

# **EXAMINING THE NEED FOR AND PROPOSSING MAJOR CRITERIA AND REQUIREMENTS OF HALAL SPA SERVICE STANDARD IN THAILAND**

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## **Abstract**

Halal wellness and spa has recently attracted a great interest from tourism experts and practitioners across the globe. This is so in Thailand where around 5.5 tourists from Muslim countries visited and spent approximately 93.7 million Baht in 2018. In the same year, the country was ranked 2nd Muslim-friendly non-OIC members destination for Muslim travelers. Spa and massage, in particular, grew 8 percent with the market value of 3.5 million Baht in 2018 and was ranked 5th in Asia after China, Japan, Korea and India. It was reported that Muslim tourists enjoy Thai spa and massage and a large group of Muslim tourists prefer spa and massage that conform Islamic principles to conventional spa and massage services. However, there is no complete guideline or standard of Halal spa services so far available. This article thus examines the need for Halal spa services standard in Thailand. More importantly, it shall propose key criteria and requirements of the standard and the approach could be taken to operationalize the standard to appropriately support wellness and spa industry in Thailand and beyond. It shall also discuss potential issues and obstacles on the drafting and implementation of Halal spa service standard in Thailand. This articles strongly argues that a genuine Halal spa services cannot become a reality, unless a standard could be drafted and operational procedures are ascertained.

**Keywords:** Halal spa, Halal spa service standard, Central Islamic Council, Thailand

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Halal refers to an object or action which is allowed under the provisions of Islam. Allah the Almighty, says in the Holy Quran:

“O mankind, eat from whatever is on earth [that is] lawful and good and do not follow the footsteps of Satan. Indeed, he is to you a clear enemy.” (Al-Baqarah: 168)

Muslims must follow Halal principles in all their undertakings. In the past, Halal industry have focused on Halal food due to the fact that the number of Muslim consumers increases in the past years. These consumers in Muslim and non-Muslim countries need Halal for their consumption. Recently, a new trend emerges. Many other Halal industries and activities have been discussed and implemented such as Halal logistics, Halal finance, Halal cosmetics, Halal fashion, and Halal wellness and spa. These activities are a part of Muslim lifestyle and need to conform Islamic law.

In Thailand, where tourism industry forms a substantial part of its economy; around 5.5 million tourists from Muslim countries visited and spent approximately 93.7 million Baht in 2018. In the same year, the country was ranked 2nd Muslim-friendly non-OIC members destination for Muslim travelers. Spa and massage, in particular, grew 8 percent with the market value of 3.5 million Baht in 2018 and was ranked 5th in Asia after China, Japan, Korea and India. It was reported that Muslim tourists enjoy Thai spa and massage and a large group of Muslim tourists prefer spa and massage that conform Islamic principles to conventional spa and massage services. Thus far, no Halal spa services standard has been drafted by relevant authority. No operating procedures and monitoring guideline can be developed. An effort has to be done by with the cooperation of spa and religious stakeholders. This article therefore examines the need for Halal spa services standard in Thailand. More importantly, it shall propose main criteria and requirements of the standard and the approach could be taken to operationalize the standard to appropriately support wellness and spa industry in Thailand and beyond.

## 2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF HALAL CERTIFICATION AND STANDARDS IN THAILAND

Even though, Thailand is a non-Muslim country; Muslims can be found across the country. The majority of Muslims live in the southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. Islamic principles therefore have been practiced in Muslim communities in the country including the practices on

Halal products and services. These practices have been done in the past 70 years and developed from significantly until now.

The development of Halal standards, auditing and inspection, certification and logo for products and services in Thailand began in 1949. A company in Thailand wanted to supply chicken to a buyer in Kuwait who requested that the chickens must be slaughtered in accordance with Islamic requirements and must be certified by an Islamic organisation in Thailand. Since then, Halal certificate was issued by the Shaikul Islam or Cularajamontri (Preyakorn, 2017). In 1996, the then Shaikul Islam Office registered a Halal logo as a trademark with Ministry of Commerce and it has been used as an official Thailand Halal logo. One of the minestones of Halal development in Thailand is the enactment of ‘the Administration of Islamic Organisation Act B.E. 2540’ in 1997. This Act stipulates that the operations of Islamic affairs in Thailand are under the Central Islamic Council of Thailand (CICOT). In 1999, Halal certification was then transferred to the Central Islamic Council of Thailand in which a sub-committee on Halal was set up and Islamic provincial councils (Aree, 2017).

In the past, Halal industry in Thailand focused on food. In order to promote Halal certification of Halal mainly for export, Halal Food Institute of Thailand was established in 2003. This institute was under the supervision of the Central Islamic Council of Thailand. The committee of the institute comprise Muslim scholars, academicians, and experts from related fields. The institute developed standard of Halal food in order to support quality improvement, business promotion, and consumer protection. Eventually, a national standard on agriculture and food on Halal Food was set up in 2007. In order to standardize Halal certification activities in the country, the Islamic Council of Thailand then issued a Regulation on Halal Certification in 2009 and under this regulation the name of the Halal Food Standard Institute was changed to ‘Halal Standard Institute of Thailand (Preyakorn, 2017). The Halal Standard Institute of Thailand thus far has focused on standards related to food understandably because food industry in which Thailand is a key world player. The efforts must be done to promote other main industries such as tourism, healthcare and logistics.

### **3. OUTLOOK OF SPA INDUSTRY IN THAILAND**

Spa is defined in the ASEAN Spa Services Standard as ‘an establishment that provides massage treatment(s) and at least two water applications...May also include sauna, scrubs and wraps, energy treatments, exercise, nutritional programmes, dietary programmes, yoga, meditation, herbal treatment or other professional services provided for the well-being of the client’. It can be classified into ‘day spa, club spa, hotel or resort spa, mineral

spring spa, cruise ship spa and destination spa.’ (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016: pp.2-3). Wellness spa has now become a key segment of tourism industry in various countries such as Japan, India, Turkey and Thailand. Types of spa include day spa, club spa, hotel/resort spa, mineral spring spa, cruise ship spa, and destination spa (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016).

Wellness and spa industry has contributed greatly to Thailand’s economy. In 2017, it was reported that the revenues from this industry reached THB136.5 billion (USD4.1 billion), comprising medical services of THB102.9 billion (USD3.1 billion) and spa and massage of THB33.6 billion (USD1.1 billion). The total number of spa operators was 13,514 operators nationwide. Thailand was ranked 16<sup>th</sup> in the world and 5<sup>th</sup> in Asia and the growth rate recorded 8% above global average of 5% (BLT Bangkok, 2018). Thailand therefore earn the reputation as Asia’s Spa Capital (TAT News, 2017). As the country is expanding its spa services to Muslim tourists; standardised spa services conforming Islamic law shall be seriously taken into consideration. This is really so because Thailand is a non-Muslim country in which strict adherence to Islamic principles shall boost their reputation as Halal tourist destination.

#### **4. HALAL SPA GUIDELINE IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES**

Due to the increasing number of Muslim tourists from different parts of the world, spa conforming Islamic principles can satisfy the need of these tourists. This can be called Halal spa (will be used throughout this article), *Shari’ah* compliant spa, Muslim friendly spa and Islamic spa (Abdul Halim and Mohd Hatta, 2017; Othman et al, 2015; Faidah, 2018). In Malaysia, for example, the Malaysia Healthcare Travel Council highlighted the importance of this emerging tread (MHTC, 2016). Indonesians are also reported to have enjoyed Halal spa services as these fulfil both benefits-rational and emotional (Woo, 2011).

In the past few years, Halal spa concept has been developed. Having one or two Muslim workers without properly implementing Islamic spa practices is not sufficient to qualify spa operations as Halal spa (Othman et al, 2015). Major requirements of Halal spa services include beauty therapist segregation by sex, separate rooms and services among women and men, using beauty products from Halal sources, providing prayer rooms and no hair dye with black colour and shaves the eyebrow. Although, this Islamic Spa Practice has achieved standard by Malaysia Islamic Development Department (JAKIM); no other spa operators can bring this concept into practice due to lack of standard operating procedure (Yaman, 2012). In fact, many spa operators who are self-proclaimed Halal, still offer spa treatments which are forbidden by Islamic law (Jamaluddin et al, 2018).

## **5. PROPOSING HALAL SPA SERVICE STANDARD IN THAILAND**

This section highlights 2 aspects important to developing of Halal spa services standard in Thailand, namely, parties involved in the process and the components of the standard. The details of the 2 aspects are as follows:

### **5.1 Parties involved in developing Halal spa services standard**

The attempt to develop a standard for Halal wellness spa in Thailand require active participation from Halal wellness spa stakeholders. Various stakeholders who should take part in the process of the Halal spa services standard development are as follows:

- 1) Thai Spa Association
- 2) Central Islamic Council of Thailand
- 3) Halal Standard Institute of Thailand
- 4) Association of Provincial Islamic Councils Members in Southern Thailand
- 5) Ministry of Health
- 6) Association of ASEAN Halal Tourism and Trade
- 7) Ministry of Tourism and Sports
- 8) Academic institutions involved in Halal activities
- 9) Other organisations and individuals

The representatives of these organisations should participate in different stages of the standard development. The key players are the representatives from spa operators, Muslim religious organisation, and academic institutions. As such, Thai Spa Association, the Central Islamic Council of Thailand, and academic institutions such as Halal Institute, Prince of Songkla University should be involved in this process.

### **5.2 Proposed components of Halal spa service standard**

The proposed Halal spa standard should comprises 3 main sections: scope of the standard, some important terms and definitions, and key criteria and requirements of Halal spa. These components are exhibited in Figure 1 and will be briefly discussed in the following sub-sections.

Figure 1: Components of Halal wellness spa services standard

Scope	Terms and Definitions	Criteria and Requirements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Scope of Halal wellness spa services under the standard</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Spa</li> <li>•Wellness spa</li> <li>•Spa manager</li> <li>•Halal wellness spa manager</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•The place</li> <li>•Wellness spa manager</li> <li>•Therapist</li> <li>•Spa services</li> <li>•Spa products, equipment, and accessories</li> <li>•Services criteria</li> <li>•Safety criteria</li> </ul>

### Scope of Halal wellness spa services standard

This sub-section should describes the scope of the standard in which it shall be used for the promotion and improvement of spa to conform Islamic principles.

### Important terms and definitions

This section should provide definitions of spa, wellness spa, spa manager, and Halal wellness spa manager. The definitions are provided in such a way that Halal wellness spa services can be clearly differentiated from traditional spa services.

### Major criteria and requirements of Halal spa services

This section is the main section of the standard and should consist of at least 7 criteria and requirements of Halal spa. The criteria and requirements are related to the place, spa manager, therapist, spa services standards, spa products, equipment and accessories, services criteria and safety criteria. All of these criteria and requirements are always form parts of traditional spa services standard with some additional details to ensure Halalness of spa operations. It is important that these criteria and requirements must comply with the related country's laws and Islamic principles.

## 6. POSSIBLE CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARDS

As mentioned in the preceding sub-section, the spa services standard in Thailand has not been officially drafted and implemented thus far. However,

there are self-proclaimed Halal spa services are now available in the country, especially in the southernmost provinces and tourist destinations such as Phuket and Krabi which are famous among Muslim tourists from Muslim countries i.e. Malaysia, Indonesia and the Middle East. A number of issues and challenges need to be overcome before the Halal spa services standard can become reality.

### **6.1 Lack of understanding among Muslim scholars**

The first challenge is lack of understanding and acceptance about spa services among Muslim scholars. In the past few decades, Muslim scholars, Halal experts, and Halal inspectors and auditors who have been directly involved in Halal certification processes are familiar with standards for Halal food. It is not surprising because food business has dominated Halal industry for long time. Even though, Halal for Muslims covers all activities in life; tourism, logistics, cosmetics and other aspects of Halal have not been under much attention from Halal stakeholders. Halal spa is a new phenomenon derived from the need of the spa industry or industry-driven. Halal authority in the Central Islamic Council of Thailand and the provincial Islamic councils who are to inspect and audit wellness spa operations are not ready, if not aware about it at all. This could be one of the reasons that the draft Halal wellness spa services standard has not been approved. The issue might be caused by lack of experienced and qualified human resource. In order to resolve the issue, the Muslim scholars should be invited to involve in all processes and stages of the drafting of Halal wellness spa services standard. If necessary, they should experience the services first hand. They shall therefore be able to provide better feedback and suggestions to improve the standard in general and the spa treatments in particular.

### **6.2 Lack of resources of inspection and auditing**

Besides lacking of knowledge, many of them were of the opinion that the provincial Islamic councils had no enough inspecting and auditing staff to undertake wellness spa certification. Halal food certification has kept them busy the whole year long. They might not be interested to go into a new area, like Halal spa due to its controversy and need more time and efforts. As a result of that they might be somewhat reluctant to give full contribution into the ongoing project. A special course on Halal spa services and certification processes should be conducted for Halal inspectors and auditors. It should contain various aspects of spa services, religious issues and implementing and monitoring procedures of Halal spa services. Should the standard is approved, it can be the starting point for this training course.

### **6.3 Lack of awareness among customers and spa providers**

In addition, there could be a lack of awareness among customers and spa providers themselves. Spa in the eyes of Thai Muslims involves a number of controversial issues. In fact, most Muslim conservatives regard spa as a part of prostitution industry. Meaning that, a Muslim spa goer is considered committing a sin and shall be punished in the hereafter. Most spa operators and therapists could have practiced and experienced spa services; they might not however understand Halal concept. Many Muslim spa operators and therapists in the industry might have done treatments, containing non-Halal elements in their work. Apart from providing spa treatments to an opposite sex which is prohibited in Islamic law, they might have performed forbidden ritual during their training sessions and treatments. Due to the need of tourism industry and increased awareness among Muslim middle class; this attitude is now gradually changed. Muslim scholars with the help governmental and non-governmental organisations should provide correct information on Halal wellness spa services to Muslim and non-Muslim communities so that this industry could become an alternative for the improvement of economy and wellbeing of Muslim and non-Muslim entrepreneurs alike. National seminars, handbooks, lectures as well as talks on this topic should be conducted for all stakeholders and public. Printed media, online resources and visual media should be used to assimilate the right information to the public. More importantly, the public should be given a chance to feedback on various aspects of Halal spa services standard and practices so that it can be satisfactorily acceptable to all. Spa operators and therapists may have to attend training courses, designed for them to operate and provide spa treatment and operations in accordance with Islamic law.

### **6.4 Lack of awareness among government officials**

The final issue is lack of awareness among government officials. They should have a lot of inquiries on basic concept of Halal spa, non-Halal elements of current spa services and the need of Muslim customers. As government officials, they should be ready to assist. The main objective is the standard can consequently contribute to the development for alternative spa segment which can attract a new niche market and contribute to the economy of the country. Exchanges ideas and shared group meeting can be a good way to increase awareness among the government officials. A specialised course can be also designed for them to gain more insight into Halal spa services and will enable them to communicate to related authorities and potential international customers.

In summary, these 3 issues: lack of understanding among Muslim scholars, lack of human resources and lack of awareness among government official are considered utmost important for further sustainable development of



Halal spa services standard and Halal spa industry in Thailand. Information exchanges, training courses, media of communication in various forms can be used to fill the gap among the stakeholders. Therapists, spa operators, customers, government officials, Muslim scholars as well educational institute such as Halal Institute, ASEAN Halal Tourism and Trade Association, provincial Islamic councils, the Central Islamic Council and Thai Spa Association can play their part in this new development and contribute to the development of the country's tourism industry in the long-run.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Thai massage and spa are famous among tourists who consistently pour into the country and boost local economy. Muslim tourists from ASEAN countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Middle Eastern countries are among the top of the list. It is expected that Halal spa services can become a key market segment of spa industry in Thailand. Spa industry stakeholders and religious organisation and academic institutions such as Thai Spa Association, the provincial Islamic councils, ASEAN Halal Tourism and Trade Association, Ministry of Health, should work hand in hand in developing Halal spa services standard. The standard should at least consist of 3 key components i.e. scope, terms and definitions and major criteria and requirements which are the main feature of this standard, the criteria and requirements cover from the place or premise of spa, spa manager, therapist, spa services criteria to safety criteria. The criteria and requirements contain various aspects of current spa practices, health and safety standard and religious prerequisites. These are to ensure that customers can experience the best of wellness spa services without violating Islamic principles.

A number of issues must be resolved before Halal wellness spa services standard can be materialised and the certified spa operations can be implemented. Awareness and understanding of Halal spa services need to be instilled in several stakeholders. Provincial Islamic committee, for instance, must attempt to understand the spa industry and research into their uncharted area. Spa operators and therapists shall also upgrade their knowledge on Halal spa. The government officials should try their best to understand the concept of Halal spa and promote it to local and international tourists. Promotional and communicational activities must be done among the customers so that they can utilise Halal spa services. All these cannot be effectively done unless Halal spa services standard is approved and implemented.

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