

ETHNOZOOLOGY IN ECUADOR

Guinea Pigs: Food, Ritual, and Culture

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1) Cuy, or Guinea Pigs, were domesticated over 4,000 years ago in the Andean region of South America as a relatively easy, constant source of protein. Still to this day in the Andean regions of Ecuador, cuy are raised by rural families for food and for ritual purposes. In urban areas of Ecuador families do not 'farm' cuy, but they are considered a delicacy. In contrast to this, guinea pigs in North America are viewed quite differently. They are not eaten, but different varieties are bred by hobbyists to be used as children's pets or for exhibition purposes.

2) The cultural complexity of the various uses of the guinea pig is dependent upon the distinctive cultural traditions, world views, beliefs, and attitudes of the humans who interact with them.

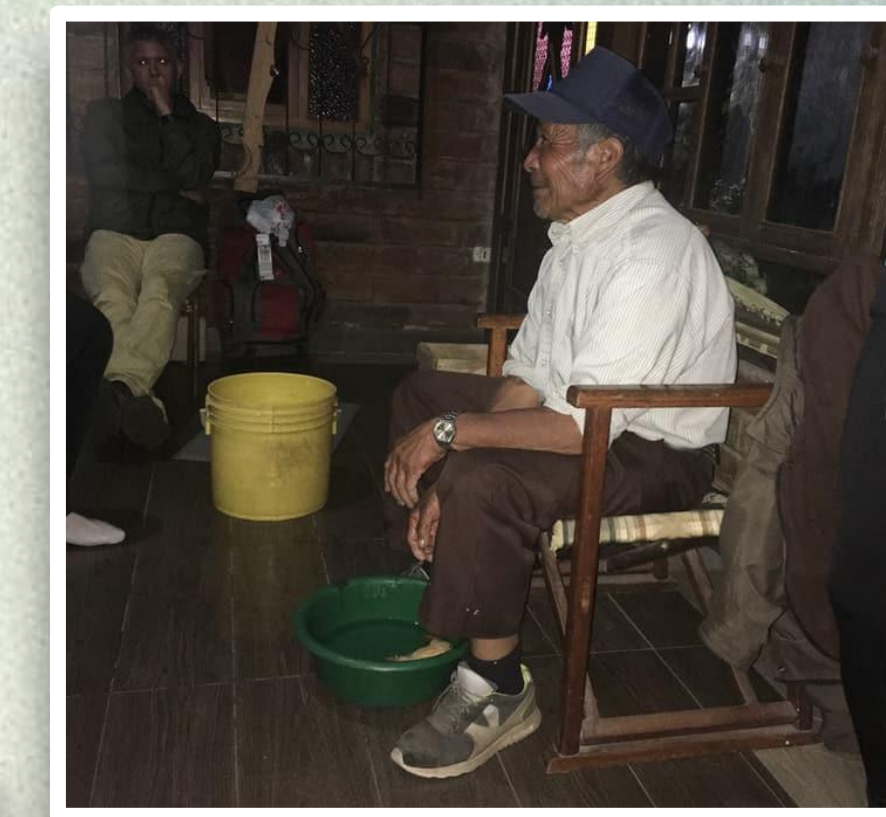
Where the cuy fits into a particular cultural system is unique.

By comparing and contrasting between cultures that use cuy differently we can learn about our own culture as well as that of Ecuador.



4) Cuy have been raised for meat in Ecuador for thousands of years. Their small size, ease of care, and rapid reproduction rate provide a consistent, reliable source of protein in high elevations.

Historically, cuy were kept inside houses in specially constructed pens in kitchens where they coexisted with their keepers. This housing arrangement for the cuy held many benefits. Firstly, cuy raised in the kitchen could not be attacked by predators such as dogs, cats, and weasels. The moderate temperature of the house also made an ideal place to rear cuy, which protected them from the wind, rain, and cold. Nevertheless, this closeness did not prevent the cuy from being used for food. They do not receive names, thus maintaining their level of impersonality. In North America, guinea pigs are considered a pet, so from the typical American perspective the act of consuming them as food is considered a repugnant act, comparable to that of eating rats or a beloved family pet. However, this etic, or outsiders perspective, fails to understand the cultural context in which using cuy as food is a practical, inexpensive, and easily cared for source of protein.



5) The ritualistic cleansing of the human body with the guinea pig is distinctively unlike the characteristic western medicine found in North America. The Ecuadorian healing approach is rooted in the belief that any illness is the result of emotional and spiritual imbalance which may be cured through rituals performed by 'healers'. In contrast, western medicine is based solely on the understanding of pathogens causing infection and disease—and resulting symptoms may be diagnosed by medical doctors and treated using pharmaceutical drugs and surgeries. These drastically different views of health can lead to *ethnocentrism*, which is when the practices of people from different cultures are evaluated according to the norms of one's own culture. Ethnocentric attitudes result from cultural norms becoming so deeply ingrained that individuals are unable to shift perspective or understanding to accept that other ways of constructing reality can be legitimate. These views could be seen during our trip to Ecuador. Cuy are not only used as food in Ecuador, but also as diagnostic tools for the evaluation of energy balance in the body. The cuy absorbs the energy, 'codifies' it, and transmits the information back to the healer. This is done through the physical examination of the animal's deceased body. The more illness, or bad energy a person carries, the quicker the cuy will perish during the process due to the intensity of the energy absorbed. Thus, the use of the cuy allows a more accurate diagnoses of the ailing individual. Some members of our group were unable to watch the process of the cuy diagnosis due to the views of guinea pigs they held. To these people, the inability to shift their thinking leads to the tightly held belief that the guinea pig was dying due to physical trauma, and not the absorption of bad energy. Additionally, the view of guinea pigs as pets in our society further promoted the difficulty to accept the role of the guinea pig as an 'instrument' which absorbs disease from the human body. While this may be a more subtle form of ethnocentrism, it is still rooted in an inability to shift perspectives. Ultimately, this is the powerful effect that culture can have on a person's view of the world.



3) Attitudes and perspectives regarding the roles of animals can vary greatly between cultures. As a result, animals are frequently treated inconsistently based on variations in cultural norms and what individuals have been taught. Typically, human relationships with domesticated animals fall into one of two categories in society. Either they are pets and members of the family, or they are utilitarian, used for food or labor. For example, in North America dogs and cats fall into the relational category of a pet. Pets are given names as a symbol of individualization and anthropomorphization. Additionally, as they are considered part of the family, live as humans in relatively lavish environments and are given a great deal of attention and care from their owners. In contrast, domesticated animals viewed as food or labor generally have a less glamorous life. These animals typically do not receive a name and are certainly not anthropomorphized. Regardless of the care they receive during their lifetime, they are still viewed and produced for utilitarian purposes. The *P. cavia porcellus* falls within either categorization depending on the cultural perspective. In North America, they are viewed as a domestic animal raised for exhibition and pets, hence tabooed as food. However, in Ecuador they are reared with the primary purpose of being dispatched of for food or for ritual purposes.