



Review Article

Matter, Meaning, and Mutual Dependence: An Anthropological View of Indonesia's Halal Governance

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Abstract

This article develops an anthropological reading of Indonesia's halal industry by placing the symbolic dimensions of halal in dialogue with the material infrastructure that now governs its certification. Since the enactment of Law No. 33/2014 on Halal Product Assurance and its 2024 implementing regulation, halal in Indonesia has come to depend on a bifurcated institutional arrangement: the Halal Product Assurance Organizing Agency (BPJPH) administers certification, while the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) retains exclusive authority to issue the religious fatwa on which that certification depends. Using Marvin Harris's Cultural Materialism and Marshall Sahlins's Cultural Reason as complementary lenses, the article treats this arrangement — informally known among practitioners as the "two-key system" — as an empirical site where material infrastructure and symbolic classification visibly compete and combine. Drawing on Indonesian halal regulation, BPJPH implementation data, and the rapid expansion of the Sehati self-declaration scheme for micro and small enterprises, the article argues that Indonesia's halal industrialization does not replace religious meaning with bureaucratic logic; rather, it routes religious meaning through bureaucratic form, producing a system in which state administration and religious authority are mutually dependent rather than mutually exclusive.

Keywords

anthropology of food, BPJPH, Cultural Materialism, Cultural Reason, halal certification, Halal industry, Indonesia, MUI, religious consumption.



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INTRODUCTION

In anthropology, food is never merely a bundle of calories, proteins, and nutrients sustaining the body. Food is a cultural text: it speaks to who we are, where we come from, and how we classify the world (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). One of the most complex expressions of the relationship between culture and food is the religious food taboo, which in the Islamic tradition crystallizes in the categories of halal (permitted) and haram (forbidden).

Anthropologically, halal is a compound problem because it links bodily consumption, religious authority, social identity, and systems of production. Why do communities classify some foods as permissible and others as forbidden, and why do such classifications retain their force as food moves through modern factories, global supply chains, and state certification regimes? In Indonesia, these questions carry particular weight, because halal is no longer only a norm of personal piety; since 2019, it has been the object of a phased, legally mandatory certification regime administered by a dedicated state agency, working in tandem with the country's foremost body of religious authority.

This article reads that regime through two classical, opposing positions in anthropological theory: Marvin Harris's Cultural Materialism and Marshall Sahlins's Cultural Reason (Structural-Symbolism). Harris (1974, 1979, 1985) represents the pole of material determinism: seemingly irrational cultural prohibitions are, on close inspection, rational ecological or infrastructural adaptations. Sahlins (1976), from the opposite pole, insists that material reality is mute until culture gives it a voice through classificatory schemes; food is governed not by utility but by its place in a symbolic order. Rather than treating this as a purely historical debate about ancient dietary law, the article uses it to interpret a live Indonesian institutional fact: since 2014, no product may be certified halal in Indonesia without two separate and interdependent acts of authorization — a state administrative act performed by BPJPH, and a religious-legal act performed by MUI. This arrangement, examined in Section 5, offers a contemporary empirical instance of the very tension Harris and Sahlins theorized in the register of pigs, cattle, and ancient ecology.

The article's central argument is that Indonesia's halal industrialization does not substitute market or bureaucratic logic for religious meaning. Rather, it institutionalizes religious meaning through standards, certification procedures, audit systems, and a state-issued label — and in doing so produces new frictions, delays, and dependencies that are best understood as the material and symbolic orders operating on, and through, one another.

This article contributes to the anthropology of religion and governance by demonstrating how classical anthropological debates—particularly the tension between materialist and symbolic explanations of cultural practice—can illuminate contemporary institutional arrangements. Rather than treating the Harris-Sahlins-Douglas opposition as a closed historical discussion, the analysis deploys it as an interpretive framework for understanding Indonesia's bifurcated halal certification system (the "two-key" arrangement between BPJPH and MUI). The article offers three specific contributions: first, it provides an anthropological reading of a legal-institutional structure that has previously been examined only through policy and legal scholarship; second, it shows how the material-symbolic dialectic theorized by Harris, Sahlins, and Douglas manifests not in ancient dietary ecology but in contemporary administrative procedures, budget constraints, and phased regulatory rollouts; and third, it argues that the friction inherent in the two-key system is not an administrative failure but the institutional expression of an ongoing negotiation between religious authority, symbolic boundary maintenance, and state capacity. In

doing so, the article bridges anthropological theory with policy analysis, offering scholars and practitioners a framework for understanding why structural tensions persist in modern certification regimes.

The article's central argument is twofold. First, Indonesia's halal industrialization does not replace religious meaning with bureaucratic logic; rather, it institutionalizes religious meaning through state administrative procedures—standards, audits, labeling requirements, and phased enforcement deadlines. Second, the frictions and delays that characterize the two-key system are not incidental implementation failures but structural expressions of the ongoing negotiation between two incommensurable logics: the state's imperative for administrative efficiency and scalability, and the religious-symbolic imperative, theorized by Douglas, to maintain clear boundaries between the pure and the impure. This article examines how bureaucratic procedures—from facility inspections to documentation requirements—function as modern technologies of boundary maintenance, constituting what might be termed a "state-led sacralization": the reconfiguration of the sacred into a legible, enforceable, and economically productive instrument of governance.

Two Poles of Anthropology, and the Indonesian Case

Marvin Harris's Cultural Materialism rejects mentalist or spiritual explanations of culture and instead seeks the causal roots of cultural practice in the material conditions of human life (Harris, 1979). Harris divided sociocultural systems into three hierarchical layers: an infrastructure of production and reproduction, sitting in direct contact with ecological limits; a structure of domestic and political economy; and a superstructure of religion, ideology, and taboo. The organizing principle is infrastructural determinism: superstructural elements such as religious taboos persist because they optimize the balance of the infrastructure, not because they descend from arbitrary revelation (Harris, 1979).

Sahlins's *Culture and Practical Reason* (1976) systematically challenges materialism and utilitarianism in anthropology. For Sahlins, the error of materialist explanation is to assume a universal "practical rationality" that precedes culture. Biological needs, he argues, never operate nakedly in human society; they are always mediated and classified by culture. What counts as food, and who may eat it, are cultural facts before they are biological ones. Material objects acquire value through their differential position within a society's symbolic grammar, not through ecological calculation (Sahlins, 1976).

Mary Douglas's (1966) *Purity and Danger* lends structural depth to Sahlins's position, arguing that dietary law maintains cognitive and social boundaries rather than hygiene. Sidney Mintz (1985) shows, conversely, how a material commodity such as sugar becomes saturated with cultural meaning — demonstrating that production and consumption, matter and meaning, are rarely separable in practice. Johan Fischer (2011) applies this synthesis directly to halal, showing that contemporary halal markets are sites where religious purity and modern consumption practices collide.

A distinct and more recent body of scholarship addresses Indonesia's halal governance specifically. Historical-institutional accounts trace the shift of certifying authority from the Indonesian Ulema Council's food and drug assessment body (LPPOM-MUI), which held exclusive authority prior to 2014, to BPJPH, the state agency created under the Ministry of Religious Affairs by Law No. 33/2014 on Halal Product Assurance. Analyses of this transition frame it as a move from a society-centric to a state-centric model of halal governance, and identify a persistent legal and institutional interdependency: BPJPH cannot issue a halal certificate without a prior fatwa

from MUI, while MUI's fatwa carries no administrative force until published as a certificate by BPJPH — a structure recent legal scholarship terms a "two-key system," prone to delay precisely because the two institutions operate under different logics and performance metrics (state administrative efficiency on one side, religious-legal deliberation on the other). This literature, largely produced by legal and policy scholars, has not yet been read through an anthropological lens; the present article addresses that gap.

This article reads Indonesia's contemporary halal certification regime through the theoretical opposition between Harris's materialist and the symbolic-structural approaches of Sahlins and Douglas. Since the enactment of Law No. 33/2014, halal certification in Indonesia has required two interdependent acts of authorization: an administrative determination by BPJPH and a religious-legal fatwa from MUI. This "two-key system" provides a live institutional site where the material-symbolic dialectic theorized by these anthropologists can be observed in operation. The central argument is that Indonesia's halal industrialization does not substitute market logic for religious meaning; rather, it institutionalizes religious meaning through standards, audit systems, and a state-issued label — and in doing so produces new frictions, delays, and dependencies that are best understood as the material and symbolic orders operating on, and through, one another. The two-key system, with its real delays and institutional friction, is not a design flaw external to this argument; it is the argument made visible in administrative form — the ongoing negotiation between material necessity and symbolic authority.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study combines a critical discourse analysis of canonical anthropological texts with a documentary analysis of Indonesia's halal regulatory corpus. The primary Indonesian sources are: Law No. 33 of 2014 on Halal Product Assurance and its 2023 amendment under the Job Creation omnibus framework; Government Regulation No. 42 of 2024 on the Implementation of Halal Product Assurance; Ministerial Regulation No. 20 of 2021 establishing the halal self-declaration (Sehati) pathway for micro and small enterprises; BPJPH public statements and implementation reports covering the October 2024 enforcement milestone; and secondary legal-policy scholarship on the BPJPH–MUI institutional relationship. These are read dialectically against two theoretical positions — Harris's deductive-materialist lens and Sahlins's inductive-symbolic lens — to interpret the institutional structure, phased enforcement, and public reception of Indonesia's mandatory halal certification regime. The analysis is qualitative and interpretive rather than statistical; where certification figures are cited, they are drawn from BPJPH's published data and are used illustratively to show the scale and social composition of certification uptake, rather than as an independent quantitative test of either theory.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Food Taboos and the Conceptual Roots of Halal

Harris's (1974, 1985) account of the Middle Eastern pig taboo begins from infrastructure. Ruminants such as cattle, sheep, and goats digest cellulose indigestible to humans and tolerate arid conditions with limited water; pigs, by contrast, compete directly with humans for grain and fruit, lack effective sweat glands, and require wallowing to cool down — an ecological and hygienic liability in a water-scarce environment. Raising pigs was, in Harris's reading, materially costly, yet pig meat remained tempting. The theological prohibition, in this account, is the superstructure's way of enforcing an ecologically necessary restraint more effectively than a

purely practical directive could: halal and haram function as sanctified ancient ecological management rules.

Sahlins (1976) and Douglas (1966) locate the same prohibition in cognitive structure rather than ecology. Halal and haram form a binary classification — pure/impure, permitted/forbidden — through which culture imposes order on a materially indifferent world. Pigs violate the classificatory logic applied to permissible land animals (cloven hooves without cud-chewing) and are, in this sense, anomalous rather than merely costly. Ritual slaughter, invoking God's name, performs a rite of passage that converts a profane, natural entity into a sanctified, cultural one fit for consumption; without it, meat remains carrion regardless of its nutritional properties. On this reading, classification precedes and organizes practical value rather than following from it.

This article adopts Harris's cultural materialism as its primary explanatory lens, while placing it in critical dialogue with the symbolic-structural tradition represented by Sahlins and Douglas. Harris's framework explains the material and political-economic forces driving Indonesia's halal formalization; the symbolic tradition explains why halal retains its force as a category of practice and why boundary maintenance generates such institutional anxiety. The article thus treats the Harris-Sahlins-Douglas triad not as a set of competing claims to be adjudicated, but as complementary analytical resources for understanding a single empirical phenomenon: the institutionalization of religious classification through state bureaucracy. Where Harris explains why a certification regime was necessary, Sahlins and Douglas explain what the halal label signifies and why its symbolic integrity must be preserved through the dual-authorization mechanism of the two-key system. Douglas's framework is particularly useful for understanding why the certification process itself — with its audits, documentation requirements, and facility inspections — generates anxiety and friction: each step is a ritual of purification designed to eliminate "matter out of place" and restore categorical order.

This theoretical framework also situates the Indonesian case within broader discussions of the commodification of religion and the entanglement of Islam with neoliberal and developmental governance in Muslim societies (Rudnyckyj, 2010; Tobin, 2016; Fischer, 2016; Lever & Fischer, 2018). Rudnyckyj's work on the political economy of piety (2010) shows how, under conditions of late modern and neoliberal governance, religious ethics and practices of self-formation are mobilized as resources for economic productivity, calculative rationality, and efficient subject-making. Piety is not merely a private or other-worldly concern; it becomes a form of human capital and a technique of governance. Religious disciplines are reconfigured to produce subjects who are simultaneously more pious and more economically responsible. This insight is highly relevant to the Indonesian halal project: the expansion of mandatory certification and the official promotion of a halal lifestyle can be understood as part of a broader spiritual economy in which Islamic norms are harnessed to enhance market competitiveness, consumer trust, industrial discipline, and national economic strategy.

The Indonesian Halal Industry as Material Infrastructure and Symbolic System

Indonesia's contemporary halal regime offers a case where the Harris-Sahlins-Douglas dialectic can be traced not in ancient ecology but in statute, agency mandate, and administrative procedure. Before 2014, halal certification in Indonesia was administered exclusively by LPPOM-MUI, the food and drug assessment institute of the Indonesian Ulema Council — a society-centric system operating largely outside formal state structures. Law No. 33/2014 transferred administrative authority to the newly created BPJPH while preserving MUI's exclusive authority to

issue the religious fatwa that underpins all certification. The result is what recent legal-policy scholarship has termed a "two-key system": BPJPH cannot issue a certificate without MUI's fatwa, and MUI's fatwa carries no administrative force until BPJPH publishes it as a certificate (Ardianto et al., 2024; Faridah, 2019).

From a Harrisian perspective, this structure represents a bureaucratic mode of production: a set of administrative procedures — documentation requirements, facility audits, supply chain inspections, and standardized labeling — built to process, verify, and certify food supply chains too large and opaque for individual consumers to inspect directly. This infrastructural reading is reinforced by the empirical evidence. As of November 2024, BPJPH reported approximately 1.55 million certified business actors, of which roughly 96.7 percent were micro-enterprises certified through the *Sehati* self-declaration pathway — a simplified process introduced in 2021 for micro and small enterprises (BPJPH, 2024, 2025). Large enterprises, by contrast, accounted for only a fraction of a percent of certified businesses, a disparity that reflects both the phased rollout of mandatory certification and the practical constraints of state capacity, with BPJPH acknowledging that its annual budget can finance only about one million free certificates per year. In Harrisian terms, this is infrastructure visibly straining under the superstructural demand it was built to serve: state capacity, budget allocation, and administrative sequencing, not theological content, are what determine who becomes certified and when.

However, this administrative machinery rests upon an antecedent classificatory demand that Harris's framework cannot fully explain. The BPJPH-issued halal logo functions in a Sahlinsian sense as a modern totem: a visible marker that transfers a product from the category of "ordinary commodity" into "food fit for the Ummah" (Sahlins, 1976). Douglas's framework is particularly illuminating here. The halal certification process — documentation audits, facility inspections, supply chain segregation, and labeling — operates as a modern ritual of purification. Each step identifies and eliminates "matter out of place": non-halal ingredients, cross-contamination risks, undocumented suppliers, or any element that blurs the boundary between the permissible and the forbidden. The anxiety that drives this process is not simply about religious compliance in a narrow sense; it is about maintaining clear categorical boundaries in a world where global supply chains constantly threaten to blur them. MUI's fatwa functions as the authoritative declaration that the boundary has been correctly drawn; BPJPH's certificate is the administrative pass that permits the product to cross from the category of "ordinary commodity" into "food fit for the Ummah." The two-key system, in this reading, manages the anxiety of boundary violation by requiring two independent acts of authorization before a product can cross from the profane to the permissible.

None of this administrative machinery would exist without an antecedent classificatory demand that Sahlins's and Douglas's frameworks explain better than Harris's. In a market where over 87 percent of the population is Muslim, the halal label does not primarily communicate chemical composition; it communicates a product's admissibility into the consumer's moral and social world. A product identical in nutritional terms to its uncertified counterpart is nonetheless differently positioned in the Sahlinsian sense: the BPJPH-issued halal logo functions as a modern totem, transferring an item from the category of "ordinary commodity" into the category of "food fit for the Ummah". This is precisely why the state found it necessary to attach its own bureaucratic infrastructure to the symbolic act of certification rather than to displace it: the

classificatory demand for halal was already firmly in place, and the state apparatus was built to service, scale, and formalize it, not to invent it.

The Two-Key System as Material–Symbolic Dialectic

The Indonesian case resists an either/or reading. Sahlins's classificatory logic is the primary mover: without an antecedent, non-negotiable distinction between halal and haram, there would be no demand inelastic enough to justify building a national certification bureaucracy in the first place. But once that symbolic demand exists at national scale, Harris's infrastructural logic takes over its administration: the state builds agencies, funds auditors, sets phased deadlines, and manages budget quotas, converting a religious classification into standard operating procedure. The two-key system is the institutional expression of this dialectic — a structure in which neither MUI's religious authority nor BPJPH's administrative authority is sufficient alone, and in which the delays and frictions between them are the visible seam where meaning and matter are stitched together.

Table 1. Comparative Summary of the Two Analytical Lenses

Aspect of Analysis	Marvin Harris (Cultural Materialism)	Marshall Sahlins (Cultural Reason)
Core driver of food taboos	Ecological adaptation, thermodynamic efficiency, infrastructural survival	Symbolic classification, cognitive boundaries, cosmic order
Nature of the pig taboo	An ecological competitor; thermodynamically maladaptive in arid environments	A categorical anomaly that blurs classificatory boundaries (cloven hoof, no cud)
Function of BPJPH–MUI certification	A state infrastructure for quality control, bureaucratic capacity, and administrative extraction	A totem-conferring rite of passage that admits a commodity into the moral community of the Ummah
Locus of friction	Budget quotas, phased deadlines, LPH/BPJPH administrative capacity	Contested legitimacy of certification when the fatwa–label link is perceived as diluted

This dialectic renders halal, in Marcel Mauss's sense, a total social fact: eschatological concern over ritual purity (Sahlins) is transformed, without being negated, into deadlines, quotas, and standard operating procedures inside a state bureaucracy (Harris). Indonesia's halal industry is neither a market mechanism dressed in religious language nor a purely symbolic system indifferent to material constraint; it is the visible, often friction-laden, product of both operating on each other simultaneously.

The institutional friction generated by the two-key system can be understood through Douglas's framework as the product of competing claims over boundary control. MUI's fatwa represents the religious boundary—the authoritative declaration of what is permissible under Islamic law. BPJPH's certificate represents the administrative boundary — the state's formal recognition that a product meets the procedural requirements for market access. When these two boundaries are not perfectly aligned—when MUI deliberates slowly, or when BPJPH's audit

procedures identify issues that MUI's fatwa did not anticipate—the resulting friction is not simply bureaucratic inefficiency. It is the institutional expression of a deeper tension between two competing systems of classification: religious jurisprudence and state administration. Each system has its own logic, procedures, and criteria for determining what counts as "pure." The two-key system ensures that neither logic can dominate the other, but it also ensures that the negotiation between them is never fully resolved. This is not a design flaw; it is the structural condition of a system that must simultaneously satisfy religious authority and state capacity.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has examined the transformation of halal in contemporary Indonesia from a religious taboo rooted in Islamic jurisprudence and everyday moral practice into a state-regulated and economically strategic commodity. Tracing its historical genealogy—from early negative labeling of impure products, through the semi-official authority of LPPOM MUI, to the decisive transfer of power to BPJPH under Law No. 33 of 2014—the analysis has shown how bureaucratic procedures, certification systems, and administrative sanctions function as modern technologies of boundary maintenance. Yet, attention to lived experiences also reveals that business actors, particularly those in micro and small enterprises, navigate these demands through a complex blend of religious meaning, pragmatic calculation, and quiet resistance. These dimensions collectively point to a distinctive form of state-led sacralization, wherein the state does not merely protect the sacred but actively reconfigures it into a legible, enforceable, and marketable instrument of economic control and political legitimacy.

Theoretically, this transformation is best grasped through a dialectical reading of Marvin Harris's cultural materialism and Marshall Sahlins's cultural reason. Harris's framework explains why halal governance had to become a state infrastructure: mass production, opaque supply chains, and a market of hundreds of millions of consumers could no longer be secured by trust in individual producers, necessitating a certifying bureaucracy—BPJPH, its inspection agencies, and a self-declaration pathway for micro-enterprises—to scale a classificatory demand across an industrial economy. Sahlins's cultural reason, however, explains why this infrastructure could never reduce religious meaning to administrative convenience: the halal label retains its force only because MUI's fatwa, not merely BPJPH's paperwork, continues to certify a product's passage from the profane to the permissible. Consequently, the tension between purity and profit, religious conscience and state compliance, becomes structural rather than incidental. The two-key system, with its very real delays and institutional friction, is not a design flaw external to this argument; it is the argument made visible in administrative form—the ongoing negotiation between material necessity and symbolic authority.

The Indonesian case thus offers broader insights for the anthropology of religion and the study of contemporary Islam. It demonstrates that under late modern capitalism and developmental governance, the sacred is neither eroded nor straightforwardly revived; it is continuously reconstituted through the intertwined operations of state power, market forces, and classificatory bureaucracy. Future research would benefit from sustained ethnographic engagement with the everyday negotiations of producers, auditors, and consumers, as well as comparative analysis with other Muslim-majority contexts undergoing similar transformations. In the end, the story of halal in Indonesia is not merely a story about religion—it is a story about how the sacred is made to work in service of the modern state and global market. Understanding this industry requires seeing the same certificate simultaneously as a totem of Muslim identity and as

the output of a phased, budget-constrained, thoroughly material bureaucracy—and treating the friction between the two not as noise to be resolved, but as the generative phenomenon itself.

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