

Cultural value cannot justify cruel slaughter

By David Benatar

It is not surprising that there are conflicting views about the Zulu rite of slaughtering a bull as part of the Ukweshwama, or First Fruits festival. However, although people might have a right to their opinions, it does not follow that their opinions are correct.

Indeed, when two opinions are inconsistent with one another, at least one of them must be false. Moreover, a right to an opinion is not in itself a right to act on it. This applies equally both to those whose opinion is that they should interfere with others and to those whose opinion is that they should be immune from interference.

Thus, somebody might have the opinion that homosexuality is immoral, but he does not thereby have the right to interfere with homosexuals. A rapist might be of the opinion that he should be free to rape, but we are nonetheless entitled to restrict that freedom.

Therefore the crucial question in the debate about the First Fruits festival is who is right? Is the proposed ritual slaughter of a bull morally acceptable? Is it the sort of ritual that should be legally protected? To answer these questions we need to know what the ritual involves, and what the arguments for and against it are.

According to reports, the ceremony is performed by young males who are entering manhood. They take hold of the bull and force it to the ground. They rip out its tongue, force handfuls of earth into its mouth, gouge out its eyes and mutilate its genitals, among other things. The bull eventually dies, but not before it has endured considerable suffering. (Claims that the bull does not feel pain as a result of the herbs fed to it are entirely implausible.)

Opponents of this rite argue that treating the bull in this way is cruel, on account of the suffering that the bull experiences, and that cruelty is wrong. Defenders of the practice respond that this rite forms part of Zulu culture and that all people have a right to practise their culture. To evaluate this cultural defence of the ritual, it is helpful to spell out the argument's premises and conclusion in a general way that abstracts from the particularities of this case. In other words, the defence of the practice takes the following form:

- Some action, X, is a cultural practice.
- People are entitled to practise their culture.
- Therefore, X may be performed.

Once we see the form of this argument - what we might call the "culture argument" - its weakness is readily apparent. We see that the argument can be used to defend not only this particular bull-killing rite, but any other cultural practice too. If X is the practice of "beating one's wife" or "excising one's daughter's genitals" or "sacrificing a human", the culture argument concludes that the practice may be performed. But even those who think that killing the bull is permissible would surely deny that these other cultural practices are acceptable.

If that is the case, then it must be seen that X cannot be justifiable merely because it is a cultural practice. In other words, the (unqualified) second premise of the argument is false. The culture argument, therefore, is an extremely poor argument in defence of the bull-killing ritual, or any other practice.

This is not to deny that cultural practices can have immense value for people. It would be unfortunate if we lost sight of this. Where there is nothing wrong with a practice the fact that it is culturally valued accords it a certain weight.

In rejecting the culture argument, we are only rejecting the claim that cultural value has decisive moral weight. We are denying that any cultural practice, no matter what it is, can be acceptable just because it has cultural value. We can recognise that a cultural practice can be immoral even though it is immensely valuable to its practitioners. This is just what we would say about human sacrifice, for example, a cultural practice common among many ancient peoples.

Rejecting the cultural defence of the bull-killing rite is not sufficient to show that the rite is wrong. There are many culturally valuable practices that are not wrong. Although the culture argument fails, it remains possible that a cultural practice could be defended in some other way.

Defenders of the Zulu rite might argue that animal slaughter is widely practised in South Africa. Millions of animals are killed every year for food. Why, they might argue, is there so much outrage about killing a single bull while the slaughter of millions of animals in abattoirs is accepted by many? This argument claims that opposition to the Zulu rite is inconsistent with the widespread acceptance of animal slaughter.

People's moral judgements are often inconsistent and it is fitting to challenge inconsistencies. For example, there is something strange about westerners who think nothing of slaughtering pigs, sheep, and cows for food but object to consumption of dogs in the Far East. However, there are a few things to note about employing a consistency argument in defence of the bull-killing rite.

First, there is a crucial difference between the slaughter of animals in abattoirs and the particulars of the First Fruits bull-killing rite. Although slaughter of animals in abattoirs is cruel, dismembering a live and fully conscious animal is even more cruel, simply because the death (or at least the onset of unconsciousness) is much more protracted. There is nothing inconsistent in opposing greater cruelty while not opposing lesser cruelty. By contrast, there is an inconsistency in condoning greater cruelty while one opposes lesser cruelty.

Second, although consistency is necessary for a good argument, it is not sufficient. It is possible to be consistently wrong. By contrast, those who are only inconsistently wrong are at least right about something. I, and many others, happen to think that this is true of those who oppose the ritual killing of a bull but permit the slaughter of animals in abattoirs. They are right about the former and wrong about the latter.

There are excellent reasons, which I shall not rehearse here, to think that rearing and killing animals for food is morally indefensible. The interests of animals are taken insufficiently seriously, just as the interests of blacks, Jews and others have been taken insufficiently seriously in other times and places.

It is thus not sufficient to assert, as some have done, that "justice is for human beings and not for animals". The racist and the anti-semitic can as easily argue that "justice is for whites, not blacks" or that "justice is for Christians and not Jews". It is simply not a good argument.

While there are differences between animals and humans, what they have in common is the capacity to feel pain. That surely must be relevant when we think about how we should treat animals.

And we do indeed treat it as relevant, which is why we have legislation prohibiting cruelty against animals. Unfortunately, this legislation is applied inconsistently. If people were to rip live dogs and cats apart, this would certainly be taken much more seriously by the authorities than the proposed dismembering of a bull is being treated.

At stake are not merely Zulu cultural practices, but practices of all cultures. There is no human culture that has not embodied some morally indefensible practices at some time or another. Progress would never have been brought about if people were complacent about cultural practices.

Finding fault with cultural practices does not require that they be abandoned entirely. Instead they need only be transformed, to use a term that will be familiar to South Africans. Zulus can foster their community spirit, give thanks and induct their young men in many possible ways that do not involve inflicting suffering on others. Indeed, causing suffering to defenceless animals seems to be a strange way of proving one's manhood. Instead, a bull might, for example, be adorned and feted - as a masculine symbol, if that is what is required - rather than being emasculated and mutilated. That would be transformation.

Non-Zulus should not think smugly that their own cultural practices are acceptable. There is much criticism to go around. For example, our entire society, I have suggested, should rethink how it treats animals. Otherwise future generations will look back on our generation's cruelty to animals and charge us with the barbarism that most people today think is characteristic of only isolated practices - such as the Zulu rite and Spanish bullfighting.

Criticising the cultural practices of others is much easier than criticising one's own. But this does not mean that criticising the rites of others is impermissible. It means only that we all need to be as vigilant in criticising our own cultural excesses as we are in criticising those of others.

While the slaughter of animals in abattoirs is wrong, the dismembering of a live bull is still worse and thus deserves special criticism. On the long road to justice towards animals in South Africa, ending this practice is a step that must urgently be taken.

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