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Mohammed Jemal Ahmed and Atilla Akbaba, *Potentials, Challenges and Prospects of halal Tourism Development in Ethiopia*. Routledge, Taylor and Francis, 2023. 244 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1032409030.

Reviewed by: Abdifatah Shafat, Jigjiga University, Jigjiga, Ethiopia.

In the past few decades, many African nations have witnessed economic growth, lifting many of their citizens out of poverty. Ethiopia is frequently touted as one country whose economy has been growing exponentially. Consequently, these countries are departing from their traditional sources of revenue and adapting to changing, global economic systems. One great example is the tourism industry, in which Africa has lagged far behind other continents. Ahmed and Akbaba in their book illustrate in-depth the potentials, challenges, and prospects for Ethiopia in developing its halal tourism industry. In their study, the authors weave the existing literature on tourism, halal tourism, and the principles of Islam. They note that the halal industry is growing fast but can only be fully harnessed if the necessary facilities are put in place to cater to the needs of Muslim tourists.

The central argument of the book is to map out the possibilities and the difficulties that Ethiopia faces in developing its halal tourism and becoming a hub in this largely unexploited industry. As such, the book has three themes: potentials, challenges, and prospects to the halal industry in Ethiopia. Ahmed and Akbaba have done an excellent job in detailing factors that are in favor of and against such progress as well as the prospects of this industry. In addition to the natural beauty and deep history of Ethiopia, the potential for halal visitors, argue the authors, is in the strategic location of the country. Straddling Africa and the Middle East, Ethiopia can exploit this advantage, as it is within close proximity to a vast number of tourists. It is because of this strategic location that Ethiopia was important to the history of early Islam and can easily market itself to halal tourists. It is the first country in Africa and the second in the world to accept Islam when the Prophet Muhammad sent a band of close associates to seek refuge in Africa. As a result, the country is home to historic heritage sites of interest to Muslims, including the oldest mosque in Africa. In addition, the authors claim that tangible resources also favor the growth of the halal tourism industry in Ethiopia. Chief among this is that Ethiopia

with a population of 115 million has one of the fastest growing populations half of whom are Muslim and that the country is bordered in almost all directions by Muslim populations. Accordingly, this gives Ethiopia an extraordinary niche from which to source its halal tourism market.

While the potential for halal tourism is limitless, Ahmed and Akbaba also consider factors that can hinder the development of the halal tourism industry. The authors claim that one such hindrance is the poor relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Ethiopia. Though the authors claim that Muslims and Christians have coexisted in Ethiopia for over a millennium, they also say that the adherents of the two religions have a tenuous relationship as an obstacle to the development of the halal tourism industry. It is common knowledge that the Ethiopian state has been under the influence of the Orthodox church for centuries and most still identify it with the Orthodox church. Because of this long running association of state power with the Orthodox church, the authors argue that the tourism industry in general and the halal tourism industry in particular has been monopolized by Islamophobes. One can easily infer that through the influence and the links that these Islamophobes have cultivated with the state, they dominate this sector of the economy, effectively cutting others off from participating in it. The authors also point to the lack of awareness among Ethiopian Muslims as occasioning the dismal performance of the halal tourism industry in Ethiopia. This is the case even though businesses owned by Muslims already meet certain standards of the halal tourism industry. In essence, the absence of advertisements means that halal tourists are not aware of the existence of these businesses.

The book is divided into five chapters. The chapters are organized in a pyramidal order by starting off in a more general manner before transitioning to the more specific themes of the book. Chapter one, titled “Definitions and Dimensions of Halal Tourism,” situates the arguments of the book by addressing three main points. It begins by defining key terms that are central to understanding the text. These terms include tourism, halal tourism, and Islamic tourism. Also covered in-depth are the various dynamics of the halal industry, particularly its background and how it came to being. Here, the authors handle important subtopics like the birth of the halal industry, its trends, the halal industry in regard to non-Muslims, as well as certifications and marketing. The chapter also examines the requisite products and services for this industry to flourish. It focuses on logistical aspects of the industry such as complying with the requirements of halal food, halal-conscious airports, and health centers. With the assumption that not many people know about the ins and the outs of the emerging industry, the chapter does a remarkable job of grounding the reader in the basics of the industry.

Chapter two is titled, “Travel, Tourism and Worship,” and it tackles the ways tourism and travel intersect with worship. Before embarking on these topics,

however, the authors open with a background to religious tourism. These are general observations that seamlessly transition into the heart of the chapter: perspectives of the foundational sources of Islam—the Qur'an and hadith—on tourism. On the intersections of travel, tourism, and worship, the authors find recourse in the Quran and the hadith to show how travel, tourism mesh with Islam. The authors point out that Muslims are encouraged to travel, referencing over 13 verses (p. 9) from the Qur'an that exhort Muslims to travel. To extrapolate the notion of travel in Islam and make the argument that one can travel without compromising their religious principles, the authors refer to the hajj and umrah journeys that Muslims make to Mecca. But while the latter does not present any kind of difficulties to Muslims, regular travel does not necessarily have to either. The chapter is not only specific but technical as it illustrates not only the intersection of these factors, but the requirements for such from an Islamic point of view.

Chapter three is titled, “Major Themes and Issues in Halal Tourism Development,” and is theoretical since it locates the halal tourism industry within the larger framework of tourism in Ethiopia. Theories like modernization and dependency are put under the microscope in a bid to demonstrate to the reader how a development of the halal tourism industry configures within them. Thereafter, the chapter transitions into describing the particularities of halal tourism and tourists. For instance, it explains the features, principles, attributes, and the red tape that could impede the development and thriving of the halal industry in Ethiopia. Regarding the tourists, the chapter explains the characteristics and motivations of halal-conscious travelers. The strength of this chapter is to locate halal tourism industry in the academia, but it also helps give a feel of what this industry and the tourists mean in the context of Ethiopia.

Chapter four explains the potentials of the halal industry in Ethiopia. The title is, “Ethiopia and Tourism Potential,” and it is partly an account of the history of the two main religions in Ethiopia: Islam and Christianity. In a way, the chapter offers the reader not only a vivid insight of the longstanding presence of Islam and Christianity in Ethiopia but demonstrates the mark the two religions have left and continue to leave in Ethiopia. In addition, this part of the chapter communicates to us—mostly as outsiders—how identity is forged in Ethiopia based on this storied past, how Ethiopians relate to each other today, and how tourism can be understood and developed based on this history and experiences. The chapter in a major way also directly addresses the main argument of the book by rendering a list of important sites for halal tourists. This part feels like a travel brochure because it recommends to visitors what locations they may want to visit. To do so, it divides the country into several sections that it refers to as “clusters”—north, east, and south. The authors enumerate what interesting historical sites to find in each section.

Chapter five deliberates on challenges and prospects to the halal industry and is titled, “Challenges and Prospects to Halal Tourism Development: Ethiopia in Focus.” Despite the title that seemingly purports to examine challenges and prospects to the industry, it provides an extensive discussion of data collection—research methods, tools used and the interpretation of the data. This is appropriate to give the reader a taste of the diversity of sources that have informed the book. Building on chapter four, the chapter continues on with the important halal sites by mapping out routes. However, there is a fascinating section in this chapter that the authors call, “Ethiopia’s comparative advantage and opportunities to develop halal tourism.” As the heading suggests, the section details the advantages to developing the halal tourism industry in Ethiopia. The prospects are bright and innumerable as they include ancient sites that sets this country apart from others. They include unique sites and legends, first Hijra, the great Muslim kings, and cities and landscapes. Coming on the heels of these potentials, the chapter concludes with an array of challenges to the progress of the halal industry such as the perception of Ethiopia as a “Christian Island”, Islamophobia, Tourismophobes and lack of Muslim-friendly infrastructure. The last part is particularly revealing to most Muslims who may view Islamophobia as a uniquely western problem and that they have to contend with it in this unlikely place.

No doubt Ahmed and Akbaba make a compelling illustration of the possibilities and the drawbacks that Ethiopia faces in developing its halal industry. However, while the authors treat halal as a secular concept, the distinction they make between halal industry and Islam is a little confounding, especially to the non-academic. Moreover, some of the chapters overlap and feel repetitive. The authors could have streamlined the argument with smooth and coherent organization. But what any student or scholar of this part of the world find interesting is the absence of any discussion of the security fragility of the region, particularly in Ethiopia. Ever since the passing of Meles Zenawi in 2012, the country has been plagued by violent flare ups and demonstrations that devolved into a full-scale war that recently ended. On a broader scale, perhaps due to willful omission by the authors, they failed to capture well the reality of the Horn of Africa Muslims—who they claim are a good source for halal tourism. While this is true, Muslims within Ethiopia’s borders and its immediate surroundings have long been marginalized and are at present too poor to be a viable source of the halal industry. Hence, one can never make the case for tourism, halal tourism no less, without discussing the socio-political and economic suffering of the Horn of Africa Muslims.

All told, this is a timely book and is a vital resource for practitioners, policy makers, and academics. The authors have used quite a rich web of sources—running into the tens of pages—, an admirable undertaking for a nascent field of study, enriching it and in the process catering to the diverse group of people and institutions

that will find it useful. Its versatility owes to its wealth of information that has accrued from depth of its research from different research methods that include interviews, focus groups, and observation amongst others. While it can sometimes be technical, the book is largely written in a clear and accessible language while it is at the same time academic. Another appealing quality of the book is the way it connects various fields of study not only in the methods of data collection but the way it was written. In effect, the book can be used by the following fields of study: tourism, halal tourism, anthropology, sociology, and Islamic studies. Another strength of the book is its recommendations and suggestion that are useful not only for Ethiopia but can also be borrowed and applied elsewhere in the Muslim majority countries.

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