The stunning and slaughter of cattle within the EU: a review of the current situation with regard to the halal market

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Abstract

The slaughter of animals for the halal market is both ethically and economically significant. There are animal welfare and spiritual requirements that must be met for meat to be considered fit for Muslim consumption. These requirements are enshrined in Islamic law, known commonly as the Shariah law, derived from commandments in the Holy Quran and the Hadith (teachings or traditions of the Prophet of Islam, Mohammed, Peace Be Upon Him). Islamic jurists widely interpret the Shariah law differently, and this has led to debate as to whether pre-slaughter stunning is acceptable for halal slaughter. This paper reviews how these laws are interpreted and implemented and reviews the methods of stunning accepted by proponents of halal stunning. It also describes why some proponents of halal stunning do not accept irreversible stunning methods for producing halal beef within the EU, a situation which has meant that thousands of halal cattle are slaughtered without any form of stunning.

Keywords: animal welfare, cattle, halal, reversible stunning, slaughter, stunning

Introduction

European Union (EU) regulation, EC 1099/2009 requires all animals to be stunned before slaughter in order to minimise the pain and distress associated with the neck-cut. However, there is a derogation that allows member states to permit the slaughter of animals without stunning for religious consumption, however, some member states have chosen not to exercise this derogation. Halal and shechita slaughter are based on ancient rules laid down in the Holy Quran and Torah, respectively, which require animals to be slaughtered ‘alive’ and prohibits the consumption of flowing blood. Whilst some Muslim authorities allow the use of reversible (non-lethal) stunning, the Jewish community unanimously reject any form of stunning during shechita slaughter with the belief that the shechita method itself incorporates an irreversible stun. It must also be noted that some Muslim authorities within the EU accept irreversible stunning (eg use of captive-bolt guns) as long as the heart is still beating during the neck-cut. Proponents of animal welfare maintain that even if the ritual cut is able to sever both carotid arteries and jugular veins, oxygenated blood can still flow via the vertebral arteries from the heart to the brain which delays unconsciousness and death (Gregory et al. 2008).

During conventional slaughter of cattle, a penetrative captive-bolt gun is usually used to deliver a percussive force to the head, this induces insensibility through the disruption of normal brain function (Gregory 2007). This method of stunning causes gross physical damage (to the skull and brain) that can lead in the majority of cases to the death of cattle. Captive-bolt stunning is therefore considered by many to be inconsistent with Islamic dietary laws to be found in Quran 5:3 and quoted later in this paper, and most of the halal certification standards including Malaysian, MS1500 (2004, 2009); Halal Food Authority (UK), HFA Standard (2014); Indonesian Standard, MUI HAS 23103 (2012). A head-only electrical stunning system, the Jarvis Beef Stunner was therefore developed in New Zealand to meet the requirement of the halal market (Gilbert et al 1984; Wotton et al 2000; Weaver & Wotton 2009). However, this equipment also uses low-voltage electro-immobilisation to reduce post-stun convulsions which is contrary to EC 1099/2009 as it would mask any signs of recovery. It cannot therefore be used within the EU. Despite the approval of some stunning methods for other species by some of the Muslim authorities, there is currently no generally approved method of cattle stunning for the EU halal beef market. This has resulted in lost revenue for the EU beef industry due to their inability to tap into both the domestic and export halal markets. This has also led to the slaughter of thousands of cattle each year without stunning (in member states that permit slaughter without stunning). Experimental trials with microwave energy (Small et al 2013; Rault et al 2014) and Single Pulse Ultra-high Current (SPUC) (Robins et al 2014) have shown some promise that they could be developed as...