

The Symbolism and Sacrificial Significance of the Art of Bullfighting

By Ángel Pascual-Rodrigo¹

To my good friend Sa'īd Kazak - 'The Palestinian', faithful bullfighter (torero) and devout Muslim.



My friend Sa'īd informed me, rather distressed, that some Muslim scholars (*'ulamā'*) had declared that bullfighting was forbidden (*barām*) in Islam. In this article I intend to put forward some reasons why this is not so, and which is probably unknown to those who issue such judgements. Such judgements should therefore be revisited and revised. At the same time, I intend to synthesize some of the knowledge that I have assimilated about the bullfighting tradition, within a spiritual and universal perspective and describe its characteristics and modalities.

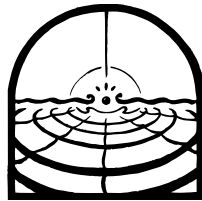
¹ Translated by Fatima J. Casewit. Edited by Ishaq Valodia. Special thanks are due to Hernán and Leslie Cadavid for their valuable suggestions and advice for the English translation. Translator's Note: Much appreciation is due to the author who has shared, with English readers, his love for and invaluable insights into, this ancient and fascinating contemporary art.

I base myself on my experience as a spectator of a good number of bullfights ever since my childhood, and through my study of the phenomenon of bullfighting and its significance. I have also studied, sufficiently, some of the immense and magnificent literary and audiovisual documentation that has been produced on this topic.

In order to judge whether bullfighting is *haram* or *halāl* (forbidden or permitted) it is necessary to understand its sacrificial significance. Although the outward appearance – of the tradition of the sacrifice of the bull and that of the ram for the Muslims when they re-enact the sacrifice of Abraham – are comparable, the differences between both sacrifices are formal and emanate from the archetypal characteristics of both animals. Therefore, each animal must have its own distinctive sacrifice. The nature of the ram is peaceful, as well as an almost transparent and luminous legerity. On the contrary, the nature of the bull is more complex and renders transparent two complementary dualities: on the one hand, peace and combat, and on the other hand, dense obscurity and noble bravery. Beyond the differences between the two animals is the proximity of their astrological signs – Aries and Taurus – and the primordial beauty of each animal.

I shall try to explain how suitable traditional bullfighting is for the sacrifice of the bull in function of its true nature. However, before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify that neither the bullfighter nor the public ever seek to enjoy the suffering of the animal, as assumed by anti-bullfighting groups and those who declare it to be *haram*. On the contrary, we who love bullfighting want the bull to undergo the minimum suffering necessary, and have in mind the catharsis of the victim and of the participants in the ritual – as with any Muslim butcher when he sacrifices a ram. Proof of this is the custom of the public to severely punish the *torero* for each clumsy move that is more than necessary. If a *torero* does not kill the bull with enough skill so as to minimize his agony, the bullfighter loses all the accolades that he had earned in his previous moves, during the combat. In addition, the clamor of the combat minimizes the suffering. Proof of this is that the meat of the bulls raised for fighting (*toro de lidia*) is tender, despite the advanced age of the animal, whereas the young calves of one year require sedation before being slaughtered so that their meat will not be tough and inedible.

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