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Slaughtering: Cruel or Humane?

By Amal Sohail

The Islamic slaughter of animals has often been under attack by many animal rights activists in the past. This debate intensifies during the Muslim festive occasion of Eid al Adha. The celebration of Eid ul Adha commemorates the Quranic event when Allah commanded Prophet Ibrahim to sacrifice his son Ismail. Prophet Ibrahim (PBUH) willingly obeyed, which pleased Allah and in the end, his son was replaced with a sheep.

Ever since then, Muslims have celebrated this Feast of Sacrifice that marks commitment, obedience and self-sacrifice. This ritual sparks up controversy not because of sacrificing an animal but because of the way the animal is slaughtered. The Islamic practice of slaughtering an animal is by means of a cut to the throat of the animal using a sharp object such as a knife. Those against this method claim that it is a painful, inhumane and a cruel way to kill an animal. This misconception exists among many non-Muslims and even among some ignorant Muslims.

The picture above titled 'Sacrifice' was published in Khaleej Times last year (January 24, 2004). It shows a camel being slaughtered in a street of Karachi on the occasion of

Eid al Adha.

The newspaper received a lot of criticism from the general public in the opinions section; their protest being that a picture showing brutality towards the camel should not have been published and that the inclusion of such material could affect the credibility of the newspaper. Worried parents expressed their fear that horrifying pictures like this could frighten their children. Some Muslims felt ashamed and were apologetic, justifying to the world how wrongly the camel was being butchered.

Comments like these indicate the need to raise awareness and remove the misconception of animal cruelty of the sacrificial animal in Islam. Whether or not the controversial picture should have been given coverage is a different issue altogether and will be discussed later. Contrary to the accusations, the Islamic method of slaughtering has been proved by science as the most humane way to kill an animal. The law in the West is to stun the animal by a shot to the head before it is slaughtered that supposedly leaves the animal unconscious preventing it from reviving before it is killed. The shot is also used to prevent the animal from feeling pain before it dies.

The results of a research conducted by Professor Wilhelm Schulze and his colleague Dr. Hazim at the School of Veterinary Medicine, Hannover University in Germany may surprise those animal rights activists who wrongly believe that Islam's stance on animal slaughter is inhumane. The study: 'Attempts to Objectify Pain and Consciousness in Conventional (captive bolt pistol stunning) and Ritual (halal, knife) Methods of Slaughtering Sheep and Calves' , prove their accusations false.

In the study, several electrodes were implanted at various points in the skulls of all animals, touching the surface of the brain. The animals were left to recover for a week. Some of them were then slaughtered by making a swift, deep incision with a sharp knife on the neck cutting the jugular veins and the carotid arteries as well as the trachea and esophagus (Islamic method). The rest of them were stunned using a Captive Bolt Pistol (CBP). Electroencephalograph (EEG) and an Electrocardiogram (ECG) were recorded during the experiment. EEG indicated the state of the brain and ECG recorded the condition of the heart of the animals during the process of slaughter and stunning.

The results of the study were as follows:

I – Islamic Method

1. The first three seconds from the time of Islamic slaughter as recorded on the EEG did not show any change from the graph before slaughter, thus indicating that the animal did not feel any pain during or immediately after the incision.
2. For the following 3 seconds, the EEG recorded a condition of deep sleep - unconsciousness. This is due to the large quantity of blood gushing out from the body.
3. After the above-mentioned 6 seconds, the EEG recorded zero level, showing no feeling of pain at all.
4. As the brain message (EEG) dropped to zero level, the heart was still pounding and the body convulsing vigorously (a reflex action of the spinal cord) driving a maximum amount of blood from the body thus resulting in hygienic meat for the consumer.

II - Western method by C.B.P. Stunning

1. The animals were apparently unconscious soon after stunning.
2. EEG showed severe pain immediately after stunning.
3. The hearts of animals stunned by C.B.P. stopped beating earlier as compared to those of the animals slaughtered according to the Islamic method resulting in the retention of more blood in the meat. This in turn is unhygienic for the consumer.

The western style of slaughtering is not only severely painful for the animal as shown in the experiment, but there is also a rising concern that this method of stunning the animal may be the cause of the spread of the mad cow's disease from cattle to humans.

Islamic Regulations for the Slaughter

As seen by the previous study, Islamic slaughtering of the animal is a blessing to both the animals and to humans alike. Several measures have to be taken by the one performing the act in order for the slaughtering to be lawful. This is to ensure the highest benefit to both the consumer and the animal.

In this regard, Prophet Muhammad (SAW) has said: "God calls for mercy in everything, so be merciful when you kill and when you slaughter: sharpen your blade to relieve its pain".

The knife or the object being used to cut its throat should be very sharp and move quickly. The swift cutting of vessels of the neck disconnects the flow of blood to the nerves in the brain that are responsible for pain. The movements and withering of the animal after the cut are not because of pain but due to the contraction and relaxation of the muscles deficient in blood. The Prophet (PBUH) has also taught us not to sharpen the blade of the object in front of the animal, nor to slaughter an animal in front of others of its own kind.

The knife should be moved in such a way that it cuts the windpipe (trachea), gullet (esophagus), and the two jugular veins without cutting the spinal cord. This way blood gushes out rapidly draining most of it from the animal's body. The cutting of the spinal cord can damage the nerve fibers to the heart, leading to cardiac arrest thus resulting in stagnation of blood in the blood vessels. The blood must be drained completely before the head is removed. This way the meat is purified removing most of the blood that acts as a medium for microorganisms. Meat obtained in this manner also remains fresh longer as compared to other methods of slaughtering.

Therefore accusations on animal cruelty should very rightly be focused on those who do not use the Islamic method of slaughtering and prefer ways that cause intense pain and agony to the animal that could also cause harm to those consuming the meat.

Coming back to the comments on the picture of the camel, there is nothing wrong in the method being used by the butcher to slaughter the animal. The large size of the camel makes it difficult to handle so it has to be dealt with in a manner that differs slightly from the one used to slaughter smaller animals like goat, cow, sheep etc. The Islamic ruling on slaughtering a camel is to thrust a knife or any other sharp implement made of iron into the hollow between its neck and chest. It is better that the camel at that time is standing. But if it has knelt down, the knife can be thrust into the hollow of its neck for slaughtering and that's exactly what the butcher is doing.

And as for publishing this so called 'inhumane' picture, those who pity and are scared

may not look at it but they should respect the act as it is a part of the religion. Pictures of this sort should be published more frequently as it provides us with the opportunity to learn more about Islam and help remove ignorance among the people.

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