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# Ritual Animal Sacrifice in Islam

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An act of religious devotion performed by Muslims the world over in the last Islamic month of the year is the ritual animal sacrifice offering. Unlike other religions where it used to be done but is no longer practiced due to changes, in Islam it is a clear act of devotion that is very much a part of the tradition. In Islam, it is different than the way it takes place in pagan societies past and present, or in occult movements. In those other traditions the meat may be left or discarded, or it is done with some nefarious intention. In Islam, ritual animal sacrifice is an expression of God consciousness and faith that has clear regulations.


An example of this act of devotion can be seen in the story of the Messenger Abraham. God showed him a dream in which he was instructed to sacrifice his son, Ishmael. “When Ishmael reached the age to work with him, Abraham said, “O my dear son! I have seen in a dream that I sacrifice you. So tell me what you think.” He replied, “O my dear father! Do as you are commanded. God willing, you will find me steadfast.” [37:102]


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Ishmael was living in Mecca, so Abraham took him to the outskirts to a site named Mina, where millions of pilgrims converge for the annual pilgrimage. There, Satan came to Abraham three times to try to dissuade him from fulfilling God's command, asking how he could sacrifice his own son. Each time, Abraham picked up pebbles and threw them at Satan to ward him off. He knew that these were whisperings of Satan and temptations from him.


Abraham lay Ishmael down, and as he raised his knife, ready to cut, God exchanged Ishmael for a ram. God says, "Then when they submitted 'to God's Will', and Abraham laid him on the side of his forehead 'for sacrifice', We called out to him, "O Abraham! You have already fulfilled the vision." Indeed, this is how We reward the good-doers. That was truly a revealing test. And We ransomed his son with a great sacrifice." [37:103-107]


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As in the story of Abraham, the foundations of ritual animal sacrifice is based on faith and worshipping God exclusively. The sacrificial offering is dedicated to God alone, out of piety and being conscious of God and obeying His commands. As such, the ritual animal offering is offered in God's name. God does not need the animal nor does He benefit from it. We do not leave the meat for God on an altar. Rather, we are encouraged to eat from it and to share it with family, friends and with the poor and needy


Unlike other traditions, where sacrificial offerings were made on altars in churches and temples, Muslims do not offer the ritual animal offering in the mosque. In fact, it is prohibited to do so. The mosque is not a place to have blood and other impurities which inevitably are part of the process. By mentioning God's name at the time of the slaughter, we attest to the fact that animals, a source of food and other benefits for us as humans, are from God's blessings. We only take the life of the animal in accordance with God's instructions and not for play or entertainment. The meat is not to be wasted or trivialized, but should be acknowledged as a favour from God.

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The Messenger Muhammad gave us instructions as to how to perform ritual animal sacrifice. Choose a healthy animal that has no major defects, that is permissible to consume and of the minimum age. Within the permissible animals, sacrificial animals must be one of four types: sheep, goats, cows, or camels. Eligible minimum age of the animal must be met - 6 months for a sheep, 1 year for a goat, 2 years for a cow, five years for a camel. The animal must be alive at the time of slaughter. The animal should be free from major defects such as missing limbs, sickness or emaciation. The act of ritual animal slaughter should be performed by a believer who is skilled and proficient. They should not unduly harm the animal, agitate it or scare it. The process should be swift using a sharp blade, so as to cause minimal pain.


This act of devotion has multiple aspects - the first of which is a financial aspect, as animals are costly to buy, especially cows and camels. Yet a person does so in the way God has commanded. There is a physical aspect as the act of performing ritual animal slaughter requires physical effort. There is also the spiritual aspect, which is to please God even in our everyday needs such as eating.

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Note that there are other reasons apart from the above for Muslims to perform ritual animal slaughter throughout the year other than the sacrificial offering related to the Celebration of Sacrifice. The first reason is to be able to eat meat. All meat must be ritually slaughtered in accordance to Islamic law before consumption. Whether you take the meat of the whole animal or buy some of it from a butcher, or eat some at a restaurant; it must all have been ritually slaughtered in order for it to be lawful to consume. This can be done at any time and for any reason. Another reason to offer a ritual animal offering is for those making the major pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj), wherein it is part of the intended rites. Ritual animal offering is also offered at the time of the birth of a child out of gratitude for the gift from God.

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