The brain, unconsciousness and death: a critical appraisal with regard to halal meat production

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Abstract

Muslims derive their dietary laws from the Quran (Islamic Holy Book) and other Islamic scriptures. These religious scriptures prohibit them from consuming meat from animals that die before they are bled-out. Some Muslim authorities have interpreted this to mean that, in addition to the animal being alive, it must also be conscious prior to neck-cutting. This has led to a section of the Muslim community rejecting pre-slaughter stunning for halal meat production with the belief that all forms of stunning lead to instantaneous death. It must be noted that some jurists have debunked claims that animals must be conscious before they are bled-out because it does not appear to be mentioned anywhere in the scriptures. This paper reviews literature on the role of the brain in the control of conscious perception and death and considers the different scholarly definitions of death and how they impact the interpretation of halal slaughter rules and the impact on animal welfare.

Keywords: animal welfare, bleeding-out, consciousness, death, halal slaughter, unconsciousness

Introduction

Halal meat is that which is deemed permissible for consumption by Muslims (Hussaini & Sakr 1983; Kamali 2008). Some Muslims hold the belief that there is a spiritual element to the consumption of such meats because Muslims consider it as a form of obeying God’s commandments (Regenstein et al 2003; Fuseini et al 2017a). For meat to be considered halal, it must be derived from specific animals slaughtered in line with rules enshrined in the Quran and other religious scriptures (Nakyinsige et al 2012; Fuseini 2017). It is the duty of Islamic jurists to interpret the scriptures pertaining to the acceptability of different slaughter methods for halal meat production. The criteria used for this interpretation have been reviewed extensively and published (Esposito 2015; Fuseini et al 2016a). Islamic jurists, however, have differences of opinion as regards their interpretations of the scriptures (see Regenstein et al 2003; Fuseini et al 2017a) which has meant that whilst some Muslims may recognise certain aspects of slaughter (eg pre-slaughter stunning) as halal, others may not necessarily approve it as such. To gauge the level of Islamic scholarly understanding and perception of stunning, Fuseini et al (2017b) carried out a survey of Islamic scholars and halal consumers in the UK, surveying 66 scholars and 314 halal consumers. On the perception of stunning, they found that 69% of scholars did not think stunning is capable of reducing or abolishing the pain associated with the neck-cut, whilst 58% indicated that they were not convinced that some methods of stunning were reversible hence they put a blanket ban on all forms of stunning. On the acceptability of stunning, over 95% of the scholars indicated that stunning would be halal-compliant if it could be shown that the procedure did not result in instantaneous death.

It has been reported that the majority of Muslims, if given the option, would choose meat from animals slaughtered without stunning (EBLEX 2010) despite the contentious nature of this method of slaughter (Gregory 2005). From an animal welfare standpoint, the slaughter of animals without stunning has been shown to compromise their welfare due to the pain associated with the neck-cut (Gibson et al 2009) and the latency of the onset of unconsciousness (Gregory et al 2010). This situation is further exacerbated during the slaughter of cattle, because of the risks of false aneurysms developing at the cut-ends of the carotid arteries and the fact that cattle have a secondary pair of arteries (vertebral arteries) which are left intact after a ventral neck cut (Gregory et al 2008). It must be reiterated that other researchers have cast doubt over the humanness of some methods of stunning (Zivotofsky & Strous 2012) and others insist that slaughter without stunning is equally a humane procedure (Grandin & Regenstein 1994; Rosen 2004).

Stunning is now widely accepted in many Muslim-majority countries (eg The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Indonesia etc). However, there is less clarity as to which methods of stunning are acceptable due to confusion as to the true definition of death. While some authorities accept irreversible