

## **Background article: Practices, Festivals and commemorations**

### **'Id al-Adha: The Festival of Sacrifice**

In Arabic, 'Id means festival. 'Id al-Adha is the “Festival of Sacrifice” and commemorates the willingness of Prophet Abraham to sacrifice his son at God’s command, and the willingness of Prophet Ishmael to be sacrificed, if God so willed. It is regarded as the most important festival of the year and is sometimes called “Big 'Id”. It takes place each year on the tenth of the Muslim month of Dhu 'l-Hijja. This is the third day of the annual pilgrimage, the Hajj.

{The material on the Pilgrimage to Makka in the Section on Practices provides the context for this.}

### **The events behind the festival**

The Bible and Qur'an agree that Abraham was put to the test by God. He was asked to sacrifice his son. The Bible names the son as Isaac. The Qur'an is not explicit about which son was to be sacrificed. Muslim tradition has overwhelmingly understood this to be Ishmael on the grounds that, as the first-born son of Abraham, Ishmael was “the son” before Isaac was born [Q. 37:102-109]. The remarkable thing about the story in the Qur'an is that Abraham told Ishmael what he had been commanded to do and asked him what he thought about it. Ishmael willingly agreed to do whatever God had commanded. The sacrifice is a test of obedience for them both. When they were on their way to make the sacrifice, they were tempted by the Devil to rebel against God’s command and not go through with the sacrifice. They threw stones at the Devil to resist his temptation and drive him away. As Ishmael knew and was willing to be sacrificed, there was no question of his being tied or forced. He was prostrate on the floor waiting for Abraham to kill him when God told Abraham to stop. Both had proved their obedience. Instead God provided an animal for them to sacrifice.

### **For those on the Hajj in Makka...**

Those on Hajj sacrifice a sheep, goat or camel. Nowadays, many pilgrims pay for an animal to be slaughtered humanely. There are modern slaughter-houses and skilled men to ensure that the job is done properly with the least possible suffering to the animals. Some of the meat will be canned or frozen so that it can be given to the poor later. A portion of the meat will be cooked and eaten as part of the festival.

In many countries, an animal is killed and the meat divided into three parts: one for the family, one to be shared with neighbours and the third to be given to the poor. A celebration meal is shared and there are presents, visits, sports and fun. In countries such as Britain, appropriately killed (*halal*) meat will be bought to be shared with the family, neighbours and people in need.

In the modern world, where there is a great disparity of wealth, many Muslims with an abundance of food will send money to a place where people go hungry to pay for an animal to be purchased and sacrificed, with all the food going to those in need in that place; this is often called *qurbani*, which is derived from the Arabic for sacrifice. Indeed, in a time of migration, when some members of a family have left their traditional homes and gone in search of work and a better life in a more industrialised country or city, it is only the money that they send back to their families on a regular basis that enables those families to survive. For decades, there have been millions of people around the world displaced as refugees; many Muslims will direct their *qurbani* to such refugee camps.