

Cockfighting



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Anthropology 200
May 2, 2006

Two men step over the barriers onto the dirt floor from opposite corners of the pit. Each man gently cradles under one arm a rooster with alert eyes. One man is carrying a Hatch, known for its speed, while the other man carries a Black, known for its strength. Both birds have shimmering manes of orange feathers and arching black tail feathers. Bound to the nub of each of their severed spurs (the natural bone-like material on a cock's leg) is a curved, two-inch-long steel gaff that can puncture a heart, brain, or lungs with the thrust of a heel (Gamefowl Glossary). Weapons and weight have determined the pairing of the birds. Cost of admission to view these fights is 10 dollars per person, which is paid at the gate upon entry. The men who have each entered the required number of four birds pay participation fees before their matches. The fees go into the purse that will go to the owners of the four winning birds. In the pit now, the two men—one wearing a blue baseball cap, the other wearing a black tank top—begin the pre-combat ritual of thrusting their birds back and forth, beak to beak. During this time the betting has started. For an outsider it seems like the betters have their own language. Some are yelling “Bet, Bet” while others are yelling “Jes, Jes, take Jes.” The betting is concluded and everyone goes silent. The referee shouts, “Ready, pit!” The handlers drop their birds and the fight begins. The birds explode from their handler's grasps and collide with a great force a foot off the ground. Beak grabbing beak, hackles (the feathers located on the neck of a chicken) flaring like porcupine quills, they bounce apart and then collide, again and again. The pitters handle their birds every once in a while to make sure each bird has an equal advantage. The Hatch takes command of the match. The Black falls over, then revives. The Black kicks his foot and connects with the Hatch's back. The Hatch fades, falling down and refusing to budge. The pitters handle their birds and try to see if the birds return the bite. The Hatch is stunned and unable to return the bite. The Black bites the Hatch twice and is declared the winner. The birds are removed from the pit and the spectators pay off the winning betters. Minutes later the next match begins with two more birds.

This subculture is very complex to an outsider. To learn and understand the cockfighting subculture we had to find out where it came from and/or how it got to Hawaii, what this culture was about, what happens before and after a cockfight (preparation and the actual event), why people participate in it, and the treatment of the birds. To be able to get this information we had to use ethnographic methods.

The methods used to better understand this subculture were participant-observation, informal interviews, and research. Approximately fifteen informants ranging from ages 13-45 were interviewed. The informants were interviewed in a group so that they could feel comfortable and they could add on to what each person would say. Alicia was also able to see a cockfighting event one day. She sat around the pit observing everyone's actions and one of our informants sat next to her to explain what was going and answered any questions that I had. Without a personal experience like she was able to have, people won't

truly understand what this subculture is and what it means to the people in it. A lot of people see this culture as a cruel sport because they do not truly understand what it is. People outside see this sport as barbaric whereas the people in the subculture see this sport as entertainment and normal. The informants believe that the birds are born to fight and that they are just helping the birds do what comes naturally to them. They treat the birds like one of their children and you can see that when they gently care the birds before the fights. This subculture has been around for a very long time, but some people just do not understand it. The sport comes as a culture-shock to them. Some people outside of this culture believe that it is inhumane to fight the roosters, but they are okay with eating chickens. Those people are taught that it is okay to eat chickens just like the cockfighters are taught that it is normal to fight a bird that is born to fight.

This sport was first introduced to the Philippines in the 16th Century by Spanish colonizers (“Blood Sport with Chance to Win Big Money Attracts Many in Philippines”). The Filipino immigrants had brought the sport of cockfighting with them when they came to Hawaii. Cockfighting has been part of American culture for a very long time. In the United States, famous presidents, who were lovers of the game, were George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and Abraham Lincoln (“The History of Cockfighting”). Abraham Lincoln got his nickname “Honest Abe” not for his politics, but because of his honesty as a cockfighting referee (Berger). It was socially acceptable and encouraged for a gentleman to have a flock of gamecocks and to be an expert on the sport. At one point, the U.S. became a center for cockfighting activities and events. Cockfights were even held in the committee rooms of the President. It is said that the fighting-cock almost became the national emblem. It lost by one vote to the American eagle. However, cockfighting declined when the civil war started.

This sport is not for the squeamish. Two roosters of comparable weight or height are paired off and fight each other until one is killed, is too badly injured to go on, or it refuses to fight. The match usually lasts a few minutes and can be bloody. Razor-sharp knives (gaff), about two-inches long are tied to both of the rooster’s legs. With neck feathers raised, the roosters bounce around each other, trying to size-up its opponent, like a boxer would in a boxing match. The birds seem to dance around and strike at each other with lightening precision. The shouting and cheering becomes louder from the spectators and in a few minutes it is all over. According to one of the informants, Jean, the following is the criteria for winning/losing a match:

“Victory is only confirmed when the dominant cock pecks twice at its victim, even if the victim is dead. If the winning bird fails to return the bite, it forfeits its victory, and a tie is declared. Sometimes both birds die, but a dead rooster can be declared the winner if it died after it returned the bite. During the match only three people are allowed in the pit: the two pitters and the referee. The referee has complete authority over each match. A

referee has the right to declare a tie. A technical draw is called when he stops a match in the middle of battle because he suspects that there was cheating involved in the fight. If there is a match where a rooster is owned by the referee or owned by a friend or relative of the referee, there must be a substitute referee to ensure that the match is fair and there is no bias. If a cock refuses to fight at the start of the match, the match is declared a tie and all of the bets made are off. The referee may inspect the gaffs before and during the match to make sure there is no cheating. If there is a case where the gaff has a defect or they are improperly aligned, the match will be canceled. All bets must be made before the match starts and cannot be canceled unless both parties agree. All bets must be paid off before the next pitter can enter the pit for their match so that no problems occur. If an unwounded bird runs from a fight, the cock is called the tool of a fixed fight. If both birds are not wounded, then the match is declared a tie. If there is an injury to the toes, shanks, or talons, it is not considered a valid injury and the match continues. The handlers will pick up their birds and face them beak to beak. They do this when both chickens have stopped fighting and are at a standstill or one or both birds are hurt badly.”

The roosters are never forced to fight a match if they do not want to. Fights between roosters occur naturally and cockfighters are only allowing the birds to do what comes naturally to them. If the birds do not peck at each other when they are face to face (before the match) or one or both birds run away during the match, the match is stopped.

Cockfighting has been around for decades. It has been known as a gentleman’s sport all around the world especially in the United States. Hawaii is among the many states that still participate in this decades long sport. Even though it is illegal in Hawaii people still participate and enjoy it. The cockfight derbies are held in secret and the location and the time of the fights are passed on to each other by word of mouth. The trainers treat their birds with compassion and they treat their fighters like kings. They feel that going to a derby (cockfight) is like watching a boxing match on television. They go to socialize, watch an adrenaline packed fight, and make money.

People are usually introduced to this sport through their family or friends. People go from being spectators to trainers for the love of the sport and/or financial reasons. All of the informants had been born into this subculture. Their parents/families were introduced to it and they passed it along to their children. The informants are now introducing the subculture to their children. Some of the informants have stayed in this subculture because they can make a lot of money by betting that they cannot make at a normal job. Those informants all work, but they go to a cockfighting event to help pay for things they cannot afford on their salary. The informants all breed their own birds and illegally fight them here and in parts of the United States. All states allow breeding of the birds, which are then sold to states where

fighting is legal or to the Philippines, Guam, Mexico and other countries where the sport is popular or in states where it is outlawed, are hustled out to the woods and urban back alleys for illicit legal combat (Kilborn). It takes years to raise a fighting-cock, and caring for game fowl is a day-in, day-out responsibility (Berger). The trainers take extreme pride and care of their fighting-cocks. The birds are treated like they are part of the family and they are taken cared of extremely well. The trainers have farms usually in their back yard. Homemade birdcages are lined up in a row and some of the fighters have enclosures on the ground so that they can walk around parts of the yard. According to one of the informants, Peter, his whole family helps to care for and train the birds. His children are not permitted to eat their food until the birds have been feed and watered. Some of the families even raise the chicks in their houses to ensure their survival. “We keep the chicks in the house because if they are left in a cage outside the chicks will be eaten by the other birds. The live in a cage under a lamp in our living room,” stated Sheena, another informant.

Fighting cocks are bred for aggressiveness and live in a privileged childhood. Instead of ordinary chicken mash, they are fed grains, ground meat, fresh vegetables and milk, often with vitamin supplements (Cortez). Good fighting roosters are extremely valuable and get first-class treatment, including high quality feed and vitamins, plus regular baths and massages. John, who has been training fighting-cocks since he was a child, has his own calendar that tells him when to feed the birds certain vitamins during their training. The vitamins help the bird to gain strength and stay healthy to prepare for the fight. Unlike the millions of factory-farm chickens that are raised in cramped and crowded pens before being slaughtered for human consumption, gamecocks are raised in fresh air and sunshine and given plenty of room to move around (Berger). While factory-farmed chickens are doomed to a miserable life and a horrible death, a gamecock has a 50 percent chance of survival—and those that prove themselves winners in the pit are retired to spend the rest of their lives at stud (Berger).

Overall, this subculture is just like any other subculture. They have their values and practices just like everyone else. They do not see this practice as violent and inhumane. They feel that they are just doing what already comes naturally to these birds. They also see this sport as a culturally practiced that started a very long time ago. The participants are introduced into this world by family and friends and some participants go one step further by raising the chickens involved in the fights. They treat their birds like they would a child. The birds become a part of their family and when the bird dies they are saddened. This sport will continue on for years to come despite it being illegal in most parts of the United States. This is one culture that will not disappear anytime soon.

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Sparring (training match)



Tying the knife (gaff)



Different Breed of Roosters





Gaffs (knives)





Chicken Spurs



Cockfighting Pit



Face-off

