



Shifting Cultural Values in Cockfighting: From Peace Ritual to Gambling in Sabu Raijua

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Article info

Received Date:

Accepted Date:

Published Date:

Keywords:*

cockfighting; cultural transformation; ritual practice; gambling; Sabu Raijua

Abstract*

This study examines the transformation of cockfighting, locally known as pei'u manu, within the Sabu Raijua community of East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. Traditionally, the practice functioned as a sacred ritual aimed at preventing intergroup violence and restoring communal harmony. Over time, however, its meaning and function have shifted under the influence of modernity, economic pressures, and changing social values. This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach, utilizing participant observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. Data were analyzed thematically to identify shifts in cultural meanings associated with the practice. The findings reveal a significant shift from a communal, sacred ritual centered on peace, morality, and cultural identity to a practice increasingly associated with entertainment, gambling, and economic interests. This study contributes to broader discussions on cultural transformation by demonstrating how local traditions are reinterpreted under contemporary socio-economic conditions, often leading to the reconfiguration of their original meanings.

1. Introduction

Cockfighting has long existed in many societies and carries meanings that extend beyond entertainment. In various cultural contexts, it functions as a social performance, symbolic contest, and ritual practice tied to collective identity and moral order (Arshad et al., 2018). It should therefore be understood not merely as a leisure activity but as a complex cultural expression involving symbolic meaning, human-animal relationships, and social values (Sanjatmiko, 2021).

In Indonesia, cockfighting is embedded in various regional traditions and is often associated with values such as bravery, honor, spirituality, and social belonging (Wardhana et al., 2021). More broadly, traditional practices involving animals frequently reflect deeper cultural meanings, treating animals as symbolic or quasi-social subjects within community life (Orr, 2015). One community in which this practice holds cultural significance is the Sabu community of Sabu Raijua, East Nusa Tenggara. In this context, cockfighting, locally known as pei'u manu, was not originally oriented toward gambling or commercial entertainment but was embedded in customary life as a symbolic mechanism for resolving conflict and restoring peace.

The cultural significance of cockfighting in Sabu has deep historical roots. Traditionally, it functioned as a non-violent alternative to intergroup conflict, redirecting human aggression into a controlled symbolic contest (Strathern & Stewart, 2022). Such practices align with broader anthropological findings that rituals often serve to maintain social cohesion and prevent the escalation of conflict (Suprpto, 2017). In this sense, cockfighting represented not only symbolic violence under social control but also a communal effort to preserve harmony.

However, cultural practices are not static. Under the influence of modernization and economic pressures, traditional practices often undergo significant transformation, frequently shifting toward more individualistic and economically oriented forms (Donzelli, 2023). In many cases, practices that were once communal and symbolic are reinterpreted as forms of entertainment or economic activity, reflecting changing social priorities (Dodoo, 2021).

Recent studies have further highlighted the evolving meanings of cockfighting in contemporary contexts. In particular, cockfighting has increasingly been associated with gambling systems, where decision-making involves a combination of knowledge, strategy, and economic rationality (Morota, 2024). These developments suggest that cockfighting today cannot be separated from broader socio-economic transformations that reshape its purpose and significance (Sudirman & Putra, 2024).

Despite the growing body of research on cockfighting, most studies have focused on its symbolic meaning, legal implications, or its role in gambling practices in different cultural contexts. While these studies provide valuable insights, they often overlook how the cultural values of cockfighting evolve over time within specific local communities. In particular, limited attention has been given to how cockfighting practices shift from sacred and peace-oriented rituals into economically driven activities in contemporary settings.

Based on this gap, the present study aims to examine the transformation of cultural values associated with cockfighting in the Sabu Raijua community. Specifically, it seeks to analyze how a practice once rooted in peace-making, moral order, and communal solidarity has gradually been reinterpreted as entertainment, gambling, and economic activity. By doing so, this study contributes to broader discussions on cultural transformation and the changing meanings of traditional practices in the context of modern socio-economic pressures.

2. Research Methods

This study employed a qualitative ethnographic design to explore changing cultural values surrounding cockfighting in the Sabu Raijua community in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia. An ethnographic approach was considered appropriate, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of cultural practices, meanings, and social interactions within their natural context.

The research was conducted over three to four months, enabling sustained engagement with the community. Participants were selected purposively based on their knowledge of local traditions and their involvement in cockfighting practices. A total of five participants were involved in this study, including community elders, cultural leaders, and local residents who were familiar with both traditional and contemporary forms of cockfighting.

Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Observations were carried out in social settings where cockfighting was performed or discussed, allowing the researcher to capture both practices and interactions. The interviews focused on participants' perspectives regarding the historical background, cultural meanings, transformation processes, and current perceptions of cockfighting. All interviews were conducted with participants' consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This process involved repeated reading of the data, coding of significant statements, identification of recurring patterns, and the development

of thematic categories. The analysis aimed to interpret how cultural meanings have shifted over time in relation to broader social and economic changes.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was employed by comparing information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentary sources. This approach strengthened the validity of the analysis and reduced potential bias in interpretation.

3. Discussions

The findings indicate that the cultural values associated with cockfighting in Sabu Raijua have undergone substantial transformation. In the past, cockfighting was primarily understood as a customary ritual intended to prevent direct violence between individuals or groups. Rather than functioning as a form of amusement, it served as a symbolic mechanism for resolving conflicts and restoring peace. In this traditional setting, the practice reflected collective rather than individual interests.

Based on the interview data, the origin of cockfighting among the Savunese community was closely related to the community's effort to replace human warfare with a symbolic fight between roosters. Violence that might otherwise have occurred between people was redirected into a controlled ritual contest involving animals. The practice was therefore not originally designed for profit or entertainment, but for peace-making and social balance.

The data further reveal that traditional cockfighting was supported by several interrelated cultural values, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Cultural Values of Traditional Cockfighting Practice

Tradition	Cultural Values	Insights
Past Tradition	Religious	Ritual ceremonies, prayers, and purification of the self and the environment were central. These practices were intended to maintain a connection with spiritual beliefs and to seek divine guidance or blessings for peace.
Past Tradition	Social	Cooperation and unity were central values. The community collectively participated in the cockfighting ritual, reinforcing social bonds. Cockfighting thus became a communal activity that brought people together for a common purpose, namely, safeguarding peace.
Past Tradition	Morality	Traditional cockfighting also came with a moral imperative. The prohibition of gambling in the past highlights a clear distinction between what was seen as morally acceptable, namely, peace-seeking rituals, and what was condemned, namely, gambling. Morality was tightly linked with maintaining social order and ensuring the ritual's sanctity.
Past Tradition	Cultural	The practice was culturally significant because it was considered part of the community's shared identity. Rituals such as cockfighting were carried out with the understanding that these traditions preserved cultural integrity while maintaining a clear boundary against harmful activities, such as gambling, which could disrupt the social fabric.

Source: Primary data analysis.

As shown in Table 1, the cultural values associated with traditional cockfighting are strongly oriented toward collective well-being. The religious dimension emphasizes ritual practices such as prayer and purification, reflecting a belief system that connects social harmony with spiritual order. Socially, the practice reinforces cooperation and unity by involving collective participation in maintaining peace. Morally, the absence of gambling indicates a clear boundary between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, while culturally, cockfighting serves as a marker of identity and continuity of tradition.

In contrast, present-day cockfighting in Sabu Raijua shows a different orientation. The findings suggest that the practice is now more often associated with entertainment, gambling, and economic interest. Although traces of its earlier cultural meaning may still remain, its dominant function has shifted away from ritual peace-making. What was once a communal and sacred activity has increasingly become a personal and commercial one.

This transformation is visible in social and economic terms, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Cultural Values of Contemporary Cockfighting Practice

Tradition	Cultural Values	Insights
Present Tradition	Social	Cockfighting is now more closely related to personal fulfillment and entertainment. It is no longer primarily a ritual serving the collective but rather a pastime satisfying individual desires. The shift from collective unity to personal interest reflects the growing influence of individualism in modern society.
Present Tradition	Economic	The introduction of gambling into cockfighting has drastically altered its cultural value. What was once prohibited has now become normalized, driven partly by economic necessity. Gambling, as a key aspect of modern cockfighting, reflects a pragmatic attempt to meet economic needs, especially in regions where financial hardship is prevalent. Cockfighting has therefore adapted to the material demands of contemporary life, becoming an economic outlet rather than a purely cultural or spiritual practice.

Source: Primary data analysis.

In contrast, Table 2 illustrates a significant shift in the underlying values of cockfighting practices. The social dimension is now more closely linked to individual satisfaction than to collective reconciliation. At the same time, the economic dimension has become increasingly dominant, as gambling is normalized and integrated into the practice. This shift indicates that cockfighting has been reoriented from a communal ritual toward an activity driven by personal and material interests.

Overall, the results show a clear transformation in the meaning of cockfighting in Sabu Raijua. In the past, it was a ritual centered on peace, morality, and communal identity. In the present, it is more strongly associated with entertainment, individual interest, and economic necessity.

The findings presented in Tables 1 and 2 clearly demonstrate a transformation in the cultural values underlying cockfighting practices in Sabu Raijua. In its traditional form, cockfighting was

embedded within a framework of religious, social, moral, and cultural values that collectively maintained peace and social cohesion. The ritual elements, including prayer and purification, indicate that the practice was closely tied to spiritual beliefs, while the absence of gambling reflects a strong moral boundary within the community.

However, Table 2 reveals that these values have undergone significant reconfiguration in the present context. The practice is no longer primarily oriented toward communal harmony but instead reflects individual interests and economic motivations. The normalization of gambling represents a fundamental shift, as an activity that was once morally prohibited has become central to the practice. This change suggests that economic pressures and changing social conditions have played a key role in reshaping the meaning of cockfighting.

This transformation reflects broader shifts in the cultural logic underlying community practices. In its earlier form, cockfighting functioned as a socially regulated ritual that enabled the management of conflict and the maintenance of communal harmony (Lee, 2019). This aligns with anthropological perspectives that view ritual practices as mechanisms of social integration and moral regulation (Allo et al., 2021).

In contrast, contemporary cockfighting is increasingly shaped by entertainment, individual interest, and economic considerations. This shift reflects broader processes associated with modernization (Sudirman & Putra, 2024), in which traditional practices are reinterpreted within more individualistic and market-oriented frameworks (Donzelli, 2023). As a result, practices that were once collective and symbolic are gradually transformed into activities driven by personal and material interests.

The growing integration of gambling into cockfighting further illustrates this transformation (Laitupa & Yasser, 2022). Rather than functioning solely as symbolic performance, the practice now operates within an economic logic in which participants engage in calculated decision-making, combining knowledge, strategy, and perceptions of risk (Morota, 2024). This indicates a shift from a morally regulated ritual to an economically rationalized activity.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to discussions of cultural transformation by demonstrating that traditions do not simply disappear but are continually reinterpreted in changing socio-economic contexts. However, this process of adaptation may come at a cultural cost, particularly when communal and moral values are weakened and replaced by individual and economic priorities (Indrasanjaya et al., 2025).

Importantly, these findings directly address the central research problem of this study, namely, how cockfighting has shifted from a peace-oriented ritual to an economically driven activity. The results indicate that this shift is not merely a change in practice but represents a deeper transformation in cultural values. What was once a mechanism for maintaining social harmony has increasingly become a form of entertainment and economic activity, reflecting broader changes in the community's social structure and value system.

This transformation also raises important questions regarding cultural preservation. While cockfighting remains a recognizable cultural practice, its underlying meanings have changed significantly. This suggests that preserving cultural heritage requires not only maintaining traditional forms but also safeguarding the values and social functions that give those practices their significance.

4. Novelties

The novelty of this study lies in its specific focus on the transformation of *pei'u manu* in the Sabu Raijua community from a peace-oriented ritual into a practice increasingly associated

with gambling and economic interests. Unlike previous studies that mainly discuss cockfighting as symbolism, entertainment, or legal practice, this study highlights the shift of cultural values by comparing past and present meanings within a particular local context. This article, therefore, contributes to linguistic and cultural studies by showing how local terminology, ritual practice, and community narratives reflect broader changes in social values.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that cockfighting in the Sabu Raijua community has undergone a significant transformation in both meaning and function. Traditionally, cockfighting functioned as a sacred ritual aimed at maintaining peace, reinforcing moral values, and strengthening communal solidarity. It served as a symbolic mechanism for resolving conflict and preserving social harmony within the community.

However, the findings reveal that, in its contemporary form, cockfighting is increasingly associated with entertainment, gambling, and economic interests. This shift indicates a broader transformation in cultural values, where practices that were once collectively oriented and morally regulated are being reinterpreted within more individualistic and economically driven frameworks.

These findings address the central research problem of this study by showing that the transformation of cockfighting is not merely a change in practice but a deeper shift in the underlying cultural values and social functions associated with it. The transition from a peace-oriented ritual to an economically motivated activity reflects the influence of changing socio-economic conditions within the community.

This study contributes to broader discussions on cultural transformation by highlighting how local traditions are continuously reinterpreted in response to modern pressures. At the same time, the findings suggest that efforts to preserve cultural heritage should not focus solely on maintaining traditional forms, but also on sustaining the values and meanings that give those practices their cultural significance.

Future research is recommended to further explore how similar cultural transformations unfold in other local contexts, particularly in relation to the interactions among tradition, the economy, and social change.

6. Acknowledgements

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 873207.

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