

Letter from Prizren, Kosovo

Tradition Gives Way to Modernity on Kurban Bajram

By Daniel Petrick





Every summer tourists and émigrés fill the streets of Prizren, a city of 180,000 people located at the foot of the Sharr Mountains in southern Kosovo. Pedestrian traffic in the Ottoman-style old town stands shoulder to shoulder, and clubs pulse with bass until the early morning. But on a Sunday morning last August, the city was silent, the streets empty. The typical sounds—car horns, café music, garbage trucks—had disappeared. Only the bleating of sheep emanating from garages, alleyways, backyards, and car trunks broke the silence. Slowly, the bleating too fell away, replaced by axes hacking at ribs and limbs, air pumps used to help peel off the pelt, and wire brushes and water hoses cleaning blood off driveway cement.

It was Kurban Bajram, or Eid Al-Adha in Arabic, the biggest Muslim holiday of the year. Honoring the story of Abraham, the Quran dictates that households with sufficient means have to sacrifice an animal, typically a sheep, and distribute the meat to the poor. According to Elmir Karadži, a Prizren-based researcher of Islamic social sciences and employee of the Islamic Community of Kosovo, the animal one sacrifices must be healthy, well-fed, and uninjured, and slaughtered humanely—with a cloth over its eyes to conceal the approaching knife—in order to minimize suffering.

Though many Prizren residents continue to sacrifice sheep at home and distribute the meat to the poor and elderly in their own neighborhoods, urbanization has made the practice increasingly difficult. Not only is it harder to find a place to butcher the animals, but also, fewer people in the younger generation

know how to properly perform the sacrifice. Increasingly, people in urban spaces like Prizren have started to outsource the duty, paying a 120-euro contribution to the Islamic Community of Kosovo to sacrifice an animal and distribute the meat on their behalf.

For shepherds and farmers who work in the mountains around Prizren this trend is an unwelcome development. For instance, the family livestock businesses of Besim Hoxha and Avdulla “Dulli” Ademaj, who respectively own about 600 and 800 sheep, rely on the annual Kurban Bajram sales. The two men, neighbors from Zhur, a small town between Prizren and the Albanian border, sell their sheep for Kurban for anywhere from 110 to 170 euros and aimed to sell upward of 100 sheep this holiday.

Every summer Dulli herds his sheep into the high pastures of the Sharr Mountains, in the southern tip of Kosovo near the Albanian and Macedonian borders, taking about 1,200 additional sheep with him from other farmers who pay him to fatten their flocks. Once a week he loads hundreds of kilos of cheese onto a horse train and takes it down to the nearest road, with the cheese eventually ending up in outdoor markets around Prizren. Most of Dulli’s annual profit, however, comes from two short spells—the spring sales of young lamb meat and

In the summer Dulli’s sheep graze in the Sharr Mountain pastures in the southern tip of Kosovo. All photos by Daniel Petrick.

the Kurban Bajram sales of full-grown sheep. A reduction in Kurban sales would seriously threaten his business.

Hoxha is in a similar position, but he said that the financial effects of the new trend have not yet hit him. He has noticed that the same break with tradition that has caused fewer people to sacrifice sheep in their own homes has also resulted in fewer people owning sheep. As a result, those who still tperform home sacrifices are more likely to buy sheep from a farmer. So far, the shift has kept his earnings stable.

But Hoxha had other reasons for opposing the new practice: he likes the bonds created when people distribute their own meat within their neighborhoods and families. He finds contributions to the Islamic Community to be sterile and perhaps even suspect. “When you pay someone else to do it, the money goes from hand to hand; who knows where it ends up?” he said.

Since the Islamic Community buys meat en masse, it can purchase larger amounts at a discount and therefore distribute more, according to Karadži, who added that the Islamic Community distributes Kurban meat to *medresas* (Islamic boarding high schools) as well as to some soup kitchens and impoverished people. Poor families can also sign up at the local Islamic Community offices to receive a donation of meat.

But, to the chagrin of Kosovar livestock farmers and butchers, in 2018 the Islamic Community purchased imported meat from Hungary, cutting in on local shepherds’ business. Hoxha is proud of the quality of his livestock and skeptical of the animals the Islamic Community acquires. “Maybe it is from Romania or





Brazil. Maybe you don't know how they treat the animals," he said.

Leading up to the holiday, shepherds bring a part of their flock to two markets on either side of the city. Berat, a shepherd from Zhur, was selling some of his 1,200 sheep on the day before Kurban Bajram. Berat's skin is creased and bronze from spending summers in the mountain pastures. His sweat-drenched knockoff Gucci cap shielded him from the worst of the sun that day; it seemed Prizren's citizens were not willing to come out to the market in the heat. "We all complain," Berat said, "but by the end of the day there won't be any sheep left." Berat sells upward of 120 sheep and, even after subtracting expenses, this amounts to a €5,000–6,000 profit—a significant portion of his yearly income. "Without Kurban Bajram, none of us would be doing this," Berat said. "There wouldn't be enough profit."



Top left: A hired butcher works on Kurban Bajram.

Bottom left: Shepherds from all over the area bring their sheep into the city in the days before the holiday.

Top right: After sacrificing a sheep at home, Hysni Berisha takes two bags of meat to friends in need.

Bottom right: Mahir Colpan explains the butchering process to a younger family member.

On the other side of town, a man named Nehiri was trying to sell off his father's two dozen remaining sheep. According to Nehiri, the prospects in the sheep business are grim, so when his father died a few years ago he decided to wind down the large family sheep operation and start a milking plant. "Every year there are more and more sheep left over at the end of the day, more and more people who don't know how to butcher," Nehiri said. "You'll see—in five years, none of us will be here selling sheep for Bajram." He attributes the decline in sheep sales to the increasing number of people outsourcing their Kurban Bajram duties. The bleak future of the sheep business didn't stop Nehiri from sharing his advice on how to raise sheep with high-quality meat. He suggested a special 45-day diet. "My secret is sprinkling Vegeta [a Croatian spice mix adored across former Yugoslavia] into their feed," he said.

Muhamet, who runs a small dried-fruit factory, and his nephew were hanging around near Nehiri's stall and invited me to their home during the sacrifice. Because their family finances were good this year, Muhamet and his brother Erhan decided to sacrifice two sheep. They donated one to a local soup kitchen and would share the other with less fortunate friends and neighbors.

Though tradition dictates that sacrifices be performed right after dawn prayer, some families who don't know how to butcher, or prefer not to, must wait until the late morning or afternoon for a hired butcher. At Muhamet's house, a hired butcher worked swiftly. How many sheep would he sacrifice and butcher during the holiday? "I'll be going all day and all night, all day and all night," he said.

Top left: The butcher ties a cloth around the eyes of a sheep to shield the view of the approaching knife as Erhan reads a prayer.

Bottom left: The overflow crowd for the dawn prayer at the Sinan Pasha Mosque spills out into the front courtyard.

Top right: Muteza Xhemal cuts the throat of one of the approximately 50 sheep he expects to butcher by the end of the day.

Bottom right: A butcher peels the sheep skin off carefully so that it can be donated to the Islamic Community, which then sells the skins to leather goods producers. Sheep skins pile up outside of mosques all over the city throughout the day before they are collected.





Hiring butchers to perform home sacrifices is a way for families to respect tradition even if they have forgotten the prayers and procedures for a proper ritual. The fact that there aren't enough butchers to go around is an opportunity for some shepherds with smaller flocks to supplement their income. Muteza Xhemal sold a few of his 250 sheep in the days before Kurban Bajram and then tore around the city on the day of the holiday, his phone ringing constantly, butchering sheep for people in garages, in backyards, and on porches. Making 10 to 15 euros per house, he expected to sacrifice almost 50 sheep by the end of the day, a nice day's wage in a country where the average monthly income is less than 500 euros.

Dudak Colpan, who was sacrificing a sheep in the family garage with his son and cousin, spoke diplomatically about the superiority of the old tradition. He said that it is "okay" to donate, but that sacrificing at home really is better, if you can.

Bertan, a shepherd with 1,000 sheep that he grazes just down the mountain from Dulli's pastures, used stronger language. For him, the tradition is more than a Quranic dictate; it builds community and "the well-being of the house." It is necessary for a man of the house to spill blood. Bertan sent a warning to the people of Prizren: "if you don't sacrifice at home; if you contribute to the Islamic Community instead, maybe it won't take, it won't count." ■

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Top left: Erhan washes away the pools of blood into a drain as his son and neighborhood children watch on.

Top right: Enver Ademaj worked as a shepherd for 40 years on Koritnik, the mountain in the background.

Bottom: A young girl leaves a family party to watch the butchering.