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Assignment 2

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There is an old tradition that hides in the midst of the modernity of Surabaya, my hometown, which is the second-largest city in Indonesia. This tradition is called the pigeon race. Every now and then in different corners of the city, you will notice some locals training their pigeons for these races. The legality of this tradition is unclear - any form of gambling is prohibited in Indonesia but there are organizations that have been given special permissions to hold such races. In this essay, I will analyze this tradition using Geertz's interpretive methodology.

When I arrived at the arena, the Sun was at its zenith. It was a large, open grassy field encircled by tall trees. Motorcycles were lined up across the entry lane, with bird cages scattered all over the place. Participants could be seen warming up their pigeons as they prepare for the race. Usually the participants are males, suggesting that these pigeons symbolize the masculinity and status that these men have. Months of dedicated training shows how much these men value their status. During the race, judges would sit around the central square arena to observe which male pigeon touches his corresponding female pigeon first. Those who won wore big proud grins, relieved by the fact that they are still worthy of respect. In fact, the prizes of such pigeon races - from cars to thousands of dollars' worth of money - reflect the high status that they embody. Meanwhile, those who lost went home in a languid manner, only to get back up the next day and continue training his pigeon with a glimmer of hope that one day, he could earn that respect. Pigeons are known for their loyalty to their partner and this might be related to how the indigenous exceedingly value loyalty, both to their life partners and to their communities. Some pigeons were homegrown; others were purchased at a high price. This shows how some men are willing to pay a high monetary price to maintain their pride and masculinity in front of their respective communities. As backward as it might seem, pigeon race participants engage in various complicated training procedures and techniques so that they could obtain victory. Elaborate rules, both written and unspoken, were being respectfully followed akin to sportsmanship. This shows that the locals value fairness over

betting. They believe that pigeon racing is not just a nugatory tradition without order, but rather it is a display of one's prowess in training the pigeon, thereby demonstrating an attempt to subdue nature in this dramatized clash between man and nature.

In conclusion, perhaps something even more insightful than pigeon race is the fact that pigeon race is actually prevalent worldwide. Many people consider it as a form of sport. From Mike Tyson purchasing Norway pigeons¹ to the news of cheating Chinese pigeon racers,² as well as the existence of the South Africa's Million Dollar Pigeon Race,³ it is clear that there is a common thread of humanity that lies within this pigeon race. While technicalities between countries might slightly differ, the fact remains that there is something familiar and relatable within this tradition that resounds throughout the world. While Geertz's argument of human nature being dependent of culture⁴ might be undeniable, we could extend his argument by looking at the existence of this pigeon race. Even though cultures might look radically different on the surface, they might have the same underlying theme as human behavior is similar worldwide. Culture and human behavior might have shaped each other in a mutualistic symbiosis. Despite all of our uniqueness, we are still human beings. And perhaps as human beings, we only adopt one universal culture: the human culture.

¹ Mike Tyson buys Norway pigeons for €15,000. (2016, April 14). *The Local*.

² Bird-brained scheme: Chinese men cheat in pigeon race by taking birds via bullet train. (2018, September 01). *TODAYonline*.

³ South African Million Dollar Pigeon Race. (n.d.).

⁴ Geertz, C. (2000). *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 49. New York: Basic Books.

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