Chapter 15 / Deep Play:
Notes on the Balinese Cockfight

The Raid

Early in April of 1958, my wife and I arrived, matriarchal and diffident, in a Balinese village we intended, as anthropologists, to study. A small place, about five hundred people, and relatively remote, it was its own world. We were intruders, professional ones, and the villagers dealt with us as Balinese seem always to deal with people not part of their lives. They have no reason to press themselves upon them: as though we were not there. For them, and to a degree for ourselves, we were nonsensors, specters, invisible men.

We moved into an extended family compound (that had been arranged before through the provincial government) belonging to one of the four major factions in village life. But except for our landlord and the village chief, whose cousin and brother-in-law he was, everybody in the house saw very little of us. We wandered about, uncertain, useless, eager to please. People seemed to look right through us with a gaze focused on some yard behind us or on someone more almost more important. Almost nobody greeted us, but nobody scowled or said anything unpleasant to us either, which would have been almost as satisfying.

If we ventured to approach someone (something one is powerfully inhibited from doing in such an atmosphere), he moved, negligently but definitively, away. If seated or leaning against a wall, we had him trapped, he said nothing at all, or mumbled what for the Balinese is the ultimate nonword—"yes." The indifference, of course, was studied; the villagers were watching every move we made, and they had an enormous amount of quite accurate information about who we were and what we were going to be doing. But they acted as if we simply did not exist, which, in fact, as this behavior was designed to inform us, we did not, or anyway not yet.

This is, as I say, general in Bali. Everywhere else one has been in Indonesia, and more latterly in Morocco, when I have gone into a new village, people have poured out from all sides to take a very close look at me, and, often an all-too-probing feel as well. In Balinese villages, at least those away from the tourist circuit, nothing happens at all. People go on pounding, chatting, making offerings, staring into space, carrying baskets about while she drifts around feeling vaguely disembodied. And the same thing is true on the individual level. When you first meet a Balinese, he seems virtually not to relate to you at all; he is, in the term Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead made famous, "away." Then—in a day, a week, a month (with some people the magic moment never comes)—he decides, for reasons I have never quite been able to fathom, that you are real, and then he becomes a warm, gay, sensitive, sympathetic, though, being Balinese, always precisely controlled, person. You have crossed, somehow, some moral or metaphysical shadow line. Though you are not exactly taken as a Balinese (one has to be born to that), you are at least regarded as a human being rather than a cloud or a gust of wind. The whole complexion of your relationship dramatically changes to, in the majority of cases, a gentle, almost affectionate one—a low-keyed, rather playful, rather mannered, rather become penalized.

My wife and I were still very much in the gust-of-wind stage, a most frustrating, and even, as you soon begin to doubt whether you are really real after all, unnerving one, when, ten days or so after our arrival, a large cockfight was held in the public square to raise money for a new school.

Now, a few special occasions aside, cockfights are illegal in Bali.
under the Republic (as, for not altogether unrelated reasons, they were under the Dutch), largely as a result of the pretensions to patriotism, radical nationalism tends to bring with it the elite, which is not itself so very puritan, worries about the poor, ignorant peasant gambling all his money away, about what foreigners will think, about the waste of time better devoted to building up the country. It seems cockfighting as "primitive," "backward," "unprogressive," and generally becoming an ambitious nation. And, as with those other embarrassments—opium smoking, begging, or uncovered breasts—it seeks, rather unsystematically, to put a stop to it.

Of course, like drinking during Prohibition or, today, smoking marihuana, cockfights being a part of "The Balinese Way of Life," nonetheless go on happening, and with extraordinary frequency. And, as with Prohibition or marihuana, from time to time the police (who, in 1938 at least, were almost all not Balinese but Javanese) feel called upon to make a raid, confiscate the cocks and spurs, fine a few people, and even now and then expose some of them in the tropical sun for a day as object lessons which never, somehow, get learned, even though occasionally, quite occasionally, the object dies.

As a result, the fights are usually held in a secluded corner of a village in semi secrecy, a fact which tends to slow the action a little—not very much, but the Balinese do not care to have it slowed at all. In this case, however, perhaps because they were raising money for a school that the government was unable to give them, perhaps because raids had been few recently, perhaps, as I gathered from subsequent discussion, there was a notion that the necessary bribes had been paid, they thought they could take a chance on the central square and draw a larger and more enthusiastic crowd without attracting the attention of the law.

They were wrong. In the midst of the third match, with hundreds of people, including, still transparent, myself and my wife, fused into a single body around the ring, a superorganism in the literal sense, a truck full of policemen armed with machine guns roared up. Amid great screeching cries of "pulisi! pulisi!" from the crowd, the policemen jumped out, and, springing into the center of the ring, began to swing their guns around like gangsters in a motion picture, though not going so far as actually to fire them. The superorganism came instantly apart as its components scattered in all directions. People raced down the road, disappeared headfirst over walls, scrambled under platforms, folded themselves behind wicker screens, scuttled up coconut trees...
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The next morning the village was a completely different world for us. Not only were we no longer invisible, we were suddenly the center of all attention, the object of a great outpouring of warmth, interest, and most especially, amusement. Everyone in the village knew we had died like everyone else. They asked us about it again and again (I must have told the story, small detail by small detail, fifty times by the end of the day), gently, affectionately, but quite insistently teasing us: “Why didn’t you just stand there and tell the police who you were?” “Why didn’t you just say you were only watching and not betting?” “Were you really afraid of those little guns?” As always, kinesthetically minded and, even when feigning for their lives (or, as happened eight years later, surrendering them), the world’s most poised people, they glibly mimicked, also over and over again, our graceless style of running and what they claimed were our panic-stricken facial expressions. But above all, everyone was extremely pleased and even more surprised that we had not simply “pulled our papers” (they knew about those too) and asserted our Distinguished Visitor status, but had instead demonstrated our solidarity with what were now our co-villagers. (What we had actually demonstrated was our cowardice, but there is fellowship in that too.) Even the Brahmana priest, an old, grave, halo-to-heavens type who because of its associations with the underworld would never be involved, even distantly, in a cockpit, and was difficult to approach even to other Balinese, had us called into his courtyard to ask us about what we had happened, chuckling happily at the sheer extraordinariness of it all.

In Bali, to be teased is to be accepted. It was the turning point so far as our relationship with the community was concerned, and we were quite literally “in.” The whole village opened up to us, probably more than it ever would have otherwise (I might actually never have gotten to meet the priest, and our accidental host became one of my best informants), and certainly very much faster. Getting caught, or almost caught, in a vice raid is perhaps not a very generalizable recipe for achieving that mysterious necessity of anthropological field work, rapport, but for me it worked very well. It led to a sudden and unusually complete acceptance into a society extremely difficult for outsiders to penetrate. It gave me the kind of immediate, inside-view grasp of an aspect of “peasant mentality” that anthropologists not fortunate enough to have headlong with their subjects from armed authorities normally do not get. And, perhaps most important of all, for the other things might have come in other ways, it put me very quickly on to a combination emotional explosion, notes on the Balinese Cockfight

status war, and philosophical drama of central significance to the society whose inner nature I desired to understand. By the time I left I had spent about as much time looking into cockfights as into witchcraft, irrigation, caste, or marriage.

Of Cocks and Men

Bali, mainly because it is Bali, is a well-studied place. Its mythology, art, ritual, social organization, patterns of child rearing, forms of law, even styles of trance, have all been microscopically examined for traces of that elusive substance Jane Belo called “The Balinese Temper.” But, aside from a few passing remarks, the cockfight has barely been noticed, although as a popular obsession of consuming power it is at least as important a revelation of what being a Balinese “is really like” as those more celebrated phenomena. As much of America surfaces in a hall park, on a golf links, at a race track, or around a poker table, much of Bali surfaces in a cock ring. For it is only apparently cocks that are fighting there. Actually, it is men.

To anyone who has been in Bali any length of time, the deep psychological identification of Balinese men with their cocks is unmistakable. The double entendre here is deliberate. It works in exactly the same way in Balinese as it does in English, even to producing the same tired jokes, strained puns, and uninventive obscurities. Bateson and Mead have even suggested that, in line with the Balinese conception of the body as a set of separately animated parts, cocks are used as lethal, self-operating penises, ambivalent genitals with a life of their own.1

And while I do not have the kind of unconscious material either to confirm or disconfirm this intriguing notion, the fact that they are masculine symbols par excellence is about as indubitable, and to the Balinese about as evident, as the fact that water runs downhill.

The language of everyday moralism is shot through, on the male side of it, with roosterish imagery. Sobung, the word for cock, (and one which appears in inscriptions as early as A.D. 922), is used metaphorically to mean "hero," "warrior," "champion," "man of parts," "political candidate," "breadwinner," "dandy," "lady-killer," or "tough guy." A pompous man whose behavior presumes above his station is compared to a tailless cock who struts about as though he had a large, spectacular one. A despicable man who makes a last, irrational effort to extricate himself from an impossible situation is likened to a dying cock who makes one final lunge at his tormentor to drag him along to a common destruction. A stingy man, who promises much, gives little, and begrades that, is compared to a cock which, held by the tail, leaps at another without in fact engaging him. A marriageable young man still shy with the opposite sex or someone in a new job anxious to make a good impression is called "a fighting cock caged for the first time."* Court trials, wars, political contests, inheritance disputes, and street arguments are all compared to cockfights. Even the very island itself is perceived from its shape as a small, proud cock, poised, neck extended, back taut, tail raised, in eternal challenge to large, fearless, shapeless Java.

But the intimacy of men with their cocks is more than metaphorical. Balinese men, or anyway a large majority of Balinese men, spend an enormous amount of time with their favorites, grooming them, feeding them, discussing them, trying to keep them against one another, or just generally ensnared. To this general pattern, the cockfight, entirely of, by, and for men (women—at least Balinese women—do not even watch, is the most striking exception.

*C. Hooyna, The Law of the Jaya Prana (London, 1958), p. 39. The lay has a stanza (st. 4) with the relevant hagiography. Jaya Prana, the subject of a Balinese Urash myth, responds to the lord who has offered him the loveinterest of six hundred servant girls. "Godly King, my Lord and Master I beg you, give me leave to go, such things are not yet in my mind," like a fighting cock excogiled indeed I am on my merits, I am alone, as yet the flame has not been fanned."* For these, see V. E. Kroh, Het Adarshet van Bali, 2d ed (The Hague, 1912), index under "luh.

There is indeed a legend to the effect that the separation of Java and Bali is due to the action of a powerful Javanese religious figure who wished to protect himself against a Balinese culture hero (the ancestor of two Keuria caves) who was a passionate cockfighting gambler. See C. Hoynaa, Agena Tirtha (Amsterdam, 1964), p. 164.

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ing at them with a mixture of rapt admiration and dreamy self-absorption. Whenever you see a group of Balinese men squatting idly in the council shed or along the road in their hips down, shoulders forward, knees up fashion, half or more of them will have a rooster in his hands, holding it between his thighs, bouncing it gently up and down to strengthen its legs, ruffling its feathers with abstract sensuality, pushing it out against a neighbor's rooster to rouse its spirit, withdrawing it toward his loin to calm it again. Now and then, to get a feel for another bird, a man will fiddle this way with someone else's cock for a while, but usually by moving around to squat in place behind it, rather than just having it passed across to him as though it were merely an animal.

In the houseyards, the high-walled enclosures where the people live, fighting cocks are kept in wicker cages, moved frequently about so as to maintain the optimum balance of sun and shade. They are fed a special diet, which varies somewhat according to individual theories but which is mostly maize, sifted for impurities with far more care than it is when mere humans are going to eat it, and offered to the animal kernel by kernel. Red pepper is stuffed down their beaks and up their anuses to give them spirit. They are bathed in the same ceremonial preparation of tepid water, medicinal herbs, flowers, and onions in which infants are bathed, and for a prize cock just about as often. Their combs are cropped, their plumage dressed, their spurs trimmed, and their legs massaged, and they are inspected for flaws with the sanctified concentration of a diamond merchant. A man who has a passion for cocks, an enthusiast in the literal sense of the term, can spend most of his life with them, and even those, the overwhelming majority, whose passion though intense has not entirely run away with them, can and do spend what seems not only to an outsider, but also to themselves, an inordinate amount of time with them. "I am cock crazy," my landlord, a quite ordinary afficionado by Balinese standards, used to moan as he went to move another cage, give another bath, or conduct another feeding. "We're all cock crazy."

The madness has some less visible dimensions, however, because although it is true that cocks are symbolic expressions or magnifications of their owner's self, the narcissistic male who is a "man in Asian terms, they are also expressions—and rather more immediate ones—of what the Balinese regard as the direct inversion, aesthetically, morally, and metaphysically, of human status: animality.

The Balinese revulsion against any behavior regarded as animal-like
can hardly be overstressed. Babies are not allowed to crawl for that reason. Insect, though hardly approved, is a much less horrifying crime than bestiality. (The appropriate punishment for the second is death by drowning, for the first being forced to live like an animal.) Most demons are represented—in sculpture, dance, ritual, myth—in some real or fantastic animal form. The main point in the puberty rite consists in filing the child's teeth so they will not look like animal fangs. Not only defecation but eating is regarded as a disgusting, almost obscene act, to be conducted hurriedly and privately, because of its association with animality. Even falling down or any form of clumsiness is considered to be bad for these reasons. Aside from cocks and a few domestic animals—oxen, ducks—of no emotional significance, the Balinese are averse to animals and treat their large number of dogs not merely callously but with a phobic cruelty. In identifying with his cock, the Balinese man is identifying not just with his ideal self, or even his penis, but also, and at the same time, with what he most fears, hates, and ambivalence being what it is, is fascinated by—"The Powers of Darkness." The connection of cocks and cockfighting with such Powers, with the animalistic demons that threaten constantly to invade the small, cleared-off space in which the Balinese have so carefully built their lives and devour its inhabitants, is quite explicit. A cockfight, any cockfight, is in the first instance a blood sacrifice offered, with the appropriate acts and obligations, to the demons in order to pacify their ravenous, cannibal hunger. No temple festival should be conducted until one is made. (If it is omitted, someone will inevitably fall into a trance and command with the voice of an angered spirit that the oversight be immediately corrected.) The demons, in turn, in their wrath consume the cock, and its spirit, are left to their own devices. In this case legal) is almost every village on the island.

In the cockfight, man and beast, good and evil, ego and id, the creative power of aroused masculinity and the destructive power of loosened animal.

*An incrustation of juice is forced to wear pig yokes over their necks and crawl to a pig trough and eat with their mouths there. On this, see J. Belo, "Customs Pertaining to Cocks in Bali," in "Traditional Balinese Culture," ed. J. Belo, p. 49, on the abbreviation of animality generally, Bateen and Meda. Balinese Character, P.

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imality fuse in a bloody drama of hatred, cruelty, violence, and death. It is little wonder that when, as is the invariable rule, the owner of the winning cock takes the carcass of the loser—often torn limb from limb by its enraged owner—home to eat, he does so with a mixture of social embarrassment, moral satisfaction, aesthetic disgust, and cannibal joy.

Or that a man who has lost an important fight is sometimes driven to wreck his family shrines and curse the gods, an act of metaphysical (and social) suicide. Or that in seeking earthly analogues for heaven and hell the Balinese compare the former to the mood of a man whose cock has just won, the latter to that of a man whose cock has just lost.

The Fight

Cockfights (tetasjen; sabungan) are held in a ring about fifty feet square. Usually they begin toward late afternoon and run three or four hours until sunset. About six or ten separate matches (watu) comprise a program. Each match is precisely like the others in general pattern: there is no main match, no connection between individual matches, no variation in their format, and each is arranged on a completely ad hoc basis. After a fight has ended and the emotional debris is cleared away—the bets have been paid, the curses cursed, the carcasses possessed—seven, eight, perhaps even a dozen men slip negligently into the ring with a cock and seek to find there a logical opponent for it. This process, which rarely takes less than ten minutes, and often a good deal longer, is conducted in a very subdued, oblique, even dissembling manner.

Those not immediately involved give it at best but disguised, sidelong attention; those who, embarrassed, are, attempt to pretend somehow that the whole thing is not really happening. A match made, the other hopefully retire with the same deindifference, and the selected cocks have their spurs (lbul) affixed—razor-sharp, pointed steel swords, four or five inches long. This delicate job which only a small proportion of men, a half-dozen or so in most villages, know how to do properly. The man who attaches the spurs also provides them, and if the rooster he assists wins, its owner awards him the spur-leg of the victim. The spurs are affixed by winding a long length of string around the foot of the spur and the leg of the
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cock. For reasons I shall come to presently, it is done somewhat differently from case to case, and is an obsessively deliberate affair. The bag about spurs is extensive—they are sharpened only at eclipses and the dark of the moon, should be kept out of the sight of women, and so forth. And they are handled, both in use and out, with the same curious combination of fussiness and sensuality the Balinese direct toward ritual objects generally.

The spurs affixed, the two cocks are placed by their handlers (who may or may not be their owners) facing one another in the center of the ring. A coconut pierced with a small hole is placed in a pool of water, in which it takes about twenty-one seconds to sink, a period known as a tuung and marked at beginning and end by the beating of a slit gong. During these twenty-one seconds the handlers (pepungkek) are not permitted to touch their roosters. If, as sometimes happens, the animals have not fought during this time, they are picked up, fluffed, prodded, and otherwise insured, and put back in the center of the ring, and the process begins again. Sometimes they refuse to fight at all, or one keeps running away, in which case they are imprisoned together under a wicker cage, which usually gets them engaged.

Most of the time, in any case, the cocks fly almost immediately at one another in a wing-beating, head-thrashing, leg-kicking explosion of animal fury so pure, so absolute, and in its own way so beautiful, as to be almost abstract, a Platonic concept of hate. Within moments one or the other drives home a solid blow with his spur. The handler whose cock has delivered the blow immediately picks it up so that it will not get a return blow, for if he does not the match is likely to end in a mutually mortal tie as the two birds wildly hack each other to pieces. This is particularly true, of course, happens, the spur sticks in its victim’s body, for then the aggressor is at the mercy of his wounded foe.

With the birds again in the hands of their handlers, the cockfight is now sunk three times after which the cock which has landed the blow is except for unimportant, small-fight (on the question of fight “importance,” see below) spur afflicting is usually done by someone other than the owner, skilled he is in it, a consideration whose importance is again relative to the im-

than the owner, they are almost always a quite close relative—a brother or personality, in the fact that all these will refer to the cock as “mine,” say “I tend to be fairly fixed, though individuals may participate in several and often Notes on the Balinese Cockfight

must be set down to show that he is firm, a fact he demonstrates by wandering idly around the ring for a coconut sink. The coconut is then bought twice more and the fight must recommence.

During this interval, slightly over two minutes, the handler of the wounded cock has been working frantically over it, like a trainer patching a mangled boxer between rounds, to get it in shape for a last, desper-

ate try for victory. He blows in its mouth, putting the whole chicken head in his mouth and sucking and blowing twists it, stuffs its wounds with various sorts of medicines, and generally tries anything he can think of to arouse the last ounce of spirit which may be hidden somewhere within it. By the time he is forced to put it back down he is usually drenched in chicken blood, but, as in prize fighting, a good han-

dler is worth his weight in gold. Some of them can virtually make the dead walk, at least long enough for the second and final round.

In the climactic battle (if there is one; sometimes the wounded cock simply expires in the handler’s hands or immediately as it is placed down again), the cock which landed the first blow usually proceeds to finish off his weakened opponent. But this is far from an inevitable outcome, for if a cock can walk, he can fight, and if he can fight, he can kill, and what counts is which cock expires first. If the wounded one can get a stab in and stagger on until the other drops, he is the official win-

ner, even if he himself topples over an instant later.

Surrounding all this melodrama—which the crowd packed tight around the ring follows is near silence, moving their bodies in kines-

thetic sympathy with the movement of the animals, cheering their charms on with wordless hand motions, slantings of the shoulders, turn-

ings of the head, falling back on masse as the cock with the murderous spurs carries toward one side of the ring (it is said that spectators sometimes lose eyes and fingers from being too attentive), surging for-

ward again as they glance off toward another—in a vast body of ex-

traordinarily elaborate and precisely detailed rules. These rules, together with the developed lore of cocks and cockfight-

ing which accompanies them, are written down in palm-leaf manuscripts (lontar; notably passed on from generation to generation as part of the general legal and cultural tradition of the villages. At a fight, the um-

pirie (aja komong; djuru kemark)—the man who manages the cock-

— is in charge of their application and his authority is absolute. I have never seen an umpire’s judgment questioned. Even by the most despondent losers, nor have I ever heard, even in private, a
charge of unfairness directed against one, or, to put it another way, complaints about umpires in general. Only exceptionally well trusted, noted, and given the complexity of the code, knowledgeable citizens perform this job, and in fact men will bring their cocks only to fights presided over by such men. It is also the umpire to whom accusations of cheating, which, though rare in the extreme, occasionally arise, are referred; and it is he in whom the not infrequent cases where the cocks expire virtually together decide which (if either, for, though the Balinese do not care for such an outcome, there can be ties) went first. Likened to a judge, a king, a priest, and a policeman, he is all of these, and under his assured direction the animal passion of the fight proceeds within the civic certainty of the law. In the dozens of cockpit fights I saw in Bali, I never once saw an altercation about rules. Indeed, I never saw an open altercation, other than those between cocks, at all.

This crosswise doubleness of an event which, taken as a fact of nature, is rage untrammeled and, taken as a fact of culture, is form perfected, defines the cockfight as a sociological entity. A cockpit is what a searching for a name for something not vertebrate enough to be called a group and not structureless enough to be called a crowd, Erving Goffman has called a "focused gathering"—a set of persons engrossed in a common flow of activity and relating to one another in terms of that flow.10 Such gatherings meet and disperse; the participants in them fluctuate; the activity that focuses them is discrete—a particulate process that reoccurs rather than a continuous one that endures. They take their form from the situation that evokes them, the floor on which they are placed, as Goffman puts it; but it is a form, and an articulate one, nonetheless. For the situation, the floor itself is created, in jury deliberations, surgical operations, block meetings, sit-ins, cockfights, by the cultural preoccupations—here, as we shall see, the celebration of status rivalry—which not only specify the focus but, assembling actors and arranging scenery, bring it actually into being.

In classical times (that is to say, prior to the Dutch invasion of 1908), when there were no bureaucrats around to improve popular morality, the staging of a cockpit was an explicitly societal matter. Bringing a cock to an important fight was, for an adult male, a compulsory duty of citizenship; taxation of fights, which were usually held on market day, was a major source of public revenue; patronage of the art was

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a stated responsibility of princes; and the cock ring, or wadilun, stood in the center of the village near those other monuments of Balinese civility—the council house, the origin temple, the marketplace, the signal tower, and the banyan tree. Today, a few special occasions aside, the newer rectangle makes a open statement of the connection between the excitements of collective life and those of blood sport impossible, but, less directly expressed, the connection itself remains intimate and intact. To expel its, however, it is necessary to turn to the aspects of cockfighting around which all the others pivot, and through which they exercise their force, an aspect I have thus far studiously ignored. I mean, of course, the gambling.

Odds and Even Money

The Balinese never do anything in a simple way that they can contrive to do in a complicated one, and to this generalization cockfight wagering is no exception.

In the first place, there are two sorts of bets, or toh.11 There is the single axial bet in the center between the principals (toh ketengah), and there is the cloud of peripheral ones around the ring between members of the audience (toh kesai). The first is typically large; the second typically small. The first is collective, involving coalitions of bettors clustering around the owner; the second is individual, man to man. The first is a matter of deliberate, very quiet, almost furtive arrangement by the coalition members and the umpire huddled like conspirators in the center of the ring; the second is a matter of impulsive shouting, public offers, and public acceptances by the excited throng around its edges. And most curiously, and as we shall see most revealingly, where the first is always, without exception, even money, the second, equally without ex-


11 This word, which usually means an indelible stain or mark, as in a birthmark or a vein in a stone, is used as well for a deposit in a court case, for a pawn, for security offered in a loan, for a stake in; for someone else in a legal or ceremonial context, for an earnest advanced in a business deal, for a sign placed in a field to indicate its ownership is in dispute, and for the status of an unfortunate wife from whose lover her husband must gain satisfaction or surrender her to him. See Korn, Het Adarwachi van Bali; Th. Pijnacker, Javaansche-Nederlandsche Handelswoordenboek (Groningen, 1938); H. H. Juyssen, OudJavaansche-Nederlandse Woordenlijst (Leiden, 1923).
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him, four-five-six; if he shouts "four," he wants it at four-three (again, he putting up the three), if "nine," at nine-eight, and so on.

A man baking the favorite, and thus considering giving odds if he can get them short enough, indicates the fact by crying out the color-type of that cock—"brown," "speckled," or whatever. 11

As odd-takers (backers of the underdog) and odd-givers (backers of the favorite) sweep the crowd with their shouts, they begin to focus in on one another as potential betting pairs, often from far across the ring. The taker tries to shout the giver into longer odds, the giver to shout the taker into shorter ones. 12 The taker, who is the wooer in this situation, will signal how low a bet he wishes to make at the odds he is shouting by holding a number of fingers up in front of his face and vigorously waving them. If the giver, the wooed, replies in kind, the bet is made; if he does not, they unlock gates and the side betting is started. The side betting, which takes place after the center bet has been made and its size announced, consists then in a rising crescendo of

10 Actually, the typing of cocks, which is extremely elaborate (I have collected more than twenty dasses, certainly not a complete list), is not based on color alone, but on a set of independent, interacting dimensions, which include—besides color—size, bone thickness, plumage, and temperament. (But not palate, for the Balinese do not breed cocks to any significant extent for this, so far as I have been able to discover, have they ever done so. The oil, or jungle cock, which is the basic fighting strain everywhere the sport is found, is native to southern Asia, and one can buy a good example in the chicken section of almost any Balinese market for anywhere from four or five rings to sixty or more.) The color element is merely the one normally used as the type name, except when the two cocks of different types—on an principle they must be—have the same color, in which case a secondary indication from one of the other dimensions ("large speckled" vs. "small speckled," etc.) is needed. Colors are coordinated with various cosmological ideas which help shape the making of matches, so that, for example, you fight a small, headstrong, speckled brown-on-white cock with flat-lying feathers and thin legs from the east side of the ring on a certain day of the complete Balinese calendar, and a large, cautious, all-black cock with tufted feathers and stubby legs from the north side on another day, and so on.

All this is again recorded in palm-leaf manuscripts and entered in the LEDGER Balinese (who do not all have identical systems), and a full-scale componential-cosmographic analysis of cock classifications would be extremely valuable, as is evident in the description of the cockfighting and in itself. But my data on the subject, though extensive and varied, do not seem to be complete and systematic enough to attempt such an analysis here. For Balinese cosmological ideas more generally see Belo, ed., Traditio Balinese Culture, and J. L. Swellengrebel, ed., Balinese Society in Epic, Thought, and Ritual (The Hague, 1960).

12 For purposes of ethnographic completeness, it should be noted that it is possible for the man baking the favorite—the odd-giver—to make a bet on himself. He does this if his cock wins or if he is the taker, but the odd-taker will feel if the latter had to pay off personally following his defeat. About 10 percent of the winner's receipts are subtracted for the umpire's share and that of the fight sponsors.
shouts as blowers of the underdog offer their prophecies to anyone who will accept them, while those who are backing the favorite but do not like the price being offered, shout equally frenziedly the color of the cock to show they too are desperate to bet but want shorter odds.

Almost always odds-calling, which tends to be far less controversial in that at any one time almost all callers are calling the same thing, starts off toward the long end of the range—five-to-four or four-to-three—and then moves, like consensus, toward the short end with greater or lesser speed and to a greater or lesser degree. Men crying "five" and finding themselves answered only with cries of "brown" start crying "six," either drawing the other callers fairly quickly with them or retreating from the act as their too-generous offers are snapped up. If the change is made and partners are still scarce, the procedure is repeated in a move to "seven," and so on, only rarely, and in the very largest fights, reaching the ultimate "nine" or "ten" levels. Occasionally, if the cocks are dearly mismatched, there may be no upward movement at all, or even a movement down the scale to four-to-three, three-to-two, very, very rarely two-to-one, a shift which is accompanied by a declining number of bets as a shift upward is accompanied by an increasing number. But the general pattern is for the betting to move a shorter or longer distance up the scale toward the, for sidebets, nonexistent pole of even money, with the overwhelming majority of bets falling in the four-to-three to eight-to-seven range.

As the moment for the release of the cocks by the handlers approaches, the screaming, at least in a match where the center bet is large, reaches almost frenzied proportions as the remaining unfilled bettors try desperately to find a last-minute partner at a price they can live with. Almost everyone is already in on the action, and it is common for the bettor's entire line to be on the screen. It is not unlikely to get a decision, on which with precise observations of individual behavior.

The precise dynamics of the movement of the betting is one of the most interesting, most complicated, and, given the hectic conditions under which it occurs, most difficult to study aspects of the fight. Many a picture recording plus multiple observers would probably be necessary to reveal it effectively. Even impressionistically—the only way, indeed, to a noneconomical extent, is to be in the middle of all this—it is clear that certain men lead both in dictating the favor (that is, making the opening cock-eye calls which always initiate the great group) and in directing the movement of the odds, these "opinion leaders" being far more accomplished cock-logicians and solid citizens to be discussed below. If these men begin to change their calls, others follow; if they begin to make bets, so do others and—though there are always a large number of frenzied but crying for shorter or longer odds to the end—the movement moves or less easier. But a detailed understanding of the whole process awaits. And, alas, it is not very likely ever to get an action theorem, with precise observations of individual behavior.

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betting dies off, trailing into silence, as odds lengthen and people lose interest. In a large-bet, well-made match—the kind of match the Balinese regard as "real cockfighting."—the mob scene quality, the scene that heretofore has been about to break loose, with all the moshing, shoving, pushing, clambering men, is quite strong, an effect which is only heightened by the intense stillness that falls with instant suddenlyness, rather as if someone had turned off the current, when the six gong sounds. The cocks are put down, and the battle begins.

When it ends, anywhere from fifteen seconds to five minutes later, all bets are immediately paid. There are absolutely no fous, at least to a betting opponent. One may, of course, borrow from a friend before offering or accepting a wager, but to offer or accept it if the money already in hand and, if you lose, you must pay it on the spot, before the next match begins. This is iron rule, and as I have never heard of a disputed umpire's decision (though doubtless there must sometimes be some), I have also never heard of a dishonored bet, perhaps because in a worked-up cockfight the consequences might be, as they are reported to be sometimes for cheats, tragic and immediate.

It is, in any case, this formal asymmetry between balanced center bets and unbalanced side ones that poses the critical analytical problem for a theory which sees cockfights wagering as the link connecting the fight to the wider world of Balinese culture. It also suggests the way to go about solving it and demonstrating the link.

The first point that needs to be made in this connection is that the higher the center bet, the more likely the match will in actual fact be an even one. Simple considerations of rationality suggest that if you are betting fifteen rings on a cock, you might be willing to go along with even money even if you feel your animal slightly the lesser of the two. But if you are betting five hundred you are very, very likely to be loathe to do so. Thus, in large-bet fights, which of course involve the better animal, tremendous care is taken to see that the cocks are about as evenly matched as can be and, if uniform condition, quotient, and so on is as humanly possible. The different ways of adjusting the spurs of the animals are often employed to secure this. If one cock strengthens another, an agreement will be made to position his spur at a slightly less advantageous angle—a kind of handicapping—at which point if you must lose (or is said, extremely skilled. More care will be taken, too, to employ skillful handlers and to match them exactly as to abilities.

In short, in a large-bet fight the pressure to make the match a gene-
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the large-center-bet fights than for the small ones, with medium ones generally in between. In detail, the fit is not, of course, exact, but the general pattern is quite consistent: the power of the center bet to pull the side bets toward its own even-money pattern is directly proportional to its size, because its size is directly proportional to the degree to which the cocks are in fact evenly matched. As for the volume question, total wagering is greater in large-center-bet fights because such fights are considered more "interesting," not only in the sense that they are less predictable, but more crucially, that more is at stake in them—in terms of money, in terms of the quality of the cocks, and consequently, as we shall see, in terms of social prestige.13

The paradox of fair coin in the middle, biased coin on the outside is thus a merely apparent one. The two betting systems, though formally congruent, are not really contradictory to one another, but are part of a single larger system in which the center bet is, so to speak, the "center of gravity," drawing the larger it is the more so, the outside bets toward the short-odds end of the scale. The center-bet thus "makes the game," or perhaps better, defines it, signals what, following a notion of Jeremy Bentham's, I am going to call its "depth."

The Balinese attempt to create an interesting, if you will, "deep," match by making the center bet as large as possible so that the cocks matched will be as equal and as fine as possible, and the outcome, thus, as unpredictable as possible. They do not always succeed. Nearly half the matches are relatively trivial, relatively uninteresting—in my borrowed terminology, "shallow." Affairs. But that fact no more argues against my interpretation than the fact that most painters, poets, and playwrights are mediocre arguments against the view that artistic effort is...
Playing with Fire

 Bentham's concept of "deep play" is found in his The Theory of Legislation. By it he means play in which the stakes are so high that it is from his utilitarian standpoint, irrational for men to engage in it at all. If a man whose fortune is a thousand pounds (or ringgit) wagers five

14 Besides wagering there are other economic aspects of the cockfight, especially in very close connection with the local market system which, though secondary both to its motivation and to its function, are not without importance. Cockfights are open events to which anyone who wishes may come, sometimes from quite distant areas, but well over 90 percent, probably over 95, are local activities, and the locality concerned is defined not by the village, nor even by the administrative district, but by the rural market system. Bali has a three-day market worth in the familiar "solar system" type rotation. Though the markets themselves have never been very highly developed, small morning affairs in a village square. It is the megacenter such rotation (rather generally marks out—ten or twenty square miles, seven or eight neighboring villages (which in contemporary Bali is usually going to anywhere from five to ten million people) from which the core of any cockfight audience, indeed virtually all of it, will come. Most of the fights are in fact organized and sponsored by small combinations of petty rural merchants under the general premise, very strongly held by them and indeed by all Balinese, that cockfights are good for trade because they get money out of the house, they make it circulate. Stalls selling various sorts of things as well as assorted shoot-change gambling games (see below) are set up around the edge of the area so that this even takes on the quality of a small fair. This combination of cockfighting with markets and market affairs is very old, so among other things, their conjunction in inscriptions (R. Gurna, Pustu Ball, 2 vols. (Badung, 1956)) indicates. Trade has followed the cock for centuries in rural Bali, and the sport has been one of the main agencies of the island's monetarization.


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hundred of it on an even bet, the marginal utility of the pound he stands to win is clearly less than the marginal disutility of the one he stands to lose. In genuine deep play, this is the case for both parties. They are both in over their heads. Having come together in search of pleasure they have entered into a relationship which will bring the participants, considered collectively, net pain rather than net pleasure. Bentham's conclusion was, therefore, that deep play was immoral from first principles and, a typical step for him, should be prevented legally.

But more interesting than the ethical problem, at least for our concerns here, is that despite the logical force of Bentham's analysis men do engage in such play, both passionately and often, and even in the face of law's revenge. For Bentham and those who think as he does (nowadays mainly lawyers, economists, and a few psychologists), the explanation is, as I have said, that such men are irrational—addicts, lechers, children, fools, savages, who need only be protected against themselves. But for the Balinese, though naturally they do not formulate it in so many words, the explanation lies in the fact that in such play, money is less a measure of utility, had or expected, than it is a symbol of moral import, perceived or imposed.

It is, in fact, in shallow games, ones in which smaller amounts of money are involved, that increments and decrements of cash are more nearly synonyms for utility and disutility, in the ordinary, unexpanded sense—for pleasure and pain, happiness and unhappiness. In deep games, where the amounts of money are large, much more is at stake than material gain: namely esteem, honor, dignity, respect—in a word, though in Bali a profoundly freighted word, status. It is at stake symbolically, for (a few cases of ruined gambler addicts aside) no one's status is actually altered by the outcome of a cockfight; it is only, and that momentarily, affirmed or insulted. But for the Balinese, for whom nothing is more pleasurable than an affront obligingly delivered, all men need be as well-behaved as one obliquely received—particularly when mutual acquaintances, unequally by surfaces, are watching—such apprasive drama is deep indeed.

This, I must stress immediately, is not to say that the money does not matter, or that the Balinese is no more concerned about losing five

20 Of course, even in Bentham, utility is not normally confined as a concept to monetary losses and gains; my argument here might be more carefully put in terms of a denial that for the Balinese, as for any people, utility (pleasure, happiness, etc.) is merely identifiable with wealth. But some terminological problems are in any case secondary to the essential point: the cockfight is not roulette.
Notes on the Balinese Cockfight

remarkably short time, but there always seems to be one or two of them around, pawing their land and selling their clothes in order to bet, at any particular time."

This graduated correlation of "status gambling" with deeper fights and, inversely, "money gambling" with shallower ones is in fact quite general. Bettors themselves form a sociomoral hierarchy in these terms. As noted earlier, at most cockfights there are, around the very edges of the cockfight area, a large number of mindless, sheer-chance-game gambling games (roulette, dice throw, coin-spin, pea-under-the-shell) operated by concessionaires. Only women, children, adolescents, and various other sorts of people who do not (or not yet) fight self, allusively and metaphorically, through the medium of one's cock, on the line. And though to a Benthamicite this might seem merely to increase the irrationality of the enterprise that much further, to the Balinese what it mainly increases is the meaningfulness of it all. And as (to follow Watier, rather than Bentham) the imposition of meaning on life is the major end and primary condition of human existence, that access of significance more than compensates for the economic costs involved.33 Actually, given the even-money quality of the larger matches, important changes in material fortune among those who regularly participate in them seem virtually nonexistent, because matters more or less even out over the long run. It is, actually, in the smaller, shallow fights, where one finds the handful of more pure, addict-type gamblers involved—who are those in it mainly for the money—that "real" changes in social position, largely downward, are affected. Men of this sort, plungrers, are highly disparaged by "true cockfighters" as fools who do not understand what the sport is all about, vulgarians who simply miss the point of it all. They are, these addicts, regarded as fair game for the genuine enthusiasts, those who do understand, to take a little money away from—something that is easy enough to do by luring them, through the force of their greed, into irrational bets on mismatched cocks. Most of them do indeed manage to ruin themselves in a

33. W. Watier, The Sociology of Religion (Boston, 1963). There is nothing speciously Balinese, of course, about deepening significance with money, as Whyte's description of corner boys in a working-class district of Boston demonstrates: "Gambling plays an important role in the lives of Cornerville people. Whatever is going on, there is gambling somewhere in the area. When there is nothing at stake, the game is not considered a real contest. This does not mean that the financial element is all-important. I have frequently heard men say that the honor of winning was much more important than the money in stake. The corner boys consider playing for money the real test of skill and, unless a man performs well when money is at stake, he is not considered a good competitor." W. F. Whyte, Street Corner Society, 2d ed. (Chicago, 1955), p. 140.
mean. For such a man, what is really going on is a match something rather closer to an affaire d'honneur (though, with the Balinese tale for practical fantasy, the blood that is spilled is only figuratively human) than the stupid, mechanical crank of a slot machine.

What makes Balinese cockfighting deep is thus not money in itself, but what, the more of it that is involved the more so, money causes to happen: the migration of the Balinese status hierarchy into the body of the cockfight. Psychologically an Aeonian representation of the ideal/demonic, rather narcissistic, male self, sociologically it is an equally Aeonian representation of the complex fields of tension set up by the controlled, mated, ceremonial, but for all that deeply felt, interaction of those selves in the context of everyday life. The cocks may be surrogates for their owners' personalities, animal mirrors of psychic form, but the cockfight is—or more exactly, deliberately is made to be—simulation of the social matrix, the involved system of over-casting, overlapping, highly corporate groups—villages, kingroups, irrigation societies, temple congregations, "castes"—in which its devotees live. And as such it provides the necessity to affirm it, defend it, celebrate it, justify it, and just plain bask in it (but not, given the strongly ascetic character of Balinese stratification, to seek it), is perhaps the central driving force in the society, so also—amongst penises, blood sacrifices, and monetary exchanges aside—is it of the cockfight. This absent amusement and seeming sport is, to take another phrase from Irving Goffman, "a status bath."

The easiest way to make this clear, and at least to some degree to deconstruct it, is to invoke the village whose cockfighting activities I observed the closest—the one in which the raid occurred and from which my statistical data is taken.

Like all Balinese villages, this one—Tibaning, in the Klungking region of southeast Bali—is intricately organized, a labyrinth of alliances and oppositions. But, unlike many, two sorts of corporate groups, which are also status groups, particularly stand out, and we may concentrate on them, in a part-for-whole way, without undue distortion.

22 For a fuller description of Balinese rural social structure, see C. Geertz, "Form and Variation in Balinese Village Structure," American Anthropologist 61 (1959); pp. 96-108; "Tibaning, A Balinese Village," in R. M. Kootstraantri, Villages in Indonesia (Bath, 1967), pp. 210-243; and, though it is a bit off the norm as Balinese villages go, V. E. Koets, De Dorpsgemeenschap tegenover Paganiteit (Sappont, Netherlands, 1933).

23 Goffman, Encounters, p. 78.

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First, the village is dominated by four large, patrilineal, partly endogamous descent groups which are constantly divided into one another and form the major factions in the village. Sometimes they group two and two, or rather the two larger ones versus the two smaller ones plus all the unaffiliated people; sometimes they operate independently. There are also sub factions within them, subdivisions within the sub factions, and so on to rather fine levels of distinction. And second, there is the village itself, almost entirely endogamous, which is opposed to all the other villages round about in its cockfight circuit (which, as explained, is the market region), but which also forms alliances with certain of these neighbors against certain others in various supervillagial political and social contexts. The exact situation is, as everywhere in Bali, quite distinctive; but the general pattern of a tiered hierarchy of status rivalries between highly corporate but various based groupings (and, thus, between the members of them) is entirely general.

Consider, then, as support of the general thesis that the cockfight, and especially the deep cockfight, is fundamentally a dramatization of status concerns, the following facts, which to avoid extending etnographic description I shall simply summarize to be facts—though the concrete evidence, examples, statements, and numbers that could be brought to bear in support of them, is both extensive and unmistakable:

1. A man virtually never bets against a cock owned by a member of his own kin group. Usually he will feel obliged to bet for it, the more so the closer the kin tie and the deeper the fight. If he is certain in his mind that it will not win, he may just not bet at all, particularly if it is only a second cousin's bird or if the fight is a shallow one. But as a rule he will feel he must support it and, in deep, nearly always does. Thus the great majority of the people calling "five" or "speckled" so demonstratively are expressing their allegiance to their kinsman, not their evaluation of his bird, their understanding of probability theory, or even their hopes of unearned income.

2. This principle is extended logically. If your kinsman is not involved you will support an allied kinsman against an unaffiliated one in the same way, and so on through the various involved networks of alliances which, as I say, make up this, as any other, Balinese village.

3. So, too, for the village as a whole. An outsider cock is fighting any cock from your village, you will tend to support the local one. If, what is a rarer circumstance but occurs every now and then, a cock
of the reasons why both it and matchmaking are surrounded by such an air of unease, frightfulness, embarrassment, and so on. 9. The rule about borrowing money—that you may borrow for a bet but not in one's steads (and the Balinese are quite conscious of this) from similar considerations, you are never at the economic mercy of your enemy that way. Gambling debts, which can get quite large on a rather short-term basis, are always to friends, never to enemies, structurally speaking.

10. When two cocks are structurally irrelevant or neutral so far as you are concerned (though, as mentioned, they almost never are to each other) you do not even ask a relative or a friend whom he is betting on, because if you know how he is betting and he knows you, and you go the other way, it will lead to strain. This rule is explicit and rigid; fairly elaborate, even rather artificial precautions are taken to avoid breaking it. At the very least you must pretend not to notice what he is doing, and be what you are doing.

11. There is a special word for betting against the grain, which is also the word for “pardon me” (mupau). It is considered polite to do, though if the center bet is small it is sometimes all right as long as you do not do it too often. But the larger the bet and the more frequently you do it, the more the “pardon me” tack will lead to social disruption.

12. In fact, the institutionalized hostility relation, pulu, is often formally initiated (though its causes always lie elsewhere) by such a “pardon me” bet in a deep fight, putting the symbolic fat in the fire. Similarly, the end of such a relationship and resumption of normal social intercourse is often signaled (but, again, not actually brought about) by one or the other of the enemies supporting the other’s bird.

13. In sticky, cross-loyalty situations, of which in this extraordinarily complex social system there are of course many, when a fight between two more or less equally balanced loyalties, he tends to wander off for a cup of coffee or something to avoid having to bet, a form of behavior reminiscent of that of American voters in similar situations.14

14. The people involved in the center bet are, especially in deep fights, virtually always leading members of their group—knobship, village, or whatever. Further, those who bet on the side (including these
people) are, as I have already remarked, the more established members of the village—the solid citizens. Cockfighting is for those who are involved in the everyday politics of prestige as well, not for youth, women, subordinates, and so forth.

15. So far as money is concerned, the explicitly expressed attitude toward it is that it is a secondary matter. It is not, as I have said, of no importance; Balinese are no happier to lose several weeks’ income than anyone else. But they mainly look on the monetary aspects of the cockfight as self-balancing, a matter of just moving money around, circulating it among a fairly well-defined group of serious cockfighters. The really important wins and losses are seen mostly in other terms, and the general attitude toward wagering is not any hope of cleaning up, of making a killing (addict gamblers again excepted), but that of the horse-player’s prayer: “Oh, God, please let me break even.” In prestige terms, however, you do not want to break even, but, in a momentary, punctuation sort of way, win utterly. The talk (which goes on all the time) is about fights against such-and-such a cock of So-and-So which your cock demolished, not on how much you won, a fact people, even for large bets, rarely remember for any length of time, though they will remember the day they did in Pan Lohe’s finest cock for years.

16. You must bet on cocks of your own group aside from mere locality considerations, for if you do not people generally will say, “What? Is he too proud for the likes of us? Does he have to go to Java or Den Pasar [the capital town] to bet, he is such an important man?” Thus there is a general pressure to bet not only to show that you are important locally, but that you are not so important that you look down on everyone else as unfit even to be rivals. Similarly, home team people must bet against outside cocks or the outsiders will accuse them—a serious charge—of just collecting entry fees and not really being interested in cockfighting, as well as again being arrogant and insulting.

17. Finally, the Balinese peasants themselves are quite aware of all this and can, at least to an ethnographer, do state most of it in approximately the same terms as I have. Fighting cocks, almost every Balinese I have ever discussed the subject with has said, is like playing with fire only not getting burned. You activate village and kinsmen rivalries and hostilities, but in “play” form, coming dangerously and enticingly close to the expression of open and direct interpersonal and intergroup aggression (something which, again, almost never happens in the normal course of ordinary life), but not quite, because, after all, it is “only a cockfight.”

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More observations of this sort could be advanced, but perhaps the general point is, if not made, at least well-delineated, and the whole argument thus far can be usefully summarized in a formal paradigm:

THE MORE A MATCH IS . . .
1. Between near status equals (and/or personal enemies)
2. Between high status individuals

THE DEEPER THE MATCH.
1. The closer the identification of cock and man (or, more properly, the deeper the match the more the man will advance his best, most closely-identified-with cock).
2. The finer the cocks involved and the more exactly they will be matched.
3. The greater the emotion that will be involved and the more the general absorption in the match.
4. The higher the individual bets center and outside, the shorter the outside bet odds will tend to be, and the more betting there will be overall.
5. The less an “economic” and the more a “status” view of gambling will be involved, and the “soldier” the citizens who will be gambling.24

In reverse arguments hold for the shallower the fight, culminating, in a reversed-signs sense, in the coin-spinning and dice-throwing amusements. For deep fights there are no absolute upper limits, though there are, of course practical ones, and there are a great many legendary tales of great Duel-in-the-Sun combats between lords and princes in classical times (for cockfighting has almost always been as much an elite concern as a popular one), far deeper than anything anyone, even aristocrats, could produce today anywhere in Bali.

Indeed, one of the great culture heroes of Bali is a prince, called after his passion for the sport, “The Cockfighter,” who happened to be away at a very deep cockfight with a neighboring prince when the whole of his family—father, brothers, wives, sisters—were assassinated by
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Feathers, Blood, Crowds, and Money

"Poetry makes nothing happen," Auden says in his elegy of Yeats, "it survives in the valley of its saying ... a way of happening, a mouth." The cockfight too, in this colloquial sense, makes nothing happen. Men go on allegorically humiliating one another and being allegorically humiliated by one another, day after day, glorying quietly in the experience if they have triumphed, crushed only slightly more openly by it if they have not. That no one's status really changes. You cannot ascend the status ladder by winning cockfights, you cannot, as an individual, really ascend it at all. Nor can you descend it that way. All you can do is enjoy and savour, or suffer and withstand, the concretized sensation of drastic and momentary movement along an aesthetic semblance of that ladder, a kind of behind-the-mirror status jump which has the look of mobility without its actuality.

Like any art form—for that, finally, is what we are dealing with—the cockfight renders ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible by presenting it in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced for, if you prefer, mummified to the level of sheer appearances, where their meaning can be more perfectly articulated and more exactly perceived. The cockfight is 'really' real only to the cocks—it does not kill anyone, cause any injury, reduce anyone to animal status, alter the hierarchical relations among people, or refashion the hierarchy; it does not even redistribute income in any significant way. What it does is what, for other peoples with other temperaments and other conventions, love and cramps, pugilism do; it catches up those themes—death, masculinity, ego, pride, loss, evidence, challenge—and, ordering them into an encompassing structure, presents them in such a way as to throw into relief a particular view of their essential nature. It puts a construction on them, makes them, to

18 Addict gamblers are really less exalted for their status is, as everyone else's, inherited; than merely impoverished and personally disgraced. The most prominent addict gambler in my cockfight circuit was actually a very high caste nautch who sold off most of his considerable lands to support his habit. Though everyone privately regarded him as a fool and worse than, more charitable, regarded him as sick; he was publicly treated with the elaborate deference and politeness due his rank. On the independence of personal reputation and public status in Bali, see above, Chapter 14.
those historically positioned to appreciate its construction, meaningful — visible, tangible, graspable — "real," in an ideational sense. An image, fiction, a model, a metaphor, the cockfight is a means of expression; its function is neither to assuage social passions nor to heighten them (though, in its playing-with-fire way it does a bit of both), but, in a medium of feathers, blood, crowds, and money, to display them.

The question of how it is that we perceive qualities in things — paintings, books, melodies, plays — that we do not feel we can assert literally to be there has come, in recent years, into the very center of aesthetic theory.22 Neither the sentiments of the artist, which remain his, nor those of the audience, which remain theirs, can account for the agita-
tion of one painting or the serenity of another. We attribute grandeur, wit, despair, exuberance to strings of sounds; lightness, energy, viol-
cence, fluidity to blocks of stone. Novels are said to have strength, buildings eloquence, plays momentum, ballets repose. In this realm of eccentric predicates, to say that the cockfight, in its perfected cases at least, is "disquietful" does not seem at all metaphorical, merely, as I have just denied it practical consequences, somewhat paradoxical.

The disquietfulness arises, "somehow," out of a conjunction of three attributes of the fight: its immediate dramatic shape; its metaphoric content; and its social context. A cultural figure against a social ground, the fight is at once a convulsive surge of animal hatred, a mock war of sym-bolic selves, and a formal simulation of status tensions, and its aes-
thetic power derives from its capacity to force together these diverse realities. The reason it is disquietful is not that it has material effects (it has some, but they are minor); the reason that it is disquietful is that, joining pride to selfhood, selfhood to cocks, and cocks to destruction, it brings to imaginative realization a dimension of Balinese experience normally well-obscured from view. The transfer of a sense of gravity into what is in itself a rather blank and unvaried spectacle, a commo-
lion of beating wings and throbbing legs, is effected by interpreting it as expressive of something unsettling in the way its authors and audience live, or, even more ominously, what they are. As a dramatic shape, the fight displays a characteristic that does not seem so remarkable until one realizes that it does not have to be there:

22 For four, somewhat variant, treatments, see S. Langer, Feeling and Form (New York, 1951); R. Wollheim, Art and Its Objects (New York, 1968); N. Goodman, Languages of Art (Indianapolis, 1968); M. Merleau-Ponty, "The Eye and the Mind," in his The Primacy of Perception (Evanton, Ill., 1944), pp. 199-209.

British cockfights (the sport was banned there in 1840) indeed seem to have lacked it, and to have generated, therefore, a quite different spectacle. Most British fights were "mocks," in which a prescribed number of cocks were aligned into two teams and fought serially. Scores was kept and wagering took place both on the individual matches and on the main as a whole. There were also "bottle coasters," both in England and on the Continent, in which a large number of cocks were let loose or cope with the one left standing at the end the victor, and in Wales, the so-called Welsh "Curlew," a cockfighting pattern, along the lines of a present-day tennis tournament, winner proceeding to the next round. As a game, the cock fight has perhaps less competitive reality than, say, Latin comedy, but it is not entirely without any. On cockfighting more gen-


23 Above, pp. 391-398.
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counters of everyday life, through the changing pointillism of gamelan music, to the visiting-day-of-the-gods temple celebrations are. It is not an imitation of the punctuance of Balinese social life, nor a depiction of it, nor even an expression of it; it is an example of it, carefully prepared.38

If one dimension of the cockfight's structure, its lack of temporal directionality, makes it seem a typical segment of the general social life, however, the other, its flat-out, head-to-head (or spur-to-spur) aggressiveness, makes it seem a contradiction, a reversal, even a subversion of it. In the normal course of things, the Balinese are shy to the point of obsessiveness of open conflict. Oblique, cautious, subdued, controlled, masters of indirection and dissimulation—what they call alus, "polished," "smooth"—they rarely face what they can turn away from, rarely resist what they can evade. But here they portray themselves as wild and murderous, with manic explosions of instinctual cruelty. A powerful rendering of life as the Balinese most deeply do not want it to (to adapt a phrase Frye has used of Gloucester's blinding) is set in the context of a sample of it as they do it in fact have it.39 And, because the context suggests that the rendering, if less than a straightforward description, is nonetheless more than an idle fancy, it is here that the disquietingness—the disquietfulness of the fight, not (or, anyway, not necessarily) its patrons, who seem in fact rather thoroughly to enjoy it—emerges. The slaughter in the cock ring is not a depiction of how things literally are among men, but, what is almost worse, of how, from a particular angle, they imaginatively are.40

38 For the necessity of distinguishing among "description," "representation," "exemplification," and "expression" (and the irrelevance of "imitation" to all of them) as modes of symbolic reference, see Goodman, Languages of Art, pp. 61-110. 45-91, 223-224.


40 There are two other Balinese values and divisions which, connected with punctuate temporality on the one hand and individual selfhood (The world is like a cripple among the lepers; And repugnance words without meaning) (Copyright 1947 by Wallace Stevens, reprinted from The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., and Faber and Faber Ltd.; the Schoenberg reference is to the third of his Five Orchestral Pieces [Opus 16]), and a borrowing from H. H. Drager, "The Concept of Tonal Body," in Reflections on Art, ed. S. Lukas (New York, 1963), p. 154. Or Hogarth, and a borrowing from it here, called "decimal matching"—see E. H. Gombrich, "The Use of the Study of Symbols," in Psychology and the Visual Arts, ed. J. H. Roger (Baltimore, 1969), pp. 149-170. The more usual term for this sort of semantic alchemy is "metaphorical transfer," and good technical discussions of it can be found in M. Black, Models and Metaphors (Ithaca, N.Y., 1962), p. 25 ff; Goodman, Languages of Art, p. 44 ff; and W. Pesce, "Metaphor as Metanome," Sesame Review 66 (1958): 78-99.

Notes on the Balinese Cockfight

The angle, of course, is stratificatory. What, as we have already seen, the cockfight talks most forcibly about is status relationships, and what it says about them is that they are matters of life and death. That prescience is a profoundly serious business is apparent everywhere one looks in Bali—the village, the family, the economy, the state. A peculiar fusion of Polynesian title ranks and Hindu castes, the hierarchy of pride is the moral backbone of the society. But only in the cockfight are the sentiments upon which that hierarchy rests revealed in their natural colors. Enveloped elsewhere in a haze of etiquette, a thick cloud of euphemism and ceremony, gesture and allusion, they are here expressed in only the thinnest disguise of an animal mask, a mask which in fact demystifies them far more effectively than it conceals them. Jealousy as is much a part of Bali as poise, envy in grace, brutality as charm; but without the cockfight the Balinese would have a much less certain understanding of them, which is, presumably, why they value it so highly.

Any expressive form works (when it works) by dissembling semantic contexts in such a way that properties conventionally ascribed to certain things are unconventionally ascribed to others, which are then seen actually to possess them. To call the wind a cripple, as Stevens does, to fix tone and manipulate timber, as Schoenberg does, or, closer to our case, to picture an art critic as a dissolve bear, as Hogarth does, is to cross conceptual wires; the established conjunctions between objects and their qualities are altered, and phenomena—fall weather, melodic shape, or cultural journalism—are clothed in signifiers which normally point to other referents.41 Similarly, to connect—and connect, and connect—the collision of roosters with the divisiveness of status is to invite a transfer

fusion of position the scrambling cocks exemplify as its profoundest enemy and contradiction. On same, see Bateson and Mead, Baliune Character, pp. 3, 64; on paling, Std., p. 11, and Bala, ed., Traditional Balinese Culture, p. 99 ff.

41 The Stevens reference is to his "The Morive for Metaphor" ("You like it under the trees in autumn;Because everything is dying...It's as though you were...like a cripple among the lepers;And repugnance words without meaning") (Copyright 1947 by Wallace Stevens, reprinted from The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., and Faber and Faber Ltd.; the Schoenberg reference is to the third of his Five Orchestral Pieces [Opus 16]), and a borrowing from H. H. Drager, "The Concept of Tonal Body," in Reflections on Art, ed. S. Lukas (New York, 1963), p. 154. Or Hogarth, and a borrowing from it here, called "decimal matching"—see E. H. Gombrich, "The Use of the Study of Symbols," in Psychology and the Visual Arts, ed. J. H. Roger (Baltimore, 1969), pp. 149-170. The more usual term for this sort of semantic alchemy is "metaphorical transfer," and good technical discussions of it can be found in M. Black, Models and Metaphors (Ithaca, N.Y., 1962), p. 25 ff; Goodman, Languages of Art, p. 44 ff; and W. Pesce, "Metaphor as Metanome," Sesame Review 66 (1958): 78-99.
of perceptions from the former to the latter, a transfer which is at once a description and a judgment. (Logically, the transfer could, of course, as well go the other way, but, like most of the rest of us, the Balinese are a great deal more interested in understanding men than they are in understanding cocks.) What sets the cockfight apart from the ordinary course of life, lifts it from the muddle of the unimportant, and surrounds it with an aura of enlarged importance is not, as functionalist sociology would have it, that it reinforces status discriminations (such reinforcement is hardly necessary in a society where every act proclaims them), but that it provides a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment. Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive; it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves.

Saying Something of Something

To put the matter this way is to engage in a bit of metaphorical refocusing of one’s own, for it shifts the analysis of cultural forms from an endeavor in general parallel to dissecting an organism, diagnosing a symptom, deciphering a code, or ordering a system—the dominant analogies in contemporary anthropology—to one in general parallel with generating a literary text. If one takes the cockfight, or any other collectively sustained symbolic structure, as a means of “saying something of something” (to invoke a famous Aristotelian tag), then one is faced with a problem not in social mechanics but social semantics.84 For the anthropologist, whose concern is with formulating sociological principles, not with promoting or appreciating cockfights, the question is, what does one learn about such principles from examining culture as an assemblage of texts?

Such an extension of the notion of a text beyond written material, 83 The tag is from the second book of the Organon, On Interpretation. For a discussion of it, and for the whole argument for freeing “the notion of text” . . . from the notion of scripture or writing” and constructing, thus, a general hermeneutics, see P. Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy (New Haven, 1970), p. 21ff.

Notes on the Balinese Cockfight and even beyond verbal, is, though metaphorical, not, of course, all that novel. The interpretatio naturae tradition of the middle ages, which, culminating in Spinoza, attempted to read nature as Scripture, the Nietzschean effort to treat value systems as glosses on the will to power (or the Marxian one to treat them as glosses on property relations), and the Freudian replacement of the enigmatic text of the manifest dream with the plain one of the latent, all offer precedents, if not equally recommendable ones.82 But the idea remains theoretically undeveloped; and the more profound corollary, so far as anthropology is concerned, that cultural forms can be treated as texts, as imaginative works built out of social materials, has yet to be systematically explored.83

In the case at hand, to treat the cockfight as a text is to bring out a feature of it (in my opinion, the central feature of it) that treating it as a rite or a pastime, the two most obvious alternatives, would tend to obscure: its use of emotion for cognitive ends. What the cockfight says it says in a vocabulary of sentiment—the thrill of risk, the despair of loss, the pleasure of triumph. Yet what it says is not merely that risk is exciting, loss depressing, or triumph gratifying; verbal tautologies of affect, but that it is of these emotions, thus exemplified, that society is built and individuals are put together. Attending cockfights and participating in them is, for the Balinese, a kind of sentimental education. What he learns there is what his culture’s ethos and his private sensibility (or, anyway, certain aspects of them) look like when spelled out externally in a collective text; that the two are near enough alike to be articulated in the symbols of a single such text; and— the disquieting part—that the text in which this revelation is accomplished consists of a chicken hacking another mindlessly to bits.

Every people, the proverb has it, loves its own form of violence. The cockfight is the Balinese reflection on theirs: on its look, its uses, its force, its fascination. Drawing on almost every level of Balinese experience, it brings together themes—animal savagery, male narcissism, opulent gambling, status rivalry, mass excitement, blood sacrifice—82 Ibid.
84 Levi-Strauss’s “structuration” might seem an exception. But it is only an apparent one. For, other than taking myths, lostem rites, marriage rites, or whatever as texts to interpret, Levi-Strauss takes them as rubrics to solve, which is very much not the same thing. He does not seek to understand symbolic forms in terms of how they function in situational situations to organise perceptions (meanings, emotions, concepts, attitudes): he seeks to understand them entirely in terms of their internal structure, independant de tout sujet, de tout objet, et de toute contexte. See above, Chapter 15.
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whose main connection is their involvement with rage and the false of rage, and, binding them into a set of rules which at once contains them and allows them play, builds a symbolic structure in which, over and over again, the reality of their inner affiliation can be intelligibly felt. If, to quote Northrop Frye again, we go to see Macheth to learn what a man feels like after he has gained a kingdom and lost his soul, Balinese go to cockfights to find out what a man, usually composed, aloof, almost obsessively self-absorbed, a kind of moral auto-tumor, feels like when, attacked, tormented, challenged, insulted, and driven in result to the extremes of fury, he has totally triumphed or been brought totally low.

The whole passage, as it takes us back to Aristotle (though to the Poetics rather than the Hermeneutics), is worth quoting:

But the poet [as opposed to the historian], Aristotle says, never makes any real statements at all, certainly no particular or specific ones. The poet's job is not to tell you what happened, but what happens; not what did take place, but the kind of thing that always does take place. He gives you the typical, recurring, or what Aristotle calls universal event. You wouldn't go to Macheth to learn about the history of Scotland—you go to it to learn what a man feels like after he's gained a kingdom and lost his soul. When you meet such a character as Macawber in Dickens, you don't feel that there must have been a man Dickens knew who was exactly like this; you feel that there's a bit of Macawber in almost everybody you know, including yourself. Our impressions of human life are picked up one by one, and remain for most of us loose and disconnected. But we constantly find things in literature that suddenly coordinate and bring into focus a great many such impressions, and this is part of what Aristotle means by the typical or universal human event.19

It is this kind of bringing of assorted experiences of everyday life to focus that the cockfight, set aside from that life as "only a game" and reconnected to it as "more than a game," accomplishes, and so creates what, better than typical or universal, could be called a paradigmatic human event—that is, one that tells us less what happens than the kind of thing that would happen if, as is not the case, life were art and could be as freely shaped by styles of feeling as Macheth and David Copperfield are.

Enacted and re-enacted, so far without end, the cockfight enables the Balinese, as read and reread, Macheth enables us, to see a dimension of his own subjectivity. As he watches fight after fight, with the active watching of an owner and a better (for cockfighting has no more interest in the pure spectator sport than does croquet or dog racing), he grows familiar with it and what it has to say to him, much as the attentive listener to string quartets or the absorbed viewer of still life grows slowly more familiar with them in a way which opens his subjectivity to himself.20

Yet, because—in another of those paradoxes, along with painted feelings and unmeaningless art, which haunt aesthetics—that subjectivity does not properly exist until it is thus organized, art forms generate and regenerate the very subjectivity they pretend only to display. Quartets, still lifes, and cockfights are not merely reflections of a pre-existing sensibility analogously represented; they are positive agents in the creation and maintenance of such a sensibility. If we see ourselves as a pack of Micawbers, it is from reading too much Dickens (if we see ourselves as unillusioned realists, it is from reading too little); and similarly for Balinese, cocks, and cockfights. It is in such a way, coloring experience with the light they cast in it, rather than through whatever material effects they may have, that the arts play their role, as arts, in social life.21

In the cockfight, then, the Balinese forms and discovers his temperament and his society's temperament at the same time. Or, more exactly, he forms and discovers a particular facet of them. Not only are there a great many other cultural texts providing commentaries on status hierarchies, but the use of the, to European us, "natural" visual idiom for perception—"see," "watch," and so forth—is more than usually misleading here, for the fact that, as mentioned earlier, Balinese follow the progress of the fight as much (perhaps, as fighting cocks are actually rather hard to see except as blurs of motion, more with their bodies as with their eyes, moving their limbs, heads, and trunks in general mimicry of the cocks' maneuvers, means that much of the individual's experience of the fight is kinesthetic rather than visual. If ever there was an example of Kenneth Burke's definition of a symbolic act as "the dancing of an attitude," (The Philosophy of Literary Form, rev. ed. (New York, 1957), p. 9) the cockfight is it. On the enormous role of kinesthetic perception in Balinese life, Bateson and Mead, Balinese Character, pp. 84-88 on perception, in general, Goodman, Language of Art, pp. 241-244. 22 All this coupling of the occasional grunt with the oriental lusty with double entendre certain sorts of aestheticism as the earlier efforts of anthropologists to speak of Christianity and literature in the same breath described certain sorts of theodolism, that is, ontological questions are too should be bracketed in the sociology of religion, developmental ones are (or should be) bracketed in the sociology of art. In any case, the attempt to dehistoricize the concept of art is but part of the general anthropological "conspiracy to dehistoricize all important social concepts—marriage, religion, law, sexuality—and though this is a threat to aesthetic theories which regard certain works of art as beyond the reach of sociological analysis, it is no threat to the conviction, for which Robert Graves claims to have been reprimanded at his Cambridge classes, that some poems are better than other.

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19 Frye, The Educated Imagination, pp. 63-64.

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archy and self-regard in Bali, but there are a great many other critical sectors of Balinese life besides the stratificatory and the agonistic that receive such commentary. The ceremony consecrating a Brahmana priest, a matter of breath control, postural immobility, and vacant concentration upon the depths of being, displays a radically different, but to the Balinese equally real, property of social hierarchy—its reach toward the numinous transcendent. Set not in the matrix of the kinetic emotionality of animals, but in that of the static passionlessness of divine mentality, it expresses tranquillity not disquiet. The mass festivals at the village temples, which mobilize the whole local population in elaborate hosannas of visiting gods—songs, dances, compliments, gifts—assert the spiritual unity of village mates against their status inequality and project a mood of amity and trust. The cockfight is not the master key to Balinese life, any more than bullfighting is to Spanish. What it says about that life is not unqualified nor even unchallenged by what other equally eloquent cultural statements say about it. But there is nothing more surprising in this than in the fact that Racine and Molère were contemporaries, or that the same people who arrange chrysanthemeums cast swords.

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. There are enormous difficulties in such an enterprise, methodological pitfalls to a Freudian quake.

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and some moral perplexities as well. Nor is it the only way that symbolic forms can be sociologically handled. Functionalism lives, and so does psychology. But to regard such forms as "saying something of something," and saying it to somebody, is at least to open up the possibility of an analysis which attends to their substance rather than to reduce the formulas professing to account for them.

As in more familiar exercises in close reading, one can start anywhere in a culture's repertoire of forms and end up anywhere else. One can stay, as I have here, within a single, more or less bounded form, and circle steadily around it. One can move between forms in search of broader unities or informing contrasts. One can even compare forms from different cultures to define their character in reciprocal relief. But whatever the level at which one operates, and however intricately, the guiding principle is the same: societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them.