

Feeling Animal Death

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Being Host to Ghosts

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Chapter Eighteen

Goats of My Childhood

Rethinking Islamic Sacrifice without Animals

Saadullah Bashir

When I was around eight years old, my father brought a young goat to our home in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. The goat was a young male who was to be killed for Eid al-Adha, the Islamic festival commemorating Ibrahim’s willingness to sacrifice his son, Ishmael, for Allah, or God. For three days I fed this little goat, took him for walks on a rope, played “head-butt” with him. Then, on the fourth day, after coming home from having said Eid prayers at the mosque with my father, I watched as a butcher killed the goat in our garden. Although I had known from the moment I saw the goat why he was there—to be killed in a few days—I felt sadness and regret. Sadness at his death and regret for knowing that a creature who I was becoming attached to had been hurt and taken away. The sense of loss was tempered by the repeated refrain among adults that we were doing our duty as Muslims by making sacrifices—and killing animals during Eid al-Adha is chief among them—to demonstrate our obedience to God. The goat, too, I was told, was sacrificing his life for God. I believed these statements to be true.

In this chapter, I want to think through the inherited reality of animal sacrifice. In the first section, I provide the historical and theological context for Eid al-Adha. I examine the stated intent and purpose behind the ritual slaughter of animals following the culmination of the Hajj, the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, using Qur’anic injunctions regarding Eid al-Adha. In the second section, I analyze my experience of Eid as a child and what those festivals meant to me at the time. My beliefs have changed since the Eids of my childhood, instigated in part by a reexamination of the practices associated with Islam, especially those that inflict suffering on creatures who did not assent to it. As an economist who studies human behavior, I am particularly interested in what causes and prevents people from changing their beliefs. As someone whose beliefs regarding animals have changed such that

I actively try to avoid harming animals, I have struggled to consider that sacrificial goat of my childhood.

In the third section, I explore how the ritual of sacrifice has evolved over time, especially starting in the second half of the twentieth century as modern means of transportation allowed an ever-increasing number of people the opportunity to travel to Mecca in Saudi Arabia to partake in the Hajj and the ritual slaughter of animals that follows its conclusion. In addition, given the dearth of large-scale industrial animal agriculture in Saudi Arabia, I trace the journey sacrificial animals make from various parts of the world to Mecca in order to be killed and what happens to their meat after the killing is over. I also compare how ritual slaughter occurs in South Asia and in diaspora Muslim communities in the West, using the United States as an example. Finally, in the fourth section, I look at Muslims who are exploring alternatives to institutionalized killing of animals while trying to stay true to the spirit of sacrifice and submission to God exhibited by Ibrahim.

EID AL-ADHA AND THE NATURE OF SACRIFICE

Eid al-Adha,¹ or the “Feast of Sacrifice,” is the second of two Muslim religious festivals, the other one being Eid al-Fitr. Where Eid al-Fitr marks the end of the Muslim month of fasting known as Ramadan, Eid al-Adha is the culmination of the Hajj, the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, and falls on the tenth day of the twelfth and final month of the Islamic calendar, Dhu’l-Hijjah or “The Month of the Pilgrimage.” In Pakistan, where I grew up, Eid al-Adha is also known as “Barri Eid” or “Major Eid.” Because the Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar with 354 or 355 days divided into twelve months, the date for Eid al-Adha recedes by approximately ten to eleven days every year according to the Gregorian calendar and thus takes place at different times each year, eventually occurring in every season.

The purpose of Eid al-Adha is to mark Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son. This Abrahamic story is also found in the Bible.² In the biblical version, Isaac is the son to be sacrificed,³ while Muslims generally believe Abraham’s sacrificial son is Ishmael.⁴ Besides this difference and a few other details, both Qur’anic and biblical stories are the same, in essence. Abraham (called Ibrahim in the Qur’an) is commanded by God to sacrifice his son. As he prepares to go ahead with the sacrifice, God stops Abraham and provides him with a ram to be sacrificed in Ishmael’s place.⁵ God’s command to sacrifice his son was a test of Abraham’s faith and of his submission to God’s will. Because he demonstrates his obedience, Abraham is rewarded.⁶ During Eid al-Adha, Muslims are celebrating Abraham and Ishmael’s submission

to God's will as well as Abraham's willingness to make such a momentous sacrifice.

MY EIDS AND ABRAHAM'S STORY

As a child growing up in Pakistan, I heard the story of Abraham and Ishmael repeated every Eid al-Adha. The day would begin with my parents waking me up early in the morning to get ready for the drive to the mosque, about a twenty-minute drive from our house. We would park and walk a short distance to the mosque, passing various animals of all shapes and sizes—rams, sheep, cattle, an occasional camel—tied up in the small yards of the neighboring houses.

At the mosque, we would say our Eid prayers, which were followed by the Eid sermon delivered by the imam. Every year, without fail, the sermon began with the story of Abraham and Ishmael, their submission to God, and their willingness to sacrifice that which is most precious to them—in Abraham's case, his only son, and in Ishmael's case, his very life. Their courage in undertaking this sacrifice was always highlighted as a testament to their faith and their obedience to God. On some occasions, the ram would also be extolled for his sacrifice. The sermon would usually culminate with an exhortation for all of us to be as steadfast in our belief and in our willingness to sacrifice what was precious to us in the name of God. When the sermon was over, we would greet each other and those we knew, wishing them a happy Eid. Then we would make our way back home to prepare for a day spent with friends and family, eating treats such as *kheer* and *gulab jamuns* prepared especially for the occasion and receiving "Eidi," the traditional gift of Eid usually given to children by elder relatives in the form of money. Collecting Eidi was one of the highlights of my youth during both Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha.

The ritual sacrifice of animals is supposed to take place after Eid prayers. Our mosque, however, held Eid prayers later in the day than most other mosques in the city. So by the time the sermon had finished and we had exchanged our holiday wishes, the killing of the animals—the ritual around which Eid al-Adha is centered—had already begun in the neighborhood where the mosque was located.

Most people in Pakistan, and in other parts of South Asia, kill sacrificial animals at home. If a house had a small yard, animals would typically be killed in the adjacent alleys and driveways just outside the gates of the houses. My parents and I had to jump over streams of blood emanating from the houses that lined the streets between our mosque and where our car was parked, a ten-minute walk away. Most of the animals that had been alive as

we arrived at the mosque were dead on our walk back. The few who were still alive had a few more hours of living left to do. We could also hear the cries of those who were being killed in that moment, an unmistakable cacophony of creatures dying that rang in our ears en route to the car.

I remember being upset by this scene when I was first old enough to understand it. I must have been around six or seven years old. My father reminded me that this was all being done for God; he recounted the sermon we had just sat through in which we humans were to make a willing sacrifice. The deaths of the animals were explained away as a necessary act required by God. It is hard to argue with your father, especially when he invokes God and especially given what I had just heard about Abraham and Ishmael.

Unlike most of our neighbors who would acquire animals a few days or weeks before Eid in preparation for the festival day, our family never got an animal. My father explained that it was easier for him to have his cousin in my father's village buy the animals and sacrifice them there. While my father's reasoning made sense, I felt left out of an activity that all my peers in the neighborhood were engaged in—caring for the animals, feeding them, taking them for walks. I remember being envious of my friends who had their own animals, wishing I could have one of my own and not have to explain to everyone I met why we didn't have an animal for Eid al-Adha.

Then one year—I think I was eight years old—I finally got my wish. I came back from school one day, a few days before that year's Eid al-Adha, to find a goat tied up to a tree in our backyard. It was a total surprise because no one had bothered to inform me that this Eid, unlike all past Eids I remembered, we would be getting a goat. The goat was a ram because female goats are not supposed to be sacrificed given the possibility of them being pregnant. He was supposed to be over a year old, and I spent that first afternoon just hanging out with him—petting him, feeding him, trying to get him to head-butt me. He had a dark brown, shiny coat, two small horns, and a wisp of white hair on his forehead. I was overjoyed at having an animal I could take around the neighborhood to show off to my friends. This year, I was going to join in the ritual of sacrifice and not be a mere bystander.

That afternoon, I proudly walked my goat from house to house down the street, showing him off to all my friends in the neighborhood, comparing him with the other animals who were present. Most of our neighbors also had rams of varying sizes and the children would compare their heights and lengths, trying to see who had the longer horns, the bigger tail, and other features. For the next two days, I could not wait for school to be over so I could rush home and spend as much time as possible with my goat. I would take him around to a small plot of land close to our house so he could graze on the grass and bushes that grew there. That was also the spot where the rest of the

neighborhood children would gather with their animals—a small congregation of kids and goats, not unlike being at a modern dog park except for the small matter that all these animals would be dead in a few days.

As someone who did not grow up with animals as “pets,” the goat was the closest thing I had to a companion animal, and I happily delighted in having him around. By the end of my second day of hanging out with my goat, someone—I don’t remember who, either one of my older siblings or one of my parents—gently reminded me of the grim fact that while it was good that I was spending time with the goat, I should not forget that he was going to be killed the day after tomorrow. I, of course, had known that all along. It was not an eventuality I wanted but it seemed like one I was powerless to stop. So I decided to make the most of the short time I had with the goat and spend as much time with him as possible. Around ten o’clock at night my mom dragged me away from him, telling me that the goat needed a rest from me. I asked if I could bring him inside but that suggestion was immediately rejected. The goat was going to stay outside. The next day was more of the same: I rushed back from school and spent every minute with him, save the few I took to eat dinner inside. This was our last day together. By this time, the goat would see me coming and start bleating because he knew I was going to take him for a walk to the grassy patch to munch on things other than the feed he had been given. He would also be able to stretch his legs, set free from the post he was tied to with about ten feet of rope. I cannot really say how much the goat appreciated my company, but I remember being very happy to have him trotting along beside me on our tours of the neighborhood.

Eid morning, I asked my parents if we could keep this goat and get another one to kill. My parents said that was not going to happen and the goat was going to sacrifice his life for God. On our way back from the mosque after Eid prayers, with the story of Abraham’s and Ishmael’s obedience ringing in my ears, all I could think as I dodged the rivulets of blood on the walk back to the car was that my goat was going to be dead soon. When we got home, the butcher hired to do the killing was already there. My father asked if I wanted to go inside so I did not see him die. I refused, wanting to be with him until the end.

The goat’s death was mercifully swift. His legs were tied, he was laid down on the ground, and the butcher said a quick prayer and slit the goat’s throat with a single stroke of the knife. The goat did not scream or bleat, he just shook and kicked his legs as a torrent of blood gushed from the severed carotid arteries. In less than a minute, he was still. In less than ten minutes, he was reduced to a mass of skin, internal organs, and meat. My goat was gone. All that remained was a pile of flesh, some that we would cook and some that we would give away. His skin would be donated to charity and his entrails

would be taken to the dumpster down the road. My father reminded me again of the sacrifice that we, and the goat, were making for God. Somehow it seemed to me that the goat was sacrificing a lot more than whatever cash my father had sacrificed in getting him.

That Eid morning, the one where I got my wish for my own goat, was not among my happier Eid memories. Recollection, of course, is imperfect, and over time all the Eids blended into one another, with particular events standing out, like the killing of my goat. I do remember that I did not cry. The goat was my first experience with death in a personal way. Up to that point in my life, I had not lost someone or something I cared about. As that Eid morning stretched into the day, I felt a growing sense of loss: the loss of a creature I had known for far too short a time, a creature that I had become very attached to and who I would no longer be able to take for walks, nor feed fruits and vegetables, or leaves from the mulberry tree. In retrospect, I imagine I was one of thousands of children my age who were sharing a similar feeling of loss that morning. Unlike the kids in my neighborhood who had gone through this experience a few times, that year was a first for me. My father never got another animal for Eid. I am not really sure why he had decided to bring a goat home that year, but my downcast mood the rest of the morning might have been one reason he decided against it for future Eids, which were mercifully free from deaths in our backyard. Of course, animals were still killed in our name by relatives in my father's village, but there was no blood in our house, the killing being done hundreds of miles away.

WHY GOATS, AND OTHER CREATURES, ARE SACRIFICED TODAY

I have struggled to consider that goat as my thoughts about the ritual killing of animals associated with Eid al-Adha have evolved. My struggle has been both my feelings toward that particular goat as a creature with its own intent and desires who was ritualistically put to death and my unthinking participation and complicity in a ritual to which I paid very little mind but one that was deadly serious for those who bore, and continue to bear, its brunt. It was not a traumatic enough event to cause a dramatic change in my behavior or feelings toward animals at the time, but it was an event that is etched in my mind with great detail. I suspect that long before that particular goat arrived in my life, I had already become inured to the killing of animals, having witnessed it all around me every Eid al-Adha. This killing felt more personal, but that was the only part that really affected me—the fact that it was *my* goat. The goats who died in the neighborhood did not affect me at all, although I imagine children

who had become attached to them likely felt the way I did. This lack of feeling is understandable in the sense that one is hard-pressed to think outside the framework under which one grows up. Melanie Joy defines this framework as “carnism,” which “is the belief system in which eating certain animals is considered ethical and appropriate.”⁷⁷ I certainly did not reconsider the killing of animals, for ritual or food, until much later.

The ghost of that goat stayed quiet in my mind throughout my adolescence and into adulthood. Years later, after I had moved to the United States in pursuit of a graduate degree in economics, I began researching how and why people come to change their belief systems. Over the next years, my own belief system about animals began to change, especially through encounters with a close friend who strove not to use animal products and was deeply invested in interrogating social structures that allowed for the killing of animals. Through our numerous conversations, I came to examine my own beliefs regarding killing animals, something I had not considered before. In examining the issues, I came to realize that the arguments for killing animals seemed, at least to me, mostly a case of special pleading—meaning an act we would generally not do or condone except if we wanted to kill animals for our own purposes, ritualistically or in order to eat them. We would never treat “pets” in the same manner that we treat animals sacrificed for Eid. I had basically supported the use and sacrifice of animals during my life because I had not considered the alternative.

Unlike some people who undergo a powerful moment of conversion, I did not have one blinding instance of moral clarity but rather a slow, growing recognition that I no longer found the justifications—whether they be moral, pragmatic, or theological—for killing animals personally compelling. As such, I decided that I would try to not add to the suffering of animals by eliminating meat from my diet. When I decided to stop eating meat, I was aided in the transition by the fact that I was not deeply wedded to the idea or taste of animal flesh. Another point of support during this dietary change was the fact that I ended up encountering, through my close friend, a number of dogs and cats who became part of my life. I would look after them when my friend was out of town. I fed them, played with them, cared for them, enjoyed their company, and earned their trust in a manner not unlike my time spent with the sacrificial goat. Over the subsequent years, I mourned each of their deaths in a manner that I did not and could not as a child. It crystalized in my mind the connection that these creatures were not all that different from my childhood goat. It also helped that while I did eat meat for the first three decades of my life, it was not a part of every meal growing up. This is worth noting because certain friends of mine who grew up in Pakistan were raised in homes characterized by a common belief that if a meal does not contain

animal meat, it is not a meal, merely a snack. Unlike that view, ours was a meat-light household. And thus, meat eating, while unobjectionable, was not a constituent of my identity, unlike many of my friends. Thus, in some ways, it was easier for me to give up eating meat and transition to a vegetarian diet. But it took me a much longer time to come around to reconsidering the value of the ritual killing of animals, as a constituent part of all my “Barri Eids.”

In the formative days of Islam—the early seventh century—meat was an expensive luxury in Arabia, only afforded by the rich. To be able to share this luxury with the less fortunate was a sacrifice of some significance and its value should not be understated. For some people, the flesh they received from these offerings was their only chance to consume meat for months. Thus, the purpose of the ritual animal slaughter was for the richer members of the community to sacrifice their wealth and share it with the poorer members of society.⁸ While many Muslims consider an Eid al-Adha without animal slaughter to be no Eid at all, ritual slaughter of animals is only incumbent upon those who can afford it.⁹ In Medieval Arabia, few had the means to afford killing an animal and the vast majority were barely subsisting. In the modern world, where hundreds of millions have the means to afford a sheep or a goat, the purpose of killing an animal becomes something entirely removed from the original intent of the ritual.

Saudi Arabia, for instance, lacking indigenous animals to slaughter in the quantities required during Eid al-Adha, imports vast quantities of live animals from other countries. Until recently, the great majority of these animals came from Australia,¹⁰ but recently Saudi Arabia has turned to Somalia for its live animal needs.¹¹ According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), in 2014 Somalia exported over five million live animals to the Arabian Gulf, the vast majority to Saudi Arabia,¹² and more than a million of these are killed in Mecca on Eid al-Adha, immediately following the Hajj.¹³

The modern killing of a million creatures means that there is simply too much meat available in too vast a quantity to be adequately distributed to those in need. Until recently, a significant quantity was disposed of by burying or by burning the flesh of recently killed animals.¹⁴ Slaughter on this scale is a universe away from the ritual killing of animals as envisioned in the Qur’an, both in terms of the scale and of the intent. Whatever the intention and context was in the Qur’an, it was certainly not burying ritually slaughtered animals before they began to rot. Recently, the vast majority of meat is flash frozen and shipped to poor Muslims in Saudi Arabia and around the world.¹⁵ Having curtailed the waste, this practice—slaughter on an industrial scale that undermines the very essence of the act being considered a sacrifice—still seems far removed from Abraham’s intent.

In Pakistan, the majority of slaughter is not centralized in industrial abattoirs as it is in Saudi Arabia. Instead millions of animals are killed during Eid al-Adha much like the goat from my childhood—in the gardens and driveways of homes, on the roads and lanes among houses, and in and around open spaces in residential areas. According to Islamic practice, the meat is supposed to be divided into thirds—one-third for yourself, one-third for your friends and neighbors, and one-third for the poor and less fortunate. In this manner, however, the majority of the meat is shared among those who already have a substantial amount of recently acquired meat in their refrigerators. Pakistan and other poorer Muslim-majority countries lack the infrastructure deployed by Saudi Arabia to process and transport large quantities of meat. Thus, one of the most significant parts of the ritual sacrifice—the portion reserved for the poor and the needy—is undermined by waste and spoilage on a mass scale as meat goes bad in large quantities before it reaches those it could benefit.

In diaspora communities, such as the United States, the whole notion of killing animals as a form of sacrificing something of value to share with those who are less fortunate seems far-fetched. In a society in which meat is so abundant and cheap that a half-pound of beef as a meal can be sold for under five dollars,¹⁶ the killing of a cow for charity is considerably removed from the act envisioned in the Qur'an. The value of meat in Western societies has declined precipitously since the advent of industrial animal agriculture. These days, it is hard to argue that having a cow or a goat killed in the United States comes close to a substantial and valuable sacrifice.

CONSIDERING EID WITHOUT KILLING

Recent years have seen the beginnings of a movement among some Muslims arguing for an end to animal slaughter as part of the ritual of Eid al-Adha. The arguments against the killing of animals are rooted in Islamic texts, citing both the Qur'an and the Hadith, a text that contains the sayings of Prophet Mohammad.¹⁷ Sammer Hakim, one of the cofounders of the Vegan Muslim Initiative, for example, illuminates the global environmental costs of industrial animal agriculture and its consequences, excavating a potent thread of Islamic animal ethics and Islamic environmental care.¹⁸ Others emphasize the growing chasm between the intent of a ritual commemorating Abraham's sacrifice and its modern day practice by hundreds of millions of Muslims every year, arguments that I have articulated earlier.¹⁹ At present, this movement is small and does not have serious theological support behind it. With a few notable exceptions,²⁰ it is mostly composed of diaspora vegan or vegetarian Muslims who are trying to remain faithful in performing the duties and

rituals necessitated by Islam. In the face of criticism from within the Islamic community,²¹ Muslim advocates have managed to carve out a space to start a conversation that highlights the myriad costs of blindly following a ritual without considering its intent and purpose.²²

In order for an alternative proposition to be taken seriously within the larger Muslim community, it will need theological and cultural allies, including Islamic scholars who can argue with greater authority than lay Muslims for modifying a ritual that is so closely identified as one of the pillars of Islamic practice. To be a Muslim means, among other things, celebrating Eid al-Adha. While the communal characteristic is definitely one of the most important aspects of practicing the tradition of Eid al-Adha, the explicit justification for the ritual killing itself is purely theological, and redefining the holiday will require both theological and social reorientation. In diaspora communities, the holiday is primarily a time of communal gathering rather than ritual performance because most Muslims living abroad cannot kill animals in their own yard like they can/could back in their home countries. The ritual killing takes place away from the community, usually at the farms where these animals are raised, away from the urban centers where community members reside. A significant number also send money to their home countries for purchasing animals and having them killed there.²³ The distance between the sacrificial rituals and diaspora Muslim communities could offer a space to redefine Eid al-Adha.

After more than three decades of not seriously considering the deaths of sentient creatures as part of this ritual, I feel some relief to have begun a process of mitigating this oversight. As the advent of Eid al-Adha draws near, a joyous occasion for a billion Muslims, I can no longer ignore its foundation of death and suffering for untold millions of creatures, the total number of which is very hard to track in reliable figures. When I allow myself to remember the goat from my childhood whose life I saw extinguished all those years ago in my garden, I cannot help but consider the millions of animals like him who will soon draw their final breaths. My hope is that a growing number of Muslims start to consider the animal lives that are an integral part of this ritual and how we may reframe its purpose and meaning in a manner that stays true to the spirit of Abraham's and Ishmael's sacrifice—a reframing that allows Eid al-Adha to also be a joyous occasion for all the creatures who no longer have to sacrifice their lives for Eid to have personal value and social meaning.

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