



RAM FIGHTING: ASSESSING THE ETHICAL IMPLICATION OF USING ANIMALS FOR SPORTS AND RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES IN NIGERIA – A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

There is an increasing need to reassess our treatment of animals in ways that prioritise their welfare. Animals have long been involved in various sports and recreational activities, serving as companions, performers, and participants. However, the ethical implications of using animals in such practices have been scrutinised recently. This review critically analyses the ethical implications of employing animals in sports and recreational activities, focusing on ram fighting in Nigeria. It explores the various perspectives surrounding this practice and examines the ethical concerns raised by its proponents and opponents. The study also delves into the cultural and historical context of ram fighting in Nigeria, shedding light on its significance and the conflicts it presents between animal welfare and cultural heritage. Considering both sides of the debate, this paper aims to foster a balanced understanding of the ethical considerations and propose possible alternatives or solutions to mitigate the concerns raised.

Keywords: ethical implications, ram fighting, recreation, sports, welfare

INTRODUCTION

Using animals in sports and recreational activities has been a long-standing practice in various cultures worldwide, including Nigeria (Connor, 2010). One such activity is ram fighting, which holds cultural and historical significance within the Nigerian context. However, the ethical implications of employing animals in these activities have become increasingly concerning. Ram fighting is deeply rooted in Nigerian culture and has been practised for generations (Vanguard, 2016). It is often associated with cultural events, festivals, and traditional celebrations. The practice holds symbolic significance, representing strength, power, and bravery. Ram fighting events attract large audiences and foster a sense of community engagement and entertainment. Understanding the cultural and historical context of ram fighting is crucial for comprehending the practice's conflicting viewpoints and ethical considerations (Senior, 2008; Connor, 2010).

The use of animals in sports and recreational activities raises several ethical concerns. Animal welfare is a primary consideration, as the well-being of animals involved in such activities may be compromised. Ram fighting, in particular, raises concerns about cruelty, harm, and stress inflicted on the animals during fights and training processes (Hussain, 2021). Consent and agency are also relevant, as animals may not willingly participate in these activities. Moreover, using animals in sports can be seen as a form of speciesism, where animals are exploited for human entertainment without sufficient moral consideration. (Hopster, 2019). The ethical implications of using animals in sports and recreational activities, including ram fighting, can significantly impact Nigeria's public perception and image. Animal welfare concerns and the perception of a country's ethical practices have become important factors in shaping international reputation and attracting tourism (Bulbeck, 2005). How Nigeria addresses these ethical considerations can affect its cultural heritage preservation and standing in the global community.

The debate surrounding the ethical implications of using animals in sports and recreational activities in Nigeria involves diverse stakeholder perspectives. Proponents of ram fighting argue for preserving cultural traditions and highlighting the economic and social benefits associated with the practice (Premium Times, 2013). On the other hand, opponents emphasize ethical concerns and advocate for animal welfare, emphasizing the need for alternative forms of entertainment that do not involve animal exploitation (Heinich, 2014). Understanding these perspectives is crucial for developing a comprehensive understanding of the topic. This review, therefore, aims to provide an overview of the cultural, historical, and ethical dimensions of

using animals, specifically in the context of ram fighting, in sports and recreational activities in Nigeria.

Understanding Ram Fighting in Nigeria

Ram fighting is a traditional sport in some cultures, particularly in certain regions where it is considered a significant part of local heritage. In Nigeria, it usually occurs during religious festivals, especially the Muslim Festivals, or at other times deemed suitable by the organizers. The origin of Ram-fighting in Nigeria is traced to the Muslim festival of Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of Ramadan. Rams are bought to commemorate the event but are used by some faithful for ram fighting before it is slaughtered (Sports Intelligence Magazine, 2017). Typically, male rams with large horns are pitted against each other in a competitive arena, engaging in head-on collisions until one ram submits or cannot continue. Supporters argue that it displays strength, skill, and natural behavior, and that the rams are not seriously harmed. However, examining the ethical implications through a critical lens is essential. During ram fighting activity, rams are deprived of feed and water, and most of these animals are slaughtered for meat soon after the fight (Ferguson and Warner, 2008). Meat from such animals often turns out to have compromised quality (Cappellozza and Marques, 2020). Pre-slaughter stress on animals could lead to Dark, Firm, and Dry (DFD) meat. Ram fighting puts rams through immense physical torture, which often results in bruised bodies, damaged skin, and broken bones. Consumer tastes and preferences are negatively affected as there would be a decline in the general acceptance of meats from such stressed animals (Food Marketing Institute, 2019). A set of rules governs ram fighting in Nigeria. According to a report by Vanguard (2016), the Nigerian ram fighting rules state that at the start of a tournament, rams are allowed to hit 30 “blows” before the referee calls a tie. By the finals, the Rams can head-butt up to 100 times. Sometimes, however, fights never take place at all because some rams could run to their owners for safety amid laughs and jeers from the crowd.

During a typical ram fighting event in Nigeria, organizers display an array of exciting prizes to be won. These may include cars, motorcycles, electronic appliances, or cash gifts. Hundreds of spectators gather to watch ram fights. Other interesting games like gambling also occur on this occasion as a side attraction. It is common to see fans of specific rams placing bets in monetary value on such rams. Vendors of petty items (mostly food items) also seize the opportunity to make



Source: Vanguard (2016)

brisk sales at the event. Common snacks at a typical ram fighting event include popcorn, FanMilk® ice cream, and Suya (spicy grilled meat served with onions and tomatoes). A group of young entertainers (mostly young boys and girls) may be called up to entertain the dignitaries and spectators with dance and music at intervals. Although ram fighting is regarded as one of the bloody sports, it rarely results in the death of the ram soon after a fight. The same cannot be said of bullfighting, which often results in the death or slaughter of one or both bulls involved soon after a fight.

Ethical Considerations in Ram Fighting

The use of animals in sports and recreational activities raises several ethical concerns. The primary concern in ram fighting revolves around the animals' welfare. Ram fighting raises concerns about cruelty, harm, and stress inflicted on the animals during fights and training processes. Even though supporters claim that the Rams are not seriously injured, the nature of the sport inherently exposes them to physical harm. Collisions between rams can result in injuries such as broken bones, horns, concussions, and internal damage (Mitchell, 1991). The stress of the event (ram fighting event) and the confined space further compromise their well-being. As sentient beings capable of experiencing pain and suffering, it is crucial to consider their interests and minimize harm. The concept of animal sentience connotes the ability of animals to react to pleasurable states, such as joy, and undesirable states, such as pain and fear (Broom, 2007). The debates about the ability or otherwise of animals to experience pain, suffering, or pleasure have been ongoing for many decades. While some early thinkers viewed

animals as automata, lacking the ability for any form of feeling (Duncan, 2006), others, especially from the 18th century, were of the view that animals possess the ability to react to unfavourable states such as suffering or pain (Senior, 2008). Studies over the years have shown that most vertebrate species are sentient (Broom, 2007; Elwood *et al.*, 2009), and some countries have promulgated laws ensuring vertebrate protection (Turner, 2006).

Consequently, many proponents of animal rights are of the view that better human-animal relationships should be encouraged. Because animals such as rams have feelings, their physical and mental welfare needs must be considered (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 2023). Although non-human animals are often seen as the 'property' of their owners, it is advocated that these animals should be cared for by their human owners, and it has also been suggested that they deserve to have rights similar to those of humans (Ladwig, 2023).

The ethical implications of ram fighting revolve around the principles of respect, fairness, and intrinsic value of animals. Advocates for animal rights argue that animals should not be exploited for entertainment purposes, especially when it involves causing harm and distress (Heinich, 2014; Tienda-Palop, 2018). Ram fighting can be seen as a violation of these principles, as it prioritizes human entertainment and monetary gain over the animals' well-being. Additionally, the practice may perpetuate a culture of violence and cruelty, normalizing the mistreatment of animals for the sake of human enjoyment. While it is argued that the rams engage in similar behaviours in the wild, it is important to recognize the significant differences. In their natural environment, rams compete for resources, social status, and mates, driven by instinct and survival (Begon *et al.*, 2006). Sometimes, conflicts over territory or access to parental care could trigger intraspecific fights between animals in the wild. These fights could be openly aggressive or simply non-violent competition over limited resources. The resultant effect of animal fights in the wild is that individual animals suffer from violence or deprivation. The dominant animals take control of the territory to show their superiority over the weaker ones; those without territories often struggle to find enough food.

Similarly, those animals who lose out in competitions for mates may not be killed by stronger males, but they will be unable to breed and may suffer from sexual frustration. Non-human animals often find themselves struggling to survive from the very moment they are born, and much of the dangers they encounter come from animals of their species (Animal Ethics, 2023). For some species, even their parents and siblings can pose a threat. In ram fighting, the animals are intentionally placed in an artificial and controlled environment solely for human

entertainment. Exploiting animals for our amusement raises questions about the moral justifications for such practices.

Addressing Welfare Concerns Associated with Ram Fighting

Developing Alternative Forms of Entertainment

The debate surrounding the ethical implications of using animals in sports and recreational activities in Nigeria involves diverse stakeholder perspectives. Understanding these perspectives is crucial for developing a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Considering the ethical concerns associated with ram fighting, it is important to explore alternative forms of entertainment that do not involve the use of animals. Society has progressed in recent years, embracing more compassionate and humane alternatives. Sports and recreational activities that prioritize the well-being and dignity of animals, such as agility competitions, can provide engaging entertainment without subjecting animals to harm or exploitation. Agility competition is fast becoming popular in dogs and horses and could be popularized in other species like rams. In agility competitions, the animal (ram, dog, horse) is directed through some pre-set obstacle under a given time limit within which to complete certain tasks, and these tasks may include racing through a tunnel, tyre jumps, and seesaws (American Kennel Club, 2022). The fascinating thing about these agility tasks is that they are done following the clues and instructions of the animal's owner. It further presents an avenue for bodily exercise for the animal and its owners. Before any agility competition, the owner of the animal holds several practice sessions with the animal over a considerable period, during which the animal is expected to have mastered the trickeries involved in agility games through the use of certain equipment that the owner may have purchased or fabricated for such home practice.

Promoting Awareness and Change:

Addressing the ethical implications of using animals in ram fighting requires a multi-faceted approach. Raising awareness among the public about the welfare issues involved is crucial. The first step towards discouraging ram fighting is discouraging attendance at ram fighting events. During ram fighting, community sports centres, school playgrounds, or even a stadium could be used for such events. These venues are often packed with people, and most spectators do not even find anywhere to sit.

In most cases, spectators buy tickets to go and watch a typical ram fight. Often, most of them end up getting disappointed after seeing how bloody the event could become, especially judging from the angle of the torture the animals have to go through to amuse spectators. The use of venues for such activities should be banned. Furthermore, educating individuals about the potential harm inflicted on the animals and the moral considerations at stake can foster empathy and encourage critical thinking. This awareness can lead to shifts in societal attitudes and eventually influence policymakers to reevaluate the legality and ethics of such activities. Such awareness efforts can start in our schools. As a matter of responsibility, teachers and caregivers should teach their children and wards about the dangers of animal cruelty, which encapsulates animal fighting (ram fighting). Textbooks, charts, and video and audio messages discouraging ram fighting should be incorporated into our school curriculum. By extension, owners of pets or companion animals (dogs, cats, rams) should also be taught about responsible ownership. They should also respect that these animals, though not humans, are aware in all regards. Parents can protect animals and combat animal cruelty on the home front if they lead by example. This can be achieved by teaching their children how to safely and respectfully interact with animals. Children are always quick to learn. A simple walk through the neighbourhood behaving as a responsible, loving pet owner can make a huge difference. Awareness campaigns should focus on the fact that cruelty to any species of animal means cruelty to all animals in any form. Animal rights groups and government authorities should place monetary rewards for those reporting offenders of ram fighting around them.

Regulation and Enforcement

Implementing and enforcing animal welfare regulations specifically tailored to sports and recreational activities involving animals is vital. Governments and regulatory bodies should assess animal welfare's impact and ensure that existing practices adhere to ethical standards. Stricter guidelines, including regular veterinary inspections and the provision of appropriate care, can help mitigate the harm inflicted on the animals. Penalties should be met to offenders or those found guilty of organizing or participating in animal fighting. Although laws against animal cruelty exist in Nigeria. According to World Animal Protection (WAP, 2020), the government of Nigeria is urged to forbid the organization and attendance of entertainment events that cause animal suffering. Such a prohibition should cover circuses, rodeos, animal fights, animal races, rides on wild animals, and all other forms of entertainment. However, these

laws have not been properly adhered to, probably because there may not have been proper awareness about their existence or because violators of such anti-animal cruelty laws see animals as mere 'properties' of their human owners, which should not be accorded any special care.

CONCLUSION

Using animals for sports and recreational purposes is an age-long practice in most parts of the world, including Nigeria. Assessing the ethical implications of using animals in sports and recreational activities, particularly ram fighting, in Nigeria requires a comprehensive examination of cultural, historical, and ethical dimensions. Balancing the preservation of cultural heritage with animal welfare considerations presents a complex challenge. This study provided an initial overview of the topic, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of the ethical concerns, stakeholder perspectives, and potential solutions to address the ethical implications of using animals in sports and recreational activities in Nigeria. There is an increasing need to reassess our treatment of animals and consider alternative forms of entertainment that prioritize their welfare. This is because greater attention is now being paid to the quality of animal meat and meat products. Using animals for sports constitutes great physical stress on them. This has resulted in loss of weight, carcass damage, and alteration of meat quality. It also caused an increase in meat pH, which resulted in products (meat and skin) being compromised in quality. Therefore, efforts should ensure that rams are subjected to minimal stress conditions to enhance the quality of their products. Animals, being sentient, should be handled in the most humane conditions. Moreover, by fostering a culture of compassion and respect, we can create a more ethical and sustainable future for humans and animals.

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