

The Symbolic View of Cockfighting: A Study among the Cock Fighters of Mianwali, Pakistan

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Abstract

Cockfighting being an uncommon old sport, is deep-seated in various rural areas of Pakistan. This study investigates the cultural and symbolic comprehension and significance of cockfighting by examining the whole process of the fight. This research was conducted in the rural areas of the Mianwali district as the activity commonly practised in secret areas. The main objectives of the study were to systematically analyze the procedures involved in the fight and exploring the underneath symbolic role of the sport in the area by using qualitative methods. Thirty cockfighters and trainers were selected and informally interviewed during the fieldwork duration. The findings of the study revealed that people of the area view cockfighting under the influence of cultural construction and follow the legacy of their elders. The social identity and symbolism involved in the fight have strengthened the status of the activity. It provides a sense of prestige and social identity to its practitioners, proving the notion of masculinity.

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Introduction

Cockfighting being a primaeval sport, has a ubiquitous dispensation. Historically advertised in the eighteenth century, it had a popularity as an exciting sport from various regions all over the world, including from India, China, Ancient Greece, and Persia to the Indus valley and Mohenjo-Daro city in 6000 BC. Factually, chickens were domesticated for the sport rather than to be used as food. At present, it is still considered an interesting sport in various places worldwide. Albeit many developed and developing countries verboten cockfighting, it is still flourishing in countries where it has been prohibited (Sallaz, 2008).

Cockfighting comprises several rounds of the rigorous fight between two gamecocks of equal weight in the fighting arena. Being a blood sport, both the fighter cocks usually fight until the death Of the adversary. The gamecocks are fostered particularly for fighting.

The aftermath of the fight depends upon the circumstances of the fight and the conditions of roosters. The games cock possess inherited aggression towards the males of the species through which fighting is substantiated (Parikshit & Falguni, 2016) Cockfighting is as a paramount part of a cultural legacy as the language, dress, art and craft by making a valid cultural statement in an increasingly complex and diverse era. (Walker, 1986). It is entrenched in the rural part of the world benefitting the masculinity and proclamation of the male status and identity among its practitioners, thus, affirming the symbolic connotations of the activity (Hawley, 1982).

Numerous Anthropological studies have endorsed the cultural implication of the phenomenon by highlighting its part as a variable of formulating and perpetuating the male identity. The gamecocks reflect the behavior, personalities and enthusiasm of their owners (Paul et al., 2015). In history, the role of males during wartime is of warrior and protector, which currently has turned in sporting contests with aggression. Lying in this category and being an eminent male-dominated sport, cockfighting symbolizes male ethos. (Walker, 1986) With the comprehensive terms of acts and objects and having practical repercussions, it stands as an art. The outcome of the procedures can be controlled according to the will of the owners. The elucidation and articulation of the procedures involved in the fight depict the lived realities of the participators in the meaning of social life. (Geertz, 1973).

Anthropological studies have repeatedly highlighted the cultural importance of cockfighting, particularly for the construction and maintenance of masculine identity. Thecocks maybe surrogates for the personalities, enthusiasm and fight intention of their owners. Many kinds of researches showed that cock fighters are thus always embedded inwell-structured social networks. (Paul, et al., 2015).

As far as the money matters in cockfighting are concerned, the total wagering is greater inlarge centre bet fights. These cockfights are considered more engrossing because more amount of money is at stake. They are usually less predictable. Consequently, it is seen interms of money, quality of the cocks and social prestige. It is an interesting cultural activityin the case of money. Men get involved in cockfighting to win, bet and be entertained. Somepeople win; others lose. They participate, negotiate, argue, and pit their cock against the opponent. They return to the same place or the nearby place after winning or losing the beton the same day or other. Social and political dimensions of gambling are here subsumed within an economic framework of action and understanding.

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Notwithstanding, to understand cockfighting only as a social event is to ignore its cultural significance of it. Cockfighting is a composite of objects, people and events with symbolic meanings. In Pakistan, cockfighting has been an admired sport and pastime in many regions and even now rehearsing in various rural settings. The district Mianwali is regarded as a pivot of cockfighting. From the previous year's analysis, the district produced many gamecocks that remained beyond question throughout the country. Besides the illegal status of the sport, people from all the segments of the society participate in the fight in covert settings.

This study was conducted with the prime objective to systematically explain the procedures involved and how the fight is organized. It dispenses the elucidation of people about parts of the fight along with the emblematic role in the area.

The present study contributes to the insight of various symbols and their comprehension to conceptualize the action and status of people relative to the cockfight in their cultural context. It magnifies the knowledge of the reader about the general understanding of a traditional sport with specific connotations attached.

Materials and Methods

Cockfighting is an entrenched activity customarily practiced in covert settings in the research area. This study is concerned to assess the process of cockfighting, methods involved, and feeding, conditioning, rearing and training practices of the local breeds of gamecocks. It provides an insight into the comprehension of people involved in fighting and uncovers the cultural and symbolic factors that determine the status of fight and cock fighters. Furthermore, it attempts to apprehend the role of the various personages in constructing the history, developing and arranging cockfight. This study was conducted in rural areas of the district *Mianwali*. Due to the illegal status of the fight, the study was solely centered upon standard anthropological research methods. Total thirty cock fighters were selected through purposive sampling to explore the process of the fight and to analyze the symbolic aspect of the phenomenon. The selected sample was informally interviewed using an interview guide.

Discussion

Cockfighting is an ancient sport that has deep roots in rural parts of the world and in certain areas of the world. It also has great symbolic significance to its practitioners as an affirmation of masculine identity in an increasingly complex and diverse era. Although the activity is illegal in most jurisdictions, it continues, generally in a covert setting. Because cockfighting is subject to criminal sanction and informal social disapproval, cock fighters have developed rationalizations which they use among themselves and offer to outsiders. These rationalizations are complex some are overtly culturally and economically in nature. (Hawley, 1982).

The fighting Rules Every fight is held according to several rules and regulations that decide the types of activities involved during cockfight, the result and time duration of the fight. These fighting rules are not made by a single individual rather they are altered and evolved with the passage of time with practice and experimentation of the fighting. Some of the experienced native cock fighters have written account of these rules. Anyone who breaks the rule of the fight risks his reputation being a cock fighter.

Rules concerning Timing of the Fight

- The duration of each round of the fight is recorded.
- After each round, a break of five to seven minutes is given to each cock.
- The duration of the break can be extended depending on the situation of the fight and the condition of the fighting cock.

Rules Regarding Activities Allowed

- The owner of the cock or trainer of each fighting group is allowed to use any method to revitalize the strength of the cock, i.e. giving injections, medicines and changing spurs.
- During the whole fight, the trainer can change the spur of the cock only once in case the spurs have broken.
- The trainer only picks the bird during a fight if the cock has a feather or blood in its eyes or beak. It can be removed by the trainer of the cock.
- Rules Respecting the Outcome of Fight
- The fight continues until one of the cock is completely blind.
- The cockfight is stopped if the owner of the cock withdraws his cock and picks but of the pit.
- The cock is declared as a loser if it is unable to stand on its feet after hitting by the opponent.
- If the cock runs away from the ring, it is considered as the defeat of the cock.
- The decision of the judge is treated as final.

Nurturing/Fostering of the Fighting Cock

The indigenous people select eight types of cocks, including *Amroha*, *Java*, *Freed Kati*, *Methy*, *LLIsani*, *Mushky* and *Sawa*, to use for cockfighting. The famous cock proven to be the retaliator fighter is red blood *Aseel* having qualities of agility and elevated fortitude. The cockfighters breed the gamecocks by keeping the age, incestuous limitations and fighting reputation of the cocks

into consideration and rear them in their farms. A special diet mainly consists of wheat grains, maize and egg yolks, especially in winters are fed. They are kept in soft soil areas with proper cleaning, disease precautionary measures and immunization. When the cock reaches the age of two years and five months, the cockfighters begin the training of the cock. It comprised of running, mock fighting and a rudimentary exercise called " *Pharak* ". The gamecocks are thrown in the air and allow to land while flipping their wings. It is repeated fifty times a day for fifteen days before the fight.

Selection of Fighting Place

The cockfighters select a particular place for the fight away from the residential area. The organizer of the fight either selects a " *Kaccha* " or " *Pakka* " place for the fight outside the town.

For small fights, *Kaccha* " place is selected. It is guaranteed safe from the police raid. In contrast, the " *Pakka* " place is considered secure for the fight.



Figure 1: Place of the Fight

Participants of the Fight

The cockfighters all over the district participate in the fight, including the owner of the gamecock, breeder and trainer locally called " *Panial or Peewal* ". The cockfighters of the setting trace their genealogies to the sainthood i.e. the family of *Pir Shah Alam*. The whole male population of the society, including both literate and illiterate people of all ages, participate in the fight whether as breeders, trainers or cock owners. Only children are not allowed to participate in the fight.

The Fighting Process

Usually, the fights start at noon or midday when all the participants gather at the selected place. Each fight comprises four rounds of five minutes each. Each fight is based on a pre-decided set of rules. The spurs are attached before the beginning of the fight and only be changed once during a fight. Spurs are artificial metallic equipment made of bullet and natural cocks spur attached to the legs of the fighting cock with tape.

After that, both the cocks are weighed and released in the arena to fight with aggression.



Figure 2: The Fighting Cocks

When one of the cocks gets injured, the owner or trainer of the gamecock is allowed to give medicine, injections and special treatment to boost its energy. The fight continues until one of the cocks runs out of the ring or becomes completely blind.



Figure 3: A Blind Cock

The Symbolic and Cultural Aspect

In the research area, cockfighting maintains the status of a sub-culture. In the worldview of cockfighters, it is believed to be a legal activity albeit having illegal status and practised accordingly. For its practitioners, this sport is a cultural imperative. Unlike other games or sports, it requires only care, effort and consistency. The values and information attached to cockfighting are transmitted from one generation to the other. Although it involves materials, it is recognized as the intangible part of the culture. It is a vital part of the social and cultural life of the natives, which can be understood through the process, methods, information involved in cockfighting. Besides the cultural vitality of the fight, the fight is a symbol of the social and political power in the respective society. The prestige, social status and political power of a man are denoted by cockfighting. As mentioned above, the selection of the place has a key role in the fighting. The rationale behind this is that it symbolizes the political power and social strength a person possesses. The safe arrangement of the fight and selection of the place is the responsibility of a powerful man. The consequences of the fight signify the respect and honor of the cock owner. During a fight, not only the gamecock but also the status and ego of the owner are at risk. When the gamecock flees from the fighting arena, it is considered as the defeat of the cock owner. The whole fighting process is the dramatic expression of the feelings and engrossment of the contenders. The way cockfights and the victory or defeat of the gamecock determine the social status of the cock fighter.

Being a male-centric game, the fight depicts gender reinforcement in society. The behavior of a cock is closely observed and compared to the male characteristics of its owner. The fighting strength, pain, endurance, and agility are desired not only in the gamecocks but also the manhood in society. The fighting cocks who resemble the females having matron characteristics are also not allowed to fight. The defeat of the gamecock is the failure of its owner and is considered subdued.

In a single cockfight, the notion of pride, prestige, competition, and accomplishment is illustrated. The fighting cock must have the quality of aggression. Likewise, in symbolic terms, any man who lacks an aggressive attitude is not considered a man. In respective society, the ideal image of manhood is confined to the personality and behavior of the fighting cock in the cockpit. During a fight, the qualities of patience and endurance are highly required, just as a true man tolerates injuries and hardships of life without complaining. In the native culture, the ideal man does not show feelings of sorrow for deceased ones and manages the funeral ceremonies with great patience.

Rituals During Cockfight

The cockfighters of the *Mianwali* practice some rituals before, during and after the cockfight. Before the start of the training session of the gamecock, the breeders involve the cock in breeding practices. They believe that the cocks are the pure and rare breed of making fighting cocks so, they utilize it. Before the fight, the gamecock is not allowed to have sexual activities. The trainers believe that physicality before the fight can reduce the energy level of the cock and increase the chances of its defeat.

During a fight, when a gamecock gets an injury on the head, any person other than the cock owner is not allowed to wash the injury and put a bandage. The cock owner sucks the blood of the cock from the wound by himself. The cockfighters believe that it is against the status, ego, and pride of the cock fighter to allow any other man to rescue his cock and perform the blood-sucking ritual.

To execrate the opponent's cock owner by abusive language during a fight is considered a ritual. When a cock owner tries to cheat or leave the fighting arena, all the other people start yelling and calling him "*Porh*". In local comprehension, it is a way of cursing. The "*Porh*" person has to remove his trousers and sit on the land so that his body impression becomes imprinted on the land. The mark of his body on the sand is the symbol of cursing and used to insult that person.

This research aimed to explore the cockfighting mechanism, activities, conditions, rules, and regulations and how society understands this activity. Data was collected by employing qualitative methods such as focus group discussion, case study method, participant observation, and in-depth interviews, etc. Thirty individuals were selected as research samples which are involved in cockfighting, cock breeding, and trainer practices.

Cockfighting includes subsequent processes include a selection of the area, duration of the fight, rules regarding the activities allowed

in the fight and outcome of the fight, gambling, and spur-making processes. Instant, small, training, and large-scale fighting mainly held in the area with different conditions and betting strategies. The person who trains and arranges fights has a significant role in fighting and dealing with police.

The indigenous breeds trained for cockfighting include *Aseel Amroha*, *Java*, *Mushky*, and yellow breeds, each with impressive and unique physical characteristics and fighting abilities. The habits such as fearsome fighting, agility, activeness, and endurance are required to defeat the opponent. The breeders of the area used single and cross-breeding to produce true fighting cocks. Prior to breeding, they consider the age and reputation of the breeding cock.

The fighting cocks are reared and trained with extreme care with special feeding and placing arrangements. There are several kinds of diseases that attack cocks in every season, including high temperature, Gapes, Barek, scaly legs, Rani khait, and Gol ghuto. They are immunized and given traditional and modern medicines. Each cockfight in a specific way is acquired through training.

Conclusion

Cockfighting is a blood sport between two gamecocks that fight in the cockpit till the death of the one. Gamecocks are trained to fight by giving them special care, diet, and exercise. Cockfighting is a series of subsequent processes such as selection of the fighting area, training of the gamecocks, fighting process, and several rituals. The participants of the fight believe it is an integral part of their life. During socialization, they learn the notion of social prestige associated with cockfighting. The primary section of the fight is the knowledge delivered through ancestors.

The fight is comprehended in several terms such as a cultural sport, a factor of masculinity, a way of social prestige, and above all power and bravery. As the characteristics of bravery and courage in gamecocks are associated with personality of the game owner, the people of the city construct gender attributes through the fight. The social relations and behavior of the people is defined by the image a person possesses by raising, pitting, and winning the cockfight. The findings of the study revealed that the people of Mianwali categorized as cockfighters have various interpretations and views regarding cockfighting. Both the literate and illiterate segments of society participated in the fights. Similarly, the male population of all ages, excluding children, are viewers, breeders, and trainers of gamecocks, and cockfighters.

They believed it was a natural process and an integral part of the culture. The primary focus of cockfighting is the competition among cockfighters for social prestige and gambling. Learned during socialization. It is a cultural asset as comprehended by the methods, techniques, knowledge, experiences, equipment, and objects transmitted from generation to generation. It denotes the political power and social prestige of the people who win the fighting as well as who securely conduct fights in the area.

Cockfighting serves as a construct and gender reinforcement because the practices and behavior of the fighting cocks are depictions of gender characteristics. Certain elements such as aggression, agility, and endurance, belligerence, and activeness are desirable for any man that is represented in fighting practiced by gamecocks. The cock owners possess a deep emotional relationship with their fighting cocks.

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