

## CULTURAL STUDIES

IVO L. MULLER-JUNIOR<sup>1(ADEF)</sup>, ANDRE M. CAPRARO<sup>2(ADEF)</sup>

1 ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1710-2807>

Federal University of Parana, Faculty of Physical Education, Curitiba (Brazil)

e-mail: [ivojunior11@yahoo.com.br](mailto:ivojunior11@yahoo.com.br)

2 ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3496-3131>

Federal University of Parana, Faculty of Physical Education, Curitiba (Brazil)

# Muay Thai: the consolidation of an invented tradition as a martial art

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### Abstract

Background. Some sources report *Muay Thai* has been part of Thailand's history and heritage for hundreds of years.

Problem. This study investigated whether *Muay Thai* originated from war contexts or was an invented tradition.

Method. Analyzed books, scientific articles, and websites from professional and amateur *Muay Thai* organizations.

Results and Conclusions. *Muay Thai* should not be considered an ancient martial art. In fact, *Muay Thai* is an invented tradition: a cultural heritage characterized by an artificial continuity with its remote past. Nevertheless, it is also considered a fighting art due to its cultural aspects, such as meditation, religion, music, dance, and the ritual of respect for one's master. In most Western countries, this fighting modality is seen solely as a combat sport, disregarding its cultural aspects and emphasizing its technical efficiency and media appeal in MMA events. The Thai Government, through its cultural institutions and movie industry, spread this invented traditional narrative in an attempt to turn *Muay Thai* into one of Thailand's Intangible Cultural Heritages.

### Introduction

*Muay Thai*<sup>1</sup> has been part of Thailand's history and heritage for hundreds of years. This fighting modality was the primary and most effective self-defense method used by Thai warriors on countless battlefields throughout their nation's history [Kraitus 1988; Delp 2005; Van Der Veere 2012; Raimondo, Stampi, Giacometti 2019]. There are many historical versions regarding its origins, of which two are noteworthy. The first claims that *Muay Thai* developed over 2,000 years ago, when villagers from Yunnan Province, in Central China, fled south to freedom and fertile land. During this long journey, they were constantly harassed and attacked. To protect their group, these villagers trained and created several fighting techniques until they settled in what is now known as Thailand [Kraitus 1988; Van Der Veere 2012]. However,

the second narrative states that the villagers were originally in Thailand, in the Kingdom of Sion<sup>2</sup>, which was never dominated by any other nation. *Muay Thai* was then developed to defend the land and its people from constant invasion threats during the 13th century [Delp 2005; Garcia, Spencer 2013].

In this sense, according to the former Prime Minister of Thailand (1995-1996), Banharn Silpa-Archa Banharn,

*Muay Thai* is an art of self-defense that is uniquely Thai. It is a cultural legacy that arose long ago and has been passed on ever since the birth of the Thai nation. Ancient Thai warriors used the art of *Muay Thai*, together with other kinds of weapons, to fend off their enemies and maintain the independence of

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<sup>1</sup> *Muay Thai*: fighting art that uses various clinch techniques and combines the use of two wrists, two elbows, two knees, and two shin guards to fight efficiently against the opponent [Kraitus 1988].

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<sup>2</sup> The Kingdom of Siam (1238 -1932) was constituted in the territory where Thailand is now located. In 1932, a revolution against the absolutist monarchy of Siam resulted in the creation of a constitutional monarchy following the British model and the alteration of its name to Kingdom of Thailand [Guerra 2008].

the Thai nation. The art of Muay Thai is, therefore, a demonstration of the wisdom and the prowess of our Thai. [Banharn 1996 apud Vail 2014]

Other sources account for Muay Thai's athletic origins. According to an online article by the International Federation of Muay Thai Associations (IFMA), "the first known practice of Muay Thai as a 'sport,' off and away from the heat and chaos of the battlefield, occurred during the reign of King Prachao Sua (1697-1709 A.D.)" [www.muaythai.sport]. However, the World Muay Thai Council (WMC) states that "the first great upsurge of interest in Muay Thai as a sport, as well as a battlefield skill, was under King Naresuan in 1584" [www.wmc-muaythai.org]. These two versions seek to present Muay Thai as a martial art adapted as a combat sport either in the 16th (WMC) or 17th century (IFMA). Although the modern sport began only in the early 19th century [Guttman 1978; Gumbrecht 2006; Darbon 2014; Holt 2017], an anachronism can be perceived at Muay Thai's inception. The pseudo-historiographical versions mentioned above refer to ancient periods and substantiate the battlefield's concept, in the case of combat sports, to formulate "invented traditions" [Hobsbawm, Ranger 1984].

The term "invented tradition" is here understood as a set of practices, usually regulated by rules tacitly or openly accepted; such practices, ritualistic or symbolic, aim to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior through repetition, which implies, automatically, a continuity to the past. In fact, whenever possible, attempts are made to establish continuity with an appropriate historical past. [Hobsbawm, Ranger 1984: 9]

In this regard, the following problems arise: in what context did Muay Thai emerge? When did it start? Should this fighting art be considered a martial art developed hundreds of years ago or a modern fighting art? This study aimed to address these questions and analyze whether Muay Thai was born on a battlefield or was an invented tradition.

Muay Thai is recognized as a fighting art in many countries worldwide [Muller-Junior, Capraro 2020]. In recent years, both amateur and professional Muay Thai practices have developed significantly, with numerous events held by various institutions (IFMA, WMC, and others). This fighting art has changed over the years due to Western boxing and the growing number of foreign competitors. Due to its commercial appeal, Muay Thai became popular in hundreds of countries at the risk of disregarding its cultural, linguistic, and spiritual foundations [Henry 2013].

Chuchchai Gomaratur [2011] explained that understanding fighting arts merely as sports – the result of training, combat, and competition – disrespects their traditions and deeper meaning. Muay Thai comprises other cultural elements, such as music (Sarama), dance

(Ram Muay), the ritual of respect for one's master (Wai khru), prayer, and self-defense. Crafts are also a part of these cultural elements. For instance, the Mongkon and the Prajied, composed of braided ropes used as a crown and an armband, respectively, are commonly used in rituals before fights [Kraitus 1988; Gomaratur 2011].

Fighting arts are a rich area for researchers from many fields [Cynarsky 2019]. One of our goals is to understand why some versions of Muay Thai's history refer to war contexts in the late Middle Ages. This invented tradition may influence the study of Muay Thai's contemporary history and be linked to a "recent historical invocation, the 'nation,' and its associated phenomena: nationalism, national state, national symbols, historical interpretations" [Hobsbawm, Ranger 1984: 22]. We employed a broad selection of references to investigate Muay Thai's millennial past. Firstly, we searched official websites from Muay Thai institutions – federations, associations, and councils. Then, we investigated books and scientific articles that describe this fighting art's history. This study is divided into two sections. The first presents arguments to support our hypothesis that Muay Thai is not an ancient martial art but a fighting art that originated in the 20th century. The second part explains Thailand's attempt at portraying Muay Thai as an ancient tradition and the search for a heroic, mystical, and glorious past within its national history. Lastly, we present our conclusions on the theme.

### **Muay Thai: not an ancient martial art**

According to Kraitus [1988], Muay Thai, also known as Thai boxing, is a unique martial art and self-defense method. It originated in ancient times to protect individuals from the attacks of animals and enemies. After World War I, when Thailand sent troops to fight for the Allies, Thai boxing spread worldwide. As stated above, official Muay Thai organizations, such as IFMA and WMC, describe it as having arisen from battlefields that occurred throughout the history of the nation now known as Thailand between the 16th and 17th centuries [www.muaythai.sport; www.wmc-muaythai.org].

However, several authors [e.g., Guttman 1978; Elias, Dunning 1992; Gumbrecht 2006; Darbon 2014; Holt 2017] disagree on the discontinuity in sport's history. Most of them state that certain sports traditions do not go back farther than the early 19th century. Gumbrecht [2006: 67], for example, argues that "it is hard to imagine that peasants of the Medieval Ages when physical exertion was a daily prerequisite for survival, had the same fixation we have with recreational exercise and sport," and such would be the case for Muay Thai.

Understanding this historical discontinuity helps researchers to inquire how sports became comprehensive and relevant in our times. Grumbrecht [2006] also

stated that "[...] most books on the history of sports are full of biographical accounts or chronological data, but rarely offer materials or even suggestions for our visual imagination" [Gumbrecht 2006: 69]. At the same time, other authors seem preoccupied with proving such theories in search of consolidating these traditions.

In his book, entitled *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* [1978], Allen Guttmann detailed seven points that characterize modern sport. They are the following: secularism, equal opportunities, specialization, rationalization, bureaucratic organization, quantification, and the search for the record. For the author, all sports should present, to any degree, these characteristics. In the book entitled *Les Fondements du Systeme Sportif: Essai d'Anthropologie Historique* [2014], the French anthropologist Sebastien Darbon, inspired by Guttmann's work, presented a new way of characterizing sports. He did not use seven criteria, but five: i) rules applied universally; ii) institutions to enforce those rules; iii) equality of competition; iv) specific practice spaces; and v) specific activity and interval times for each modality [Holt 2017]. However, it is noteworthy that, for Darbon, these five criteria are interdependent.

To understand the history of Muay Thai and how it turned into a sport, one must grasp the concepts of martial arts and combat sports. According to Judkins [2016], "martial arts" are a modern concept, which became widespread and understood in recent decades. However, authors such as Van Der Veere [2012] and Delp [2005] interpret them as cultural achievements that underwent repurposing, emphasizing ethical and aesthetic values experienced as cultural expressions. According to them, "art" refers to an expressive, invented, imaginary, and playful construction of anthropological signs regarding these modalities. "Martial" refers to the mythological field of unarmed confrontation used in war contexts [Correia, Franchini 2009].

According to Wetzler [2015], martial arts must be understood as a network of different dimensions of the meanings attributed to these practices. There are various reasons for attending martial arts classes, including preparation for violent confrontation, play, competition, performance, transcendent goals, and health care. Paul Bowman [2019] believes that not everyone starts practicing with specific intentions, and this rationalization mostly occurs afterwards.

According to Bowman [2019], there are two aspects to martial arts. The first is an established and strictly literal position, where the concept of martial arts relates to modalities designed for – or used on – physical combat in wars. The second aspect is more flexible and can be called cultural, discursive, or relativistic. By using rigorous literalist positions to determine whether a modality can be considered a martial art, a researcher may end up refusing to accept what others consider to be a reality, at least the lived reality of what people think and con-

sider as martial arts in a given society, culture, or at a particular time [Bowman 2019].

In *Martial Arts & Combat Sports: Towards the General Theory of Fighting Arts* [2019], Wojciech J. Cynarski introduced the term "fighting arts," which comprise fighting skills and styles, and erroneously called martial arts. It also encompasses self-defense, combat sports, and training programs. The term "fighting art" allows the researcher to explain complicated problems according to this new, holistic paradigm [Cynarski 2016]. "Fighting system" was another term created by the author to determine specific systems used in martial arts schools. These concepts go beyond combat sports and fights, considering their cultural and spiritual power, in addition to their innumerable properties [Cynarski 2019].

Correia and Fanchini [2009: 2] presented the definition of combat sports:

Combat Sport Modalities imply a configuration of combat practices, martial arts, and combat systems based on what is proposed by sports institutions. Aspects and concepts, such as competition, measurement, application of scientific concepts, comparison of results, codified and institutionalized rules and norms, maximization of corporal yield, are some examples of this modern transposition of secular practices to "combat."

Considering what was presented and allied to the concept of sport by Darbon [2014], Muay Thai, as a sport, may have originated in 1921. The first ring was built in the Kingdom of Siam, at the Suan Kulap College, and used for English boxing practice. According to Kraitus [1988], before this period, fighters fought with ropes wrapped around their hands [Kraitus 1988]. These ropes were dipped in glue mixed with broken glass to cause severe injuries and bleeding during the fight.

However, this version was contested by Mark Jacobs [2019]. According to the author, few studies discuss fights in Southeast Asia before the 20th century. The author mentions Lethwei, also known as Burmese boxing, which was known as one of the most violent fighting practices. It was fought without gloves and allowed headbutts. Jacobs' narrative is supported by written records of nine Westerners who traveled through Southeastern Asia before modern times. Although some of the letters mentioned the boxers' hands wrapped in ropes, none mentioned the broken glass being incorporated into these wraps. The first testimony was recorded by the French envoy Simon de la Loubere (1693) in the region today known as Thailand.

This Festival is likewise accompanied by Oxen races, and several other Diversions, as of Wrestlers and Men that fight with their Elbow and Fist. In boxing, they guard their hand with three or four rounds of Cord instead of the Copper Rings, which those of Laos use in such Combats [Loubere 1693 apud Jacobs 2019: 4].

These fights occurred in neighboring villages, at festivals and funeral ceremonies, and were no more violent than those practiced today [Jacobs 2019]. The first pugilism tournaments emerged with the rise of English boxing and the Siamese people's growing interest in English combat sports in the early 20th century. In 1926, the organizers of these tournaments conducted experiments approaching Muay with the rules of the Marquis of Queensbury, which are used in English boxing. Instead of wrapping their hands in ropes, they used boxing gloves during the fights. In December 1928, after the death of Thai boxer Chia Khaek Khamen due to head injuries, King Prajadhipok – known as Rama VII – decreed the mandatory use of gloves in Muay [Vail 2014].

The betting system was also a significant factor in Muay Thai's development. According to Monteiro [2017], the betting system, which influenced the development of English boxing, was the beginning of the rise of "prize-fighting"<sup>3</sup>. In this case, the fights were arranged as bets that yielded prizes to the winner. Each fight became a betting contest and a contest of pride among villages. The possibility of profit attracted more and more fighters, and the first professional fighters emerged in this context. Due to this, new techniques were developed, and stadiums were built specifically for the competitions. For instance, Rajadamnern Thai Boxing Stadium (1945) and the Lumpinee Boxing Stadium (1956) are considered Thailand's main stadiums [Kraitus 1988]. The creation of specific spaces meets one of the five criteria presented by Darbon [2014] as determining factors for modern sports.

After incorporating the rules of English boxing, mandatory use of gloves in combat, and under the influence of a growing betting system, Muay Thai was developed into a fighting art in the 20th century. Muay, which was practiced previously, was renamed Muay Boran in the 1930s [Raimondo; Stampi; Giacometti 2019].

Muay Boran is a collection of non-sporting forms of Muay purported to represent the origins of Muay Thai. It includes techniques presumed too dangerous for the modern ring version of Muay. Thus, the relationship between the two forms has similarities to those between the sport of Judo and the more dangerous Jujitsu. [Vail 2014: 510]

The use of gloves, a specific practice space (the ring), instituted referees, timed rounds with rest breaks, the addition of a scoring system, and other rules derived from English boxing represented a "civilization outbreak" [Elias, 1993] for Muay Boran. Thus, confirming our previous statements, Muay Thai as a fighting art originated in the early 20th century, and not hundreds of years ago,

<sup>3</sup> Prize-fighting was not restricted to boxing. Other forms of combat also became public performances sustained by prize-winning disputes and betting networks.

as presented by Kraitus [1988], Delp [2005], Van Der Veere [2012], Garcia and Spencer [2013], Mooksdarsanit and Mooksdarsanit [2018], and Raimondo, Stampi, and Giacometti [2019].

### Muay Thai: an invented tradition

According to Vail [2014], the term Muay Thai was first used in 1928 to distinguish it from English boxing, and it became associated with Thailand to explain the early roots of Thai tradition. Traditions that often seem or are considered old are, in fact, quite recent, when not invented [Hobsbawm, Ranger 1984]. This invented tradition regarding Muay Thai's history is broadly supported: governments, federations, websites, books, and academic articles accept and reinforce it as an ancient tradition [Vail 2014]. When one seeks an allusion to the historical past, these invented traditions are characterized by establishing a somewhat artificial continuity [Hobsbawm, Ranger 1984]. For instance, Muay Thai's traditional roots date back hundreds of years, to a time when Thai people used this martial art to forge a free and independent country [Kraitus 1988]. The invented tradition is recurrent in other fighting arts, such as Aikido [Lefebvre 2016], Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu [Lise *et al.* 2017], Capoeira [Assuncao 2004], Judo [Nakajima, Thompson 2012], Savate [Loudcher 2007], and Taekwondo [Moening, Minho 2016].

When searching for a logical justification that substantiates this ancient tradition, the same answers are found. There are rumors that, during the Burmese-Siamese War [1765-1767], the Burmese army destroyed the kingdom of Ayutthaya, and the archives of Thailand's history were lost. With them, much of Muay Thai's early history disappeared [Moore 2008; Vail 2014]. Later, the myth of Nai Khanom Tom, a warrior from the kingdom of Ayutthaya who was enslaved, arose. After being challenged by the king of Burma, Nai Khanom Tom won the fight against the ten best Burmese fighters, all by knockout, and was freed. This warrior is considered the first Muay Thai fighter and the father of this fighting art [Kraitus 1988; Moore 2008]. According to Vail [2014] and Jacobs [2019], all modern details of this myth have nothing to do with historical facts.

In this sense, what made Muay Thai into this uniquely Thai ancient tradition and part of official national history, in which a heroic, mystical, glorious past is pursued incessantly, and the forging of national martial art, is nationalism sponsored by the Thai Government itself. In doing so, the government's goal would be to profit through cultural exports and attract international consumers of martial arts searching for cultural exoticism [Vail 2014]. National identity is constructed collectively around a country, moving towards an ethnic community and a nation, a patriotism that builds

the idea of totality: a person, a nation, a culture. Thus, "[...] national identity is an attempt to preserve the 'customs' of our ancestors. Nationalism highlights the need for roots and tradition in the life of any community" [Santos 2010: 11].

Additionally, the invention of traditions is a process of formalization and standardization, characterized by referring to the past, even if only through repetition [Hobsbawm, Ranger 1984]. There are three prominent locations to preserve and consolidate this tradition created by the Thai government:

- The Muay Thai Preservation Institute, located at the National Stadium in Bangkok, and operating under the Ministry of Sport and Tourism,
- The Muban Chombueng Ratchaphat University [MCRU], a regional university in Ratchaburi province that promotes research on Muay Thai having as reference the ancient traditions [Vail 2014], and
- The Department of Cultural Promotion (DCP), a division of the Ministry of Culture, previously called the National Commission of Culture within the Ministry of Education [Vail 2014].

In recent years, through the DCP and the Ministry of Culture, the Thai Government struggled to consolidate Muay Thai's invented tradition, among other cultural practices, as an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Thailand is not a signatory to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO) treaty on ICH, but the Thai DCP has initiated its national registry.

The element of the invention is particularly clear in this case since the history that has become part of the knowledge or ideology of the nation, state, or movement does not correspond to what was actually preserved in the popular memory, but to what was selected, written, described, popularized, and institutionalized by those who were in charge of doing so. [Hobsbawm, Ranger 1984: 21]

The Thai film industry also exerts significant influence in consolidating this invented tradition, which presents old and new myths [Cynarski 2019]. The so-called "new Thai cinema" presents a category associated with nationalistic and transnational characteristics, with the movies *Nai Khanom Tom* (2003), *Ong Bak* (2003), *Tom Yum Goong* (2005), and *Beautiful Boxer* (2004). These movies portray nationalistic messages that seek to convince their audiences of a historic obligation on men to defend their country. "Muay Thai films illuminate Thai men's imagination and desire to reclaim their nationalist heroism, which is needed to restore the country's troubled image and its struggling performance on the global stage" [Kitiarsa 2007: 410]. One recurring protagonist is the Thai actor and director Tony Jaa, whose films commonly portray rural villagers battling evil foreign invaders and modernizing forces. He

also uses martial arts techniques as a national icon and seeks to resolve conflicts between modernity and tradition [Muller-Junior, Capraro 2019].

Muay Thai has also attracted a great deal of interest from foreigners interested in cultural tourism in Thailand [Cynarski, Sieber, Mytskan 2015; Cynarski 2017; Cynarski 2018; Mookdarsanit, Mookdarsanit 2018]. There are numerous gyms for tourists, particularly in Bangkok, for the so-called Thai "cultural tasting" [Cynarski, Obodyński 2006], that is, martial arts tourism [Sieber, Cynarski, Litwiniuk 2007; Cynarski 2012]. Presented as an exclusively Thai martial art, Muay Thai is usually seen as a unique experience, a "cultural heritage," and distinct from other martial arts. Unsurprisingly, many foreigners spend their long holidays in Thailand to travel and learn Muay Thai [Mookdarsanit, Mookdarsanit 2018].

## Conclusions

Several sources present Muay Thai as a martial art, which became a combat sport between the 16th and 17th centuries [Guthman 1978]. However, considering the concept presented by Sebastien Darbon [2014] and the rules developed to avoid severe injuries and deaths during fights, one may consider Muay Thai to become a combat sport only during the 20th century's first decades. This fighting style rapidly expanded West due to the growing popularity of MMA events. Most countries disregard Muay Thai's cultural aspects, understanding it solely as a combat sport, training, and competition, and disrespecting its traditions [Kraitus 1988; Gomaratut 2011]. Based on Cynarski [2019], this modality must be understood as a fighting art due to its cultural, religious, self-defensive, and athletic aspects.

Fighting arts originated between the 16th and 17th centuries in the region currently known as Thailand occurred at festivals and funeral ceremonies and were no more violent than those practiced today [Jacobs 2019]. Moreover, warriors from this modality frequently fought using their hands wrapped in ropes, but they did not dip these ropes in glue mixed with broken glass to cause severe injuries and bleeding during fights. This observation suggests that the modern details of the *Nai Khanom Tom* myth are not in keeping with those from historical facts [Jacobs 2019; Vail 2014].

Muay Thai also appears to have emerged from an "invented tradition," a cultural heritage characterized by an "artificial" continuity with the remote past [Hobsbawm, Ranger 1984] in its history. The Thai government, in a nationalistic and exceedingly patriotic way, seeks to turn Muay Thai into an ICH. Through state mechanisms and institutes, the Thai Government tied Muay Thai to Thailand's official national history. Lastly, the Thai film industry produces martial arts mov-

ies that reference these nationalistic messages. These movies continuously portray the historical duty of Thai men to defend their country through patriotic heroism [Kitiarsa, 2007].

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## Muay Thai: konsolidacja wymyślonej tradycji jako sztuki walki

**Słowa kluczowe:** Muay Boran, sztuka walki, sztuka walki, sporty walki, tradycja wymyślona

### Streszczenie

Tłó. Niektóre źródła podają, że Muay Thai jest częścią historii i dziedzictwa Tajlandii od setek lat.

Problem. W badaniu tym sprawdzano, czy Muay Thai wywodzi się z kontekstów wojennych, czy też jest wymyśloną tradycją. Metoda. Zanalizowano książki, artykuły naukowe i strony internetowe profesjonalnych i amatorskich organizacji Muay Thai. Wyniki i wnioski. Muay Thai nie powinno być uważane za starożytną sztukę walki. W rzeczywistości Muay Thai jest wymyśloną tradycją: dziedzictwem kulturowym charakteryzującym się sztuczną ciągłością z odległą przeszłością. Niemniej jednak uważana jest również za sztukę walki ze względu na jej aspekty kulturowe, takie jak medytacja, religia, muzyka, taniec i rytuał szacunku dla mistrza. W większości krajów zachodnich ten sposób walki jest postrzegany wyłącznie jako sport walki, pomijający jego aspekty kulturowe i podkreślający jego sprawność techniczną i atrakcyjność medialną w zawodach MMA. Rząd Tajlandii, za pośrednictwem swoich instytucji kulturalnych i przemysłu filmowego, rozpowszechnia tę wymyśloną narrację tradycji, próbując przekształcić Muay Thai w jedno z niematerialnych dziedzictw kulturowych Tajlandii.