

## Cockfighting in later life: A qualitative inquiry into elderly Filipinos' gambling experiences

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**Abstract:** The surviving passion for cockfighting or *sabong* among Filipinos has made it a culturally and legally acceptable form of gambling. As an established cultural phenomenon, *sabong* has largely influenced the ways its practitioners make a living. It is in this context that this qualitative study explored the experiences of two old Filipinos who had been engaging in the blood sport for a very long time. This study employed an in-depth interview technique and was guided by the principles of an indigenous research method known as *pagtatanong-tanong* or 'asking questions.' Through a thematic analysis of the responses obtained from the interviews, this study has surfaced six key themes that characterized the informants' experiences: (1) cockfighting as an all-consuming pastime, (2) cockfighting as a thrill-seeking activity (3) family influence on cockfighting, (4) cockpits as venues for socializing, (5) betting as a way of earning money, and (6) gambling as a family issue. Such experiences could be regarded as both positive and negative illustrations and consequences of gambling in later life.

**Keywords:** cockfighting, gambling, elderly Filipinos, Philippines, thematic analysis

### INTRODUCTION

Cockfighting is an old sport that has survived centuries despite the controversy surrounding its practice. Locally known as *sabong* in the Philippines, this bloody contest pits two roosters of almost equal weight, which are made to fight until one of them becomes injured, is killed, or runs away. Its first documented record in the country dates back to pre-colonial times. It was the Italian chronicler Pigafetta who observed that people of Palawan owned large domestic cocks, which were not consumed but instead were raised for fighting exhibitions (Stanley 1874). Crawford (1856) further emphasized this passion for

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cockfighting among Southeast Asians, noting how it had become a popular form of gambling that existed in every Philippine island.

The enduring passion for cockfighting has made it a time-honored habit and profound form of diversion among Filipinos (Alabanza, Gonzaga, and Obligacion 1979). More than a pastime, *sabong* has been viewed from different critical perspectives, namely as a representation of ‘cultural degradation,’ as ‘political resistance,’ as a ‘nationalist symbol,’ and as a condemnation of the powerful authorities (Davis 2013, 557). At the most evident characterization of cockfighting, it was described as an addictive vice by Filipino nationalist Rizal (1961) in his famous novel *Noli Me Tangere*. After all, a crucial aspect of this game is the betting system that is driven by its unpredictability, resulting in a potential loss of money (Hidalgo 1994). Currently, the legality of cockfighting in the country has resulted in its continuous growth as a billion pesos industry, which comprises a wide range of production activities driven by the demands for veterinary products and cockfighting equipment (Samson 2017).

Substantial information on *sabong* has been well-documented in books and academic journals. Bankoff (1991) offered a historical analysis of cockfighting as a form of gambling that had penetrated the fabric of Philippine society during the colonial times. He explained how it rose to popularity, particularly among the Tagalogs, and became a motivating factor for developing a liking to other gambling forms. In his interesting characterization of *sabong*, Lansang (1966) explained the intimate relationship between a Filipino cocker and his gamefowl, highlighting how the latter is constantly given special treatment prior to its fight and symbolizing a relationship, which what Geertz (2016) called ‘deep play.’

Furthermore, Alabanza, Gonzaga, and Obligacion (1979) conducted a qualitative inquiry that explored the characteristics and experiences of *kristo*’s or cockpit’s bet-takers. They found that the job of a *kristo* requires competencies that could only be obtained from experiential learning and constant training to harness their mathematical and memorization skills. In his ethnographic study, Wong (2010) detailed the actions involved in a cockfight in Cagayan Valley, illustrating how the game represented a fight within a clan and how it could be used as a tool for resolving interpersonal conflicts.

While there are interesting and scholarly examinations of *sabong* as a cultural phenomenon, there is still a need to explore it as a form of gambling that particularly influences the experiences and actions of

Filipino cockers. Furthermore, studies were already conducted overseas to address a specific gap in the literature concerning people who gamble in later life (Nixon et al. 2005, Botzet 2005). In light of this gap in Filipino gambling research, this study qualitatively explored the lives and experiences of old individuals who actively participated in gambling, particularly in cockfighting. This study dealt with specific issues such as reasons for involvement in cockfighting, means of earning money through it, the amount of bet spent on the game, and effects of cockfighting on a cocker's relationship with his family.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employed an in-depth interview technique, which provided the researcher with a vast amount of information not usually revealed in using quantitative methods. Explaining in depth the sensitive issues is done more effectively through the use of qualitative research methods (Dickson-Swift, James, and Kippen 2005). Moreover, according to Li (2008, 100), in-depth interviewing uncovers meanings of gambling through an examination of the informants' perspectives and interpretations.

This study also applied certain aspects of an indigenous research method called *pagtatanong-tanong* or 'asking questions.' By some means, this study employed the following principles outlined in *pagtatanong-tanong* such as (1) establishing *pakikipagpalagayang-loob* or mutual trust with the informants, (2) interviewing at time and venues appropriate for and convenient to the informants, (3) avoiding controversial questions at the start of fieldwork, (4) full use of native dialect in asking questions, and (5) *pakikiramdam* or feeling a special kind of sensitivity towards the informants (Pe-Pua, 1989, 155-158).

Two elderly individuals, who engaged in cockfighting, participated in audiotaped semi-structured interviews. Both informants were male, were over 80 years of age, and were residing in the rural town of Pandi in Bulacan province, Philippines. They came from households that were middle-income earners. The first interviewee, Philip, had (10) children. All his children already had their own families. The second interviewee, Oscar, had nine (9) children who also already had their own families. Both informants had relatives who were also cockers and breeders, including their fathers, brothers, and nephews. At their young ages, they were already working as farmers. Oscar also worked as a 'jeepney' (a popular mode of transportation in the country) driver for several years.

The fieldwork was conducted during an evening when the informants already had their rest in their homes. Both informants were oriented about the objective of the study, and informed consent was obtained from them. All the research questions were asked in Tagalog, following the protocol employed in *pagtatanong-tanong* method. Interview excerpts that were chosen to be reported under each theme were translated from Filipino into English and back-translated. In reporting these selected responses, fictitious names were assigned to both informants. After each core question, follow-up questions were asked to probe more in-depth on the informants' gambling experiences. The researcher familiarized himself with and reviewed the interview transcriptions. Following the process outlined by Aronson (1995) in performing a thematic analysis, interview responses that showed similarities and patterns were clustered under several categories to produce sub-themes and themes.

## RESULTS

After a thorough analysis of the interview responses, the following themes emerged: (1) cockfighting as an all-consuming pastime, (2) cockfighting as a thrill-seeking activity (3) family influence on cockfighting, (4) cockpits as venues for socializing, (5) betting as a way of earning money, and (6) gambling as a family issue.

### *Cockfighting as an all-consuming pastime*

Cockfighting appeared in both interviews to be a pastime activity. It could provide elderly enjoyment while watching several cockfights. Philip suffered the loss of his wife, and cockfighting became his diversion. He described his feeling whenever he engaged in cockfighting: "I am just entertaining myself. In doing so, I have to pay the entrance fee. I am having fun whenever I watch cockfights. But I don't spend much money when placing my bets. I just stay there for a long time."

For Oscar, cockfighting also became his diversion even if it would cost him his health and money: "I cannot understand myself why I cannot avoid it even if I am always losing. It is like already my diversion. But there are times when I experience body pain. Aside from that, those times whenever I lose hurt my pocket. I just cannot understand. Cockfighting makes me feel light and heavy at the same time."

Despite attempts to eliminate cockfighting as their vice, both informants still could not get gambling out of their minds. With money at hand, there was always a yearning to go to the nearest cockpit. Thus, cockfighting kept them addicted. Oscar even labeled cockfighting as *may sa demonyo* or 'like work of a demon' due to constant conflict with their conscience in spending money. He commented about this addictive potential of gambling: "The problem with cockfighting is that it is so inviting that it is already becoming a vice. For example, whenever I have money, I am tempted to leave the house. I cannot sleep. There are instances when I am resting for a while, I would always think of it. That's the problem."

In the past, due to their busy lifestyle working as a farmer and a jeepney driver, respectively, Philip and Oscar did not venture into other gambling activities aside from cockfighting. Cockfighting remained as the only form of gambling they knew. Hence, when asked what other forms of gambling activities they knew and what they were busy at doing in the past, both responded: "None. We only know about *sabong*. We are also busy working aside from doing cockfighting."

When each of them was asked whether they were raising gamecocks, only Oscar mentioned that he was raising local breeds of rooster despite the high cost of taking care of them: "In the past, I was able to raise 20 cocks. Nowadays, because of the high cost of feeds, I only have five cocks left. They are carefully tended."

#### *Cockfighting as a thrill-seeking activity*

Both informants viewed cockfighting as a thrill-seeking game of chance. The element of luck was usually present since the thrill of outwitting fate is engaging yet challenging to do. For Philip, his wins and losses were unpredictable. Oscar also acknowledged such unpredictability of the game: "Win. Lose. I don't know. Right away, I would expect that my bet would win, but it turns out that it would be on the losing side. There are bets that I would expect to lose, but they would turn out to be the winners. That's the reason why it is so hard to wager in cockfighting."

Choosing good cockfights to bet on is vital for cockers who want to prove their luck of winning. Both informants would not try to bet on almost all cockfights. For instance, out of 10 matches, informant Oscar would only wager on five matches. This was also Philip's stand on betting. They remarked:

"I would usually bet for five times. If there are ten cockfights, I would just choose which to bet my money on. I am not the type who always places bets." (Oscar)

"I would place my bet if I really want to. When I accompany my friends to the cockpit, I do not really wager a high amount of money." (Philip)

The highest amount of the informants' bets would range from around a thousand pesos (20 USD; for Philip) to 3,300 pesos (59 USD; for Oscar).

### *Family influence on cockfighting*

In their accounts of their early experiences of cockfighting, the informants recounted how their relatives became factors for developing a liking for cockfighting. Philip told this story about going with his father for a cockfight: "When I was around 30 years old, I was always brought by my father to the cockpit arena. We would go as far as Meycauyan (presently, a city in Bulacan province). There, I witnessed how a cocker passed out after his game fowl lost in a fight. What we did was that we gave him porridge. I actually thought he would already die. I saw that he could no longer take the situation, that he could no longer place even a small amount of bet."

For Oscar, he started engaging in cockfighting when he already had children but stopped with this activity for a while to work as a jeepney driver. He went back to engaging in *sabong* when all his children had their own families. He also recounted his first few cockfights. He recalled the times when he went to the cockpit even during the wakes of his relatives and brought with him the gamecocks they owned. He explained how these instances confirmed his belief in the element of luck present in cockfighting. As what he verbalized:

"It was during the wake of my father when I engaged in cockfighting. I surprisingly won. I also remember that time when I brought the game fowl owned by my brother. I also won. One of my grandchildren also died. I also brought his game fowl, which eventually won. All of the game fowls won in their first fights. However, on the next day, when I tried to participate in a cockfight, I would usually lose. It should have been a one-time fight."

*Cockpits as venues for socializing*

The frequency of going to a cockpit depended largely on the availability of money and a travel companion. Both informants were engaging in cockfighting on a weekly basis. There were instances when they would go together. But if Philip's nephew invited his uncle to go with him, the elderly would accept the invitation. With Oscar's case, he would sometimes go to a cockpit alone since he was busy working on the farm. But before, whenever he had money, it was common for him to leave the house to go to the nearest cockpit. They remarked:

"Every time someone invites me to go to the cockpit every weekend, I would join him. That's it." (Philip)

"Now, it is not so often that I go to the cockpit since I have work to focus on. In the past, I went there regularly for as long as I had money. Nowadays, I sometimes go there since I have a lot of things to do on the farm. I consider cockfighting now as a diversion. After all, in the past, I only considered it as my source of income." (Oscar)

The commonly accessible venues of cockfighting they went to were the towns of Pandi, Guiguinto, and Balagtas and the city of Meycauayan, which are all located in the province of Bulacan. Travel time would usually range from 30 minutes to one hour. Often, both informants commuted going to these licensed cockpits. They did not mind commuting as what Philip pointed out: "Why would I complain? It is just a small amount of money that I have to spend."

Since both informants would only go to a cockpit every week, they would make the most of the time amusing themselves on cockfights. Their whole-day stay at the cockpit would be devoted to not just watching or joining cockfights but also having lunch and snack with fellow cockers:

"After all, I usually leave the house early in the morning. I arrive in the afternoon. I take my lunch near the cockpit. I would just leave before 5:00 p.m. I do not go home without eating." (Philip)

"All day, I am just in the cockpit. Before late afternoon, I go home right away." (Oscar)

Going to a cockpit was also a chance for them to meet other cockers, mostly belonging to a younger age group. At times, they would meet practitioners of the same age as theirs. Oscar, also called 'five star' by fellow cockers due to his frequent cockfights and wins, shared his experience of meeting other old cockers: "I know the other

cockers in the arena. Most of them are already old. I do not know them by their names. A lot of them seem to know me, and they call me ‘five star.’ I think the reason behind that alias is that they commonly see me participating and winning in cockfights.”

Most of the time, the informants spent their earnings on buying viand. For Oscar, he would also unhesitatingly share a small amount from his wins to fellow cockers asking for money. Compared with money earned from a job, he regarded money earned from gambling as worthless: “If it comes from cockfighting, I do not consider it as something with great value.”

### *Betting as a way of earning money*

Compared to other cockers who could gamble thousands or even millions of pesos, both informants were aware of the consequence of instantly losing money if they gambled excessively. The win should be achieved with certainty and in moderation. In a cockfight, the wins are doubled depending on the amount of bet. For instance, Oscar would earn additional 2,000 (39 USD) pesos if he would bet 2,000 pesos. He described such certainty and moderation in winning: “Whenever I observe a cock is weak, I would just place a smaller bet. If I think it will show a good fight, I will place a bet amounting to 2,000 pesos. That is my regular bet. I do not usually place a higher bet. That is just what my heart could bear. I might have a high blood pressure if I lose.”

Early wins, as well as huge wins, were cited by informants as a cause for moderate betting due to the fear of losing more money with betting a higher amount. Philip learned from his first experience: “I remembered that day ... I placed a large bet on the cock, which I thought would give me luck. But from that time on, I would no longer want to do it again.”

Early losses were also part of the learning experience. It then became a source of strain for informant Oscar: “When I lost one time, I just felt physically weak.” Wins also largely depended on whether the gamecocks were considered *lyamado* (favorite) or *dehado* (underdog). For Philip, if he had *kursunada* (liking) on one cock, which he thought to be *lyamado*, then he would not hesitate to try his luck: “If the game is good, I would really place my bet. But sometimes, if both gamecocks are imported, I usually have a hard time deciding where to put my bet. If I think that a gamecock carries luck, I will give it a try. That’s me. But if I am not really sure, I won’t even place a bet.”

Chasing losses also depended on having a *kursunada*. Both informants admitted that they sometimes tried to recover from their losses. If they felt they were ill-fated, they no longer attempted to bet and went home right away:

“If I lose several times, I just stop betting. But sometimes, I still try my luck if only I have a liking for a gamecock.” (Philip)

“Whenever I lose, I just decide to go home. Sometimes, I still continue betting. But if it is really a bad day for me, I just leave the cockpit.” (Oscar)

### *Gambling as a family issue*

Undeniably, cockfighting could be a constant family issue. This was an issue raised by Philip’s wife when she was still alive. Whenever Philip was asked by his father to accompany him to a cockpit, he would willingly accept such a request. It turned out then that his wife was against it, saying that his father was only teaching him how to gamble through cockfighting. He even recalled some lines from their argument: “I could not bear the fact that I would not be able to accompany my father to the cockpit. Well, he was already old. But one time, my wife told me, ‘Your father is a bad influence on you. He is teaching you how to gamble.’ I then replied to her, ‘My father is not actually teaching me to gamble. He is just inviting me to go with him. Don’t you always see that he would usually fetch me up from home?’” For Oscar, he had no problem dealing with his wife in terms of his involvement in cockfighting: “My wife has no issues with it. She is even the one who tells me, ‘Go ahead’.”

As fathers, both informants did not want their family members, particularly their sons, to learn about cockfighting and treat it as a vice. Since they had already experienced some dire consequences from engaging in cockfighting, disallowing it among family members would be the best means to prevent such effects. For Oscar, who stressed the importance of personal ‘control’ in gambling, pointed out: “I do not want them to learn about cockfighting. I have four male children. I told them, ‘do not try to learn about it, that it would be difficult for you to get away from it.’ They might not really endure life with vices. Engaging in gambling as a source of income would be very problematic. I know some individuals younger than me who seem to have no control at doing it.”

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed interesting insights into two elderly cockers' experiences, providing qualified support to the findings of qualitative studies done overseas. It is important to note that most of these studies focus on problem and pathological gamblers (Nixon et al. 2005, Botzet 2005, Dickson-Swift, James, and Kippen 2005, Jackson and Thomas 2005). The present study, however, does not address the issues of problem and pathological gambling as both informants have not been diagnosed as such type of gamblers.

Both informants considered cockfighting not just as a gambling activity but also as a form of diversion from current life stressors. This particular finding, which highlights cockfighting as a pastime that provides entertainment and escape from current life problems, supports the idea that gambling is a form of adult play that offers fun and excitement (Shaffer and Korn 2002).

In the past, a significant factor that led to developing their liking for the game at a later age was the influence of their relatives, particularly their fathers and brothers, in cockfighting. Family background has been cited as one of the reasons for developing gambling problems (Jackson and Thomas 2005). When introduced by their family members, especially at an earlier age, gambling is likely to develop and sustain even at a later age (Botzet 2005, Ohtsuka and Chan 2014).

Both informants also shared that they regularly went to cockpits weekly and made the most of their whole-day stay in the cockpit, devoting their time on eating, meeting other old cockers, watching, and joining cockfights. As pointed out by Luo and Ferguson (2017, 209), accessibility to gambling facilities is one of the factors that encourage the development of a gambling habit.

Consequently, constant engagement with cockfighting sometimes becomes a topic of argument between a couple. Gambling has been documented as one of the causes of problems in a relationship between a couple (Dickson-Swift, James, and Kippen 2005). However, it is interesting to note that it was a different situation for the other informant whose wife accepts his engagement in cockfighting.

## CONCLUSION

This qualitative study has surfaced themes that illustrate cockfighting experiences in later life. However, the informants' accounts of their experiences during their younger ages would reveal that they already developed a liking for this form of gambling, which was largely

influenced by their family members. The frequent exposure to *sabong* made them perceive it as an all-consuming and thrill-seeking pastime that offered them a source of diversion and recreation. Their early wins and their liking toward a particular game fowl contributed to their betting decisions, particularly in the context of betting in moderation. The cockpits also became their weekly venues for socializing with mostly younger cockers. However, a negative consequence of their constant engagement in *sabong* was their addiction towards it, making it a relevant issue that had to be discussed with their respective families.

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