



# Tajen

## INTERACTIVE

*An interactive project made by visual anthropologists using different modes of representation to evoke and explain the cultural, historical and psychological aspects of cockfighting in Negara, Bali*

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# EXPLORE THE LIFE OF A GAMECOCK

VIDEO



The Perfect  
Cock

## FUNCTIONALISM

Most of the analysis of the cockfight provided by anthropologists focuses on the event of the cockfight and the symbolic relationship between cock and man, which has been interpreted as either sexual or hostile. But in this segment we see that outside of the cockfighting ring, cockfighting also provides many opportunities for friendly and collaborative social interaction between men.

Throughout Tajen Interactive, what are all the reasons different respondents and scholars suggest people participate in cockfighting? How might these different functions complement or contradict one another?

VIDEO



Training a  
Contender

## ETHNOGRAPHIC PRAGMATICS

This segment introduces some of Levi-Strauss's key ideas about binary structures of thought. One of these is that those aspects of human experience that don't appear to be binary are considered either "sacred" or "taboo." Looking at your own culture or another culture of choice, can you come up with some examples (from any area of cultural life) that might either prove or challenge this rule? Are binary structures immutable or can they be changed? If they can be changed, how might this happen?

VIDEO



Spotting a  
Winner

## ETHNOGRAPHIC LITERATURE RESEARCH

Although the men in this short have ideal physical qualities they look for in a gamecock, ultimately they agree that appearances may be deceiving—it is the chicken's divinely ordained fate that will determine whether it wins or loses. How does this philosophy on cockfighting reflect or relate to broader Balinese ideas about fate? Using an academic search engine, find at least one or two articles that address this idea, and formulate a hypothesis.

# DELVE INTO THE MIND OF A COCKFIGHTER

VIDEO

 Compulsive Gambling

## CULTURAL FACTORS IN BEHAVIORAL DISORDER

In the section called “Spotting a Winner” Balinese cockfighters assert that whether a cock wins or loses is up to the cock—or cockfighter’s—fate. In this section, the addiction psychiatrist Dr. Timothy Fong claims that gambling might be particularly appealing or prevalent in Asian cultures because of pan-Asian shared ideas about fate. How would you summarize these cultural beliefs? Based on Tajen Interactive, does his hypothesis seem applicable to Balinese cockfighting? Why or why not?

Dr. Fong also says that an understanding of cultural factors in behavioral disorders, such as gambling addiction, can play an important role in developing prevention and treatment. Given the information in this segment, if you were a psychiatrist working in Bali, how might you determine that a cockfighter has gambling disorder? Furthermore, with gambling on cockfights such a common behavior throughout Bali, how might you develop a prevention and treatment program for a cockfighting-addicted individual that would be successful in this cultural environment?

VIDEO

 Balinese Manhood

## PSYCHODYNAMIC PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURE

This short film provides multiple interpretations as to how the cockfight relates to the construction of Balinese manhood. Anthropologists Mead and Bateson concluded that it was a symbolic masturbatory practice, while Geertz considered it a performance that reflected and amplified the Balinese emphasis on social status and emotional control.

One contemporary subject interviewed here states that he believes the cockfight is a way to channel the Balinese man’s usually suppressed urge to do violent things. Are there cultural practices in the United States that serve a similar function—giving an opportunity to express certain emotions that are otherwise forbidden to address or discuss? If so, is this expression symbolic or coded in any way?

# UNSHEATHE THE BLADE

VIDEO



Choosing  
Your Weapon

## INFORMAL LEARNING

There is no formal “cockfighting” education: as this segment shows, men learn about spurs and how to handle them through informal channels, such as observation and friendly conversation. What is a cultural skill you have learned how to do in a similar informal way? How was this process different for you than formal education?

VIDEO



Blade Lore

## ETHNOGRAPHIC PRAGMATICS

The “lore” shared in this video covers a number of different categories: beliefs (e.g., if a tree is struck by lightning, you should put your blade in its fire), personal anecdotes (getting cut by a blade), philosophy (if you use a blade, you will certainly get cut), and folk religious practices (putting a blade on a religious altar). If you were conducting ethnographic research to collect more blade lore, what questions might you ask in interviews? What other fieldwork strategies might you use?

# EXPERIENCE THE COCKFIGHT

VIDEO



History and  
Anthropology  
of Cockfighting

## HUMAN UNIVERSALS

Numerous anthropologists believe that there are “human universals”—patterns, traits, institutions, or behaviors that are present in every human society. Given how old and widespread the practice of cockfighting appears to be, could a case be made that it is a human universal?

VIDEO



Betting on a  
Cockfight Then

## ACTIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE: RE-ENACTING A COCKFIGHT

Geertz has provided a framework for understanding how betting on a cockfight works, including the technicalities of wagering and how status and kinship affiliation influences fast-paced bets. To bring this framework to life, role-play a cockfight.

VIDEO



Betting on a  
Cockfight Now

Students can be assigned identities: first, the two “central betters” and then the “side betters”. Then the relationship between “side betters” and “central betters” can also be determined: for example, of course each “central better” should have some relatives and friends amongst the “side betters”. Another student can be assigned the role of reading out how the cocks are doing in their fight. Depending on what happens between the birds, the students must react accordingly, using the numerical betting schema and calling out bets the way Geertz and/or contemporary Balinese respondents describe AND keeping in mind what their kinsmen are doing and what the typical Balinese reactions would be to that.

# WITNESS THE FIGHT'S AFTERMATH

VIDEO



The Raw and The Cooked

## SACRED AND TABOO

This segment introduces some of Levi-Strauss's key ideas about binary structures of thought. One of these is that those aspects of human experience that don't appear to be binary are considered either "sacred" or "taboo." Looking at your own culture or another culture of choice, can you come up with some examples (from any area of cultural life) that might either prove or challenge this rule? Are binary structures immutable or can they be changed? If they can be changed, how might this happen?

## USING ETHNOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE TO TEST THEORY

Building off Levi-Strauss's formulation of "male" and "female", this video suggests that the losing Balinese gamecock goes through a process of changing from male to female as it goes through the process of being fought and then, if a loser, cooked. Go through the other materials in Tajen and find either first person or scholarly perspectives that might support—or disprove—the theory.

VIDEO



Globalized Animal Rights Perspective

## GLOBALIZED ANIMAL RIGHTS PERSPECTIVES

Cockfighting is clearly an important cultural practice to many Balinese men, and yet from a globalized animal rights perspective, it is "hideous" animal cruelty. In this short, Ben Williamson says, "PETA appreciates cultural differences, but culture and tradition should never be an excuse for animal cruelty. Cultural traditions should be part of social progress, not a reason to deter it." Meanwhile, Erik Sakach of the Humane Society asserts that societies need to ask themselves the question: "Does this cause unnecessary pain and suffering. Is there another way? Is there a better way?"

## APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY

Assuming you agree that cockfighting needs to change for the benefit of the chickens involved, let's say you were responsible for designing a public awareness campaign or program aiming to change Balinese behaviors and perspectives on the cockfight that would eliminate or ameliorate animal suffering.

What might you propose? How might this be done? Is there a way to preserve or maintain aspects of the cockfight that Balinese report as being culturally meaningful while adapting the practice to satisfy 21st century globalized ideas about animal rights and wellbeing?

## CULTURAL AND MORAL RELATIVISM

In this short, Erik Sakach of the Humane Society asserts that when it comes to shifting their ideas about the ethical treatment of animals, *"Every culture has to come at its own pace, but that only happens when the people who are involved come in contact with outside thinking, and that stimulates people inside to think about the rightness and moral correctness of what they are doing."*

What do you think about this position? Is it up to "cultural outsiders" to help people inside a culture reflect on practices that outsiders may think of as immoral? Can it be possible that certain practices might count as "moral" in one culture and "immoral" in another? Are there certain "moral absolutes" that could/should be applied and upheld cross-culturally?

Similarly, Ben Williamson compares cockfighting to slavery and child labor, categorizing them all as "cultural traditions" that should be eradicated due to their undue cruelty. Do you think this metaphor is accurate and appropriate? Why or why not?

In comparison, take another heated and fraught contemporary discussion of a cultural tradition that is being reframed by many as "cruelty": "genital mutilation." Research different sides to the argument.

Why do some argue it is cruelty that should be eradicated? Why do others argue that it is an important cultural tradition that should be upheld?

Or consider a popular US Sport that some are deeply troubled by: Football. There is great resistance to changing the game, even in light of recent research explaining how dangerous it can be to players. Why do some believe the game needs to change? Are there cultural explanations for why, despite risks, it should remain the same?

Does it make it easier or more difficult to think about issues of cultural and moral relativism when discussing human interactions or human treatment of animals?

How do contemporary urban college students tend to think about domesticated animals (dogs, cats, horses, chickens, etc.)? How is this constructed and upheld by various cultural traditions? Is this the "right" way to think about animals? Are there existing cultural traditions in the US that contradict this or espouse a different view? (E.g. horseracing, laboratory experiments, zoos, meat-eating, etc.)

# TAJEN

tajenfilm.com

*A sensory ethnography film on the Balinese cockfight*

The Balinese cockfight, known as *tajen*, is an ancient blood sport that unites man, rooster, and blade in an archetypical drama of fate and status. Shot in the arid landscape of West Bali, Indonesia, **Tajen** follows the disparate journey of each, leading up to the moment when they meet in a match, a spectacle of anticipation and excitement where men's fortunes can be made and animals' lives lost.

With a richly sensory approach, **Tajen** embeds the viewer within the realms of the cockfight—from the claustrophobia of the rooster cage to the honed focus of the bladesmith's studio to the action of the arena. This poetic evocation of the craft, intimacy, brutality, and festivity of the cockfight neither approves nor decries this tradition; rather, the film immerses the viewer in the visual, auditory and visceral domains of feathers, blood, steel, and money that define the Balinese cockfight.

(29 min)

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