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NOTES AND COMMENTARIES

Spider Wrestling and Gambling Culture in the Rural Philippines

Ty Matejowsky

This paper describes spider wrestling as a sport; the methods by which spiders are collected, trained, and rehabilitated; and how matches are organized and bets placed. Given the role it plays in the enculturation of adolescent Filipinos, spider wrestling represents for many youths the first stage of what can become a lifelong gambling obsession.

KEYWORDS: *Gambling, spiders, games, anthropology of sports*

Like other countries of East and Southeast Asia, the Philippines has developed the reputation as a gambling society. Whether it is buying a lottery ticket, betting online, or playing *jueteng* (an illegal numbers game), games of chance have become something of an obsession for millions of Filipinos (Flavier 1974, 173–74). So ingrained is gambling in Philippine life that, according to one recent estimate, the country offers no less than thirty-four types of wagering activities (PDI 2000). Not taking into account the billions of pesos that go unreported every year in illicit gambling activities, legitimate gaming operations in the Philippines were expected to have generated upwards of P16 billion (approximately US\$3 billion) in gross income for the state in 2001 (PDI 2001a).

This figure will doubtless increase in the years to come as the government continues to promote state-sponsored gambling as a strategy integral to generating funds and revitalizing the nation's sluggish economy (*PDI* 2001b).

This culture of gambling permeates all sectors of Philippine society. Nearly every segment of the population participates to some degree in gambling activities, whether legal or illegal. Perhaps no group is more avid in these pursuits than rural males. This is especially true when it comes to blood sports. Betting on contests pitting two animals against one another in a fight to the death is a way of life for many males in the country's hinterlands. Some sports based on animal fighting enjoy widespread popularity and are practiced year round. Others have less of a following and are only associated with local feasts, an example of which are the horse fights staged by the T'boli of Lake Sebu in southern Cotabato every September. Similarly, the town of San Joaquin, Iloilo, is famous for its Festival of the Bulls, which is held in January and features contests pitting bulls against one another (Harper and Fullerton 1993, 83–84).

Clearly, the most popular type of blood sport is *sabong*, or cockfighting (Lerner 1999, 120–29).¹ Every weekend, arenas across the Philippines are packed with thousands of men anxious to legally wager on fights featuring roosters with razor-sharp gaffs fitted to their legs. The sheer spectacle of such an event—with its fast pace, noise, gore, and crowd participation—has done much to establish cockfighting as the national sport of the Philippines (Lansang 1966; Roces 1994, 78–79).

For most rural Filipinos, an affinity for sports like cockfighting begins early. Although most males do not become involved in *sabong* until their teens, it is likely that by the time a boy is finishing elementary school he is already adept at wagering on animal fights. This know-how comes from a most unlikely place since the creatures involved are only a few millimeters long and housed in match boxes. The animals in question are, of course, spiders.

Spider wrestling is not exclusive to the Philippines. There is a long tradition of spider wrestling in Kajiki, Japan.² It has also been featured in a novel set in the Singapore of the 1950s.³ Spider wrestling is a fa-

vorite pastime of Filipino youth living in low-income rural areas where free time and spiders are abundant.⁴ Until recently, spider wrestling was viewed mainly as a harmless, if somewhat disruptive, diversion for schoolboys. This sentiment has changed in the last few years as concerns about the sport's impact on the educational and moral development of its participants, not to mention its effect on the environment, have arisen.

The Need for Ethnography

An ethnographic account of spider wrestling in the Philippines is long overdue. Unlike cockfighting, which has been a subject of anthropological inquiry both in the Philippines and throughout Southeast Asia (Aguilar 1998, 47–50; Fox 1956, 627–29; Geertz 1972), spider wrestling remains a facet of Philippine life almost completely overlooked by social and cultural researchers.⁵ This omission is surprising given the significance of gambling in Philippine society and the fact that the sport represents many Filipinos' first experience with wagering. Much could be learned about how gambling is introduced and perpetuated on the local level and the implications this may have on other aspects of rural life by taking a closer look at this popular pastime.

This paper serves mainly as a descriptive account of spider wrestling in the Philippines, based largely upon fieldwork in Dagupan City, Pangasinan, in 1997–98. Besides documenting how the sport is played, I also explore the methods by which spiders are collected, trained and, if injured, rehabilitated. Likewise, I look at how matches are organized and bets placed. More generally, I examine recent perceptions about spider wrestling. In particular, I describe the way educators, environmentalists, and others have responded to the sport and elaborate on their efforts towards limiting or advancing this boyhood pastime. On a more theoretical level, I also consider what spider wrestling may tell us about life in the provincial Philippines. Is spider wrestling merely an incipient expression of the rural Filipinos' fondness for gambling and blood sports or does it indicate something deeper about the enculturation of preadolescent males? These questions are addressed in this paper's concluding sections.

Two general points should be made before examining spider wrestling in greater detail. First, while females rarely, if ever, take up spider wrestling, schoolboys are not the only ones involved in the sport. Young men in their late teens or early twenties, whose jobs entail long periods of downtime, participate in spider fighting to some degree. Notably, security guards and drivers of tricycles (motorcycles with covered sidecars hired out for public transport) and tribikes (bicycles with sidecars hired out for short trips) commonly spend hours outdoors each day with little or nothing to do. One way they pass the time is taking part in petty gambling. It is not uncommon to see individuals from these lines of work hunched around a spider fighting match when work is slow.

Second, spider wrestling enjoys some popularity in Metro Manila and other large cities, although it is mainly practiced by those living in rural areas. The sport has less of a following in these large metropolitan centers primarily because decent fighting spiders are not readily available. Unchecked sprawl, air pollution, and other factors of city life have significantly diminished the spider population of the urban Philippines. As a result, most of the spiders used for fighting in major cities are imported from the provinces.

Spider Wrestling

Spider wrestling seems a sport well suited for boys in the provincial Philippines. With the majority of the population living in poverty, Filipinos have proven resourceful in coping with a lack of disposable income. This ingenuity is evident among the country's schoolchildren. Having little or no money, young Filipinos have devised various ways of passing the time with the resources available to them (Basa 1992; Jocano 1969, 40–42). Spider wrestling is such an endeavor. The sport requires little more than two fighting spiders and a stick measuring about 20–30 cm long.

The basic premise of spider wrestling is simple: Two spiders fight on a stick until one is either dead or incapacitated. Although contests tend to be impromptu and loosely organized, most bouts follow a predictable sequence. Two boys will inspect each other's spiders and

agree to a match under a predetermined set of rules. Usually, spiders of equal size and ability are pitted against one another. The spiders are placed on opposite ends of a fighting stick by their owners. To discourage cheating, the stick is usually held by a *sentensiyador* (referee) who grasps it at midpoint between his thumb and index finger. This creates a barrier and prevents one spider from getting an unfair jump on its opponent. As one or both spiders advance, the *sentensiyador* takes hold of a free end with his opposite thumb and index finger. He releases his grip from the middle of the stick and the barrier is gone. The spiders have their first glimpse of one another.

Fighting begins almost at once. The spiders collide and grapple along the stick nearly faster than the eye can follow. Although there is no time limit for a match, few last longer than a minute. Most are over in a matter of seconds with one of the spiders being killed, severely injured, or wrapped in a cocoon. Some spiders avoid such fates by dropping off the stick on a silk thread. When this happens, the *sentensiyador* may take hold of the thread and return the spider to the stick so that fighting can resume. If the spider drops off three times, its owner must concede the match. An owner must also forfeit if he touches either spider or somehow causes the opposing spider to lose. Once the winning spider has been determined, bets are settled and preparations for the next match begin.

There are instances when neither spider will attack. Sometimes their only reaction is to contort their bodies to appear larger and more menacing. When this occurs it is up to the *sentensiyador* to prompt them into action. Typically, he does this by softly blowing on the spiders, shaking the stick lightly, or rolling it between his fingers. Any attempt to get the spiders to fight must be done with caution. If the *sentensiyador* should inadvertently knock one of the spiders off or in some way disrupt the contest, he may have to pay the participants with money or spiders of his own.

Given its simplicity, spider wrestling can take place almost anywhere. Not surprisingly, most matches happen in and around schools, playgrounds, and other places where elementary students normally congregate. Whether attending public institutions or private academies, boys spend much of their free time at school involved with the sport. When

classes are not in session, the primary venue for spider wrestling is the town plaza. The plaza serves as a popular hangout for students and street kids alike. Spider wrestling represents one of the few activities in which children living on the street can interact with their more affluent counterparts on something of an equal level.

Spider Collecting

Spider wrestling does not occur year round. It is a seasonal activity that typically begins during the rainy season when vegetation is lush and spiders are plentiful. From September through January, groups of boys can be seen roaming the countryside in search of the perfect wrestling spider. Invariably, this takes place outdoors since household spiders (*gagambang babay*) are considered poor fighters. Hunts can last up to several hours and normally happen in the morning or late afternoon when spiders return to the center of their webs and are easily captured.

A boy will use either a stick or his hand to extract the spider from its web. The spider will then be placed in an empty matchbox. Since a spider hunt generally yields more than one capture, these containers are often divided into compartments. This allows the collector to store up to a half-dozen spiders in one box and keeps the more aggressive spiders from eating the weaker ones. The matchboxes are normally perforated with air holes and sometimes decorated with drawings or small stickers. At night, spiders have to be protected from ants. One way this is accomplished is by keeping matchboxes on top of an inverted cup resting inside a jar lid filled with water. During the day, matchboxes are either hidden away in pockets or worn on a string around the child's neck.

Most spiders are gathered from the vast fields of cogon grass (*imperata cylindrica*), a perennial weed with sharp, hairlike spikelets which pervades the rural landscape of the Philippines in dense tufts. These plants present an ideal habitat for spiders to construct webs and snare insects. The grass does not grow very tall, giving children easy access to the spiders (*gagambang palay*). Somewhat more difficult to catch are the spiders nested in tree branches or electrical pylons. These spiders have

to be retrieved with a long stick. While spiders collected from trees (*gagambang puno*) are regarded as worthy fighters, the most highly prized spiders are the ones found along power lines. Apparently, collectors believe the electric wires give these spiders a special power which makes them especially fierce. Understandably, their capture is greeted with much enthusiasm.

If a boy is unable to collect spiders on his own, he can usually buy one from a fellow classmate or spider peddler. The latter are typically teenage males who ply their wares near schools or other places where boys gather. These spiders run anywhere from P40 to P100 depending on their size and fighting ability. These are not inordinate amounts for many elementary students in the rural Philippines. Even if a boy is unable to afford a first-rate spider, he always has the option of trading for one. Spiders are traded amongst young Filipinos in much the same way Pokémon cards or pogs are swapped by American school children.

Spider Training

After spiders have been collected, the next step is to train them. Boys often go to great lengths to make sure their spiders are in optimal fighting condition. Even though it remains unlikely that the natural fighting ability of a spider can be greatly improved, several techniques have been devised in order to give spiders a competitive edge.

Before these training methods can be applied, however, a boy must first determine which of his spiders is the best fighter, a process that relies as much on intuition as it does on a spider's physical characteristics. It is commonly believed that hairy spiders with small bodies and long arms are the best fighters. These traits are usually associated with female spiders. There is also an assumption that spiders that have recently laid eggs will be more aggressive. Conversely, males with large bodies, short arms, and no hair are assumed to lack prowess. Such beliefs become something of a moot point when spiders are pitted against one another in a series of mock bouts. These exercises provide the clearest indication of which spiders will likely prevail when fighting is for real.

Once the best fighters have been selected, various approaches are employed to enhance their wrestling ability. Most training methods emphasize regular sparring sessions and a strict dietary regimen. Champion spiders are tested against weaker spiders anywhere from three or four times a day in an effort to keep their fighting skills properly honed. Practice bouts not only help preserve the natural agility of spiders, they are also useful in familiarizing them with the fighting stick.

As far as nourishment is concerned, most spiders are limited to a diet of dragonflies, mosquitoes, and other insects commonly found in rural areas. In the time leading up to a match, however, boys often set aside this basic menu for something less orthodox. Some owners feed their spiders bits of chili pepper a day or two prior to wrestling. Whether served alone or mixed with small amounts of dried fish or rice, the pungent qualities of peppers are believed to bring out a spider's more aggressive tendencies. Others prefer restricting a spider's intake entirely. Under the assumption that a hungry spider is a more pugnacious spider, boys sometimes stop all feeding the day before a match.

Champion Spiders

No matter how fierce or formidable, a fighting spider will almost certainly meet its demise on the stick. Very seldom does one last more than six or seven bouts before dying or becoming seriously disabled. As such, boys are generally quite selective about which of their spiders to fight. Though it would seem children would have few qualms about putting their favorite spiders at risk since replacements are widely available, boys often develop an attachment to their best fighters that approaches what some feel for more conventional pets.

This fondness is expressed in various ways. For instance, boys tend to utilize their more accomplished fighters sparingly. Unless the stakes are high, it is likely that a boy will rely on his new or less aggressive spiders for most matches. Likewise, it is not uncommon for collectors to give their favorite spiders nicknames. These names tend to reflect a

spider's physical characteristics as much as they do popular culture. The most popular spider name I came across during my fieldwork was Tyson. Boys named their favorite spiders (regardless of sex) after the controversial former-heavyweight boxing champion of the world, Mike Tyson. Not surprisingly, my research coincided with the infamous ear-biting incident Tyson perpetrated against then-heavyweight champion Evander Holyfield in July 1997. The kind of ferocity Tyson displays in the ring is apparently something most spider-wrestling enthusiasts want for their spiders.

What is more, champion spiders are usually given preferential treatment when it comes to food and shelter. Compared to their less fierce "stablemates," prized spiders are generally provided with better food and their own matchboxes. Finally, some spiders are deemed so exceptional that if injured they are not discarded but, instead, nursed back to health.

Spider Rehabilitation

As surprising as it may seem, steps can be taken to rehabilitate injured spiders for an eventual return to wrestling. Obviously, these treatments do not apply to all spiders. Some end up so mangled that they are beyond saving. Nevertheless, spiders can prove quite resilient when it comes to confronting injury. Many do recover enough to go back to wrestling. Whether or not the curative measures administered by local schoolboys play any significant role in their comeback is something that remains questionable.

The main therapy involves allowing the spider plenty of rest and treating it with leaves from the *ampalaya* plant.⁶ Generally speaking, this treatment proceeds as follows: A wounded spider is returned to its matchbox following a bout. Ampalaya leaves are collected and carefully placed in the box for the spider to consume. Over the next few days, the spider is limited to a strict regime of ampalaya and water. Its owner keeps a watchful eye on the spider during this time of recovery, noting any change in its condition. As signs of improvement become evident, insects and bits of meat and rice are added to the spider's diet.

Soon, the spider is transferred from its matchbox to a house plant so that it can recuperate in a more natural setting. Before long, it starts exhibiting normal behavior like spinning webs and snaring insects. At this point, boys begin preparing the spider for a return to wrestling. Mainly, this involves reacquainting it with the stick and sparring it against lesser spiders.

Gambling Behavior

As a form of petty gambling, spider fighting is simple and straightforward. Side bets and other wagers not directly related to the outcome of a bout tend to be rare. Matches can take place almost anywhere and require minimal cost to participate in them. Although most schoolboys have little in terms of material wealth, they rarely agree to a contest without something of value at stake. The primary wager is customarily between the two spider owners. These bets usually involve the exchange of money or the spiders themselves. When cash is wagered, amounts tend to be low. Most bets do not exceed P100, although some occasionally reach into the P1,000–P2,000 range. When fighting spiders are wagered, matches tend to be less serious and, as a rule, not permitted to continue to the death.

Anyone can bet on a spider-wrestling contest. Much of the action surrounding a match takes place among the friends and classmates of those directly involved. Their participation adds an air of excitement that would otherwise be missed if wagering were limited strictly to spider owners. Spectators generally bet in small amounts, though sometimes friends will pool their funds to increase the size of a payoff. Since there are no bookies or odds-makers to influence the stakes of a contest, betting is usually a matter of personal preference; but social pressure does exist for boys to wager on their friends' spiders.

Given the short duration of most bouts, cash will change hands frequently. An implicit honor system is followed when it comes to collecting or paying bets. When participants are not well acquainted, money is usually entrusted with a neutral third party until a winner is declared. If a loser should try to renege on a bet, trouble is likely to occur.

The Appeal to Boys

Spider wrestling clearly resonates with boys in the rural Philippines. The sport is played in virtually every provincial community and enjoys tremendous popularity despite recent efforts to restrict it. Its seemingly ubiquitous presence for part of the year begs the obvious question: What is it about spider wrestling that accounts for its considerable appeal amongst young Filipinos?

Beyond a general boyhood fascination with spiders, several explanations can be offered. First, spider fighting plays a formative role in the social development of some of its participants. It provides one of the first opportunities for rural schoolboys to assert their independence in a structured way. It is the students themselves who collect the spiders, train them, organize the matches, and wager on their outcome. As a child-directed process, spider wrestling is an activity that has little or no input from parents, teachers, or other adults. This gives boys a rare taste of autonomy outside of the sometimes complex and confining structure of Filipino family and social life (Medina 1991, 12–56).

Second, the camaraderie felt by those participating in spider wrestling is also a factor contributing to the sport's popularity. Same sex peer relations figure prominently in the lives of most preadolescent and adolescent Filipinos. Next to the family, no group exerts more influence over or receives more loyalty from a boy than his *barkada*, or clique (Roces 1985, 199–200). Members of this tightly knit group spend much of their time engaged in recreational activities. One way they interact is through spider wrestling. They hunt for spiders together, trade them with each other, and fight them against one another. While matches within one's *barkada* are seldom adversarial in tone, the same cannot be said for contests between members of rival cliques.

Expressions of group affiliation are often articulated in the context of competitive spider fighting. Unspoken rules dictate how members of a *barkada* should act when rival cliques agree to a match. Boys are expected to support their *barkada* through cheering and wagering on their friends' spiders. Similarly, they are expected to come to the defense of their *barkada* if cheating or some other impropriety occurs. Such

displays of public support underscore the sense of camaraderie within a barkada and the sway it has over young males. Failure to conform to these tacit expectations puts one at risk of being ostracized from the group, a situation most Filipinos would find distressing (*ibid*). In many ways, peer behavior within the format of spider wrestling illustrates the value Filipinos place on qualities like group membership, conformity, and smooth interpersonal relationships.

Third, and perhaps most compelling, is the role spider fighting plays as a game of chance. Children's games in the Philippines have long been noted for their gambling tendencies (Le Roy 1912, 56–59). What sets spider wrestling apart is the degree to which actual wagering is involved. Although bets tend to be small and matches loosely organized, the sport represents many Filipinos' initiation into the world of gambling. The culture of gambling that pervades Philippine society clearly finds expression in this boyhood pastime.

Indeed, its simplicity and low expense appeals to boys living in rural areas where resources are often limited. Unlike cockfighting that requires significant investments in both time and capital, a first-class fighting spider can be acquired and maintained with minimal effort or expenditure. This gives boys the opportunity to participate in a wagering activity without confronting the more serious aspects of blood sports like cockfighting (i.e., the financial cost of caring for, losing, and replacing a prized animal). It is not an overstatement to suggest that spider fighting represents the first stage of what can become a lifelong gambling obsession. This is especially true since it emulates what is probably the ultimate public expression of male identity in the rural Philippines: cockfighting.

Responses to Spider Wrestling

The popularity of spider wrestling amongst young Filipinos has not gone unnoticed by those outside of the sport. Although most Filipinos continue to think of spider fighting as little more than a harmless diversion for schoolboys, the phenomenon has come under increased scrutiny in recent years. Since the mid-1990s, concerns about the effect of spider fighting on children and other aspects of rural life have

arisen. Educators, environmentalists, and local politicians have all weighed in on this debate.⁷

Given their close interaction with young Filipinos, it is not surprising that educators have emerged as the most outspoken critics of spider wrestling. Elementary school teachers across the Philippines have complained that the sport distracts students from their studies, promotes gambling, and encourages truancy. Rather than attend class, many boys skip school to search for spiders. This problem has become so serious that some school districts have banned the sport. In 1998, the Department of Education in Cotabato del Norte began cracking down on spider fighting after it was noticed that a large number of student absences could be linked to the sport (*Houston Chronicle* 1998).

Also critical of spider wrestling are those associated with the Philippines' burgeoning environmental movement. Their opposition to the sport is based on the impact it has on local ecosystems. Removing spiders from their natural habitat places crops and other vegetation at risk since spiders consume a wide range of herbivorous insects. Without spiders, plants become increasingly vulnerable to pest infestation. A proliferation of insects would likely diminish harvest yields and possibly lead farmers to adopt more drastic measures (i.e., an increased reliance on chemical pesticides). Likewise, spider fighting may also contribute to the spread of mosquito-borne illnesses. Malaria and dengue fever are common in many parts of the rural Philippines. Spiders help prevent these infectious diseases from becoming more widespread by keeping the mosquito population in check. The removal of spiders from their natural habitat undermines this safeguard and might very well increase the severity of future outbreaks.⁸

For all the criticism directed at spider fighting, it is not completely dismissed as a harmful activity. In fact, a number of influential Filipinos have recognized the sport for its more favorable qualities. Some environmentalists have acknowledged that children involved in spider wrestling are likely to gain an appreciation for nature that they would not normally receive if they pursued other interests.⁹ Similarly, a few local politicians have expressed interest in capitalizing on the sport's growing popularity. In September 1997, city council members in Dagupan City,

Pangasinan, announced their intention of developing the sport as a possible tourist attraction along the lines of cockfighting (Lucasan 1997).

Although spider fighting has come under increased scrutiny in recent years, efforts to restrict the sport, however well-intentioned, are likely to prove ineffective. This is true for a number of reasons. First, it would be hard to convince the public at large that spider wrestling poses any significant risk to children, much less the environment. Games of chance are an integral part of Philippine life. Nearly every segment of the population participates in wagering activities to some degree. As such, few parents would oppose the sport on the grounds that it promotes juvenile gambling unless it could be shown to interfere with schoolwork. Similarly, the ecological implications of spider wrestling appear somewhat vague and far removed from the scope of this popular pastime. Certainly, the Philippines has more pressing environmental concerns than the removal of spiders from their natural habitats. Second, as long as conditions of poverty persist, it is likely that rural children will continue to pursue recreational activities that are accessible and inexpensive. Spider fighting affords young Filipinos the opportunity to participate in an activity that is both fun and engaging and does not discriminate because of economic status.

As a culturally meaningful activity, spider wrestling embodies many aspects of local life for young Filipinos. It reflects the ingenuity of rural schoolboys in confronting a lack of disposable income and the limited availability of material resources. It highlights their familiarity with the natural environment and the creatures that inhabit it. It underscores the importance of peer relations in the lives of most preadolescent and adolescent males. And, finally, it emphasizes an interest in gambling and animal fighting that preoccupies much of Philippine society. Since these conditions are likely to remain stable in the years to come, there is little to suggest that spider fighting will decrease in popularity anytime soon.

Notes

1. "Cockfights are banned throughout most of the world, including Canada and the United States, with the exception of Oklahoma. No European, African, or continental Asian country allows the sport; the only Pacific jurisdictions that per-

mit cockfighting are the Philippines and Guam. Most of the 'action' is found in Latin America and the Caribbean" (Thompson 2001, 55–56).

2. A small coastal community 30 minutes north of Kagoshima, Kajiki is home to the Kumo Gassen (Spider Wrestling Match) festival. Each summer, hundreds of spider-fighting aficionados descend on the town to participate in this annual event. Although the fundamentals of spider wrestling in Kajiki are very similar to what is practiced in the rural Philippines, notable differences in the nontechnical aspects of the sport exist. First, spider wrestling in the Philippines enjoys immense popularity throughout the provinces. In Japan, the sport appears to be little more than a novelty in the Kajiki area. Second, Filipino spider wrestling remains a pastime initiated by boys and entails wagering. The Kajiki version is more highly structured. It takes place in a tournament setting organized and supervised by adults and does not involve gambling. Third, rural schoolboys are the main practitioners of the sport in the Philippines. In Kajiki, both girls and boys participate in the Kumo Gassen.

3. The novel *Spider Boys* (1995) by Ming Cher tells the story of a gang of street children in 1950s Singapore who gain power and prestige by wrestling spiders. The sport, as it is described in the book, stands in contrast to what is currently practiced in the rural Philippines. While both versions are carried out mainly by children and involve wagering, according to Cher, spider wrestling in Singapore is more of an informal team sport that pits rival gangs against one another in something of a tournament setting. Moreover, spiders do not fight on sticks in Singapore. Instead, contests are held under banyan trees on small makeshift rings of plywood and bricks and attended by hundreds of children. Curiously, this was one of the few substantial accounts that I came across describing spider wrestling in Southeast Asia.

4. Spiders are among the most omnipresent and numerous predators in both agricultural and natural ecosystems, averaging fifty thousand individuals per acre in vegetated areas (Zahl 1971). Over two hundred species of spiders have been documented in the Philippines (Barrion and Litsinger 1995, 2). A variety of indigenous species are used in spider wrestling. As Nazarea-Sandoval (1995, 121) points out, most rural Filipinos have a remarkable ability to classify and differentiate various types of arachnids. Rarely, if ever, are wrestling spiders poisonous to humans.

5. Besides describing the fundamentals and attendant gambling behavior associated with cockfighting, the accounts by Geertz and Aguilar both delve into the symbolic aspects of the sport. Each suggests that cockfighting provides a context where class antagonisms and social relations underlying local hierarchies in both Indonesia (Bali) and the Philippines (the Visayas) are articulated and played out. Moreover, both propose that cockfighting serves as a dominant metaphor for understanding concepts of Balinese and Filipino masculinity.

6. *Ampalaya* (*Momordica charantina*), which translates as "bitter gourd," or "bitter melon," is a year-round vegetable that is cultivated extensively throughout the

Philippines. Served in many local dishes, ampalaya leaves are a good source of iron, calcium, and phosphorus. They are commonly believed to have healing properties that, among other things, help cure injured spiders.

7. Notably absent from the debate over spider wrestling are those advocating animal rights. Although the concept of animal rights may seem foreign to most Filipinos since the majority of the population lives in poverty with their own human rights repeatedly neglected, the issue has recently gained national attention. In February 1998, the Philippine government enacted the Animals Welfare Act (Republic Act 8485) that, among other things, banned activities that were deemed especially cruel to animals (Tan 1998). Although the law targeted a number of blood sports including horse fighting and dogfighting, it made no mention of cockfighting or spider wrestling. That the legislation failed to include cockfighting is not surprising given the significant role the sport plays in Philippine society. That it neglected to mention spider wrestling is also not unexpected since spiders are generally thought of as pests, not animals.

8. The superintendent of the Department of Education in North Cotabato, Isidro Valeroso, recently alluded to these concerns. According to him, "We have to teach children that spiders are a farmer's best friend because they catch insects that destroy or damage crops, we really have to stop children from killing spiders" (*Houston Chronicle* 1998).

9. Lodel Magbanua, one of the Philippines' most active and effective community builders, expressed such sentiments in a recent interview. "It is part of our culture to have spider fighting as a pastime for kids. . . . I suppose these are not very environmental friendly things, but somehow it exposed me to the wonder of nature, and gave me a love of wildlife. We were already taught at the time about how to care for the environment though I never saw myself becoming an activist" (Bojer 1999).

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