

ON THE ETHNOZOOLOGY OF THE GUINEA PIG

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Editor's preface. The dietary and cultural significance of the guinea pig in antiquity constitutes a problem which has not received the attention it deserves, perhaps partly because our early Spanish sources had little that is pertinent to say on the subject. The archaeological evidence is going to be scanty. To get the most out of it, we are going to need to know what questions to ask of the evidence, and it would be helpful in this connection to know more about the place of the guinea pig in modern Andean life. We are publishing this brief ethnographic account of guinea pigs and people in a present-day community in the sierra of central Peru in the hope that it may stimulate other ethnographers and archaeologists to make more systematic observations along similar lines. It may be of interest to add that Garcilaso de la Vega, writing of his boyhood before 1560, also says that ordinary people in Peru ate guinea pigs only on festive occasions. One feature noted by Andrews is thus evidently old. -- J. H. Rowe.

In an article published a few years ago, Gade discussed some aspects of the ethnozoology of the guinea pig in the Andean region.¹ In this article, I would like to expand on some of Gade's comments and present some additional data as well.

My information is based on anthropological research in Paucartambo, a village located 10,000 feet above sea level on the eastern slopes of the Andes in central Peru.² Most of the 1700 inhabitants depend on maize and potatoes for their livelihood; small businesses and trades are next in importance, followed by animal husbandry. The domesticated animals found in Paucartambo are cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, horses, mules, burros, ducks, geese, chickens, dogs, cats and guinea pigs. Of all these animals, it is the guinea pig, the smallest and one of the least important economically, that occupies a very special place in the lives of the Paucartambinos.³

There are fewer homes in Paucartambo without guinea pigs than there are without children; they seem to be a necessary component of a completely furnished house. The number per house ranges from 5 to 20. In most houses they are found in the kitchen or cooking area and, since this area is the focus of most domestic activity, people are in close proximity to the guinea pigs. Their incessant "chortling" and movement are constant reminders of their presence. These circumstances and characteristics, plus their antiquity as domesticated animals, probably contribute significantly to the special place they occupy in the lives of the Paucartambinos. On the other hand, the human house plays an important role in the lives of the guinea pigs -- it provides an

ecological niche for them. Time and again, informants pointed out that the guinea pigs die if left alone for several days and/or if they are kept away from the kitchen area. Several women attempted to keep their guinea pigs in a cage in their patio, only to discover that they did die, even with regular feedings.

One aspect of this "special place" is an attitude held by the Paucartambinos toward the guinea pig, an attitude I call "humorous affection." This attitude is an inference on my part and is based on several observations.

Since the guinea pigs are rarely confined to a pit or cage, they scurry around the floor, darting in and out of the wood pile and beneath and behind benches, tables and other household items on the floor. This helter-skelter movement is the basis for the expression "como cuyes" (just like guinea pigs), which is used frequently by the Paucartambinos to describe similar movements of other animals, including human beings. For instance, on one occasion, a vendor arrived in town with some highly desired vegetables. As women scurried about him, trying to buy before the supply was exhausted, one local observer laughed humorously and commented warmly "como cuyes."

Another situation on which I base my inference is the following. As women prepare a meal, guinea pigs swarm around them, hoping a tidbit will drop their way. On numerous occasions such as this, I have seen women reach out and gently but firmly push a guinea pig or two out of the way and say, in effect, "now just run along" in what I interpreted as a tone of amused warmth.

The guinea pig's large appetite is a frequent focus of attention, some of it humorous and thus a further basis for my inference. One must be careful not to leave vegetables on the floor for they are fair game to the guinea pigs. I remember well the time a woman discovered that her guinea pigs had eaten a large hole in a squash she had planned to take to market the following day. This situation, the woman's comments and the tone in which they were made struck me as being similar to that of a woman in the United States who discovered that her son and his friends had eaten some cookies made for a bake sale -- somewhat disgusted but at the same time saying humorously and warmly "those dickens, you've got to watch them every minute."

What I took to be another manifestation of this attitude of humorous affection occurred when a friend approached me chuckling and commented, by way of explanation, that his niece and nephew had just thrown one of the guinea pigs out of the cooking shed as he was eating more than his share of food. Other situations in which the guinea pig is a source of humor will be discussed later.

The guinea pigs' appetite is not appeased by accident and, since they do not forage, food must be given to them. This is a daily chore. Around Paucartambo, their food usually consists of certain wild plants, e.g., pinow wanta, magora (Pitcairnia) and shillku (Bidens

pilosa).⁴ These plants are often gathered by women on their way from taking lunch to men in the fields. Sometimes, the wife, a daughter or servant (if there is one) will make a special trip to gather these plants. Green leaves, husks and stalks of maize are also fed to guinea pigs.

The guinea pig is a significant part of several other aspects of life in Paucartambo. One of these is as a food item. This does not mean that they are a part of an everyday meal for in sixteen months of observation, I recorded only one instance of eating a guinea pig at an ordinary meal and then it was not killed for that meal but was left over from a fiesta held the previous day. Nor were they served as part of a regular meal at any of the local restaurants.

As just suggested, guinea pigs are eaten only during a fiesta or some other special occasion. When asked to name the events or occasions at which guinea pigs are eaten, local informants listed birthdays, saints' days, Independence Day, first hair cutting ceremony and the May 3rd fiesta. The occasions on which I observed them being eaten were Corta Monte (part of Carnival), house roofing, first hair cutting, a wedding reception, inauguration of a local hydroelectric plant, a farewell party and the May 3rd fiesta. The last named was the biggest fiesta of some thirteen held during the year and 120 guinea pigs were eaten during the eight days of the fiesta.

In preparing the guinea pig for eating, the hind legs are held by one person and the head by the second, who slits the throat with a knife. The guinea pig is then swished around in hot water to facilitate removal of the hair, which is pulled out in bunches. Once all the hair has been pulled the original incision is widened to run from ear to ear. The genitals are then cut off and an incision is made from the throat to the anus. This much is standard procedure; variations follow. In some cases the guinea pig is cooked and served in this "spread eagle" fashion, in other cases, the head and feet are removed and the body is quartered and cooked, along with the head. In the latter case, all entrails are removed, the heart, lungs, liver are saved and also cooked. Whole guinea pigs are either baked or fried but quartered ones are fried only. A spicy sauce of powdered red capsicum pepper (ají colorado), garlic, mushrooms, black pepper, other herbs, and fresh onions is often served on top of the quartered pieces.

Sometimes accompanying a meal in which guinea pig is featured but never apart from it is the custom called jakamichi. Here, the entire guinea pig is served, to the guests of honor. Sometimes a flourish is added by sticking a red carnation in the mouth. Those served thus are often greeted with cries of "jakamichi!" on the part of the other guests. After eating the guinea pig meat, the honored guests break the skull open with their teeth and try to find a small bone which is part of the inner ear. This is often a very difficult thing to do as the bone is about the size of a pin head. The search for the bone is often accompanied by goodnatured banter from the other guests, who will also comment on the progress or lack of it that each person is

making. There are several variations on what follows the discovery of this particular bone.

One reliable informant, in relating the sequence of events at a wedding, said that at the wedding feast, the madrina (sponsor) is served the whole guinea pig and only the head with a carnation stuck in the mouth is served to the other guests. Those who are unable to find the bone send out for caña, which is then poured into a glass and the bone is placed in it. The glasses of caña, each with a bone in it, then make the rounds of the celebrants, each person trying to swallow the bone as he drinks the caña. The person relating this then chuckled for he said everyone ends up drunk, as the bone is very hard to swallow; it sinks to the bottom of the glass and adheres to the bottom or side as the caña is drunk. Here, the trick is to try to have a small amount of liquid poured into the glass, swirl the contents so that the bone is picked up in suspension and then, while the liquid is still swirling, down it in one swallow.

I observed variations of this procedure at other fiestas. Those served the head, after extracting the bone, in some cases with help, sent out for a bottle of wine and served the cook the glass with the bone in it and she had to drink until she had swallowed the bone. This and giving a bottle of caña to the cook were explained as being tokens of appreciation for her cooking.

The third event in which the guinea pig plays a significant part, and again, is a source of much amusement, is the Corrida de Cuyes, part of the fiesta of Pascua Rey (Epiphany) on January 6th.⁵ Long before the Corrida occurred, people would speak of it with eager anticipation, their comments accompanied with chuckles, if not guffaws.

During the Christmas season, creches are displayed in a number of homes in Paucartambo, the most important being in the home of the mayordomo (sponsor) for the fiesta of Pascua Rey. On January 6th, the image of the infant Jesus is taken from the creche and danced back to the church. This done, the reverent, subdued atmosphere changes to one of humor and release. In 1960, a crowd of approximately 150 people gathered in front of the mayordomo's house and formed a circle some 20 to 30 feet in diameter. Two young Indian women and one old Indian woman come into the circle, each with a big guinea pig on the end of a ribbon about two meters long. The women danced to the music played by the small ensemble, dragging the guinea pigs after them on the ground. Soon, eight couples joined them in the circle and they too began to dance. The women with the guinea pigs picked them up and threw them at the men who were dancing or were watching. The women would also try to rub them on the faces and necks of the men, who tried to avoid this by bobbing and weaving and raising their arms in a defensive gesture. This lasted for about an hour and caused considerable laughter among the participants and spectators. The crowd then moved down to a small plaza in the lower part of town, where the same sequence of events was repeated but this time, some of the men who were dancing tried to jab the guinea pigs with tipinas -- pencil sized objects of wire or wood

used to remove corn husks. The number of spectators had increased to about 275 and the mirth had increased to the point where many of the spectators were virtually convulsed with laughter. Unfortunately, I do not know if the humor came from the events per se or from any symbolic value they might have. Many of the spectators were particularly anxious that I take photographs of the Corrida, considering it one of the high points of the annual fiesta cycle. After another hour or so, the Corrida broke up and other activities connected with the fiesta began.

The use of guinea pigs in events of this nature is not limited to Paucartambo for a short notice appeared in a recent issue of The New York Times, telling of a "rodent rodeo" at the Knowland Park Zoo in Oakland, California, in which more than "150...[guinea pigs] raced, performed, and paraded before 500 spectators." The guinea pigs were dressed "as hippies, others wore academic cap and gown, but many wore nothing at all."⁶

The fourth aspect of life in Paucartambo in which the guinea pig plays an important part is that of illness. When a person is ill and the lay diagnosis is problematical, a curer (curandera) is called. The curer takes a guinea pig of the same sex as the patient (some informants said it must come from another household) and rubs it over the body of the patient. In the process, the guinea pig dies (strangled by the curandera) the quicker the death the more gravely ill the patient. The guinea pig is then opened (one informant said with the fingers) and that part of the entrails that the curandera sees as affected corresponds to that part of the patient that is affected. As one local informant, a law student, explained, "It is our form of X-ray." A remedy, usually an herbal one, is then prescribed. There is nothing humorous about this use of the guinea pig, the serious atmosphere thus being in sharp contrast to that surrounding the guinea pig in the other aspects of life.

Another use of the guinea pig in the health area is to put some of its fat on small cuts and wounds, for example, after ears have been pierced. It is also used as a remedy for sunstroke. Here, a black guinea pig is cut open and immediately put on the affected person's head.

The antiquity and wide distribution of the guinea pig in the Andean region are circumstances favorable for considerable variation in beliefs and practices surrounding it. What I have tried to do in this paper is to add to the documentation of these variations and thus add to a still incomplete picture.

NOTES

¹Gade, 1967.

²Andrews, ms.

³The only other domesticated animals in at least this region of Peru that might occupy a special place in the lives of many people would be the llama. It is far more important economically, serving as a beast of burden, a source of fertilizer, fiber for weaving, and meat. In talking to llama herders, I was constantly amazed at the detailed knowledge of behavior patterns a single herder possessed of the 40 to 50 llamas in his herd.

⁴In areas too high for these and other suitable plants, e.g., the Pampa de Bombon -- to the west of Paucartambo at 13,500 feet above sea level, a type of barley is grown specifically as guinea pig food.

⁵January 6th is a particularly busy day in Paucartambo so my observations were rather piecemeal -- there were several concurrent events. Thus, my description of the Corrida de Cuyes is incomplete but I present the data I do have, for I have neither read nor heard of a similar event elsewhere in Peru.

⁶The New York Times, September 9, 1969.

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