

THE TRANSITION OF NYABONG FROM CULTURAL IDENTITY TO ILLEGAL ECONOMY IN SARAWAK, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT: *Nyabong or cockfighting has been a traditional practice among the Ibans in Sarawak, Malaysia. However, vast changes have taken place in this practice to-date. It has been a favourite past-time hobby of the Ibans since the 1800s but has emerged as a social evil lately. Nevertheless, the innovations in this practice have led to its sustainability as an illegal globalised income generating activity often at the expense of cruelty on the cockerels. This study seeks to find the extent of this practice as a source of business and the types of innovations evolved. Purposive sampling research method was used where the game players were interviewed and observations made. It was found that cockfighting has become a major business for many players. They are also involved in illegal cock trafficking from Thailand and Indonesia. It is now practiced in secretive places with heavy bets placed on the lives of these poor cockerels. The government law enforcing agencies regularly crack-down their dens and rings. This study recommends stricter laws imposed on this illegal business to stop this cruel innovation of business sustainability.*

Keywords: Nyabong, cockfighting, culture, economic, Iban, Sarawak, Malaysia

1. INTRODUCTION

The Iban community represents one of the biggest ethnicities in the state of Sarawak followed by the Chinese, Malays, Bidayus and so forth. Within the Iban community itself, it is divided into different dialects such as the Balau, Sebuyau and Lemanak just to name a few. These communities still hold strong to their identities traditionally through various and unique customs [1]. The cockfight also known as Nyabong are usually one of the traditional activities held among Iban men of the villages during this season of Gawai Dayak. A leader will be elected as referee of the event as well as lay down ground rules. According to researcher [2], the cockfight traditionally was a well-known past time activity among the Iban community. Even so that they recognize close details like the type of feathers and scales of the chicken feet that will bring them luck and eventually to victory. Hence, our study will describe Nyabong in the modern context in the village of Skim Skrang in Sri Aman. Skim Skrang was named based on the words Skim which meant new settlement and Skrang which was the name of the river located nearest to the village. Before the existence of the village was a thick forest between the districts of Engkelili and Lubok Antu. Whereby, the government at that time decided to create a settlement for the people there during the Indonesian Confrontation in the 60s. The village was then established in 1964, with villagers who originally came from Hulu Batang Ai which was located on the borders of Sarawak and West Kalimantan. There was about 11 longhouses that were moved into the village at that time. Today, there are about 1000 people residing in the village where the majority of them are of Iban descent. The village is located near the main road that leads to Miri from the Kuching district. There is one pengu, and 17 tuai rumah that resides in the longhouses respectively. The village is also well equipped with facilities like a primary school, clinic, library, police station. Main economic activities involved by most villagers in agriculture and others in construction.

2. Problem Statement

Although a long-time tradition, cockfights are still one of the customs practiced among the Iban community even till this day. However, there are changes that have taken place within the custom itself. One of the biggest changes that occurred is that it is no longer an occasional past time activity, however a source of income. Villagers began

placing bets to see which cockerel wins the fight. Moreover, not only the Ibans are involved but the Chinese and other ethnicities as well of people of various backgrounds. Fights are taken at serious levels, taking place over the weekends. Police have also raided the scene in several occurrences yet this does not stop anyone from carrying on the fights. Now it is all made in secret, not publicly as before; planned and executed well but much more exhilarating today than it was traditionally. However, from what we have observed, such activity that is supposed to be rich in the traditional belief of the Iban, has become illegal in the eyes of the law and has the possibility of breaching the security of the society. It is to our interest that we propose questions to help us understand this issue further. Firstly, why is this activity still taking place even when it is illegal? Money or source of income may be a common answer to this but there is an element of unity among villagers that made the activity a norm in the community which will be discussed further in our research. Secondly, how did this culture underwent the transition of being a past time activity into a source of income for the villagers? It is important to analyse the historical context of such activity that contribute to the changes in tradition to situate with current times and predict its future for the betterment of society.

3. Research Questions

Cockfighting originated from most Southeast Asia before making its way to Europe, United Kingdom and America. Roosters were one of the livestock carried in vessels during the 18th and 19th centuries as living food source and eventually a source of economic exchange at the ports [3]. According to researcher [5], before the existence of the cockfighting sport, cocks were admired animals among the community in ancient Greek and Rome. They became animals of worship as he wrote in his account: "an ancient example of worshipping: Cockfighting occurred in the temples and the dead bird which lost the battle was prepared to be presented to the Gods. The bird would be placed in a gold cauldron, soaked in gums and spices. Then, its body was burned on an altar and its ashes were placed in a golden pot or urn"[5]. Historically, cockfighting was known to be a past time activity among villagers before it became illegal. One of the main reasons is because of gambling involved and the usage of sharp cuffs which injures the cocks becomes the cause of animal

cruelty. According to his famous account on the "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" in the 50's, researcher [10] had opened various discussions on how cockfighting should or should not be regarded as part of culture. To apply this in the modern context especially, it is difficult to say that cockfighting is a culture yet it is not since it has become a globalised economic activity. In another account by Leon L. Gardner in the 30's, Filipinos regarded cockfights to be a national sport. Rearing cocks were an obligation for competitors and there was still a practice of the placement of bets.

In his study of the Balinese cockfight, Geertz discovered the unique meaning of the cockfights to the villagers. To them the cocks were a symbols of masculinity and represented detachable penises. The word sabung itself was metaphoric for "hero, warrior, champion, man of parts, political candidate, dandy, lady-killer or tough guy." (p.5) it was a clear symbolic representation of men solving their disputes or wars of ego with the means of cockfights. As Geertz puts it: "Along with everything else that the Balinese see in fighting cocks- themselves, their social order, abstract hatred, masculinity, demonic power- they also see the archetype of status virtue, the arrogant, resolute, honor-mad player with real fire, the ksatria prince." (p. 23). Moreover, he also mentions that it was the gain of status that was important for the community rather than the economic activity itself. More importantly he also relates to the reasons the cockfights are held which were to solve disputes, held open discussions and entertainment. In his words: "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong." (p.29) It was in his point of view that cockfighting is a culture for the Balinese community. According to researcher [5], who conducted a similar observation of the modern cockfights on the Indonesian island of Kundur, he compared Geertz's idea of cockfights as culture to that of what he observed which was merely game fowl for money and women. Lindquist concluded that although the game did bring people of various backgrounds and systems of values in a room together, they rather engage in this illicit form of economic activity than to engage in real conversation and exchange of values.

Yet in certain cases, cockfighting is still seen as a means of cultural identity rather than economic activity. In an account by researcher [7] against animal cruelty: cockfighters do become nationalist as she wrote: "Cockfighting enthusiasts were cultural nationalists—indeed, cockfight nationalists—who defended their right to fight as a right to preserve their cultural heritage and a right to citizenship and self-determination. Similarly, anti-cockfighting activists implemented their own culturally inflected ideals of proper assimilability and nation building to create an empire of benevolence and animal kindness." Gambling was and still is a much known habitual trait from the Chinese community. In a study conducted by researchers [8], the first accounts of Chinese gambling took place during the reigns of Xia (2000.1500 B.C.), Shang (1700-1027 B.C.) and Chou (800-256 B.C.). Dynasties. Cockfights were one of the illicit activities practiced at these times. Moreover, it became an economic activity at a point of time especially during the Qing dynasty where the country kept losing wars and needed to keep a stable economy. It is believed that most of the influence of

gambling in today's cockfighting activities originated from the Chinese community who live in those regions. Researcher [5] also mentioned that the betterers who were gambling at that time of the cockfight was Chinese Singaporean men. In our study among the villagers of Skim Skrang, we will emphasize mainly on the significance of the cockfights to the villagers, furthermore we will investigate the cause of the transition of this culture into an illegal activity. We will also account the historical context of the existence of cockfighting in the village. Thus, the questions arise are what are the significance of 'Nyabong' in the context of the Dayak Community in Sri Aman? What are the factors that caused the transition of this culture? Next, what are the process, preparation and conduct of the activity?

4. Purpose of study

Nyabong or cockfighting has been a traditional practice among the Ibans in Sarawak, Malaysia. However, vast changes have taken place in this practice to-date. It has been a favourite past-time hobby of the Ibans since the 1800s but has emerged as a social evil lately. Nevertheless, the innovations in this practice have led to its sustainability as an illegal globalised income generating activity often at the expense of cruelty on the cockerels. This study seeks to find the extent of this practice as a source of business and the types of innovations evolved. Purposive sampling research method was used where the game players were interviewed and observations made.

5. Research methods

5.1 Population and Sampling

The current population in Skim Skrang were estimated to be around 1110 people. It was difficult to acquire the whole population to participate therefore we took a sample the population to participate in this research. Hence, the final results or findings were based on the selected sample size and techniques used. For this research, we decided to use non-probability sampling. The non-probability sampling conducted were purposive and convenience sampling. Purposive and convenience sampling are two different sampling techniques however interrelated with each other.

5.2 Purposive sampling and convenience sampling

In our research, we used expert sampling whereby we interviewed those whom are experts in their respective skills. For the purposive sampling, we interviewed an old man who had experiences in nyabong activity for more than 30 years. On top of that, we also interviewed the Headman regarding the history of Skim Skrang. Besides that, one of our respondents, Nenek Tik who is 72 years old and was the first generation that lived at Skim Skrang. We also used convenience sampling to whom we encountered and asked their permission to participate in our research. For this research, our respondents were 6 locals which consisted of 3 key informants, and 3 adults and youths who were involved in nyabong.

5.3 Data collection

Questionnaire was the most common interview schedule used in most research. The questionnaire that were used in this research are organized systematically to gain information from the local community. We used open-ended questions which were not limited for the respondents and can be further explained by the respondent. Key informants were questioned through in-depth interviews. This in-depth interview enabled us to communicate face to face with our key informant to provide a better

understanding for our research. The key informants were the Headman of Skim Skrang, the veteran in nyabong for almost 30 years, Nenek Tik and 3 adults who participated in nyabong.

5.4 Participant observation

Participant observation allowed us to understand or explore the local community life. We especially could gather information of the way of life and surrounding environment of the village through observation methods. As we could only spend about half day during fieldwork, observation methods helped us to gather more additional information and it enhanced the validity of some data which we collected via interviews. In addition to this, one of our group mates took photographs to show the actual situation of nyabong. Those photographs were evidence to prove the real situation of the village and selected photographs have been included in this research to elaborate event.

5.5 Ethical issues during research

During the conduct the research, researchers were aware about the topic which involved illegal activities and may be sensitive to discuss openly. We decided not to give the specific name of our research location. Moreover, our informants asked us not reveal their real names and faces, so that all personal information on participants, that could identify them, will remain anonymous at all times. In this research, we did not disclose the identity of a person nor disclose any information that could identify that person without having obtained, prior to the person's participation or the person's consent in writing. We were also aware to keep types of personal information storage such as audio, video tapes and picture which directly identify our informants as highly confidential content.

6. Findings and analysis

6.1 Definition of Nyabong

Nyabong is the fight between two male chickens that is reared by men in which a man brings his cockerel to be challenged against another. Each cockerel has a sharp metal gaff also known as taji attached to its' leg.

6.2 History of Nyabong

The history of Nyabong according to our respondent, began during the time of their ancestors where the Ibans lived under the same roof with the orang Panggau (beings sent from heaven). Conflicts and fights used to occur among the villagers that were difficult to resolve at that time. Even if the tuai rumah (headman) settled the problem between them, the peace only retained momentarily.

It was due to the situation that one of the ancestor or orang Panggau known as Sengalang Burung came to resolve the issue through the means of cockfighting. After the fight was over, the party at the losing end must ask for forgiveness from the winning party in which in return the winning party must accept and forgive in order to maintain peace between them. It was then that cockfighting was a medium to maintain social relationships among villagers. For instance, during the Gawai Dayak festival (festival of the harvest), cockfights are held as a sign of welcoming guests to the longhouses as well as a form of bebuti (entertainment). Besides that, cockfights are also held as a sign of respect for the deceased and for certain occasions such as Gawa or Gawai Kenyalang. Moreover, cockfights also became a medium for solving conflicts with property such as trees that bore fruits which were located between two households since agriculture was prominent during

those times. The winner from the cockfight battle will have access to the fruit tree and his household as well as for the generations that comes after him.

6.3 Types of cock fighters

The cockerels that are used for cockfighting may vary based on the colour of its feathers and the origin of the cockerel. Each cockerel is categorized according to 5 types or colour in which has its' own unique names such as Biring (red), Burik (speckled), Labang (white), Kelabo (grey), Ejau (striped) and Chicas (imported from Thailand and Phillipines).

6.4 Items used during the cockfights

A metal gaff known as taji ias attached to the leg of the cockerel in which it will be used to attack its opponent. There are two types of taji that can be used which is either taji rasuk or taji cincin which will be worn at the claw. Taji sulat on the other hand is worn at the sole of its feet. The cockerel is also given a pill in which enables it to withstand pain if it were stabbed, becomes very aggressive and will not become weary easily. The pil can be obtain from local Chinese medicine shops.

6.5 Process of Nyabong.

Days before the actual fight, the cockerel is released from its cage to be pegged for a week. Every evening it will be put to challenge with other roosters to test its agility to fight also known as bebintis in Iban. On the day of the fight, the cockerel is bathed and cleaned. It is then given the pill to be consumed hours before the fight. Once the fight takes place, it is by fate whether the cockerel wins or loses the fight. After the fight, if the cockerel is lightly injured, it will be taken for treatment by its owner. But if it has died during the fight, it will be thrown away, however of it was not given the pill it may be eaten by the owner and his household.

6.6 Transition of culture (Traditional to Illegal)

According to our informant, cockfights involved money in 1960 where the Chinese joined the Ibans to watch the cockfights. He added that the Chinese at that particular time were only interested in money. So they had a major influence in gambling towards the Iban people at that particular area in Skim Skrang. During early 1960's, they were only betting RM1 in the cockfights which at that time the amount was quite a lot. Nowadays, the amount of betting can be up to thousands of ringgits. However, cockfighting was a norm and even was illegal in Malaysia since 1909 [8]. While in the 21st century, cockfights are well planned by the local community and are held every weekend at secret locations. It was not like a past time where the cockfights were held publicly on special occasions. In that particular area at Skim Skrang, not only Iban and Chinese people "participate" in cockfighting but also joined by the rest of the Dayak community. This was the starting point where the traditional elements in cockfighting diminish day by day thus becoming illegal. But the real issue here is that the men who are in charge of the cock fighters do not see the activity as part of their cultural heritage.

6.7 Blood and Violence

Blood and violence are the suitable words to describe animal cruelty in cock fight. Blood here can be interpreted as two different meanings. One is the blood in the cock fighters. In this particular research, only men were involve as cock fighters. The Ibans have a strong obligation in taking care and training their rooster thus reflects their

masculinity in cockfighting. This finding is similar with Philippine community, wherever one goes in the Philippine Islands, researcher [9]: “saw the bare-footed and ragged Filipino with his pet cock under his arm or squatted by the roadside or by his miserable nipe shack, training it in the essentials of fighting. This cock is his most beloved possession, the hope of his financial prosperity and also his unflinching devotion.”

The second blood is the blood of the rooster. Whether realized or not the rooster becomes the victim for the entertainment of the other. The sad part is where the rooster is bleeding and can't move to get up. This is because it has been stabbed by a sharp knife on the rooster feet which they call taji. Taji is one of the important equipment used in modern cockfights to hurt or maybe kill the opponent. The death or injury of the rooster is also a strong reason for cockfights to be illegal. As Malaysia experienced modernization, cockfighting also underwent great changes. If people in the past only used rice or worm to feed their rooster, people today “feed” their rooster with medicine. The function of the medicine as mentioned is to boost the rooster achievement when it fights. This obviously shows the animals' welfare is slowly fading through cockfighting. Thus, cock fighting is illegal under Prevention of Animals Act 1953 to ban any activity from torturing any animals causing unnecessary suffering or pain to it. Not to mention, whatever law implemented by governments all over the world to ban this activity created controversial issues all over the world among nationalist who support cockfights as cultural heritage and animal activist who see cock fight as violence.

6.8 Big business

Nowadays, cockfights are accompanied with gambling. As the cockfight begins, the people “behind” the event also begin to place their bets. There is only one table opened, set for betting. Samchung, holo and skipoi are the names of gambling activities that are famous within the local community. So, there is a situation where one will ask, “How much?” and the other names a number. These are called “side bets” which ranges from RM20 or RM50 to sometimes a hundred for one game. When both sides agree, each person puts the money on the table and one person secures the money till cockfighting ends. They shout and support their cocks and pray for good luck. In a day, there will be at least 3 games which gives them the opportunity to bet for the next game if they lost the previous bet. They become addicted as they only depend on luck because they know nothing about cockfights except for gambling. Though gambling is illegal in Malaysia under Prevention of Gambling Act 1953, they risk up to six months in jail and a fine of not more RM5,000 however still they turn a blind eye for money in gambling. Not only that, a group beside the gambling table will enjoy eating snacks and smoking cigarettes. There will also be sales of alcohol to this group. Some of them will drink while others shout while watching their favourite game. Surprisingly, they are a few children between the ages of 9-12 years' old who follow their fathers to watch this illegal activity. Some of them support their fathers who are involved in the game and some have no idea what is cockfighting about so they just enjoy watching. No one really pays attention to the impacts of the illegal activities conducted in front of children. To make the situation more intense, the place is filled with mafias or gangsters. Some of them make

cockfighting as their main source of income. They control the place and keep surveillance to make sure there are no fights between the cock fighters or the people behind the game. The situation during the cockfights is usually full of joy and contentment.

6.9 Reasons for gambling

Based on our respondents, there are several reasons that they chose to gamble in cockfights. Firstly, it intrigues them that it is a game purely played by luck. Therefore, there is an adrenaline rush one they have won the bet based on the winning rooster. Moreover, it is also due to the influence of their environment such as their relatives and friends that find cockfighting as a means of income and entertainment. In terms of income, cockfighting was easy money made, whereby placing bets do not require any form of strained activity.

Besides that, cockfights are believed to make the environment merrier than tensed as it was initially assumed to be.

6.9.1 Cock trafficking

Another changes noted was from the type of cockerel. In the past, cockfights only involved local roosters. But now to make cockfighting more lucrative, the “good fighting cocks” are illegally imported from neighbouring countries such as Thailand and Indonesia. Our informant added that the cockerels can be sold for more than RM5000 in Malaysia. Take note that the value is not for the fighting cock but only for a chick as they will take care of the chick till they can train the cockerel for the fight. This shows that cockfighting is an ongoing economic activity.

6.9.2 The debate of culture and economic activity

Regardless of the illegal activities taking place, our respondents emphasized a lot more on the impacts that the cockfighting activity attributes which is happiness and unity among men. To them it was important to make friends than to fight with the awareness that everyone in the room consisted of different backgrounds, ethnicity, age and abilities. Irrespective of what is taking place, there is still meaning given to the event by the partakers such as how our respondents interpret it. Although Geetz and Lindquist has contrasting views on both categories, there are situations such as the Iban community in Skim Skrang that fuses both of these together. Therefore, we do agree that there is a need of preservation of culture as well as an ongoing need of income which is where the illegal activities take place.

7.0 Conclusion

Based on our findings, we realized that although cockfighting is now an illicit economic activity, there is still a significance attached to the activity based on this case study in Skim Skrang. For a community well known for being rich in tradition and culture, Nyabong in a way does help them remember the practices of their ancestors. Moreover, it is still a significant activity as most of them believe that having cockfights, especially on celebrations in the village brings unity among the Iban men.

Therefore, we take a stand that cockfighting is a unique culture that does identify a community in their social context. From the way the process of preparation, steps taken during and after cockfights are similar in most societies but they have different connotation in their context. Despite the fact of the activity becoming illegal, the current generation hopes that this activity will still be

preserved in the hopes of teaching the values that cockfighting brings to the new generation.

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APPENDIX



Figure 1: Beginning of the cockfight where the owners of each cockerel places them in position



Figure 2: Cockerels fights with each other (nyabung ayam)



Figure 3: The winner and loser at the end of the fight



Figure 4: Blood from one of the cockerels because of the use of taji