

## Halal Hysteria

by Karima Hamdan

There has been a great deal of white noise regarding halal meat slaughter bandied around in the media lately. The story usually revolves around how halal (and by definition kosher...but this is hardly ever mentioned with any vigour) is barbaric and cruel because the animal remains "unstunned" until death, unlike modern slaughter techniques in which the animal is stunned.

Sometimes this may be coupled with an exposé of some unlikely place; like Wembley Stadium or Ascot Racecourse, serving halal meat on the menu that permits the insinuation that it is all due to spineless Guardian reading liberals who capitulated in accepting this mindless barbarism in an idealistic desire to appear inclusive.

Whether it is articles like this Daily Mail story about a reporter who went undercover to film a halal abattoir in Birmingham or Johann Hari writing about "The religious excuse for barbarity" in The Independent, the literary style is the same – an emotively written piece that resembles an airport bookshop pot-boiler rather than a balanced piece of journalism. Bucket loads of hyperbole about throats hacked open, screaming lambs and spurting blood cover over the real science, with the only references being to organisations openly against halal and kosher slaughter. And when these cannot be found, Hari manages to quote some impressive sounding facts without mention of the source or if they were validated observations having been published in a peer reviewed scientific journal, leaving the reader with the vague impression that some white-coated boffins have agreed these facts and that the rhetoric presented is entirely factual.

So in truth these articles amount to nothing more than a hysterical scare story and, to quote Shakespeare, are *"a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"*.

Leaving aside any references to what Muslims and Jews say about halal and kosher slaughter (which has been dismissed by Johann Hari as *"pseudoscience: the intelligent design of animal welfare"*), there is in fact a significant body of independent scientific evidence that seems to have been conveniently ignored which shows that at the very least the alleged humaneness of stunning is a very grey issue indeed.

So that the readers of UmmahPulse do not fall foul of these scare tactics it is important to clarify the real facts about stunning. In the UK today three different methods are used according to the animal being slaughtered:

- The captive bolt pistol (used for cows/cattle)
- Electric stunning (used for sheep)
- Electrified water bath (used for poultry)

### **Captive Bolt Pistol Stunning**

The captive bolt pistol, used widely in the UK's cattle abattoirs, gives the animal a blow to the head causing percussive stunning without

penetrating the skin with unconsciousness resulting from direct brain injury.

Concerns about this type of stunning reach as far back as 1974 when carried out at Hanover University in Germany by Professor Wilhelm Schulze comparing EEG (brain wave) and ECG (heart beat) recordings from cattle and calves slaughtered either by the modern "captive bolt pistol stunning" method or traditional non-stunned halal slaughter with a sharp knife were published[1].

The results demonstrated that non-stunned halal slaughtering was associated with no evidence of pain from the time immediately after slaughter until loss of consciousness several seconds after. Blood continued to be pumped from the body after loss of consciousness due to spinal reflexes. In contrast, animals that were first stunned with the captive bolt pistol may have appeared unconscious but EEG readings revealed readings consistent with pain perception.

This research was cited in the German Federal Constitutional Courts on the 15th January 2002 when a previous ban on halal slaughter was overturned. Furthermore, research carried out at the Texas A&M University showed that captive bolt pistol stunning of animals prior to slaughter in fact forced brain material into the blood stream which posed a significant risk to the spread of BSE (Mad Cow Disease). This work has been reproduced by a team at Bristol University in 1999[2].

It is interesting to note that although the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) had banned the use of captive bolt pistol stunning since 2004 due to the risk of BSE, the situation in the UK during this period was:

*"... in the UK, despite the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food (MAFF - now known as DEFRA) findings that the captive-bolt stun gun can indeed help spread BSE, no similar ban to that of the USDA has been imposed. The Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) stated in a recent report (June 2003): 'The potential loss of this tool without a suitable substitute would present a major animal welfare challenge.' They make no comment about the challenge this presents to human welfare."*

It is interesting to note the Farm Animal Welfare Council which refuses to place the health risk that captive bolt pistol stunning poses to humans above the alleged welfare of cattle has also been particularly vocal in its opposition to halal slaughter.

### **Electrical Stunning in Sheep**

The UK's Meat Hygiene Service found that whilst some abattoirs use captive bolt pistol stunning on sheep, the majority of sheep slaughtered are first shocked with electrical tongs delivering an approximate 1.2amp shock. This technique also has its problems: A scientific paper published in the British Veterinary Journal[3] in 1984 showed that there was a significant problem with "mis-stuns" that only delivered a painful partial shock rather than the usual full charge.

In addition there was also the issue of what actually occurs after the sheep is stunned. Current scientific evidence suggests that insensibility to pain occurs when brain wave activity "flatlines" (an isoelectric EEG pattern). In halal slaughter it takes 13 seconds for sheep's brains to flatline and interestingly there is no actual change of the EEG patterns during these 13 seconds compared to before the throat was cut, which caused the author to postulate that the actual loss of the pain reaction occurred within 4 seconds[1].

In contrast, the animal that is stunned before slaughter has EEG patterns resembling a type of seizure that if it were to occur in humans is called a "grand mal" epileptic seizure. This epileptic fit lasts for between 25-32 seconds, depending on the length of the initial electrical shock. The whole premise of stunned slaughter is based around the idea that during an epileptic fit the animal cannot feel pain, so rendering the slaughter "humane" if it occurs during this seizure activity.

However, the average time between stunning and commencing the act of slaughter is 21 seconds[3], and under UK law only one carotid artery needs to be severed, in which case death occurs at about 70 seconds. Hence, if the throat is cut within the average 21 seconds after stunning, the sheep will regain consciousness for approximately 1 minute before it bleeds to death – usually when it is hanging upside down waiting to be skinned. It is rather sickening to note that because skinning usually starts about 20 seconds after slaughter, there will be a significant number of animals which will literally be skinned alive.

In comparing this with halal slaughter, where both carotid arteries and both jugular veins have to be severed causing brain unresponsiveness within 13 seconds (but is postulated to perhaps start at 4 seconds) - which now is the most humane?

Whilst we are recovering from the mental image of a sheep being skinned alive after recovering from its stun-induced epileptic fit we should ponder on an even more basic question. Does the stun actually cause non-responsiveness? Research carried out at Bristol University showed that whilst the electrical stun probably causes analgesia, the sheep will have significant periods of responsiveness when it is aware of its surroundings – and so it is not unconscious but probably spends the last minutes of life experiencing extreme stress[5, 6]. Contrast this with halal slaughter where our blessed Prophet (sallallahu alaihi wasallam) forbade that the animal should be stressed in any way before the slaughter so that even the knife should be hidden from view until the very last moment and that we should "**Fear God in the treatment of animals.**" (Abu Dawud)

### **Electrified Water Bath for Poultry**

The preferred method of stun slaughtering poultry is by shackling their legs and stunning by passing them head first, upside down through an electrified water bath, before being passed through an automatic neck cutter before entering a scalding tank. Leaving aside the obvious reaction

when hearing about how stun-slaughtered poultry spend their last moments, there are several issues that need to be explored.

The first is the body of evidence that show the electrical water bath doesn't actually stun the bird – sometimes because the bird moves its head and so avoids the bath, sometimes due to the variation in weight, fat content, amount of feathers, brain resistance, and sometimes due to "under-stunning" where an abattoir decreases the voltage of the bath to avoid the situation where the bird starts fitting so severely that it breaks its bones[7].

Even if the bird does get the optimal electrical shock, the brain wave pattern produced resembles that of a "petit mal" epileptic seizure in humans which does not cause unconsciousness (low frequency poly-spike EEG pattern)[7]. This practically means that if a bird is not unconscious after the electrified water bath it will have its neck cut by a mechanical knife whilst fully conscious.

An even more disturbing scenario is that some conscious birds also manage to avoid the mechanical knife. Hence if they are not identified by the slaughter-man acting as the system back-up (not an unusual occurrence as in a typical abattoir he has 150 birds whizzing by him upside down every minute), it will enter the scalding tank fully alive and conscious.

Coupled with these issues are also the same issues as with sheep stunning – namely the time it takes between the stunning and actual slaughter. Needless to say there is significant research demonstrating that around 10% of stunned birds will have regained consciousness when entering the scalding tank due to the lag time between stunning and dying due to only having one carotid artery severed[8].

## **In Conclusion**

With such a body of scientific evidence lending weight to the fact that stunning before slaughter is not humane, one wonders why it is that this has not featured in the halal/kosher debate up until now. It is also interesting to read the remarks of the non-Muslim scientists that published some of these papers, with Professor Wilhelm Schulze concluding back in the 1970s that:

*"the Islamic way of slaughtering is the most humane method of slaughter and that captive bolt stunning, practiced in the West, causes severe pain to the animal."*[1]

...and Dr Freeman Boyd concluding in his 1994 paper that:

*"It is interesting to ask why, if this method of slaughter can render an animal unconscious immediately, it is treated as an exemption to the requirement of humane slaughter - that is, available only to those of Jewish or Islamic faith? It can be argued that despite its status as an exemption to humane slaughter, complete severance of the jugular veins*

*and carotid arteries is a humane method of slaughter for poultry, where blood loss to the brain quickly results in loss of brain function."*[7]

Where are these voices in the debate about halal? Unfortunately, they are not heard. Instead, all we hear is the constant accusation that halal/kosher slaughter is barbaric, with precious little scientific evidence used to back up this claim. Anyone trying to raise their head above the parapet risks putting their lives and the lives of their family into danger as Sajjad Karim, a courageous Muslim MEP from Lancashire, has found out when he received death threats for opposing new European Parliament proposals for compulsory labelling of stun-free halal meat.

It is interesting that this is not the first time attempts have been made in Europe to ban halal/kosher slaughter. It is sobering to note that one of the first enactments of the Nazi Party in 1933 was a ban on kosher slaughtering as they considered it barbaric and cruel as well. One of the most poisonous Nazi propaganda films at the time *Der ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew) showed a complete distortion of kosher slaughter and instead showed Jews torturing animals to death for their own pleasure. Considering the current level of rhetoric about halal slaughter present in the UK media I wonder how long it will be before the lies told about halal slaughter are immortalised in film.

One fact that is made over and over again in papers is that halal and kosher slaughter is medieval and should be replaced by modern techniques. This to me demonstrates a truly sickening level of arrogance on the part of papers like *The Daily Mail* and journalists like Johann Hari, where they assume that they have achieved a more enlightened level of morality and of concern for animal welfare by pushing a trolley absent-mindedly around Tesco compared with generation upon generation of devoted Jewish and Muslim worshippers who until this last generation would spend a great part of their everyday lives caring for, feeding and, yes, slaughtering their animals.

As most UK Muslims have joined the ranks of those disconnected from the food chain we all perhaps have lost sight of the most important fact in this whole debate: these animals are not owned by the farmer, the abattoir, the supermarket or the consumer but rather they are all Allah's creatures that we have been given permission to use only if we obey Allah's laws about how they are treated. We as individuals will be held accountable for every one of our actions on The Day of Judgement including any complicity in the mistreatment of animals due to the abandonment of Allah's laws because we were too embarrassed or too greedy to care or too keen to join the politically-correct brigade. At the end of the day we know that halal slaughter is the most humane way of killing an animal, not due to a multitude of scientific papers but rather because we were told by the One who created us and created them. He is the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate.

## **References**

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