

## Foreign Workers' Roles for Businesses Breakout Process in an Ethnically Themed Market: The Case of Halal Food Markets in Kyoto, Japan

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### Abstract

This article focuses on understanding the connection between the breakout strategies of businesses and the migrant workers' employment opportunities in ethnically themed markets, especially halal food businesses. Accordingly, this research aims to analyze the working sector where migrants are employed. On the one hand, globalized market conditions demand workers with adequate skills and knowledge to work abroad. On the other hand, studies in global cities describe that migrants' working sector tends to serve economic areas that mainly assist similar ethnic customers. In order to address the issue of enclaving occupational activities, this research uses primary data obtained from ethnographic research and analyzes the findings using the existing frame of the breakout process and strategies. The research results show, first, the employment of foreign workers enables Japanese enterprises to reach targeted ethnic clientele by rebranding and remaking the existing products in the market. Moreover, even though these workers have been contributing to the companies' breakout process, their roles cannot assure job security for the long-run. The evidence of this research also implies that in the current globalized market, labor importing practices rely on the dynamics of companies. However, as companies located in a specific location, the opportunity structures -such as local and national law, social discrimination, and market prospects- affect job stability along with migrants' ability to transform their knowledge and skills.

**Keywords:** breaking-out; entrepreneurs' strategy; ethnically themed market; halal food market; mixed embeddedness

### Introduction

The commodification of ethnic symbols has been gaining attention for its contribution to leisure activities and leveraging the city's attraction (Aytar & Rath, 2012). The development of ethnic symbols as a commercial space also often couples with migrant-related phenomena, such as the

enclaving ethnic neighborhood of Chinatown (Zhou, 1992), with its entrepreneurial activities (Light & Gold, 2000). Although, in some Japanese local areas such perspective remains debated, whether benefiting locals or creating social segregation (Maruyama, Woosnam, & Boley, 2017; Maruyama & Woosnam, 2015), the increasing interest in introducing ethnically economic activities

as part of the urban selling points has been taking place widely.

In Kyoto City, more local entrepreneurs are interested in providing goods and services as suppliers in halal food markets. The gaining popularity of the industry goes hand in hand with the tourism sector of the city. In response, local business associations and local governments have been enthusiastically introducing concepts through seminars related to halal, Islamic culture, and business with aims to attract more sellers and tap the market potential<sup>1</sup>.

At the same time, the limitation of knowledge among Japanese business owners leads to labor importing practices. As halal food becomes globalized and demands changes in many areas of businesses, the employment of foreign workers is arguably necessary to adjust to current business environments (Akashi, 2014). Foreign workers' employment activities and halal consultation centers established by people with migration background proliferate in the city<sup>2</sup>. It indicates that the opening of business and employment is a possible pathway for economic integration among those categorized as minorities.

Nevertheless, the raised concern is that halal food market phenomena may be similar to other global cities that attract migrants to serve in the industrial area of specific consumer groups (Sassen, 2005). In which, the enclaving of occupations among migrants signal the blocking mobility and indicate many other limitation aspects. The proposed research questions for this research

*are to what extent halal food markets can provide employment opportunities? Are the employment activities limited to serve ethnic clientele and compete in economic sectors that have difficulties to grow? What are the roles of migrants in positioning the companies of their working places?* In order to locate such discussions, this research pays attention to the breakout concept, which previously elaborated by Rusinovic (2008) and Lasalle and Scott (2018).

Engelen's (2001) notion over the breakout concept pinpoints the migrants' opportunities to enter lucrative areas beyond ethnic niches and middle-men markets. The effort that migrants put for reaching farther than the economy of the niche area is the break out strategy. The application of the breakout concept has been so far concerning migrants' self-employed practices. Breaking-out and self-employment activities are essential to conceive the degree of sustaining livelihood while experiencing discrimination in the labor markets. On the contrary, when exclusion in the mainstream labor markets is lesser, the breakout concept is useful to analyze whether migrants' occupations remain in vulnerable areas or experiencing dynamic mobilities (Edwards et al., 2016).

Informants of this research are people with migration backgrounds employed by Japanese companies. There are five companies and nine foreign workers as the source of information for this research. The five companies' characters are small-medium in size. Meanwhile, among the nine workers, they possess various visa statuses. Two are permanent residents who marry Japanese. Four international students who have been living for more than two years, and the other three are permanent workers who hold short-term employment visa status.

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1 Fieldwork attending business seminars: Kyoto city 25 January 2018; Kyoto city 8 February 2018; Osaka city 8 November 2018; Kameoka regency, Kyoto Prefecture, 20 January 2019; Kyoto city 23 January 2019; and Osaka city 14 February 2019 and 22 February 2019.

2 In Kyoto city, there are at least two halal consultation centers that both established by migrants.

Furthermore, the chosen city for conducting this research is through the primary considerations that Kyoto and Osaka are known for their service industries. Even though Tokyo is the center for business and having more dynamics regarding halal food markets; nevertheless, the Kansai area currently follows the development of the Japanese capital city for the halal food industry<sup>3</sup>.

Hence, this research remains to concentrate in Kyoto city as the unit of analysis. Unlike many other developed cities that use migrants to attract more capital, the number of foreign workers in Kyoto city is relatively moderate<sup>4</sup>. It also implies that foreign workers' employment patterns may follow selective migratory processes. In which, those who move abroad are the one who overcomes barriers, such as capital, language as well as securing settlement in the new place. Therefore, locating the discussion of breaking-out remains focused on the connections between structural opportunities of the market, local companies, and migrants' ability to transform their knowledge and skills.

## **Data and Methods**

The data extraction for this research goes through several phases. Firstly, as there remains a limitation of the exact numbers of foreign workers employed in such kind of market sector, this research proceeds with conducting ethnography research for a year in advance. The fieldwork results are useful to

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3 Halal Media Japan categorizes the two cities, Osaka and Kyoto, as adopters. The overall data by Halal Media Japan lists infrastructure, such as place for praying and the availability of halal foods of cities across the country.

4 Data in 2018 shows that the number of foreign workers in Kyoto city is 61,022 people. Meanwhile Tokyo and Osaka have 567,789 and 239,113, respectively.

describe some essential information and find the informants, business locations as well as explaining general conditions.

Furthermore, the selection of informants is through the snowball sampling process. The initial access relies on the observation by attending business seminars and visiting places that marked as Muslim Friendly by the local government<sup>5</sup>. Accordingly, building rapport occurs during dinner and appointment with informants. Semi-structured interviews help to gather information regarding the necessary data, such as the type of consumers, business-related information, migrants' activities, and the prospect of companies. Thirdly, the data obtained from the fieldwork is salient for mapping the typology of markets and explaining the breakout process.

## **Findings and Discussions**

### *A Brief Description of The Research Field*

Halal food refers to what is permissible for consumption among Muslims according to Islamic rules. Previously, business players for this market were mainly ethnic entrepreneurs. There is only a handful of Japanese who are also Muslims. Nevertheless, for the past five years, not only in Kyoto but also in the rest of Japan (Samori et al., 2016; Yusof & Shutto, 2014), there is an increasing consciousness of the demand for consumer goods' productions according to religious ethics.

The flowing information about economic opportunities in that market attracts local governments' attention. At the same time, data compiled by the global financial organization has been monitoring and ranking cities across the globe according to the estimated

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5 <https://kyoto.travel/en/muslim/prayer> (accessed in 23 January 2019)

economic transaction of halal food<sup>6</sup>. Those two factors affect the private and public discussion for economic activities, which are previously deemed as less-attractive in many local areas.

Nevertheless, in order to adapt to the current demand in the industry, it requires adjustments that mainly related to employment practices as well as business transformation. As Japan Muslim members are deemed as minority groups, and most are people with migration backgrounds (Sakurai, 2008), this phenomenon alone is a negotiation between market and culture. On the one hand, Japan's unwillingness to use human migration to support the country's economy faces challenges, since the halal food industry is an activity that contains cultural performances, on the other (Bergaud-Blackler, 2004; Fischer, 2016).

Nowadays, the need for supporting capital attractions is essential for the city's management. In Kyoto Prefecture, especially Kyoto City, the local government puts efforts to rebrand local businesses for attracting religious consumers. Among those, there are vegetarian foods, serving halal meat for all of the menus, pork-free, and alcohol-free restaurants, as well as labeling own restaurants with specific halal standards. Local government also engages in marketing of business in this sector and promoting it as Muslim friendly places. It indicates that local authority does not want to miss the economic opportunities.

In this regard, for conceiving the spatial formation of halal food markets, this research follows the definition of a themed market by Rath et al. (2017). Similar characteristics of halal food markets and the development of

Amsterdam's Chinatown lies on the few points. Firstly, it is rarely an enclaving ethnic economy phenomenon, where people with migration backgrounds are forming economic activities to help their fellow migrants who share similar languages or other social characteristics to survive in a hostile place. Secondly, halal food markets entail the competition of various businesses to get benefit from religious consumers by rebranding their goods and services that complies with their ethical standard of consumption. In other words, the statement of halal food or Muslim friendly places both is the way to describe the commercial value of products and to market local businesses according to the current trends.

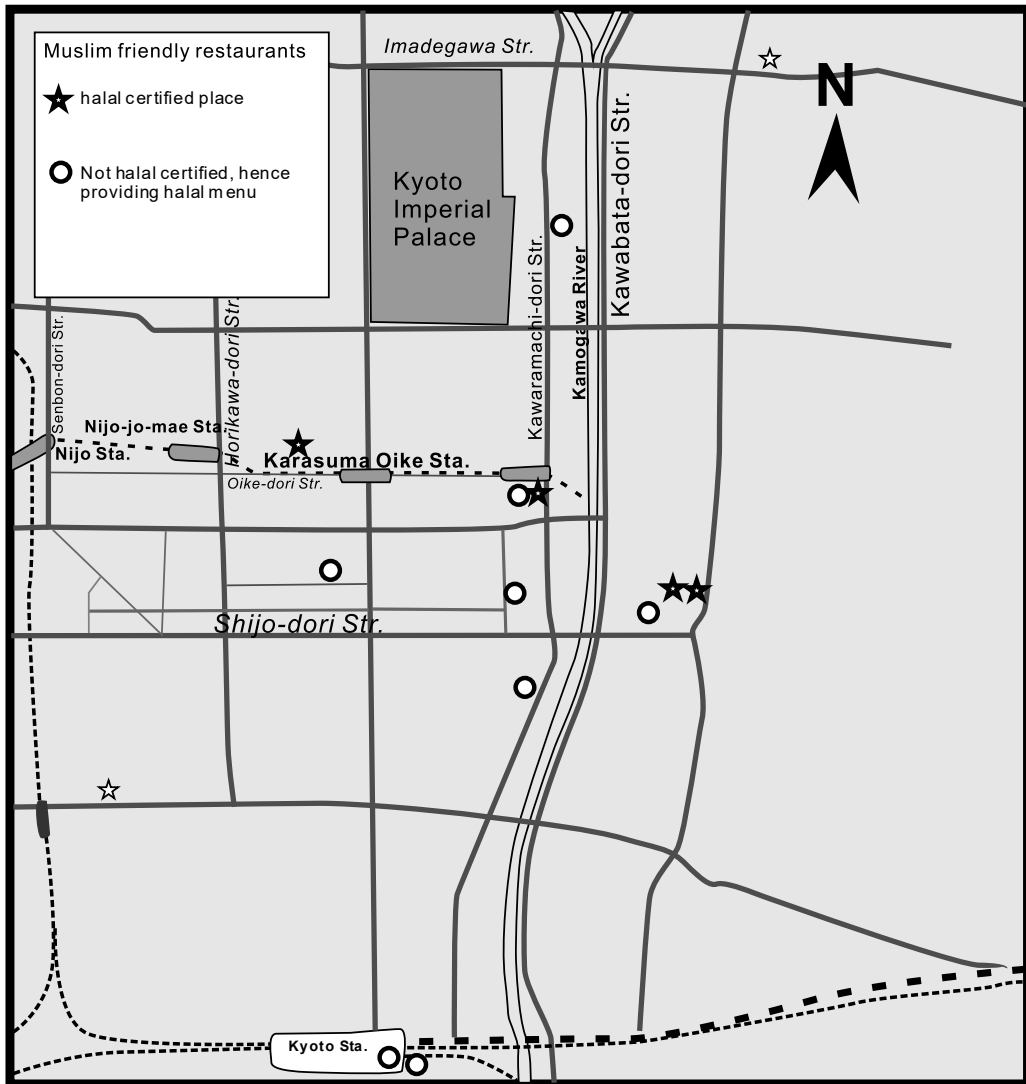
However, there is a difference in halal food markets from other ethnic district studies. In which, the available businesses marketed as religious-compliant services are widely distributed in Kyoto city. The presented map above points out that the characteristics of locations are occupying major shopping areas, such as Kawaramachi-Dori street and Oike-Dori street of Kyoto City. Those areas are the basis of the central city commuters, located near Yasaka Shrine, Kyoto Station, as well as close to local universities.

#### *Intersectionality of Migration, Identity, and Market Dynamics*

The above discussion elucidates the emergence of business in Kyoto city that aims to attract Muslim consumers by marking the spatial information with the related religious symbol. Meanwhile, from the entrepreneur side, entering such market also requires overcoming structural and social barriers in order to win the competition. This section attempts to gain a deeper understanding on

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<sup>6</sup> Data obtained from State of the Global Islamic Economy Report.



(Map designed by the author, Source: Fieldwork)

**Figure 1.** The availability of Muslim friendly places and halal-certified restaurants

the roles of foreign workers' employment practices by local companies. In which, such labor importing pattern receives limited attention as an integral part of local markets.

The more receptive of the host society and country policy upon the particular group makes cultural differences as part of local livelihood (Portes, 2010), rather than minority-majority relational discourse (Johnson et al., 2017). At the same time, the acceptance of

local businesses toward foreign workers can result in a mixed economy (Nee et al., 1994). Cross-group employment is not only enabling to embed differences within organizations (Fuhse, 2012) but also, it helps to diversify the ethnically concentrated working sector (Nee and Holbrow, 2013; Maruyama and Woosnam, 2017).

This research employs the term of migrants and foreign workers interchangeably. Firstly,

as Roberts (2018) argues that migration in Japan is often a shadow phenomenon, and those categorized as students, trainees, and spouses of Japanese citizens are temporary migrants or potential migrants in the future. Accordingly, such arguments are also similar to Glick Schiller and Salazar's (2013) category of people who move across borders as people with migration backgrounds or migrants. Nation-state acknowledgments may hinder a complete understanding of migrants, where people who come as undocumented or temporarily stayers are not included. At the same time, they have been contributing by shaping the local economy practices (Goto, 1998; Hennings & Mintz, 2018). This research also uses a similar notion that foreign workers who work for Japanese companies and equates them with the category of migrants regardless of their status, whether as a student, a permanent worker, or a short-term employee.

Those who are categorized as migrants have overcome the barriers to enter Japan through company-sponsored visas as well as due to marital status by following Japanese spouses to stay in the country. The employment practice occurs through increasing demand for providing ethnoreligious goods and services for local markets. Moreover, most of the informants have experienced to live in Japan beforehand. Therefore, they acquired related skills for filling the labor market gap through long processes, such as attending Japanese universities, exchange students, as well as taking Japanese language courses.

This process is different from the other national programs that require selection based on government to government (G to G) treaty. Meanwhile, business to business (B to B) does not necessarily involve a third party. Individuals can also apply for vacancies in a company. Most of the informants have

obtained a working visa in Japan for at least two years. Likewise, they also shared experiences that the renewal process of their stay is related to the market conditions.

This finding shows that workers in the occupational niche sectors are vulnerable in their job security. On the one hand, the global market conditions provide opportunities for them to work abroad in the area that accommodates their identity. On the other hand, there remains a yawning gap regarding job security from their type of occupations they work. One of the informants explained:

"I don't know until when I am working in this area. The company director gives me the flexibilities to manage the restaurant, but I have to make this restaurant works... They only know that selling is going on, and they will renew my visa every three years. It used to one year, as the immigration office has no record in this kind of business... I mean, back then in 2015, when the company just opened for few months, and they (the director boards) wanted to grant me a foreign-worker visa to operate their business. Now, the immigration office gives me three years after this business survived for the first two years" (1, Interview on 9 January 2019).

Another possibility for migrants to be able to work in Japan is also through the marriage channel. Moreover, when both spouses are practicing the same religion, they are more likely to exploit current market opportunities. During the field research, the findings noted that there are three restaurants established by couples. Those three restaurants have a similarity that one of the owners is a person with a migration background who married a Japanese.

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In a case of a niche industrial activities, the previous study suggests perceiving migrants as actors in shaping business practice through their ability to deal with the identity of targeted ethnic clientele (Edwards et al., 2016). The religious and ethnic identity of those who are employed by locals, in this sense, helps in developing products, and positioning companies in the market. As halal food is a specific dietary consumption among Muslims, hiring workers with Islamic background aims at understanding the targeted clientele better.

Most of the companies rely on migrants for production because of their proximal identity that often problematized by consumers. Even though the Japanese owners obtained training from local halal certification bodies, the interviews have found that their clients often question Japanese stores for providing halal food. As one of the informants explained:

“...Once it was a customer that I think he came from one of the Middle Eastern countries. When he saw there were no visible Muslim staffs, he went away... (1, Interview on 9 January 2019)”

The market demand has created a channel for importing labor force, especially within an industry that requires cultural performance. Among the Japanese, there are a limited number of Muslims and willing to work in similar job positions. However, although company and market conditions seem important factors for migration, there is also a personal motive in such the migration process. Based on the interviews, all informants expressed their concern for working in Japan based on their religious identity.

“...I chose to work in Japan because I want to practice my religion and be part of spreading messages of Islam... Even working in Indonesia for Japanese company has less pressure and be able to support my life... but my dream here is related to my religion as well as make a living... for those who work in Japan only for money without any goals, that is the most awkward decision I have ever known, with this amount of pressure, why would anyone works in Japan without any dreams (other than money)...? (with laughing) (1, Interview on 9 January 2019)”

“...I received two job offers, and I chose this company with a specific job category as I want to practice my religion while working abroad... (2, Interview January 14, 2018)”

Previous studies have analyzed the importance of supporting factors outside the workplace to attract foreign talents. Morita (2015) argues that relationships with host society are another salient aspect. Similarly, D'Costa (2013) also explains that perception over the career prospects in the country is part of considerations among highly-skilled migrants. However, those studies have not yet elaborated on the individual identity and migration perspective. By revealing their religious motives and preferred working sector, this finding also contributes to the previous discussion of ethnicity and identity for migration (Tsuda, 2002). This information shows how the problematized identity based on race and culture in migration is negotiated through religious and civic engagement (Levitt, 2008), primarily through market activities. In this sense, foreign workers perceive that contributing to the local market also goes hand in hand with their religious activities.

At the same time, from Japanese entrepreneur counterparts, they also learn to accept different ideas for conducting business, especially by foreign workers that often forced to do in Japanese ways (Morita, 2017). The negotiation of Japanese ways of doing business is by giving some workers a degree of flexibilities to perform their preferences to manage businesses. However, as one of the informants challenged:

“The director gives me flexibilities to manage the restaurant, I mean everything, from workers’ shifts, recruitments, budgeting, and daily operations. But, I feel like they don’t care about personal relations. There is no question to ask regarding how everything is going with my personal life. Even when my father passed away and I had to go back to Indonesia, she just said: please come back to work as soon as possible.” (2, Interview January 14, 2018).

#### *Market Typology of Businesses in Halal Foods in Kyoto City*

There is a typical pattern of people with migration backgrounds who work in a sector related to their ethnic identity. Despite their better educational attainment and better employment opportunity by the mainstream job market, however, they remain working in a sector that requiring their ethnic knowledge to attract similar ethnic clientele (Edwards et al., 2016). In this sense, scholars argue that the limitation of careers among migrants is the ethnic market itself. When they often work serving low-level economic activities or within an industry that has difficulties to grow, such as the restaurant business (Kloosterman, 2010), the opportunities of their economic mobilities are limited.

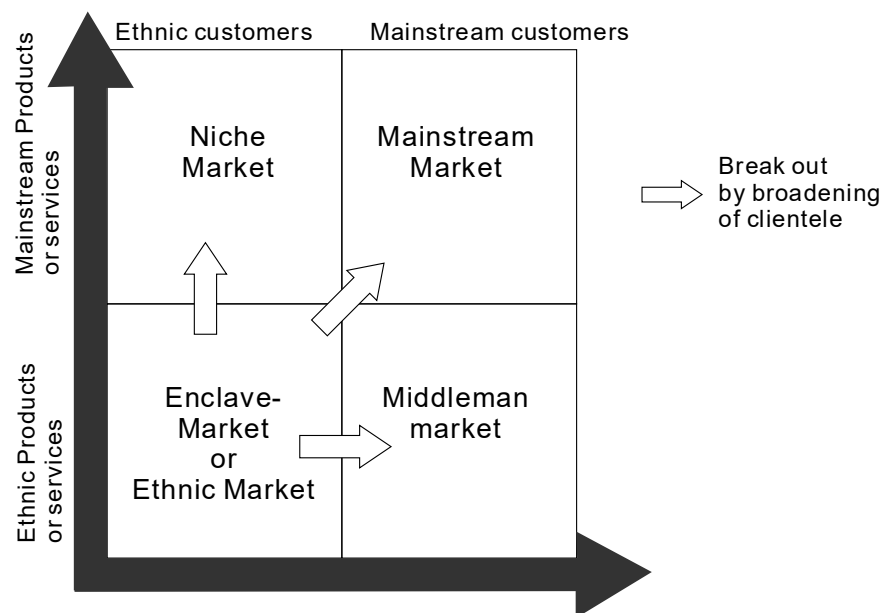
In order to comprehend migrants’ contribution in the business development process as well as the market category of their working places, this research employs a conceptual framework of the typologies of a market by Rusinovic (2008) and elaborated further by Lassalle & Scott (2018). Accordingly, the breakout concept is salient to clarify the relationship of ethnic workers, their contribution to the business development process, as well as market category.

There are four market categories where businesses are operating based on ethnic characters of products and consumers. Firstly, the domination of ethnic products to supply ethnic clientele is called the ethnic market. Business in this type of market also often relies on an ethnic network to sustain. The domination of business in this type of market is mainly informal, which opens their food order for supplying internal groups. This type of business is not included as part of the analysis of this research since they are merely an ad-hoc with no permanent store. Likewise, business in this category is also rarely having cross-group employment.

The second type is the middlemen market. There are many ethnic restaurants as a seller in halal food markets in Kyoto city. The most familiar restaurants are Turkish and Indian restaurants that market their products as exotic for the broader type of customers. Aiming solely at a similar ethnic group would be a disadvantage for these businesses as there are too few residents from a similar group. In addition to that, this type of business also rarely employs workers outside their ethnic group.

The third and fourth category is the niche market and the mainstream market. Businesses of most informants in this research fit under these two categories. Japanese-





Source: Adapted from Rusinovic (2008); and Lasalle and Scott (2017)

**Figure 2.** Typology of market

owned companies offer mainstream products to mainstream consumers. Subsequently, those companies diversify goods and services to include ethnoreligious clientele. Furthermore, cross-group employment activity also occurs within these two categories. However, as the two categories are challenging to understand in a separate way (Engelen, 2001), consequently, blurring the boundaries between the niche market and the mainstream market occurs as a result of product diversifications (Lasalle and Scott, 2018).

The previously overlooked ethnic customers are now becoming a targeted clientele. Unlike previous studies on the breakout focusing on immigrant entrepreneurs and their market categories, breaking-out in this research is providing information of local entrepreneurs that employing ethnic workers for reaching ethnic clientele (Pecoud, 2004; and Lasalle and Scott, 2017). Accordingly, the breakout process also indicates that

almost all entrepreneurs are cosmopolitan (Pecoud, 2004). Regardless of their migration backgrounds, it is essential to study and include the category in the discussion.

Selling halal food for most entrepreneurs is a diversification strategy to escape from the highly competitive restaurant business. Indeed, there are correlations between the availability of halal mark and the increasing religious consumers<sup>7</sup>. The gathered big data from public internet facilities, such as bus stops, train stations, as well as internet providers, indicates such correlation of ethnic customers and available ethnic products<sup>8</sup>. However, this does not mean that local businesses are fully transforming into ethnic-oriented products and clientele.

<sup>7</sup> Fieldwork attending local business seminar in Kyoto City 25 January 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Fieldwork attending local business seminar in Kyoto City 25 January 2018, panel discussion by an internet company which manages most of the internet connection in public facilities in Japan.

There are several shops in Kyoto City that previously served customers without paying attention to the concept of a religious dietary. Subsequently, over the past three years, more companies have been trying to encompass ethnoreligious clientele for their businesses. An example is a Japanese cuisine restaurant located in the western part of Kyoto, which has been operating for over sixty years, subsequently began to serve halal foods in the past two years. Accordingly, in the past three years, the management has a permanent foreign employee and continuously recruiting part-time students with related religious identity. This shifting strategy is due to enter the halal food business. As the vice president of the company stated:

*"...I met my Muslim friend who visited Japan. She always says no to every Japanese food that I offered. I asked her, what kind of foods do you eat? From that point, I started to learn about halal food from my friend and visited the Kyoto Muslim Community for asking about halal food. Now, our restaurant which has been selling traditional Japanese dishes for over 50 years, is also providing service for Muslims... and to maintain the quality of our products, she helps us (pointing at the migrant worker) to control the daily operations..."* (Interview, 18 January 2018)

Similarly, a Japanese-owned cooking school company, which is located near the major shopping district of Kawaramachi street, has decided to invest in the halal certificate. The owner pays about five hundred thousand Yen for the accreditation process from one of the Islamic institutions in Osaka. Although being acknowledged for understanding the halal process and "eligible" for supplying

the market, the owner remains caught in the limitations for distributing the services. Eventually, the school decided to hire an advisor who also a person who experience international migration from Indonesia. As a result, the cooking school has been starting activities addressing Muslim students from local universities. In this sense, the social network of the hired migrant enables the business to reach out to the targeted ethnic clientele.

In general, migrant workers' contribution affects the restaurant business by providing network channels with ethnic clientele as well as having the ability to recreate mainstream products for ethnic customers. Almost in every attended local business conferences, migrants are contributing to the mentioned economic activities. However, even though their working status is usually as skilled workers, such as local advisors in developing restaurant businesses or managers of the halal section in more prominent companies, their significant roles remain in the area of exploiting ethnic market and the restaurant business.

The presented table above concludes that the engagement of the migrants is part of the business transformation and diversification of products. Current opportunity structures have been attracting Japanese companies, especially businesses that operate in the food sector. The employment of people with religious-related identities who also mostly immigrants bridge the gap between demanded products and services and the necessary knowledge. Furthermore, the overall area of business which has been successfully explored is the service industry, especially restaurants and food-related products.

The diversified products help to attract targeted customers who have been neglected

**Table 1. Type of food businesses employing foreign workers in the breakout process**

<b>Type of restaurant</b>	<b>Owner</b>	<b>Contribution of cross-group employment practices</b>	<b>Typology of the market (based on products and clientele)</b>
Cooking school	Japanese	Product diversification by including the halal type of cooking and connecting to broader social networks.	The mainstream market
Ramen noodle restaurant	Japanese	Remaking and rebranding ramen for ethnoreligious and mainstream clientele.	The mainstream market and the ethnic market
Japanese cuisine restaurant	Japanese	Product diversification by providing two menus and other related religious consumer goods and services.	The mainstream market, niche market that also including ethnic market
Gift shop	Japanese	Product diversification by providing a specific section for ethnoreligious clientele.	The mainstream market and the ethnic market
Okonomiyaki or Japanese style fast food	Japanese	Product diversification by providing two menus for a broader clientele and ethnoreligious clientele.	The mainstream market and the middle-men market

Source: Fieldwork by the author

in the past years. However, one of the characters from the products that remain an issue is that it is consumed mostly by ethnic-related customers. In other words, even though foreign workers' employment activities facilitate broadening the clientele process, their offered products rely heavily upon customers with similar group category. Those circumstances, in turn, affect the job security from their occupations.

## **Conclusion**

This research concludes that firstly, halal food markets provide an employment opportunity for migrants. The opportunity

comes from the gap between the increasing demands and the need for skills and knowledge. The local companies demand workers with related religious identity to facilitate the broadening targeted clientele of businesses.

The migration process of those workers occurs through long experience and mobilities between countries of origin and Japan. Early experiences of migrants working at local companies while studying at Japanese universities help them to know the situation in advance. The exploration process enables the informants of this research to know better the country's system regarding foreign workers' recruitment and validate their dream to work

abroad. This sort of migration process does not occur directly through the influence of the government-sponsored movement. Market dynamics play vital roles in the demand for foreign workers, and companies are at the heart of the migratory process.

Secondly, the evidence of this report shows that the occupational niche, which is resulted from the dynamics of halal food markets, does not necessarily fall into categories of the niche or the ethnic market when conceiving through the overall company position within the market. This finding implies that the mixture between broader and ethnoreligious products developed by companies where migrants work can provide jobs for a shorter period, on the one hand. On the other hand, the limitation of demands outside the targeted religious group for religious-standard products cannot assure that the occupations sustain for a more extended period.

Lastly, by studying the foreign workers' employment activities in the occupational niche and through the breakout concept, this research also shows that the critical aspects of migration based on market dynamics rely on both efforts of structure and agency in facilitating the process. Structure, such as local and national governments' policies, local companies' willingness to recruit foreign workers, enables to facilitate the flourishing of the market. At the same time, the prominent roles of agency or migrants are to transform the current opportunities using their abilities to capitalize on their possessed skills and knowledge that are not delimited to a particular group.

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