

The 'Kristo' of the Cockpit: An Unsung Phenomenon

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There are certain occupations which can be termed as unusual in the sense that these occupations require the mastery of special skills which are developed to the fullest only by a few individuals. A very typical yet unnoticed example is that of the *kristo*, the cockpit's bet-taker. Quijano de Manila, a prestigious figure in Philippine cockfighting, believes that the word *kristo* was derived from Christ. It relates the two because of their role as an 'intercessor' or 'mediator.' Just as Christ mediated between Man and God, the *kristo* mediates between the bettors and the managers. Moreover, Christ's heavy burden of dying for us is associated with the *kristo*'s highly demanding functions while the bettors whom he serves sit and wait in complete relaxation. Together with the *sentenciador* or the chief arbiter and the *casador* or bet-fixer, they are responsible for the efficient operation of the game. Of the three, the *kristo* shoulders the most demanding responsibility; that is, to take bets and to see to it that all bets are accounted for fairly. It is in the performance of this function that skills acquired by him are put to use and perfected. These skills include excellent retentive memory of people and transactions involved and accurate, speedy mathematical computations. Having in mind the very interesting features of the *kristo*'s job, it was deemed worthwhile that a detailed study be conducted on the said topic. This paper, therefore, aims:

1. To give a general description of the *kristo*'s work experiences that would include information on how he got into the job, his training as a neophyte, and his development.
2. To present a detailed account of his functions in the cockpit.
3. To delineate specific interpersonal interactions in the performance of his functions.
4. To obtain information on personalized techniques which the *kristo* employs in the process.
5. To present problems he frequently encounters in relation to his work as a *kristo* and how he solves such problems.
6. To know other sources of income of the *kristos*.

The researchers hope that this paper would contribute to the scant material available at present concerning this particular cockpit personality. While little has been written about the *kristos*, considerable information is known about cockfighting, the sport in

which he performs a major function. Cockfighting is an old and established institution in the world, especially in the Philippines and most Latin American countries. It existed 3,000 years before the Christian era and has been indulged in by Filipinos aeons before Magellan set foot on this archipelago. *Sabong* is firmly rooted in the age-old habits of our people. An ennobling diversion, it has depth and fullness that are not found in other games. It bars no one except crooks, cheaters, persons of doubtful character, and minors. As an established institution, it has survived the onslaught of the West which tried to introduce other forms of recreation quite alien in nature to our people (Lansang, 1966). Due to the intimate relationship of cockfighting to Filipino customs and traditions, President Ferdinand E. Marcos issued Presidential Decree No. 449, otherwise known as the "Cockfighting Law of 1974." This decree seeks to prevent the sport's exploitation as an object of commercialism or as a business enterprise. More important of its objectives is its aim to preserve and perpetuate our native Filipino heritage, thereby enhancing national identity (New Philippines, 1974).

METHOD

Subjects—Information was obtained from ten *kristos* from Albay and Baguio City. With ages ranging from 38 to 53, all ten are presently in active performance of their functions as the cockpit's bet-taker. The ten have been in the job for an average of four years; the least experienced with three years while the most experienced with nine years to his credit.

Procedure—Data were gathered through arranged informal interviews with the subjects outside of their working hours. The researchers also did participant observation in three different cockpits in Albay and Baguio City.

In Albay, the study was conducted in the two neighboring towns of Daraga and Camalig, classified as second- and third-class municipalities. Daraga, a mere 4 kilometers from the capital city of Legazpi, is a thriving municipality with its progressive *abaca* cottage industry and agriculture, recreational facilities such as moviehouses, billiard halls, bars, eateries, and modern transportation and communication facilities. Approximately 10 kilometers of first-class roads away from Daraga is Camalig, a town which nestles at the foot of Mayon Volcano. It is relatively underdeveloped and may be rightly described as a 'sleeping town.' Though having electrical and water systems, the town has a slower pace of commerce, no moviehouses, fewer eateries, and lesser transportation and communication facilities. Like its neighbor, the chief means of livelihood are agriculture and the cottage industry. For both towns, one of the most popular recreation centers is the cockpit. Five-hundred meters from Daraga town proper's National Road is the Daraga Sports Complex, one of the newest and most modern cockpits in the province. It is interesting to note that not only cockfights are held there, but also boxing bouts and other spectator sports suitable to the place. This cockpit is unlike the common cockpits since it is made mostly of concrete. This cockpit's location is ideal since it is in relative isolation from the surrounding residential areas. It must be recalled that prior to the issuance of Presidential Decree 1535, which took effect June 11, 1978, cockpits located in residential and commercial areas as well as those located within a 200-meter radius of

government buildings were ordered closed (Bulletin Today, 1978). As in Daraga, the cockpit in Camalig is along the National Road, although it is farther from the *poblacion*, being about 1.5 kilometers away. In contrast with the Daraga Sports Complex, this cockpit is old, badly in need of repairs. It is made of wood and bamboo topped with a thatched *nipa* roof. Most of the country's cockpits may have galvanized iron roofing as in the Daraga cockpit. Clay earth composes the floor of the arena and surrounding it is an amphitheater-like gallery where the spectators sit. This description holds true to the cockpit in Baguio City, the country's summer capital. Located in Irisan, a barrio 12 kilometers away from the heart of the city, the cockpit is to be found 50 meters from the Naguilian Road, one of the two roads leading to Baguio City, the other one being the famous Kennon Road. Outside business days, the cockpit becomes a marketplace for fruits and vegetables. Irisan, known for its bananas and pineapples, is a favorite stopover for people going out of Baguio.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Not everybody can become efficient *kristos*. Only the proper motivations and the right potentials can make good ones. Becoming a *kristo* involves certain motivations, the most dominant of which is the desire to land in a job which pays highly but that which allows them (the *kristos*) to engage in other occupations. Apart from being a *kristo*, respondents engage in different occupations such as teaching, butchering hogs, farming, and business. None of the *kristos* claimed 'fulltime' involvement in the job. According to them, although it pays highly, they have to be productive and active during the days when there are no cockfights. Except for those *kristos* engaged in slaughtering of hogs and in retail, eight of the respondents remarked that their earnings as a *kristo* are generally higher than their earnings in their regular jobs. For instance, the average minimum earning during a Sunday is P100, not including the sideline pays (*balato*) he receives from winning customers. Therefore, he earns a minimum of P400 a month which is actually an underestimation, considering the extra pays, the holidays, and the increased betting capacities of customers during certain parts of the year, like the harvesting season and December. Considering the combined earnings of his full- and part-time occupations, a *kristo* usually exceeds the P1,000-mark a month. Consider the public school teacher who earns, say, P600 a month. Add to this an approximate amount of P500, he then earns a total of P1,550 monthly. In the provinces, this amount would enable the family to live in relative comfort and ease. Considered an equally important factor in their decision to become *kristos* is the keen interest in cockfighting as a sport. This was encouraged by constant exposure to the game and the cockpit environment. Two respondents were quick to add that family influence played an important part since most of the male family members are *aficionados*. One of the two have uncles who were formerly stockholders of his town cockpit.

Once the decision has been made, the individual concerned has to go through a learning stage as a neophyte in the business. Respondents claimed a one-hundred per cent attendance of all cockfighting bouts in the local cockpit, and in the process taking careful mental note of the different terms used and the step-by-step functions performed

by the *kristo*. This could never have been accomplished without the sustaining effect of interest, his talent in mathematics, and his knack for memorizing. The moment one is confident enough of his learning and is convinced of his attributes, he then obtains his license from the municipal mayor, costing a certain amount which ranges from P13-P25 in different municipalities. He seeks employment and once the approval of the management of the cockpit is obtained, the neophytes now becomes a *kristo*, ready to perform the functions of the cockpit phenomenon.

The busy days for a *kristo* are Sundays and holidays, except Rizal's Day (December 30), National Heroes' Day (November 30), Holy Thursday, Good Friday, election and referendum days (New Philippines, 1974). The excitement of these days are not exclusively the *kristo*'s, since *aficionados* and the public share the excitement. During these days, business starts as early as 7:30 in the morning as signaled by music blaring from the cockpit's sound system. At about the same time, the enthusiasts, especially those coming from the barrios start preparing for the day. Taking their prized cocks from the chicken pen, they would examine every part of the cock's body, thus ensuring top quality performance. After some stroking and exercising of the cock's legs, these 'early birds' dress up, eat a hurried breakfast, and leave home with high hopes for a lucky day. This early routine is encouraged because of the cash prize awarded by the management of some cockpits to the first few arrivals. As an *aficionado* walks to the cockpit, he should never look back to acknowledge a call from behind as it is believed to be bad luck. This is even truer if a prankster, who knows the superstition, would call, waving a *tabo*. Between these early hours of the morning and the actual start of the bouts at about 9:30, these men socialize with one another and at the same time eye a probable match-up. As time passes, more and more customers arrive – those coming from the farther barrios, giving one the impression of a town fiesta air. Cockfighting holds a special appeal for these simple rural folks as it is one of the few recreational outlets which they can afford. Trying to relax after a week's backbreaking labor in the farms or mountainsides, rural folks eagerly anticipate the Sundays when they could relax and have a crack at fate. This is not true, however, in more urbanized areas like Baguio. According to one of the researchers who comes from the place, cockfighting in Baguio today is not as popular as it used to be due to the availability of other forms of recreational facilities. City residents would rather stay in the city and enjoy the more modern forms of recreation than travel 12 kilometers for a cockfight.

While the *aficionados* are kept busy with their haggling, fish and meat vendors start setting up their transportable bamboo market stalls within the cockpit's vicinity for them to display their merchandize. Vendors of cigarettes, candies, peanuts, and other foodstuffs freely circulate inside the cockpit with the permission of the management. For those with a permanent stall, they pay the management a certain fee for occupancy. Hence, the area near the cockpit becomes another marketplace aside from the town's permanent one. As such, residents patronize the market, especially during the late Sunday afternoons as business in cockpits usually ends at 5 o'clock. Not only these vendors are benefited. Similarly, *sari-sari* store owners in the community enjoy a day of brisk business. A curious behavior which is associated with this market thing is the rural folks' way of telling a loser

from a winner. Winners usually bring home large quantities of meat, fish, and other foodstuff while the losers manage to present to their wives a lean *pasalubong*, most often, a string of tilapia and *galunggong*.

In spite of the flurry of activities engaged by the different groups mentioned, it is still the *kristo* who is the busiest among them. Upon arrival at the cockpit during a typical cockfighting day, he checks in for attendance. With *aficionados* around, pairing of cocks is arranged among *aficionados* themselves. Once a match is agreed upon, by both parties, a blade is placed on the cock's left foot. After placing a sheath over the blade, the fighting cocks are brought to the arena after which betting proceeds. The betting system is based primarily upon traditional customs and practices. Under the present system of betting, the initial bets on a cock is called pot (*parada*) which is pledged by word of honor or entrusted to the *kristo*. If the amounts of the initial bets are unequal, the favored cock with the bigger pot is called *llamado* and the cock with the lesser pot is called the *dejado*. This unfavored cock is not necessarily inferior to its foe since it is only the amount of money which determines its status (Lansang, 1966). Once it is established that betting is unequal, the *kristo*'s steps into the picture. He now begins to call for money on the *dejado* to even up the posted pot. He calls out a succession of odds locally termed as *logro* which is broken down as follows:

Progressive Scale of Odds

| 'Logro' | Pesos |
|---------------------|---------------|
| Logro nueve-diez | 9 against 10 |
| Logro nueve | 8 against 9 |
| Logro diez | 8 against 10 |
| Logro sies-ocho | 6 against 8 |
| Logro siete-diez | 7 against 10 |
| Logro once | 8 against 11 |
| Logro veinte y tres | 16 against 23 |
| Logro seis-diez | 6 against 10 |

For instance, if a *kristo* calls out *logro nueve*, if one bets on the *dejado*, his capital of eight pesos becomes nine if the cock wins. When there are no takers, the odd is increased by a gradual scale with the consent of the favored cock's owner. To illustrate, if there are no bettors on the odds of *logro nueve*, the *kristo* then goes on calling the next lower odds, the *logro diez*. This would indicate that a capital of eight would receive ten pesos if the *dejado* wins. It must be observed that as the *kristo* goes up the scale, the odds become more and more attractive such that in due time, the bets are equalized. If after some time the pot is still unequal, the *kristo* confers with both cock owners. If the *llamadista* agrees to lower his pot by an amount which would equalize the pot, the match proceeds. If, however, the *llamadista* disagrees and the difference is too big, the match is called off and superseded by another. Let it be noted that as the *kristo* rattles off the *logro*, betting is done merely by

calling the attention of the *kristo*, entrusting the bet without money involved. Hence, here we can see why cockfighting is sometimes called the sport of honest men. Once the *kristo* has determined that the pot has been equalized, he shouts, *Larga!* Which signals the beginning of the fight. The outcome of the fight is determined by the *sentenciador*. The winner is the living cock that does not run away. It is allowed to bite the head of the dead cock three times. The fight is declared a draw by the arbiter if both cocks are dead, if the living cock runs away from the vanquished, or if the fight lasts for more than five minutes. There is another way of determining the 'winning cock and such is employed during a cockfighting derby or *encontrada*, an added attraction which is held once or twice a year. In the derby, many cocks are allowed to fight all at the same time. The cock which remains alive or does not run away from the dead losers is declared the winner. Usually, large amounts of cash awards are given to the owners by the management.

At this point, the reader must have realized the intricacy and delicacy of the *kristo*'s job. Considering that there are hundreds of *aficionados* in a typical day, the *kristo* has to keep track of the different bets by different individuals on varying *logros*. As an illustration, say a *kristo* knows that to equalize the pot, there is a need to raise the amount by P100. He then calls off the different betting odds and recognizes the different takers for each particular odd on the scale. At the same time, he performs a lot of mental mathematical calculations so as to stop calling out at the point when the needed amount is covered. No calculator or paper and pencil is ever used by the *kristo*. Doing so would be a disgrace to the occupation. Without the necessary skill, talent, and experience, an individual serving as a *kristo* would produce disaster on the business. When asked how they cope with such demanding responsibilities, the *kristos* cited their abilities in performing rapid addition, determining solutions to ratio problems and a certain talent in remembering faces or other prominent features of persons. They added that such skills are honed and sharpened through actual experience. Considering that the average work experience of the respondents is four years, it was no surprise when respondents remarked that their responsibilities did not bog nor unnerve them a bit. They added that there is nothing superhuman about their feat. Though evidently differentiated by seemingly inborn propensities and developed interests, they also make use of commonsense stimulus cues such as the color/color combinations of clothes, the position of the bettors with respect to their neighbors, and prominent physical characteristics. Then associating such identification aids with the amounts and their respective odds, the *kristo* is further aided by a built-in standard procedure of *kristos*. He makes it a point to orally repeat betting arrangements simultaneously pointing to the persons concerned. Obviously, this technique sort of refreshes the *kristo*'s memory and virtually impresses the relevant information in his mind. Moreover, some of the respondents said that their burden was relatively lighter during ordinary cockfighting days not only because of the lesser number of bettors but also due to the presence of the cockpit's regular customers. Such regulars are sometimes marked off as *llamadistas* or *dejadistas* as their betting behaviors have become predictable to the *kristo*. As a corollary, new faces easily stand out in the crowd, so to speak. During certain holidays, *kristos* do not rely heavily on this techniques as there would be a much larger number of new faces which would practically eliminate the factor of customer familiarity. Aside from merely making out the new faces, the *kristo* takes

extra effort to remember the color of the customers' clothes and if such newcomers are accompanied by the 'regular,' the *kristo* takes note of their companions. He also observes the newcomer's relative position within the cockpit. The *kristo* assumes that as a newcomer, he would tend to remain on that same spot or very near it till the end of the bout as he would have a limited number of acquaintances with whom he can socialize.

At the end of the fight, the *kristo* has to collect the amount due from the losing parties and award dues to the winners. This function is the real test of the *kristo*'s mettle as he would be making use of all previously stored or memorized information which was gathered during the earlier states of the game. He has to remember exactly the same individuals and their respective bets so as to maintain fairness in the game. As expected, *kristos* encounter problems either arising from the bettor or from the errors committed by the *kristos* themselves. There are rare instances wherein the two paired cocks are quite similar in appearance which ultimately leads to confusion in the identification of the winning cock. At times, bettors take advantage of this ambiguity in their desire to reverse their bad luck. When settled amicably, members of the organization of *kristos* chip in to account for half of the amount payable while the customer pays the other half. To avoid such a problem, the *kristo* specifically points out to the bettors distinctive physical characteristics in the nearly identical cocks. With many witnesses around plus the confirmation of bets, dishonesty among the bettors is discouraged. Another problem stems from the wrong computation of dues by the *kristo* for which he pays largely from his own resources with a little help from the organization. The funds of this organization are raised by the members' required contribution of P5.00 every cockfighting day. If miscalculation concerns the cock owner's bet, the management is responsible. On other forms of dishonesty on the part of the bettors, respondents claimed that these are rare. All of them were confident of their skill and efficiency such that they felt that the probability of being misled by a sly bettor is nil. They also mentioned that clear and constant repetition of bets and the proper identification which follows serves as an inhibiting factor for customers to falsely allege their bets. The numerous witnesses around also serve as a very effective inhibiting factor. It was stated earlier that cockfighting is a game for honest men. Unfortunately, there are some who gamble without the necessary finances. Good for them if they win. For those who lose, trouble awaits them. The most common way out taken by such persons is to surreptitiously move out of the cockpit. However, spectators are usually aware and alert of such smelly maneuvers. The dishonest evader usually receives some rough manhandling from the more irate and aggressive gamblers. From here on, the *kristo* marks out this particular evader, thus keeping him (*kristo*) on guard over a possible repetition. He also takes note of the customers' betting habits and in so doing detect certain dishonest tendencies among them. Again, he is on the lookout for such people.

We have now seen that the *kristo*'s job is not that easy in spite of the assurances brought by experience and talent. What then is the lure of the job? As was mentioned earlier, it pays well, thus serving as an ideal supplementary source for family income. *Kristos* receive commission pay of a certain percentage of the total earnings of the cockpit from ticket sales and accumulated cash bets during the day. The *kristo* usually receives a

minimum of P100 on a cockfighting day on these terms. Sometimes, payment is based on the total cash per pairing from which he gets a certain percentage which depends on the policies of the management. For every bet, the *kristo* usually receives 10 per cent. Aside from this, they receive sideline pays (*balato*) from grateful winning customers most of whom are the *kristo*'s regular customers. At times, an ambitious and daring *kristo* would take the risk of adding his own personal bet to that of a certain bettor without the latter knowing it. If he wins, he takes his due share; otherwise, he pays the bettor an additional amount. Not only is the *kristo* assured of modest returns after every cockfighting day. He is also made secure by the organization composed of fellow *kristos* within the same cockpit. In big cockpits, there are six of the more efficient *kristos* assigned to the ring, while about seven are stationed outside the ring. With its own set of officers, the organization has for its objective mutual assistance to members in times of financial need, sickness, and death of family members. Specifically, when the *kristo* or immediate members of his family get sick, the organization gives P50.00 as assistance. If his spouse dies, twenty-five per cent of the standing fund plus voluntary contributions from the *kristos* are given to the concerned. *Kristos* are likewise insured with the Social Security System. Financial security, however, is but one reason why *kristos* find their job rewarding. Performing the functions of such job to the best of one's ability coupled with honesty also serve as factors contributing to the sense of fulfillment found in *kristos*. "By being a competent *kristo*, people easily like you, thus enhancing self-worth," remarked the youngest of the respondents. However, they warned that the picture is not that rosy. Due to Presidential Decree No. 449 which prohibits the establishment of cockpits near schoolhouses, churches, and government offices, some cockpits have been closed, thus putting *kristos* and other cockpit personnel out of their jobs. These *kristos* have not been able to find a similar job since in a number of cockpits, the management hires many *kristos*, thus finding no need for employing more for economic reasons. The relatively large number of *kristos* in one cockpit has prompted one respondent to suggest that the management should hire only the most competent *kristos* in order to maintain efficiency within the cockpit and to afford the deserving an opportunity for a raise in commission. Along a similar vein, another respondent opined that it is but fair that the management give the *kristos* bonuses especially during days when business is brisk. Such incentives would keep them in top efficiency. Moreover, with the present economic situation, the respondents considered their suggestions as necessarily in order.

In spite of its darker side, the job of the *kristo* will continue to have its appeal to people with the right interest and qualifications. For aspiring ones, the respondents mentioned the following characteristics as necessary and imperative: an above-average ability in numerical operations, interest in cockfighting, familiarity with the cockpit's terminologies, retentive memory, alertness, and personal integrity. A lone respondent, however, placed emphasis on the *kristo*'s manner of dressing. "A well-dressed and decent looking *kristo* attracts more customers and demands more respect from bettors," he declared. Furthermore, they reminded prospective bet-takers that it is only through the painful experiences of learning, relearning, and unlearning that they can hope to achieve competence in the job. The job of the bet-taker is certainly not for everybody. Are you, then, one of the few?

CONCLUSION

On a business day in a cockpit, the spectator never fails to notice the noisy, haranguing figure inside the cockpit's arena. He is the *kristo* of the cockpit. Indeed, his striking and easily noticeable presence is indicative of the central role he assumes in a smooth administration of the sport. Responsible for taking bets and accounting for them fairly, the *kristo* elicits wonder on a newcomer in the cockpit and the ordinary viewer. How could he ever possibly remember a maze of information which includes faces, amounts, ratios, considering the confusion generated by a large throng of noisy and enthusiastic *aficionados*? The ease and confidence he shows are misleading since behind all this 'stage composure' are years of training, learning, and perfecting. True, anybody willing to learn the art of the *kristo* may learn in time, but it takes a keener interest and a more intense devotion to the intricacies of the cockpit to produce competent and top-notch *kristos*. Gifted with the necessary abilities and interests, an aspiring *kristo* has to pass a theoretical learning stage which ultimately leads to the actual practice as a bet-taker. In the performance of his functions, the *kristo* depends upon his accumulated learning experiences and the use of mnemonic techniques such as repetition and confirmation of bets and noting stimulus cues in the environment. Despite such measures, there are still problems encountered which arise from the *kristo*'s fallibility on one hand, and the bettor's dishonesty on the other. However, such problems are easily overwhelmed by the personal satisfaction derived from the job because of its high-paying nature and challenge.

The *kristo*'s job might not seem very appealing to those who dream of wide acclaim since the *kristo*'s popularity is limited within the cockpit and its circle of *aficionados*. As such, he is unsung and obscure. Neither is the job very glamorous for ambitious persons who dream of glitter and pomp. However, the fact remains that the *kristo* is a phenomenon in his own right, and as such will continue to fascinate people with the right attributes and awe the common man of the street.

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