



Between the Logic of Killing Kid Goats and the Ethics of Care for Livestock

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This study examines the logic of rationalizing killing kid goats, which I observed during my stay in the Altai mountains, sheds light on the relationships between the herders and their livestock as well as their sense of responsibility towards them, and considers the ethics of concern for livestock.

In the summer of 2018, I found my host family milked a dozen goats. The wife (referred to as ME, aged 68) had given most of them individual names. The goats willingly came to her to be milked when she called their names. She explained, “I milk ten goats that have lost their kids. They willingly come to me, begging me to milk them.” The naming is based on the goat’s external characteristics and sometimes on personality traits. As the call and milking are repeated, the goat responds to the call and comes to be milked on its own. It is called “*ner aval*” in Mongolian, “to accept a name”. Even those that do respond to a call will only respond to the persons who are “close to goats” (i.e., they are regularly milking and have established a close bond with them). The name-calling and responses are constructed through the repetition of daily milking work.

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Soon, I realized that the goats were giving birth to the kids during the summer due to the absence of birth control and that the husband (referred to as OB, aged 70) killed them one by one upon their birth. Due to their high age, both the husband and wife, in recent years, had entrusted their livestock to a local herder and stayed in the county or prefecture center in winter and spring. OB told me that the local herder was so irresponsible that he had taken no contraceptive measures for the sheep and goats entrusted to him in March. As a result, the mother goats bore in the late summer, around August. He explained about the killing of kids, saying that late-born kid goats could not grow up enough before the winter, so it was hard to survive the severe weather conditions. He added that a weak kid would also jeopardize their mothers, as they would be unable to eat enough grass and become weak, which meant they could probably die both during the winter.

Here were entangled in this case: ecological conditions, such as the severely cold winter; biological conditions, including the birth cycle of goats and the vulnerability of kids to freezing temperatures, which causes the need to manage the timing of kid births; and social and the family's challenges, such as aging and the absence of a successor. The family had managed those issues with their extensive knowledge and techniques developed over time.

In the car back to Hovd city, the driver, my friend, GB, a teacher at Khovd University who had come to pick me up, expressed his criticism of the family, saying, "They are terrible people with no blood or tears. They kill baby goats and milk their mothers. A Mongolian never kills baby animals. This is a sin, "*nugel*," isn't it?" When GB questioned OB and ME, they answered, "It is not a sin, but a merit. GB doesn't know the reality of pastoral life." The term "*nugel*" is rooted in Buddhism, and violating the commandment against killing is one of the most prominent examples of "*nugel*." So, should his conduct be condemned by this Buddhist code? Most of the Mongolians I asked this question replied that it was immoral. Still, many added that he should not be charged because he only obeyed the natural law humans cannot oppose and that he, as a well-experienced herder, had made the right choice.

Michel Foucault considered morality on three "independent" levels: (1) 'moral code', (2) 'the morality of behaviors, and (3) 'the manner in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject.' From this perspective, OB's actions can be immoral at the first level.

However, at the third level, his conduct as a pastoralist reflected a strong sense of professional ethics. For Foucault, the third level is more critical than the first one to obey a moral code.

There are many solid codes or norms in Mongolian society, including sex roles and hospitality, which previous literature has highlighted. However, I often saw they were overridden. Although milking an animal is a woman's role, a man milks in need, and I saw a woman slaughtered livestock, which overrides a man's role. Mongolian pastoral society has emphasized more tact than strict adherence to moral norms compared to other cultures because prescribed codes often could be ineffective due to the fluctuating natural and social environment.