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2000: A Sheep Sacrifice

By Whitney Mason

ISTANBUL, Turkey
April, 2000

The Turk I know best is a 22-year-old guy named Serdar Ucel who's become like a little brother to me. We first met the summer I studied Turkish and rowed at Bogazici University, where Serdar learned excellent English and finished a two-year degree in tourism. More than any other young man I can think of, Serdar treasures those luxuries we call "the finer things in life." He loves nothing better than preparing and eating a gourmet meal and washing it down with a good bottle of wine. On returning from a trip to New York, my fiancée Amanda Wilson brought Serdar an encyclopedia of wine that immediately became his most prized possession. Another weakness is expensive cologne. Serdar found the charming old apartment Amanda and I live in and he has his own room in it, in which he and his girlfriend Efsal stay a couple of days a week. As you will have gathered, Serdar, like many young Turks these days, is hardly more Muslim than I am. There is, however, one intriguing exception, which he often told me about: his family's traditional celebration of the Sacrifice Feast, Kurban Bayram.

Held 70 days after the Sugar Feast, Sheker Bayram, which marks the end of the fasting month of Ramazan, Kurban Bayram traditionally revolves around the ritual slaughter of animals, most often sheep. These days an increasing number of urban Turks treat the holiday as a four-day weekend to hop over to Europe or get in some spring skiing. Many more who still stick to the tradition prefer to leave the bloody act itself to professionals. In a way Kurban Bayram is for Serdar and other secular, cell-phone-toting Turks what Christmas and Hanukkah have long been for me and other non-religious inheritors of the Judeo-Christian tradition — a ritual that retains a certain nostalgic attraction despite having been emptied of its religious significance. Yet here is an undeniable difference. People from any background can enjoy exchanging presents, eating chocolates and candy canes, angling for kisses under mistletoe, singing and looking at the sparkling lights along Fifth Avenue. Animal sacrifice is, well, more of an acquired taste.

It amazed and intrigued me to think that this taste had been imparted to my epicurean young friend. I've often seen Serdar practically melting with affection as he cuddles Amari, a naughty cat that he's helped to raise since she found me on the street. I could hardly imagine the same person in some way actually relishing the slaughter of those poster animals of innocence, lambs. For myself, nothing could be more alien. This tradition seemed to me one feature of Turkish life that one definitely had to have been raised in the Muslim tradition, even without much religion, to get involved in. Indeed, for Serdar and probably millions of other young Turks, this annual ritual represents the last custom differentiating themselves from the vast majority of first-world Christians and Jews who never get any closer to the source of their meat than the refrigerated shelves of the grocery store.

With this buildup of curiosity, Amanda and I accept with alacrity when Serdar invites us to celebrate the holiday with his extended family in Eshkishehir, a five-hour bus ride southeast of Istanbul. Serdar and I take an overnight bus together and Amanda, in Europe on business, will follow a day later. Our overheated coach arrives in Eshkishehir at around six on a frosty morning. After rousing ourselves with a couple of little glasses of hot tea in the station, we catch a taxi to a *hamam* (a

traditional public bath), hoping to be further revived by a vigorous scrub and massage. We give up on the idea when we see dozens of men already waiting for a purifying bath before their most important visit of the year to the mosque. As we walk toward the neighborhood where Serdar's parents, grandmother and various aunts, uncles and cousins live within a block of one another, Serdar explains how his family had come to settle there. It seems that when his paternal great-grandfather came from Greece in the population exchange after World War I, the infant republic granted him a large tract of land right in the city center. Realizing that the area was destined to be built up and worrying that traffic would one day make it dangerous for his kids to play outside — obviously a birthright in the eyes of someone raised in a village — he traded his central plot for one in a quiet area a 15-minute walk away. Most people in the new neighborhood were Tatars, a Turkic group from the Crimean Peninsula in the northern Black Sea, many of whom moved to Turkey after it fell to Russia in 1878. Like all the older generation, Serdar's grandfather, Kasap ("Butcher") Yusuf, had spoken Tatar fluently; Serdar's father can still understand it.

Serdar's parents and little sister and I greet one another with kisses on the cheeks, then settle down for a big breakfast, the highlight of which for me is fruit preserves and heavy cream on toast. Though the flat is small for three people, Serdar's maternal grandfather, a career army non-commissioned officer, built it with the solidity



Serdar with his darling niece and my daughter, Amari of a bomb shelter. It's obvious that Serdar's sister Zehra, a cute and self-assured 20-year-old, is best pals with his father Ziya, an energetic and jovial-looking sort who is constantly leaping out of his seat to attend to some chore. His mother Aysel is a gentle woman whose face, sadly, is clenched in a grimace of constant but largely self-imposed worry. After the sleepless night on the bus, eating in the warm room knocks me out and I am led to a waiting bed in a small cubicle divided from the living room by a narrow wall with windows.



Serdar's aunts Shukriye and Melek, his sister Melek and his mother Aysel

Around midday the family wakes me for the first step in the sacrifice: going to the market to choose the sheep. Serdar's family has no car, but his aunt and uncle, successful civil engineers, have driven their Ford Mondeo over from Ankara. We pile into the Ford. Serdar's uncle Kutsi, who seems squeamish about the whole sacrifice business, is driving, while I, as the unrelated guest, sit in the passenger seat. Four others cram in back – Serdar, his dad Ziya, Serdar's friend Akif and his septuagenarian great uncle by marriage, Ali.¹ As we drive, I'm struck by the fact that though Kutsi and Ziya are obviously good friends, they don't call each other by their names. Instead, they call one another "*bacanak*," a title indicating a man married to your wife's sister. The

¹ This seating arrangement particularly struck me because of a story my friend Roberto had told me just the day before in Skopje. The Macedonian Press Center, of which he's deputy director, was hosting a conference of journalists from all over the Balkans and one evening he and four others, including two female Turkish reporters, set out for a restaurant. While Roberto and his Slav and Greek colleagues were agreeing on the need to take two cars, the two Turks had already sat, one on top of the other, in the passenger seat. In Istanbul a taxi acting as a shuttle once charged me for two places when I refused to have another passenger sit in my lap in the passenger seat. Toleration of such cramped conditions seems to represent a similarity between Turks and Koreans and a difference between Turks and Balkan Christians.

use of such titles is practically universal in Turkey. The titles can be used either alone or in combination with a name; a title alone expresses more intimacy than a name without a title. Nothing attests to the Turks' links to the Mongols' descendants in East Asia so poignantly as this preference for titles.

Five minutes from the city center we arrive at Eskişehir's main livestock market, several city blocks covered by pens full of sheep of different sizes and colors. When sheep have been picked and their new owners are taking them away, the animals do what pitiful little they can to resist, squirming, kicking and digging their cloven hooves into the dirt and leaning their weight opposite whatever direction their killers are dragging them. It's tempting to think that they know what's in store for them. It seems more likely, though, that they are reacting to the immediate turn of events, which is being separated from what's left of their flock. Like most animals, including, of course, most humans, the lambs probably loathe change of any sort. When prospective buyers approach them in their pens, they become alarmed; as soon as the threat passes, they go straight back to eating and frolicking.

As we walk around watching these moments of destiny quietly being transacted between the species, it strikes me that wielding the power of life and death represents a rare role-reversal for most of the humans involved. Newspaper headlines these days are dominated by the debate over whether the constitution should be amended to allow 75-year-old Suleyman Demirel, aka "Baba," another five-year term as president. In Turkey, it is a law of nature that party bosses die in harness. The only power in the land that can rein them in is the army, as it does every ten years or so. For ordinary Turks, like those walking around the market, the struggle for power is a battle among titans that they can no more affect than the mortals of Athens could interfere in the squabbles on Olympus. Could it be, I wonder, that for Turks killing sheep is a projection of the harsh paternalism they have always suffered in their still-feudal society? Beyond the Muslim world, animal sacrifice is important in Orthodox Christian countries and, in the form of the bullfight,



Ziya and Kutsi refer to each other as "bacanak," or brother-in-law.

in Spain and its offspring. But has animal sacrifice ever flourished in a culture that wasn't politically authoritarian, where the state treated its citizens like these sheep born and raised to be sacrificed to a remote deity?

As we stand outside one pen where Ziya is taking the measure of some promising-looking animals, my cell phone emits a banal little tune, telling me a message has arrived. It's the phone company itself, wishing me a happy Sacrifice Feast: "Valued subscriber, we celebrate your Bayram and wish you health and happiness, Telsim."

After two hours of inspecting and haggling, Serdar's dad chooses three lambs. From looking at their teeth, he knows they're all one and a half years old — young enough still to be tender. He chooses them, too, for their stockiness, apparent good health and pedigree, which is advertised as being just a notch or two down from the very apex of sheep hierarchy. From an asking price of 85 million *lire*, he bargain them down to 70 million (U.S.\$130).

One is pure white, a merino, a prized breed that's the mainstay of Australian sheep stations. The other two are a mix of karaman, a breed from Konya with long fleece





The sheep offer feeble resistance after they're chosen for sacrifice.



and spots around the eyes, and dalich, a local Eskishehir breed. These sheep, being one and a half, are called "toklu;" lambs up to a year old are "kuzu," a two-year-old is a "sishek," a three-year-old is a "ohvech," and a four-year-old is called a "koch." Their impressive size makes the *koch* the most expensive, Ziya explains, despite their having tougher meat that needs to be cooked for five hours.

We load the sheep on a truck that will follow us home, and drive to Serdar's grandmother's house. Ziya and Serdar lead two of the lambs into the apartment building and downstairs to a storage cellar while the third goes around the corner to Ali's. Forgetting the traditional holiday obeisance of kissing her hand and then touching it to my forehead, I greet the grandmother with a simple kiss on each cheek. Grandma's head is bare as we enter but now that she has guests she covers her head with a scarf. Serdar tells me that his grandmother moved to Eskishehir when she was two from a village then in Romania and now in Bulgaria. "I didn't know anything about it, I was so small," she says with a smile. "But my

parents spoke Romanian." Apparently she has nothing else to say about it: nothing about what her family's "real" ethnicity was, nothing about how her birth in Romania had shaped her destiny, much less bequeathed to her blood feuds with other tribes. Since I've just returned from Kosovo, grandmother's lack of interest contrasts sharply with the Kosovars' endless wrangling over people's "real" ethnicity, as opposed to the one they claim for themselves. Though it shares much in common with Balkan countries, the Turkish Republic has distinguished itself by breaking the spell of blood nationalism, at least for the large majority.²

I pop into the bathroom and in the 15 seconds or so that it takes to do my business, experience four problems that bring home how different this environment is from the one Serdar and I share in Istanbul. First, the toilet seat, the thickness of a newspaper, won't stay up, so I have to prop it with my foot. [Like most older apartments in Turkey, Serdar's grandmother's has one toilet that's just a hole in the ground with foot rests on either side, known as "*à la Turka*," and a western style "*à la Franca*"]

² Yugoslavs, of course, thought that they'd broken the spell, though the wars of the last few years suggest it was only in abeyance. In Turkey, by contrast, it's hard to imagine a revival of blood nationalism except among the most impoverished Kurds for whom it's a pretext for lashing out at an authoritarian state that has neglected the eastern half of the country. According to a survey by the Turkish Foundation for Economic and Social Studies, 35.4% of Turks identify themselves primarily as Muslims, 33.9% as citizens of Turkey, 20.2% as ethnic Turks, and only 1.4% and 1.2% as Kurds and Alevis, respectively. A co-author of the study, Ali Charkoglu of Bogazici University, points out that the Kurdish figure is misleadingly low because the survey was conducted just after the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan when Kurds were worried about an anti-Kurdish backlash.

toilet in the room with the shower and main sink.] Second, a wood stove is roaring in the corner of the room making me, with a much lower tolerance of heat than most Turks, feel like I'm suffocating. Third, there's no stall for the shower; water is standing on the floor, and since I've taken off my shoes at the entrance and forgotten to put on plastic thongs waiting by the bathroom door, my socks are immediately saturated. And finally, in this crowded apartment I'd neglected to lock the door and one of Serdar's aunts, whom I hadn't met yet, walks in on me.

After greeting a collection of Serdar's relatives, Ziya leads the women down to the cellar to look at the lambs. Grandmother carries a henna mixture that she's made that morning and with her hand wipes a bit of it on the lambs' rumps and heads. The women praise Ziya for finding such healthy-looking animals at a good price. Then he shuts the door, turns off the light and leaves the lambs to spend their last afternoon and night.

After a long chat over tea, Serdar, his friend Akif and I set off on a walk around the city center. I tell them that I still can't see the attraction of buying and killing these sheep. Sacrificing a lamb, Serdar explains, has three satisfactions. The first is the pleasure of being able to afford it. The two aunts who are the richest members of the family, one the engineer from Ankara, the other an elementary school teacher, had bought the two animals that were



Serdar and his father Ziya spent two hours finding the right sheep.

now in the cellar. "Next year I plan to buy a lamb for my dad," says Serdar. "He's been killing lambs for other people for years and I know he'd like to have his own."

The second satisfaction is giving something to other people. In the three-day holiday known as Sugar Feast, children are given candy and Muslims pay a "zekat" or contribution. Though officially set at 2.5 percent, in practice people just donate whatever they feel is appropriate to poor people or a charity. In the Sacrifice Bayram, people likewise distribute a portion of the meat — usually a third — to people who can't afford their own sheep.

The third satisfaction, according to Serdar, is a sense of relief at having shed blood for God. As an explanation for the appeal of animal sacrifice this is a tautology: the notion — or pre-notional feeling — that a loving God would be pleased that you had shed other living creature's blood for him, strikes no chord in an outsider like me. In terms of the Koran, the Muslim holy book — as opposed to traditions that anteceded Islam — the basis of the animal-sacrifice tradition is remarkably scant. It derives from one of the very last and shortest verses [or *suras*], "The Heavenly Fountain":

*Surely We have given you Kausar,
Therefore pray to your lord and make a sacrifice.
Surely your enemy is the one who will be without posterity.*

Without a Koran on hand, Akif explains the significance of the verse as he's learned it. People in Medina were teasing Muhammad for not having a son; God told him not to worry, He would give him Kausar [a river in heaven that serves here as a metaphor for heaven itself]. Those who should be sorry, God told him, were the ones trying to humiliate his prophet.

According to the oldest and most liberal school of Muslim law, the Hanafi, to which most Turks subscribe, animal sacrifice is somewhat weaker than a "*fard*," a requirement binding on all believers. According to other schools of law the sacrifice is merely "*sunnah*," a traditional practice based on the behavior of Muhammad and consistent with the Koran but not strongly recommended.

Ideally the person who buys the lamb slaughters it himself. These days many Turks' only connection to their sacrifice is pecuniary: they buy the sheep and take it to a butcher to do the dirty work. Our neighborhood grocer, Oguz, for instance, wrinkles his nose when I ask whether he sacrificed an animal. "I just paid for one that was killed by the city butcher," he says with an expression of distaste. The purchasers' only personal involvement in the sacrifice is to perform two "*rekats*" [rounds of prayer] of appreciation after the slaughter. Serdar's father, though, comes from a long line of butchers and does the whole thing himself, from picking the unlucky animals to carving and dividing the various parts afterward. [In calling the sacrificial sheep "unlucky," I impose my American urbanite view; according to Muslim tradition, by contrast,

being sacrificed honors the animal.] Before slaughtering someone else's sheep, Ziya fulfills the ritual requirement of formally asking the owner permission. The aunts who bought the lambs wouldn't be able to slaughter them anyway, for this is one sacrifice that Muslim women never make.

The next morning Serdar and I rise at 5:40 to pick up Amanda at the bus station. Amanda is exhausted and anyway couldn't bear watching the slaughter so I put her to bed in the apartment of Serdar's aunt and uncle, two floors up from his grandmother's. Then Serdar goes into his grandmother's room, where I'd slept the night before, and picks up a pile of knives wrapped in a newspaper. He and Ziya and I step out into the brisk morning and walk around the block to his cousin's to kill the first lamb. After leading the sheep into the yard, Ziya picks it up and carries it to a hole about half a meter deep that he's dug to catch the blood. Ziya and Serdar then tie three of the lamb's legs together. One is left free, Serdar explains, both for the animal's comfort and so that when it struggles after its throat is cut, its kicking will make the blood flow faster. They then wrap a dishtowel around the animal's eyes and position it with its neck above the hole.

When the crucial moment comes, I see that it isn't a moment at all, but the beginning of a process of dying: Transforming the animal drawing fast, shallow breaths into pieces of what I'd think of as meat takes about half an hour. Because the lamb's neck is thick, cutting its throat requires a sawing motion of several quick strokes. As the



Serdar's family was somber as they prepared for the sacrifice.



Serdar's grandmother weeping as she watches the sacrifice.

blood spurts from the lamb's neck, steaming in the chill air, Bulent, a cousin of Serdar's who is a retired Lt. Colonel from the Air Force, leans over toward me. "It's just like what the Chechens did to that Russian soldier," he says in a voice that strikes me as inappropriately loud in this sacralized situation. Bulent explains that for the past couple of days, Turkey's Show TV has been repeatedly airing footage of Chechen guerrillas decapitating a Russian soldier. The Russians reportedly retaliated by massacring 83 Chechen prisoners.

After its throat is cut, the lamb continues kicking for almost five minutes, until its head has been completely separated from its body. Its flesh continues to shudder even as it's being skinned and quartered. Serdar, meanwhile, performs his grisly specialty: cutting off the horns and carving the white-fleeced skin from the bones of the face and skull.

After Ziya has finished the butchering, he rolls the skin into a bundle to be given to the Turkish Civil Aviation Association — the only group to which Turks are legally allowed to donate the valuable fleece. The government imposed the rule for fear of illegal Islamic organizations making millions from donated skins. The rule isn't entirely effective: Only about half of the skins actually make it to the Civil Aviation Administration. According to a 1999 survey, 72 percent of Turks object to not being allowed to donate the skins to whomever they want.

When we return to the grandmother's apartment,

(right) Ziya and his sister Shukriye, who had bought the lamb, caressed the lamb as they prayed before Ziya cut its throat. (below, left) The sacrificial lamb beginning to die (below, right) Serdar doing his specialty: skinning the head.



Serdar's Aunt Nurten, whom I've already come to know as a joker, answers the door. "Ziya is Hizbullah," she says with a grin. We sit down in the living room, where Serdar and his grandmother had slept the night before, and have a cup of thick Turkish coffee. After ten minutes, Ziya jumps up. "Let's get on with the next ones," he says enthusiastically. While I wait on a low deck overlooking the back yard, Serdar and his dad go down to the cellar to get the first lamb.

Ziya and his aunt Shukriye squat next to the lamb and put their hands on its fleecy flank. While tenderly stroking the lamb, they murmur a prayer in Arabic. Serdar tells me that a remarkable thing about the process is that once the prayer begins, the animal relaxes, as if resigned to its fate.

Serdar's grandmother is standing next to me, looking down at the animal about to die. She lost her husband

four years ago and just a few weeks ago, her older sister. Now she is the eldest member of the family and, in the order of things, probably the next to go. Though in her lifetime she has seen hundreds of animals killed, this time she is crying. "We're just the same," she says quietly. "They end like this and so do we."

Then Ziya saws into the white neck and the lamb begins to die. A couple of times the lamb exhales violently through its severed throat, like a deep, long sneeze. I suppose these exhalations would be its death rattle if its throat were intact. After cutting off the horns and skinning the heads, Serdar prepares the carcasses for skinning. First he cuts a slit between the skin and bone of the leg, then fastens his lips to the opening thus created, and blows air into the space between flesh and skin, as if blowing up a balloon. When the skin is fully inflated he ties off the leg. This part of the operation — requiring lip-to-still-warm-carcass contact — I can't imagine most hard-

ened gang members in the US bringing themselves to perform.

Serdar's Uncle Kutsi and Aunt Melek, the engineers in Ankara, can't bear to look until the lambs are unrecognizable as recently bleating creatures. Their 15-year-old son didn't even bother to come to Eskishehir this year; for this branch of the family, the tradition of animal sacrifice is over. They now share the same delicate aversion to witnessing the bloody source of their meat as the average American — and needless to say, it's not going to add one minute to the average life expectancy of sheep in Anatolia.

Shukriye, on the other hand, looks radiant after witnessing the slaughter of the sheep she'd bought.

"Feel good?" I ask.

"Wonderful!" she says. "I hope the next year will be healthy and prosperous."

"And if not?" I say, teasing about expecting a quid pro quo from God.

"If not..." She trails off with a laugh and shrugs her shoulders.

After a big breakfast with the whole family, the next hours are devoted to butchering and dividing the meat. Serdar's family give a few kilos to some neighbors who couldn't afford a sheep of their own. On a stroll around the neighborhood we see dozens of men lugging buckets of entrails and bloody chunks of meat from house to house. We first hear, then see a young man, called a



Serdar's family visiting the grave of his grandfather.

"davulcu," banging on a big marching-band drum and going from house to house to collect small change for his contribution to the festivities.



A celebratory drummer collects a donation.

The next and final step in the celebrations before everyone devotes themselves to receiving and visiting members of the extended family, is a visit to the cemetery where Serdar's grandfather, Butcher Yusuf, and his parents and sister are buried. Before we leave, grandmother gives Amanda a pretty scarf, which she insists Amanda keep, with which to cover her hair. (Displaying great progress since our first visit to Turkey three years ago in respecting — or at least graciously tolerating — Muslim tradition, Amanda thanks her warmly and utters not a word of objection.) Grandmother wants to come to the cemetery but Serdar's dad is concerned she would feel overwhelmed by the sadness of losing her husband and sister and persuades her to stay home. After a surprisingly brief silent

prayer over the plots, we jump in Kutsi's car and head home.

For the next few days the press is consumed by stories about the misadventures that result from millions of men using tools that are as unfamiliar as they are sharp. Every year over a thousand amateur butchers cut themselves. A butcher in Kayseri cut all the legs off one bull while it was still alive. Condemned in the press, he is now being sought by police. This year officers tried to prevent people from having ceremonies in public places; next year many municipalities will issue Bayram licenses to professional butchers.

These administrative changes reflect the fact that, unlike 20 or 30 years ago, today many Turks aren't any more comfortable with this custom that they've inherited than most Americans would be. Serdar's girlfriend Efsal's extended family, living in a small city on the eastern Black Sea coast, for instance,

haven't had anything do with animal sacrifice since she can remember.

Yet for a shrinking group of young, educated Turks the annual rite of sacrifice retains a strong appeal. "For me, what's special is seeing the whole family together, which only happens once a year, at Bayram," says Serdar, back in Istanbul. "A few years ago we had a Bayram without sheep and I was still happy to see my relatives, just a little sad about not having any sheep. Maybe the reason that killing the sheep feels so special to me is that I know that my great-grandfather and grandfather — and even my dad, for some years — were all butchers and this is the one day each year when I can experience what their lives were like every day."

Bayram made a deep impression on me too, one that I hope will influence every day of my life from now on. Watching the sheep die moved me, belatedly, to make my own difficult sacrifice: no more red meat. □

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