

(selected essay from the book "Shepherds and the Slaughterhouse" by Simon Chang)

## Inside the slaughterhouse's rehearsal the seasoned driver lacerates / Submerged in this pool of blood, reason suffocates



Akre, Kurdistan, Iraq 2019 © Simon Chang

*"And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music."*

— Friedrich Nietzsche

A mournful howl emerged from behind the high wall. Even from afar, the flustered struggle's final dogged attempt to resist was apparent. A broom rustled against the ground, brushing away any possible evidence. Butchers, clad in high rubber boots and thick plastic aprons, maintained their trays of razor-sharp knives and frantic footsteps as they jerked their heads around to shout for their apprentices to follow close behind. These unusual sounds accentuated the anxiety and tension that hung thick in the air, leaving me wholly unprepared for the scenes I was about to witness...

Like famished beasts casting gray shadows in the dark of night, the concrete structures of the slaughterhouse curled itself lazily at the gloomy foot of the mountains in Simele, a small town in the suburbs of Duhok. Immediately behind the mountains stood the shepherds market I had visited earlier. After the market closed, livestock marked for slaughter were herded into the holding area of the slaughterhouse. The Duhok Municipal Slaughterhouse, completed in 2007, was the most advanced halal slaughterhouse in Iraqi Kurdistan. A large portrait of Kurdish hero Mustafa Barzani hung in the facility manager's office. The layer of dust on the frame made it seem as if Barzani was still imprisoned in the battlefield, still under blistering attack by the Iraqi government. In the staff lounge on one side, two young men laid casually across the middle of the worn sofa, their gazes glued to the gameplay on their mobile screens, their rubber footwear strewn aside. A 2007 and a 2015 calendar hang

on the wall. The 2007 one is a faded freeze-frame of time, featuring a stocky bull and an innocent-looking herd of sheep. 2015 shows a group of Peshmerga soldiers donned in full military gear in front of a Kurdish flag; a diagram of the Kurdish map was superimposed onto the photo. This is the outline of what Kurds see as their “Motherland”—a mountainous region that spans the borders of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, a shape that closely resembles a revolver cinched around the mountain ridges that ran along these borders.

The slaughterhouse has extra high ceilings, its white walls speckled by the passage of time. Sky blue tiles, neatly embedded directly at eye level, ran along the wall from the entrance into the processing area of the slaughterhouse. It was almost a thoughtful reminder for the workers, a clear marking of the winding esophagus and feeding tube for this behemoth. Cool white LED bulbs highlighted the cream-colored floor tiles and gray cables twisted along the metal meat rail suspended from the ceiling, both bearing the textures of unusual composure and indifference. This seemed to be a deliberate juxtaposition to the passionate and vivacious image of Kurdistan which existed outside of the slaughterhouse. Continuous clangs of metal tools and crashing chains drifted from the end of the long hallway, the low rumbling of the meat rail was the gnashing of the beast’s fangs as it readied to devour its prey. “Baa... baa, baa, baa...” I couldn’t tell if the bleating belonged to sheep or goats, but the apprehensive and panicked echoes indicated a significant number of them. And inside this slaughterhouse that was about to operate late into the night, the grimy air hung thick.

Sounds from the final struggles of life prior to its termination and the butchers’ joking laughter jostled bizarrely with one other.

As I moved towards the cacophony, I started to see blood splatters on the walls in varying shades and sizes, and pieces of wool littering the floor, quite like the aftermath of a session by Jackson Pollock, the abstract expressionist artist famous for his splatter paintings. Discarded hooves and muddy prints left behind by rubber work boots covered the space. The slaughtering behind the high wall had already commenced, and it was only then that I became aware I stood in a pool of blood that expanded like high tide during a full moon. Sprays of blood officially marked the raging buildup to a brutal battle. I didn’t have any time to wipe either the camera lens or my face clean of blood before the young butchers forcefully dragged the sheep from the holding pen into the slaughtering area approximately the size of a basketball half court; the animals were spray painted with blue dots, red lines, or green circles. The sheep immediately sensed the murderous strangeness that chilled the air; a few hysterical rams jumped onto the back of the others. Hooves, as limp with fear as my own feet, skidded on the bloodstained floor tiles as they attempted to regain their balance in the geysers of blood that gushed around them. With clenched teeth and veins bulging from their neck, the butcher’s assistants focused their bloodshot, hawk-like eyes as they hoisted up one sheep leg after another from the horde and affixed them into the paperclip-shaped mortise on the overhead rail. The ascending steel bars slowly lifted the befuddled sheep, each suspended head down by a single leg, into the air and then dragged them one by one into the slaughtering area on the automatic track. I only see the gentle-looking butcher—his eyes as deep as lakes—sharpening his blade. As Aiyad wiped away the sweat beads on his face, he pierced into a sheep neck with no hesitation. The veteran butcher said, “According to what the Koran teaches on halal slaughtering, a sharp knife must be used to pierce the animal’s neck and lacerate the jugular vein, esophagus, and windpipe without harming the spine. ‘Bismillah, Allahu Akbar’<sup>1</sup> must be chanted throughout the entire process. The animal should die immediately and all blood must be naturally drained within 30 seconds. This is the most humane way...”

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<sup>1</sup> In the name of God, God is great.

Within the sheep's line of sight, I saw my own lifeless gaze mired in the bloody river flowing through the slaughtering area. Amidst the bloody chaos that washed over my consciousness, "humane" was definitely the furthest term from my mind.

Aiyad was remarkably composed, his face bore a similar charm to the flock of sheep, the latter of which could not suppress their curiosity to peek inside. Yet, neither the butcher nor the sheep bore any expression on their visages. Without uttering a sound, he waited quietly at the corner and signaled to his assistants with mere glances. His right hand held the knife tightly in a reverse grip as blood dripped from his palm. His left arm reached out to jerk the oncoming sheep's neck close before he thrust the fine tip of the knife into the soft under chin as the animal flailed for its life. With a flick of his wrist, he pulled upwards sharply with the deft movements of a seasoned driver who knew the roads like the back of his hand as he changed gears. A malfunctioning faucet, the severed neck was unstaunchable; warm blood gushed out, burgundy and still emanating a light steam, spraying all around in its terrible rhythm from the rows of convulsing bodies. Every so often, Aiyad would pause the throat-slitting to furiously sharpen his blade. With a lunge, he leaned forward towards the upside-down sheep to chop off its head in one swift move. A handcart sat in the corner of the area, long overflowing with sheep heads and the many blank stares that could not shut in time, altogether piled high into a hill of horns.

Broken bodies, with misplaced heads or limbs, were determined to not go down without a fight. One waterfall after another of fresh blood guzzled out, as if a thorough cleansing of blood was the flock's concerted calling before their final release. Bloodstained proof of this covert mission was evident on my pant legs and jacket. From beside the door, the flock's incessant cries seemed as if they were calling out for their shepherd, begging for him to plead mercy from the butcher. At this moment, the shrill "hiss-hiss" of the electrical valve went off in the slaughtering area and the sheep's cries morosely dissipated in that space where only red remained. Through a cut in the sheep's leg the assistants quickly pumped air into the carcasses. Blood nearly drained and heads removed, the bodies bulged up like leather balls, allowing the butcher, who stood on the tall platform, to readily rid each sheep of their skin.

The rest of the upside-down flock were brought in front of the butcher in quick succession. Suddenly, I was overwhelmed by regret at my decision to explore a slaughterhouse simply to satiate my curiosity.

After a laborious bout of cleaning, I was finally able to rid the soles of my shoes of the mud and sheep dung collected earlier at the nearby shepherds market. But they quickly became gummy with blood, perhaps blood from the very same flock which expelled the feces that I had also stepped in merely hours before... From the corner, I watched as Aiyad rewound and repeated his machine-like rhythm, carefully observing him as he closely followed the rigid halal slaughtering procedures as stipulated in the Koran. Two reoccurring words in the Koran, *halal* (حلال), translated as "permissible", and *haram* (حرام), translated as "forbidden", embody the juxtaposition of Islamic doctrine and ideology. For example, livestock must be treated well, must be delivered to the slaughterhouse early, and must be protected from injuries during the transport process. Animals are killed individually and cannot bear witness to the slaughtering of fellow animals. To ensure livestock hygiene, the animal's hair and skin must be clean and free of feces, dust, or other impure substance. Knives cannot be sharpened in front of the livestock prior to slaughter, blood must be drained from veins, and so forth. Other rules include strictly forbidding the consumption of animal blood and carrion.

On the eve of the Feast of Sacrifice (Eid al-Adha), the butchers at this halal slaughterhouse work until dawn. Although they may not have observed every single rule in the Koran, I felt strongly that halal slaughter was more than simply killing for food—it was the manifestation of the local people’s profound and pious faith, their obedience to what is halal (حلال) and their avoidance of what is haram (حرام). The emphasis on intangible guidelines for slaughterhouses within the Muslim faith far exceed the modern inspection standards for even local veterinarians.

However, these complex commandments were decreed by prophets; it is a set of rules imposed on “a certain group” by “a certain person” and the sheep flock were not invited to take part in the decision-making process. If we take the sheep’s perspective towards such a cruel sensory stimulation, I will always side with the flock to mount a rebellion with no hesitation. If you observe their eyes, you will discover these mild-mannered herbivores have always been prey within Nature’s food chain. This is precisely why they must be perpetually observant and on high alert. Their pupils have evolved to be horizontally elongated—a flat, narrow pupil gives the flock a broad perspective and dynamic vision that serves as a natural means of protection. Studies further indicate that goats can differentiate between joyful or painful emotions in the noises emitted by their fellow sheep. In other words, sheep and goats have the ability to experience one another’s emotions. Through their wide-angled panoramic view of the world, one can only imagine the terrifying scenes they had to witness in the topsy-turvy slaughterhouse before being engulfed by absolute darkness.

Humans have the capacity to observe the emotions of other animals or other “people” and also the capacity to articulate these emotions. Humans also possess the capacity to reflect on their motivations or contemplate the causality or consequences of a particular decision—this is the critical difference between human beings and other organisms. Yet, when practiced, innate reason and emotions are actually highly selective. In this piece of land infested with gunfire, watching the slaughtering process up close teleported me to the scene of an absurd nightmare. The bloody river before me, is it not a mirrored reflection of the elements of violence that lay coiled within the dark depths of human nature? If we reference the oppressive and bloodstained Kurdish history, humans don’t just kill animals to whet their appetite, the violence that runs rampant in our blood and genes has never relented in justifying attacks on the “other.” Yesterday afternoon in a downtown café, a group of Assyrian youth from the suburbs of Duhok spoke to me about the time they fought ISIS while in alliance with American troops. The boys turned their smartphone screens towards me, showing me a picture taken in Telskuf, a Christian district in northern Mosul, of the beheading of ISIS radicals after an intense battle with ISIL in 2016. When I caught a glance of the photo, the contents of which seemed jarringly out of place in a café, the fear rattled my core remains fresh in my mind to this day. Every Kurd will remember the end of the Iran-Iraq War from 1986 to 1989. The Iraqi government carried out the Anfal genocide on Kurds in northern Iraq who refused to undergo Arabization; the campaign killed close to 20,000 individuals. On March 16, 1988, Saddam Hussein used chemical attacks on Kurds affiliated with Iran in northeastern Iraq in what was known as the Halabja Massacre; more than 5,000 Kurds were killed in their sleep. Across the border, the nationalist resistance gained power after the establishment of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey. This radical organization carried out a tireless guerrilla campaign that has lasted for almost 35 years and the continuous conflict has taken more than 40,000 lives; more than 10,000 perished in skirmishes between Kurdish troops and ISIS. The aforementioned numbers are merely a drop in the ocean. If we attempt to calculate in greater detail, we may only begin to get a better understanding once we pull a few all-nighters, just like these butchers are doing...

The carnage outside of the slaughterhouse continues. The hunger for violence is like an incurable infectious disease. Effortlessly, that cruel killing escaped over the slaughterhouse's low fence and seeped insolently into the streets and markets of everyday life. I was struck by a sudden illusion—the slaughterhouse warm-up was only a rehearsal, merely a hypothetical simulation, in order to gain a landslide victory in that even madder, even more mammoth slaughterhouse outside of the slaughterhouse. At least the halal slaughterhouse heeded the prophets by killing livestock with a single cut through the windpipe after adequately helping to process its emotions. Yet, there are no rules to follow in the real battlefield; it oftentimes exceeds the boundaries of the butchers' playbook, making the cruelty within the slaughterhouse seem compassionate or even caring in comparison.

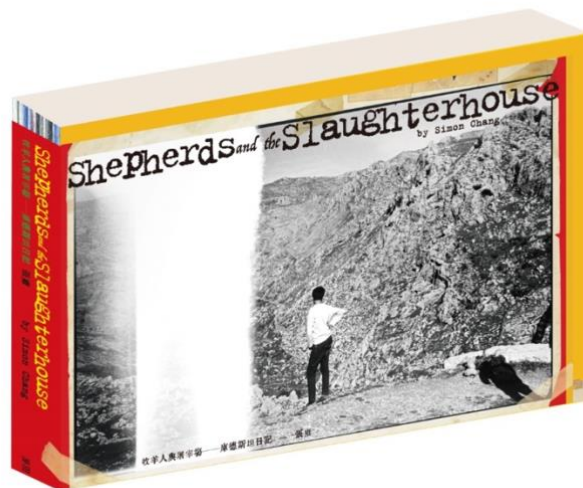
I deliberately avoided the slaughtering of cows—repulsed by the noises and the hysterical impact that accompanies the killing of large livestock. Young movers busied themselves during their break by playing PUBG (Player Unknown's Battleground), an online game that was sweeping the region, in the staff lounge next to the calendar featuring the Peshmerga in full military gear alongside the Kurdistan flag. All eyes were glued to their screens as they battled to the bitter end with players from around the world, whether they were the boys in downtown Duhok, in the refugee camps in the suburbs, or at the slaughterhouse. In this online shooting game with hyper realistic characters and scene design, players can earn a certain number of battle points at the end of every round according to their survival time and their rival's casualty and fatality numbers. These battle points can be used to purchase gear or weapons to change a character's appearance. For the life of me, I simply cannot conjure up another game that is more apropos for a slaughterhouse setting than PUBG...

The Koran doesn't seem to mention if virtual battlefields are halal or haram. The clacking of submachine guns and post-grenade explosion screams coming from a few cellphones drifted into one ear. Into the other ear drifted the lowing of cows before the sound suddenly escalated into high-pitched moans more mournful than the cries of the sheep. The frequency at which the butchers sharpened their knives echoed death's countdown.

Humans continued to feed into the stomach of this giant gray beast the sacrificial blood used at the altar of the god of violence, and the peeled sheep skin, cowhide, horns, and hooves followed... Two temporary laborers who had fled the ISIL genocide of Yazidis in the Sinjar Mountains assisted the slaughtering with stony expressions on their faces. Blood still draining, they pushed the cows forward and washed down the blood-soaked walls and tiled-floors. The two men's scrawny figures resembled two ants struggling before a collapsed dam; no matter how vigorously they rinsed and scrubbed, that dark bloody red lingered in the line of sight of those that still lived and of those that had passed.

Seeing how every family I met during my time here had endured loss, exile, or captivity of some form, I thought the Kurds, who had endured generational suffering, would be particularly cautious in the face of violence or bloodshed. Yet, both at the shepherds market and at the slaughterhouse, the fistfights and the carnage did not appear gory or violent to the locals; perhaps acquiescence had already settled in. Was it an overreaction on my part, or were these scenes all too numbingly familiar to the Kurds? Had survival from inevitable violence become an undeniable way of life? Maybe it is merely a means to adhere faithfully to their religion's commandments... Or maybe, much like how evolution has given sheep flat, narrow pupils to evade predators, the violence that derives from survival instinct is stubbornly buried within the most ancient of genes. Their necessity is undoubtable, yet one wonders if unfettered violence will eventually cause humans to wreck devastation upon ourselves?

In that slaughterhouse in Kurdistan, my bewildered mind seemed to have long detached from my body; I could only stare, with wide open eyes, as my understanding of the world and my feet suffocate under the surface of this tumultuous pool of blood, slowly and incessantly...



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