

An excerpt from Dr. Edward L. Powe's Combat Games of Northern Nigeria [© 1994] dealing with the setting of the contest (pages 18 – 20)

### *The Setting*

Imagine that you are in a small Hausa village awaiting the beginning of a *dambe* (traditional boxing) match. As the boxers and spectators accompanied by drumming troop to the boxing area (a large clearing generally used for festivities) one is overwhelmed by the festive air and the unusually large number of people who have flocked to this isolated hamlet from various villages and towns to see their men compete against those boxers of a more distant village. The crops have just been harvested and this is now a time for celebration. Vendors (see photo gallery) sell grilled meat, hot cakes, beverages, fruit, corn on a cob and other sundry items as the multitude assembles forming a circle around the *dandali* (the battlefield – i.e. the area where the fighting will take place).

Each village represented has teams of boxers varying in number from five to fifteen, but since the supporters are many, one can not be precise as to how many boxers and how many supporters there are in each group.

After the sun is no longer severe (around 4:00 P.M.), the crowd assembles and the elders and dignitaries seat themselves on special mats provided for them. As the boxers huddle in their respective groups, the drum calls (*take-take*) of various boxers are sounded and the boxer to whom each call belongs stands up and responds to it by shouting his *kirari*. Each village has its own drummer and so this event takes place simultaneously in small groups. Parents, relatives, friends and well-wishers of the boxers may at this time offer gifts of money to a particular boxer or they may wait until a more propitious occasion during or after the competition. Out of the money so received, each boxer will turn over some of it to his drummers.

At this time various boxers strut around the perimeter of the area looking for a possible challenger. If a boxer sees someone he would like to fight, he assumes a fighting stance with one arm raised in the air and the hand open and the other with clenched fist held at the ribs (see photo gallery). And moves his clenched fist forward and backwards once or twice. If the challenger happens to be equipped with the *akayau* (a metallic shin and ankle wrap), he approaches a would-be adversary or team of adversaries and stamps his foot up and down repeatedly making a jiggling sound with the apparatus. The person challenged either accepts or declines.

If there is an acceptance, the official (who is carefully observing everything that goes on) orders the ring cleared and the fight takes place. The adversaries then box until one of them is victorious which usually takes just a few minutes. If there appears to be inaction, either boxer can call for a break by grinding the clenched fist of his bound hand into the ground [Note here that in *dambe* the striking hand is bound with strips of cloth and then secured in place with twine, the other hand is used to parry with and is left unadorned]. Referees can also call for a break if there is too much inaction or if the binding on the bound hand has loosened and needs to be wrapped again. During a break, both boxers return to the spot where their teammates are seated and receive advice as to what should be done to break the deadlock.

Fighting then resumes. If nothing decisive occurs within two such breaks, the match is over and new challenges are made. ... After it becomes too dark to continue the competition comes to an end. The boxers and their apprentices then retire to a hut reserved to them to drink *fura* (a kind of liquid yogurt thickened with grain) and eat the *tuwo* (a starchy preparation made from grain) and goat meat that is offered by the host village. The events of the day are discussed and some of the boys at this time take the opportunity to meet and talk to female admirers. That evening, or the following morning, the boxers depart to their respective villages.

Although boxing in the villages is still largely done in a wholesome atmosphere, “city boxing” has become associated with beer-halls, gambling, and prostitution as groups of itinerant boxers often reside in houses owned by prostitutes during their stay in a strange city, and the matches often take place within enclosures attached to or located in the proximity of a beer hall.

Below I shall summarize both the village and city “setting” here by providing answers to the four questions “what, where, when, and why.” [the “who & how” being addressed in other parts of the text]:

**What happens?** – before the boxing begins, the drummers play the boxer’s *take* (see photo gallery), the praise singers shout their praises, and sometimes songs of praise are sung. Seemingly excited by all of this, the boxer upon hearing his *take* begins to tremble (*tsuma*) and with arms outstretched, shouts his taunts and praises (*kirari*) thus mentally preparing himself for combat. The musicians may also offer challenges (*kiranye*) on behalf of the boxers. The drumming is stopped during the match but resumed after it is over in honor of the victor. If the musicians so choose, the winner is then paraded before the spectators where he is cheered and given gifts. After being ridiculed by the *kwarijo* (clown – for which see photo gallery), the loser is sometimes given smaller sums of money by spectators to “help heal his wounds”. City boxing and village boxing is essentially the same, but instead of representing one’s village, city boxer’s represent a region (either North or South and in some cases either East or West).

**When does it take place?** – Village *dambe* takes place after harvest (when villagers are freed from agricultural responsibilities) and during feast days such as *karamar salla* (little feast) and *babbar salla* (big feast). In some cities, boxing is done weekly all year round with the exception of the Muslim month of fasting (*azumi*) at which time it is suspended. The matches usually take place in the morning (7:00 to 10:00 AM) or late afternoon (4:00 to 6:30 PM).

**Where does it take place?** – While village *dambe* is free of charge and performed in a large clearing reserved for festivals, “city *dambe*” takes place in enclosed stadiums or the courtyards of bars where an admission fee must be paid. The sport is practiced all over Northern Nigeria in towns as well as villages, but the biggest continual attractions [In 1983] were Sokoto, Kano, Wudil, Maiduguri, and Bauchi where the sport was extremely popular. Jos, Potiskum and Gwambe are towns that have also hosted extended *dambe* competitions. When spectators and revenue dwindle in one town the boxers (like our circuses) move to another more profitable location.

**Why is it performed?** – The fighting is said to be the butcher guild’s “test of bravery” par excellence, and the *Sarkin-dambe* (“dambe chief”) Kura, related to me that if a member of the butcher guild does not do *dambe*, he will be unable to find a wife. In the villages, this sport is the vehicle to overtly demonstrate one’s strength and courage and in so doing bring honor to one’s village, family, and self. In the city, however, the competitor is more interested in self glory and in receiving praises, gifts, and money from his fans and/or sponsors.

The positive aspects of this competition are many in that it: 1) serves as combat training for boys and young men; 2) provides a controlled outlet for aggression and hostility; 3) provides sensational entertainment for spectators and performers alike; 4) is a source of money and gifts to performers and organizers; 5) provides the opportunity for men to acquire fame, prestige and popularity; 6) develops and reinforces village pride and togetherness; 7) fosters guild unity; 8) extols and rewards body discipline, courage and endurance; and 9) serves as a rite of passage to marriage.

[Note that this is just a glimpse of dambe as described in Hausa Combat Games, other topics dealing with “dambe” in that text include: 1) boxing techniques, 2) musical instruments; 3) apparel; 4) weaponry; 5) medicines; 6) musicians and extras; 7) organizers and spectators; 8) competitors; 9) description and examples of *take-take*; 10) description and examples of of kirari; and 11) description and examples of chants and songs. Other combat traditions discussed in the 126 page text include: *farauta* (hunting), *kokawa* (wrestling), *shanchi* (wristlet fighting), *sharo* (ritual flogging), *tauri* (invulnerability contests), and a number of smaller traditions.]

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