr. Mohamad S. (2021, July 20). **The interviewed report.** ANAS Enterprise Owner, Phum Soai Hamlet, Chau Phong Commune, Tan Chau Town, An Giang Province.
2. Mr Mohamad V. (2021, July 15). **The interviewed report.** Hakim who takes charge of Tan Buu mosque, residing in Co Giang Street, Ward 02, Phu Nhuan District, Ho Chi Minh City.
3. The group of interviewees (2021, July 15-20). **The interviewed report.** Restaurants and meal stall owners, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City