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**ACCULTURATION OF THE HALAL CONCEPT AT THE MATIJA GUBEC  
INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL IN ZAGREB**

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**ABSTRACT**

The growing Islamic cultural identity worldwide demands changes and interest across various social fields. With the increasing population of Muslims around the world, there is a rising demand for halal food. It is evident that there is a lack of clear and targeted efforts in educating and acculturating halal culture in European educational systems. At the Matija Gubec International School in Zagreb, meal consumption is a social event that allows students from different religious backgrounds to enjoy meals together without compromising their beliefs. Compliance with halal principles within the food industry is verified through the approval of an accredited certification system, the Halal certificate. For food offered in school kitchens to achieve halal status, it must adhere to strict religious rituals prescribed by Sharia law, ensuring that the production, processing, and handling of food products are in line with Islamic principles. Our school is proud to hold the Halal Certificate, which serves as a guarantee to parents and students of Islamic identity regarding the absence of prohibited components in everyday school meals. Implementing halal food options in schools contributes to creating a stimulating and positive environment for all students regardless of their religious or dietary preferences. The work cites an example of positive experience in acculturating halal food and halal culture into the school environment and the daily lives of students at the Matija Gubec International School.

**Keywords:** *halal food, halal certification, cultural sensitivity, cultural and religious inclusivity, primary education, center for halal quality certification, halal croatia*

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**Introduction**

Halal, a word that in Islam denotes an action or object permitted by Islamic law (Britannica, 2023). An Arabic term meaning "lawful" or "permissible," it encompasses the fundamental aspects of Islamic dietary regulations derived from the Quran, the holy book of Islam. Although most commonly referring to dietary restrictions, the origin and processing of food, the word halal

can be seen in the context of cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, medicine, or tourism. It applies to almost every activity or object of life according to Islamic law. In contrast, the term haram denotes food or actions considered "forbidden" or "prohibited" in the Quran and Hadith (sayings of Muhammad) within Islamic law. Historically, Muslims have followed very different practices regarding food, especially meat, poultry, and fish. The pig is one of the few animals universally

considered haram. Alcohol is also considered haram, although the interpretation of how much alcohol can be consumed historically varies (Britannica, 2023). Haram food encompasses a range of items prohibited by Islamic law, including alcohol, animal products, and meat not slaughtered according to prescribed halal methods. However, Islamic jurisprudence recognizes cases of necessity in which otherwise prohibited items may become permissible for consumption, emphasizing the primacy of preserving life over the strict observance of dietary laws. While certain foods are unequivocally classified as halal or haram, others fall into a gray area of uncertainty, known as *mashbooh* or "questionable." This ambiguity requires further research to determine their classification. Essentially, halal food encompasses all consumable items that adhere to the principles established in Islamic Sharia law, a comprehensive system governing both personal and collective behavior. Sharia, meaning "path" or "way," determines the moral and legal framework within which Muslims are expected to conduct their lives. Rooted in the teachings of the Quran and the exemplary practice of the Prophet Muhammad, Sharia prescribes permissible and impermissible aspects of human existence, including dietary practices (Bergeaud-Blackler & Bernard, 2010).

## Discussion

With the increase in the population of Muslims worldwide, there is a growing demand for halal food. The Muslim population worldwide exceeded 1.7 billion in 2014, and by 2030, it is expected to exceed 2.2 billion, constituting 26.4 percent of the world's population (Park & Lee, 2021). The halal market is therefore growing day by day, with supply and demand in pharmacy, tourism, and the food industry strengthening daily. Furthermore, the halal food market had a value of \$2.4 trillion in 2023, and it is estimated

to have surpassed \$4 trillion by 2030 (State of Global Islamic Economy Report, 2023).<sup>1</sup> The majority of the halal market pertains to the food industry, the production, and export of halal food. Indonesia, as the country with the largest Muslim population (alongside Turkey and Arab countries being the largest users of halal food), interestingly, is not the largest exporter of halal food; instead, wealthier countries like Brazil, India, the United States, and China hold that position. Awareness of the origin of food, processing, and preparation methods makes halal food increasingly popular even in countries without a majority Islamic population that still largely import halal food. Western dietary regulations are not in line with Islamic requirements for halal meat products. The growing expression of Islamic cultural identity in a globalized world and the increasing number of Muslim migrants are driving the spread of halal regimes in Europe and beyond, as well as the production of halal food, which, due to its considerable profit, is often a subject of debate in Western countries (Iner & Baghdadi, 2021). Recent research on the acculturation of halal food suggests several possible factors for successful assimilation in European countries, including (Halawa, 2022): the arrival of Muslim immigrants, the historical colonization of Muslim countries by many former European colonizers, adherence to religious requirements for consuming halal food, cultural and peer influences on the consumption of halal food (especially in schools), perceived control over the consumption of halal meat, the development of cultural identity in the host country, as well as the increasing acceptance of non-Muslim European consumers consuming halal food as a healthier alternative to fast food and processed products. According to needs, the institutionalized certification of imported and exported halal food products is mostly led by private and non-governmental bodies striving to solidify Islamic dietary codes into national laws (Adams, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> The "State of the Global Islamic Economy Report 2023/2024" is produced by DinarStandard with the support of Dubai Economy and Tourism (DET). This report offers a thorough annual examination of the Islamic economy

For food to achieve halal status, it must adhere to strict religious rituals prescribed by Sharia law. Within the realm of halal food preparation, careful attention is paid to the animal slaughtering process, a practice subject to debate and discussion. Islamic principles dictate that animals should be treated with dignity and compassion, with their lives sacrificed in the name of God in a way that minimizes suffering. This rigorous methodology, often criticized by animal welfare activists, underscores Islam's commitment to the humane treatment of all living beings. This includes adherence to approved certification systems, ensuring that the production, processing, and handling of food products are in line with Islamic principles. Halal certificates, issued by accredited certification bodies, serve as guarantees to consumers of the absence of prohibited components in the food chain (Bergeaud-Blackler and Bernard, 2010).

Despite the increasing prices of agricultural ingredients, the halal food sector continues to thrive, experiencing a remarkable growth rate of 9.75%. It is projected to reach a record high of 5.8 billion USD by 2032. (Imarc Group Market Report, 2023).<sup>2</sup> The halal food market is growing not only due to the Muslim population worldwide but also due to the increasingly common consumption of halal food within non-Muslim populations. It is generally believed that two fundamental factors influence today's global diet: the availability of food and foodstuffs depending on the climatic zone of the inhabitants and the civilizational approach to meal preparation. With the development of civilization, industry, technology, and society, humans have adapted food preparation and processing with specific cultural or religious rituals (Halawa, 2022). Indraw, A.N. and Sur. (2022) discussed halal market users and concluded that non-Muslim populations use halal products because they believe they are correctly processed and handled. Additionally, non-Muslim communities adopt the halal concept through health and hygiene. The authors note that consumers' understanding of the halal concept stems from basic religious

education acquired in school. Most respondents stated that they gained basic knowledge of the halal concept in school, resulting in enthusiasm and interest in purchasing halal food (Bashir, 2019; Novitasari and Sur, 2021 in Indraw, A.N., and Sur 2022). It is evident that halal food, as well as the overall halal concept, is becoming increasingly popular among non-Muslim consumers due to its qualities and advantages. Consumers with a strong religious identity seek to follow Islamic law in everyday life, which stimulates increasing discussions on the phenomenon of halal tourism. Aminah and Bhakti (2023) discuss the understanding and support of foreign cultures and ensuring halal products for Muslim tourists. They note that multiculturalism in Japanese halal tourism fails to fully flourish because, for example, many restaurants offer alcoholic beverages, which is considered haram in Islam.

Most foreign, non-Muslim countries can identify with this, although an increasing number of countries supporting halal tourism are taking steps to adapt to the needs of the halal concept. Tourists or migrants who fully accept Islamic law and practice a religious approach to food must adhere to certain dietary restrictions related to food consumption. This includes what food they may or may not eat, food that may or may not be consumed at certain times of the day or year, methods of food preparation and processing, and rules on when and how long to fast. It is understandable that the food market in non-Muslim countries, in terms of restaurants, food chains, retail chains, growers, and food processors, needs to make significant strides in controlling, quality, and origin of foodstuffs. However, given the growing consumption of halal food not only within halal tourism but also among non-Muslim populations, more and more European countries are ready for the process of acculturation of halal food (Halawa, 2022).

#### *Acculturation of Halal Concept in European Schools*

The growing Islamic cultural identity worldwide demands changes and interest in various social

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<sup>2</sup> IMARC Group provides an analysis of the key trends in each sub-segment of the global halal food market report,

along with forecasts at the global and regional level from 2023-2028.

fields. We are witnessing how important it is to raise awareness of the Halal identity at the school level. Not only is there an increasing demand for halal food options in restaurants and food chains, but also in school cafeterias. Due to the religious dietary requirements of Muslim students adhering to halal practices, it is extremely challenging to accommodate religious beliefs given the limited halal food offerings. However, the experiences of students in our school show that many non-Muslim students with specific dietary restrictions or preferences find halal food tasty and inclusive. Often, students in our school desire halal food even when given the choice between another meat-based and vegetarian meal in the school cafeteria. Offering halal food options in schools promotes cultural understanding and inclusion by allowing students from different religious backgrounds to enjoy meals together without compromising their beliefs. The implementation of halal food options in schools can contribute to creating a stimulating and positive environment for all students regardless of their religious or dietary preferences.

Many European countries have attempted to address the acculturation of the halal concept and have made well-intentioned efforts to support the halal market and Islamic adherents by introducing certain changes within various systems. Some countries have been more successful than others, but it is evident that clear and targeted efforts in education and acculturation of halal culture within educational systems are lacking. For example, Spain introduced halal menus on high-speed passenger trains a few years ago by simply removing alcohol and pork from the menu. However, considering the requirements of Islamic dietary laws and halal food processing, it is clear that this was not a sufficient step (Kern, 2011). Belgium faced the problem of hospital patients refusing medication because it contained animal-derived substances, especially during the month of Ramadan. They introduced halal training for hospital staff to better understand and provide care for halal patients. The French food sector doubled its value within a few years because over

80% of animal slaughter is now done according to halal rules, making the process faster, cheaper, and therefore more profitable (Kern, 2011). The same author continues with the example of Italy, which obliges to harmonize Islamic law with certified Italian food products such as tortellini and lasagna. It is known that a school in the Netherlands decided to offer halal food to its students for Christmas to demonstrate acceptance of other religions. Sometimes, such actions and similar ones seem like a positive step towards accepting the halal concept and inclusion of Muslim populations, tourists, or migrants; however, well-intentioned steps can sometimes be offensive to the Islamic community as they are reduced to the profitability of halal users and markets (in terms of earnings or savings if institutions offer halal food). In recent years, since the aforementioned research on the acculturation of halal in European countries, some stronger steps have been taken towards the inclusion of halal users, including in Croatia.

*Ensuring Halal Food in Croatian Public Institutions: Government-Islamic Community Agreements and role of Center for Halal Quality Certification.*

In 2010, the establishment of the Center for Halal Quality marked a significant milestone in Croatia's efforts to accommodate the dietary needs of its Muslim population. As the sole authorized halal certification body in the Republic of Croatia, the Center plays a pivotal role in ensuring the authenticity and compliance of halal products and services across various sectors.

The certification of the first halal school kitchen at Matija Gubec International School exemplifies the vital role of the Center in promoting inclusivity and diversity within Croatia's educational system. By certifying school kitchens as halal-compliant, the Center enables Muslim students to access meals that align with their religious beliefs, fostering a supportive and inclusive environment for learning. Moreover, the certification of public institutions like schools highlights the commitment of Croatian

authorities to upholding the rights of religious minorities and promoting cultural harmony within society.

In addition to the official recognition of Islam as the state religion in 1916, the signing of the Agreement between the Croatian Government and the Islamic Community in Croatia in 2002 marked a significant milestone in the development of the Islamic Community in Croatia. This agreement addressed issues of common interest and solidified the rights of the Islamic community within the country. One crucial outcome of this agreement was the establishment of the Center for Halal Quality Certification. The agreement safeguards and specifies that the Center for Halal Quality Certification in Croatia holds the exclusive authorization from the Islamic Community of Croatia to define the term "halal" and issue certifications for products and services in accordance with halal standards.

Furthermore, the Agreement also recognized the right to halal food in all public institutions in Croatia. As a result, institutions like the International School Matije Gubec became pioneers in implementing this provision into practice. By offering halal food options, the school demonstrated its commitment to inclusivity and respect for the dietary preferences and religious beliefs of its students and staff, thus setting a positive example for other institutions to follow suit.

#### *Leading the way- Halal Certificate for the first School in Croatia*

The Matija Gubec International School in Zagreb has been a proud holder of the Halal certificate since 2015, to the satisfaction of Islamic users of our education program, both students and parents. By pioneering this initiative in Croatia, our school has garnered significant attention, attracting numerous diplomats who have visited to promote its unique commitment to inclusivity. At the Matija Gubec International School, the halal concept is celebrated not only as food in the school cafeteria (which is represented and offered to students on a daily basis), clearly marked with

the halal symbol on the school menu but also during International Community Day. The traditional cultural fair held every October provides students of Islamic faith with the opportunity to present their culture, religion, tradition, and food to their non-Muslim friends, but also serves as an opportunity to deepen understanding of halal culture for students and parents of our school. It is therefore not surprising that our school community attracts Muslim families who prioritize halal food for their children's meals, fulfilling their religious dietary requirements. Given the numerous migrations of Islamic populations, the authors discuss the inclusion of the needs of halal users in the daily school menu. Western society is not making sufficient strides towards inclusion; however, teachers encounter practical and ethical issues of students' religion on a daily basis, alongside all other aspects of students' lives, such as developmental and learning difficulties, socioeconomic status of students and parents, student health, family situation, etc. The choice of teaching methods by teachers has a strong impact on students' learning and acquisition and formation of personal identity (Aslan, 2020). Many children only encounter nutrition, religion, and worldviews different from those of their families in kindergarten or school for the first time, which can result in acceptance or rejection of the student within their school community. The teacher plays a strong, perhaps even the most significant role in this (Iversen, 2023). For example, in our school, it is evident that concessions can be made within the micro-community that have resonated strongly beyond the school cafeteria itself. At the request of parents, students can be offered halal meals, vegetarian meals, traditional Croatian dishes containing pork, and, depending on the availability of food and proper processing, gluten-free, lactose-free, and similar necessary diets will be accommodated. It is extremely important to emphasize that these foods are available daily on the school menu, so students with firm religious, cultural, and family beliefs encounter respect for them every day. We asked several students from our school if they were

familiar with halal food and the dietary choices of their friends who opt for halal meals at school. Lara (8) states, "Halal is when people from Azerbaijan cannot eat pork. Some of my friends eat halal, but we also have one who is very picky, but sometimes we manage to persuade him to taste the food. We all eat together at the same table, sometimes we talk." Samra (8) is a consumer of halal meals at school: "I eat halal, and so does my friend from the class. I'm not allowed to eat pork, it's haram. My friend from India is a vegetarian, sometimes we like to eat similar food." Boys Viktor (8) and Emanuel (8) would like to try halal food sometimes: "Halal is when you're not allowed to eat pork. Samra and Aras eat chicken, and sometimes their meat and stew look different. We all eat together, and we like it because we're not separated, and sometimes we laugh together. Sometimes for lunch, we all eat halal, we don't always have to eat our own." Depending on the structure of the class, students celebrate each other and their mutual differences and customs, which does not solely apply to the students' dietary habits. Students of all grades are familiar with the personal choices of their friends, in which parents also actively participate. The teacher within the classroom community of students and parents plays a crucial pedagogical role. The school supports multiculturalism and the coexistence of ethnic and religious diversity by providing non-teaching days for students to celebrate religious holidays and festivities with their families.

## Conclusion

At the Matija Gubec International School, the concept of halal is accepted as equally as other cultural and religious aspects of students' lives, as well as parents who are always welcome and important members of our community. Living multiculturalism daily in our school, we uphold the beliefs of each individual student regardless of their religious, national, and family background. Meal consumption in our school is a social event, and no one is excluded. This applies to the daily three school meals for students as well as meals served to parents, teachers, and students

during various gatherings. Thus, on the aforementioned International Community Day celebration, not only Western food is emphasized but also halal, along with obligatory traditional Croatian cuisine. The harmony of our differences, traditions, tastes, cultures, and people is precisely what we believe makes our school unique.

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## AKULTURACIJA HALAL KONCEPTA U MEĐUNARODNOJ OSNOVNOJ ŠKOLI MATIJE GUPCA U ZAGREBU

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### SAŽETAK

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Rastući islamski kulturni identitet u svijetu zahtjeva promjene i interes na različitim društvenim poljima. S porastom broja populacije pripadnika islamske religije i kulture diljem svijeta, povećava se i potražnja za halal namirnicama. Evidentno je da nedostaje jasnih i ciljanih pokušaja obrazovanja i akulturacije halal kulture u europskim obrazovnim sustavima. U Međunarodnoj osnovnoj školi Matije Gupca u Zagrebu konzumacija obroka je društveni događaj koji omogućava učenicima različitih religijskih pozadina da uživaju u obrocima zajedno, bez ugrožavanja svojih uvjerenja. Provjera poštivanja halal načela unutar prehrambene industrije provodi se odobrenjem akreditiranog certifikacijskog sustava, Halal certifikata. Da bi hrana ponuđena u školskim kuhinjama postigla status halala, mora se pridržavati strogih religijskih rituala propisanih šerijatskim zakonom, osiguravajući da su proizvodnja, prerada i rukovanje prehrambenim proizvodima usklađeni s islamskim načelima. Naša je škola ponosni nositelj Halal Certifikata koji je jamstvo roditeljima i učenicima islamskog identiteta o odsutnosti zabranjenih komponenti u prehrambenim namirnicama u svakodnevnim školskim obrocima. Implementacija halal opcija hrane u školama doprinosi stvaranju poticajnog i pozitivnog okruženja za sve učenika bez obzira na njihove religijske ili prehrambene preferencije. Rad navodi primjer pozitivnog iskustva akulturacije halal namirnica i halal kulture u školsko okruženje i svakodnevicu učenika Međunarodne osnovne škole Matije Gupca.

**Ključne riječi:** Halal, islamska kultura, halal proizvodi i usluge, edukacija, halal kultura

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