

Deep Pockets

Notes on the Indonesian cockfight in a globalizing world

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When anthropologists Clifford and Hildred Geertz arrived in a small village on Bali in the late 1950s, they were outsiders. It was, Clifford Geertz wrote, 'as though we were not there. For them, and to a degree for ourselves, we were non-persons, specters, invisible men' (1973:412). Things changed ten days later when they visited their first cockfight.

Despite being an essential part of the 'Balinese way of life', cockfighting was deemed backward by the Indonesian government and therefore illegal. On this occasion, the police raided the event suddenly and without warning. As everyone ran in different directions, Clifford and Hildred Geertz instinctively did the same. After the dust had settled and the police had left, both were accepted by the community. Running from the police together with the villagers was, it seems, a sure sign of solidarity and good intentions.

So begins one of the most famous arrival stories in anthropological lore. Geertz goes on to argue that it is possible to understand the cockfight as a microcosm of Balinese culture. Culture should be understood as a text and the anthropologist's task is to interpret it. As he puts it in one of his most famous lines: '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.452). If one looks carefully, Balinese conceptions of self and society, status and hierarchy, are all found in and



The cockfight as a microcosm of Balinese culture

around the cockfight where the 'sentiments upon which...hierarchy rests (are) revealed in their natural colours' (p.447). This is the reason, Geertz claims, that men get involved in 'deep play' – games where the stakes, in money and status, are so high that it would appear irrational for anyone to take part in.

'Deep play' became the defining article in Geertz's version of interpretive anthropology. In the 1980s and 90s, however, Geertz sustained increasing criticism from a wide range of scholars. The most powerful critique problematised his understanding of culture as a coherent whole (Clifford 1983). Not all Balinese, it was claimed, think in the same way and there is not just one bounded 'Balinese' culture. Geertz was not merely reading a text over the shoulders of his informants, his critics claimed, he was constructing one himself.

Forty years or so after Geertz left Bali, I witnessed my own cockfight near Tanjung Batu, a small port town on the Indonesian island of Kundur in the Riau Archipelago, located just off the coast of Singapore and the Malaysian Peninsula.

In 1824, five years after the founding of Singapore, the Anglo-Dutch Treaty made the Straits of Malacca the border between the English and Dutch colonial empires, dividing the Malay Peninsula from the Riau Archipelago and creating the geographical basis for what would become Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Until recently, these borders were of limited importance. When Geertz was conducting fieldwork on Bali – Indonesia had become an independent nation only 15 years earlier – the whole Riau Archipelago was tied to the Singapore entrepot economy. Since then, regulation of the borderlands has intensified. With the transformation of Singapore into a financial hub in the 1980s, a transnational economic zone – the Growth Triangle – connects Riau, the Malaysian province of Johor and Singapore.



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The cockfight involves stakes, in money and status, that are so high that it would appear irrational for anyone to take part in.

The still largely rural island of Kundur counts 50,000 inhabitants who have mainly subsisted on rubber planting and fishing. Kundur is nowhere to be found in tourist guidebooks. Like many other islands in the region, it has been affected by the Growth Triangle project, but remains on the periphery of formal economic development. Informal change has been more obvious. Most notably, Kundur has the dubious distinction of housing some 1,000 young women in the largest brothel village in the region. Batu 7 is located seven km from Tanjung Batu and caters mainly to Singaporean tourists.

Adi is waiting when I disembark from the ferry, one of the handful of taxi drivers on the island who make a killing shuttling Singaporeans between the port and Batu 7. We are in rural areas within minutes of getting on the main road that leads out of town and circles the island. Adi tells me that a new hotel has just opened next to the brothel complex at Batu 7, while a big cockfighting ring is nearby. It turns out that most of the Singaporeans who go to Batu 7 are just as interested in gambling as in the young women.

As Adi drives past the guard post at the entrance to the brothel, he gestures with his hand towards the man sitting there, who barely lifts his head in recognition. The blue and white paint has not yet begun cracking on the wooden buildings and the large porches where the

women hang out, most of them in their late teens and early 20s. I engage in a bit of idle conversation. All of them claim to be from West Java, a recognizable pattern in cheap brothels throughout Indonesia. Near the back of the complex is a small gate leading to the cockfighting ring and I decide to have a look.

As I approach, a young man sitting in a booth takes a break from smoking his clove cigarette and points to a sign that reads in English: 'Entrance 1,000 rupiah'. As I pay, I notice a uniformed police officer standing with another man a few metres away. Recalling Geertz's introduction to Balinese society, I smile to myself, certain that I will not be running away from the police today.

As in Bali in the 1950s, cockfighting is illegal in Indonesia, but at Batu 7 the cockfighting ring is a permanent structure with a solid wooden fence surrounding the dirt floor and a thatched roof covering most of the arena. It is still early in the afternoon but it is crowded. A fight is about to begin and two middle-aged men, both with cigarettes dangling from their mouths, are preparing the cocks. Most of the 50 or so people hanging on the fences do not seem particularly excited, but a group of six elderly ethnic Chinese men with blood-shot eyes certainly have something at stake. The fight itself doesn't last for more than 30 seconds: as the cocks are released, one is almost immediately mortally wounded.



A villager on his way to a cockfight

I look at the Chinese men who are making all the noise. One bangs his head against the fence and walks towards the exit while two raise their arms in triumph. The others, neither excited nor subdued, slowly make their way toward the brothel complex as everyone turns to watch them. When I ask the man standing next to me, he tells me they are from Singapore.

Attempting some salvage ethnography, I approach the two men counting their winnings, at least a dozen one-hundred Singaporean dollar notes. 'Do you come here often?' They stare at me. 'It seems pretty quiet', I add. One of the men seems to relax, and tells me they come here every other weekend or so. When I ask why, I receive an unsurprising answer: 'We can gamble and the women are cheap. In Singapore we could never do this'. One of the men finally smiles, and says, 'Now we are going to find some women.' Before I have a chance to respond, they turn and leave.

I turn my attention to the two men in their mid-20s standing next to me, who are far more talkative when I address them in Indonesian. 'The Singaporeans make up the majority of the gamblers', they tell me, 'but sometimes people will come from Malaysia, Thailand, or Brunei.' Evidently, the only Indonesians who have enough money to compete in this context are the *tai kongs*, the men who smuggle Indonesians illegally from Kunder across the border to Malaysia.

The two men are from the island but have just been deported from Malaysia where they were working illegally for nearly two years. Most of the Indonesian men hanging out around the ring, it turns out, frequently travel to and from Malaysia looking for work, though not all of them are from Kunder. When I ask them about their future plans, they claim that 'It is only two hours across the Straits of Malacca, and there is no work to be found here anyway. Once they stop deporting people, we will go back.'

As I witnessed these events in an era and place very different from the one Geertz was a part of, I couldn't help but think the cockfight is still a helpful metaphor to understand the broader world of which it is a part. It was not, however, the particular 'culture' of Kunder that it helped me think about. What kind of homogenous culture could I possibly find in a place where Singaporean gamblers, West Javanese prostitutes and itinerant men from Kunder assemble temporarily? The cockfight in Kunder brings together people who are not primarily bound by a shared system of values, but rather engaged in an illicit economic system (cf. Roseberry 1982). We might therefore think of the cockfighting ring as a kind of 'contact zone' (Pratt 1992) where

people who have been historically separated come together, usually in contexts of inequality and subordination.

The cockfight is therefore best understood not as a story that reflects a relatively coherent system of meaning, which people tell themselves about themselves, but rather as an event in which strategies for survival and illicit desires converge in the shadows of economic globalization. It is certainly a place where meaning is being produced (or at least communication is taking place) between individuals, but in a context structured by emergent forms of inequality, and facilitated by a transnational border regime that has no clear geographical boundaries. Despite these differences – between Kunder and Bali, and between my perspective and Geertz's – the illegality of the cockfight has remained constant. What an ethnography of the cockfight suggests is that opening the black box of illegality can reveal structures of meaning and power that lead us to critical perspectives on the contemporary world.

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