

Dynamics of the ancient boxing dance of Sakon Nakhon: the role of *Muay Boran* dance performances in the development of the Thai nation-state

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the interplay between invented traditions and the Thai nation-state, using the martial art *Muay Boran* as a case study. The art form serves as an emblem of Thai national identity, yet its roots lie in a regional, not national, past. Drawing upon theories of invented tradition, the study interrogates *Muay Boran* as an artificially constructed heritage at both local and national levels, further delving into the role of nostalgia in shaping cultural narratives. Despite the martial art's appropriation and commercialisation for political and economic gain, it remains a powerful symbol, stimulating national unity and quelling

separatist tendencies. Nonetheless, cultural safeguarding efforts risk stagnation, often promoting an exotic otherness at the expense of genuine cultural evolution. The study concludes by advocating for a balanced approach that acknowledges cultural dynamics and the inevitable transformation of traditions over time.

Keywords

dynamics, identity, *Muay Boran*, Sakon Nakhon, Thai-ification, Thai-ness

Introduction

Governments use the traditional cultures of various ethnic groups that make up their population to build and foster a national identity and collective consciousness (Gizatova et al. 2017). This is particularly true for indigenous performing arts, which are a clear example of the accumulation and evolution of cultural heritage but, importantly, are used to promote the cultural values of a collective (Picard 1997).

In different regions of Thailand there are different styles of martial arts, each composed of postures and gestures that convey the culture of the indigenous group responsible for their creation. The *Muay Boran* of Sakon Nakhon in northeastern Thailand is one such defensive martial art. This particular local tradition is a ceremonial,

performance-based art that combines *Muay Thai* postures, martial arts of visiting Kula traders to the region and the choreography of Chamlong Nuanmanee, a resident of That Choeng Chum Sub-District, Sakon Nakhon Province. The art form is unique to Sakon Nakhon and its creation was heavily influenced by Nuanmanee, a pioneer in combining these fighting traditions of various origins to form a single martial art, which has since been developed under the banner of *Muay Boran* (Saleepun 2023). The martial art is closely associated with Sakon Nakhon, where statues of famous local performers are visible to emphasise the value of strength, ability and tactics in the locality. This is often referred to in Thailand as the predecessor to the more popular, and now internationally recognised, *Muay Thai* (although there are some doubts over the veracity of this attribution, and a clearly problematic chronology

given the previous assertion that Nuanmanee adapted *Muay Thai* postures – more on this later). For the wider world, *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* (Vail 2014b, 510). Given the importance of martial arts to the identity of Thailand on the world stage, the researcher was keen to understand how *Muay Boran* has seemingly transitioned from a locally created martial art among the northeastern Thai (Isan) community to the predecessor of a nationally celebrated combat sport that epitomises the essence of ‘Thai-ness’ – the essence of being Thai.

Literature review

Thai-ification and nation-building

‘Thai-ification’ is the term used to describe the deliberate government-driven integration of minority groups into the newly created Siamese state since 1932 (Breazeale 1975; Karapan and Susuwan 2021). This unashamed acculturation was performed through fiscal conformity (imposition of taxes), transformation of social hierarchy, administrative changes, establishment of national identity markers (Boy Scout movement and military service), educational reforms, and suppression of indigenous expressions of religion, spiritualism and belief (Breazeale 1975; Diller 2002; Draper et al. 2019). Ethnic groups in Thailand have been successfully ‘subsumed into regional geonyms based on Bangkok’s central location’ (Draper et al. 2019; Hesse-Swain 2011; Iijima 2018; Lefferts and Cate 2012). The geonym that will be the focus of this investigation, colloquially termed ‘Isan’, is composed of the vast northeastern region of the country. These geographic distinctions have been heartily adopted by domestic academics and, importantly, the people themselves; ‘Isan-ness’ (as opposed to the national-level ‘Thai-ness’) is embraced and celebrated (Keyes 2014). However, assimilation was not restricted to minority groups. It also affected the majority group, Tai, who were also new members of the fledgeling Siamese nation when it was formed in 1932 – the nation-state did not adopt the name ‘Thailand’ until 1939 (Alexander and McCargo 2014). Consequently, the Thai national identity was only partially created and ‘complex, contested ethno-regional identit[ies]’ appeared based largely on continua from Thai to Lao, Malay and Burmese, depending on the geonym (Enfield 2002; McCargo and Hongladarom 2004). The Thai

government officially deems the majority of ethnic groups within its borders to be a subgroup of Tai and speak a dialect of the national language (Bunnag 1968). In reality, the relationship is more complex and non-Thai academic consensus more commonly identifies distinct ethnic differences between the various inhabitants of Thailand, especially within Isan (McCargo and Hongladarom 2004).

Contrary to this suppression of ethnic pluralism in Thailand, the importance of cultural heritage conservation is recognised (Lertcharnrit and Niyomsap 2020). Undoubtedly, the potential economic benefits of cultural- and ethno-tourism are responsible for government interest in preserving indigenous culture (Sangchumrong and Kozak 2018). This is most apparent when considering successful examples of cultural conservation programmes that provide concrete economic value (Makpa 2017). Ethno-tourism (in simplistic terms, tourism focused on indigenous culture and lifestyle) is now encouraged in indigenous communities that were previously neglected and even persecuted. This shift towards promoting ethno-tourism represents a strategic pivot by the government, aiming not only at economic development but also at enhancing the visibility and appreciation of indigenous cultural practices, thus potentially mitigating past neglect. There is universal hope that socio-economic stimuli will encourage a celebration of pluralism that leads to central recognition of the disparate identities of the Thai peoples (Draper et al. 2019). While this recognition marks a positive shift, it simultaneously underscores the ongoing tension between state-led cultural homogenisation and the celebration of regional diversity.

The process of Thai-ification, while initially aimed at forging a coherent national identity, often involved the dilution of distinct ethnic identities through policies of cultural assimilation (Krajangchom 2023). These policies, rooted in the central government’s desire to establish a unified nation-state, sometimes conflicted with the ethnic and cultural realities of diverse regions such as Isan (Farrelly 2016). By enforcing a standard Thai identity through language, education and national symbols, the state sought to integrate disparate groups into a single national narrative (Draper 2019). However, this integration often came at the cost of marginalising local languages and customs, leading to a complex landscape of cultural resistance and adaptation. The government’s recent efforts in promoting ethno-tourism and cultural conservation suggest a growing acknowledgement of the

importance of these regional identities in Thailand's social and economic fabric. This evolving approach indicates a nuanced recognition of the need to balance national unity with cultural plurality, reflecting a broader trend of re-evaluating nation-building strategies in the context of globalisation and local autonomy.

Martial arts and nation-building in Thailand

Amid these efforts to craft a national identity, martial arts, particularly *Muay Thai* and its historical variant *Muay Boran*, have played a pivotal role in symbolising and propagating what is perceived as the essence of 'Thai-ness'. This phenomenon illustrates a unique intersection of culture, history and politics within the broader context of Thai nation-building. There has been academic recognition of the role played by *Muay Thai* in the construction of a Thai identity. Peter Vail (2014b, 511) argued that '*Muay Thai* and its *Muay Boran* antecedents have been deliberately connected to a specifically royalist-national history through the invention of tradition in order to safeguard *muayas* as an inexorable component of Thainess'. In fact, Vail (2014b) goes as far as to argue that much of the history of *Muay Thai* is fabricated, or at the very least embellished in the vein of Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) invented tradition. This concept describes the creation of a set of practices intended to foster certain norms and values, and here refers to the ways *Muay* has been adopted as an inexorable component of 'Thai-ness'. As one of the few Western interpretations of the subject, Vail (2014a) suggests that a paucity of academic scholarship has enabled stakeholders to benefit from creating a narrative of *Muay Thai* that promotes its exotic appeal and historical allure. This is not itself dissimilar to the historic function of *Muay Thai* dance performances, which were used by royals to create an aura of Thai-ness for visiting diplomats and courtiers (Jackson 2004). This practice of showcasing *Muay Thai* performances was strategically employed by the Thai royals to reinforce national identity and cultural uniqueness, effectively using these displays as a diplomatic tool to impress and convey the strength, discipline and heritage of Thailand to visiting diplomats and courtiers. Such performances not only served as entertainment but also as a subtle demonstration of the martial prowess and ceremonial richness that are integral to Thai culture, reinforcing a sense of 'Thai-ness' in the international context. It played a large part in the political discourse of encounters with foreign governments, as Thai leaders sought to create a strong impression of their country – a concept described by anthropologist

Clifford Geertz (1980) as a 'theater state', a state that uses ceremonies and rituals to sustain its authority.

Similar trends in the politicisation of traditional martial arts can be observed in other countries, each embedding local cultural practices within national identity narratives. In Japan, Judo and Kendo were not merely sports but were also used during the Meiji Restoration as tools to instil discipline, moral values and a sense of national pride, closely tied to the concept of Bushido, or the way of the warrior (Lachina 2021; Sakaue 2020). In Brazil, Capoeira, once a form of resistance by enslaved Africans, has been transformed into a national symbol celebrated for its cultural heritage and dynamic expression of Afro-Brazilian identity (Wesolowski 2020). Meanwhile, in Korea, Taekwondo has been explicitly promoted by the government as a symbol of Korean culture and spirit, especially during periods of intense nationalistic fervour, such as during the Korean War and the subsequent division of the peninsula (Moenig 2023). Each of these instances demonstrates how martial arts have been elevated beyond physical combat to become significant elements in the construction and assertion of national identity, serving both domestic agendas and international diplomacy. This global phenomenon emphasises the powerful role that traditional practices can play in shaping political narratives and reinforcing collective identities.

Modern *Muay Thai* is a particularly vivid example of this in Thailand. According to Vail (2014a), the term *Muay Thai* was first used in 1928 to distinguish it from English boxing and was crafted to epitomise the early roots of Thai tradition. Although the tradition is often considered ancient, it is in fact quite recent. The narrative of *Muay Thai* as an ancient tradition is widely accepted in Thailand and promoted by the government, federations, websites, books and academic articles. During the Burmese-Siamese War (1765–1767), the kingdom of Ayutthaya was destroyed and, with it, purportedly much of Thailand's historical archives. According to Muller-Junior and Capraro (2022), this loss obscured much of *Muay Thai*'s early history, giving rise to the myth of Nai Khanom Tom, who became considered the father of *Muay Thai* after his legendary victory over ten Burmese fighters. Modern details of this myth, however, do not align with historical facts but serve as a potent element of national mythology, reflecting a heroically independent past (Jacobs 2019; Vail 2014b). This invented tradition has been preserved and promoted through various channels, including the *Muay Thai* Preservation Institute and cultural

promotion initiatives by the Thai government, aiming not only to foster national pride but also to attract international tourists and martial arts enthusiasts. This case of *Muay Thai* illustrates how the invention of tradition can serve not only nationalist interests but also economic ones, marking a significant intersection of cultural heritage with global consumer culture.

The politicisation of *Muay Thai* is not therefore a new concept. But what of *Muay Boran*? Vail (2014b) also argues that *Muay Boran* is a modern reimagining of the history of *Muay Thai* created in the 1970s as domestic scholars sought to place *Muay Thai* in its proper historical context. This is partly enabled by the Thai meaning of *boran* as, literally, 'traditional'. It is not too great a stretch to imagine a world where *Muay Boran* ('traditional boxing') is the direct predecessor of *Muay Thai* ('Thai boxing'). However, the original *Muay Boran* of Sakon Nakhon has clear and traceable roots, which do not necessarily place it as the direct predecessor of its now world-famous cousin, *Muay Thai*.

Research methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, using data sourced from document analysis and empirical research. Sakon Nakhon province was intentionally chosen as the site of study, and a purposively selected sample from the province was used. The study's primary participants included performers of *Muay Boran*, experts in the performing arts, students studying *Muay Boran* performing arts in Sakon Nakhon's higher education institutions, and spectators of *Muay Boran* shows within the province. The researcher engaged in both participant and non-participant observation in the field, conducted comprehensive interviews with academic scholars and performing artists, and held focus group discussions with spectators and students. The gathered data was organised according to the principal objectives of the study and verified via source and methodological triangulation. After verification, the data underwent typological analysis and analytic induction. The findings are articulated in the subsequent section as a descriptive analysis.

Muay Boran: pluralistic origins

Sakon Nakhon province is located in the upper northeastern region of Thailand. It is an area rich in natural diversity and has been home to human civilisations since

the prehistoric era, about 1200–1500 years ago (Boonpok 2021). Over time, local communities have been started and influenced by the Dvaravati, Khmer and Lan Xang empires, as well as the more recent political and administrative presence of the Thonburi and Rattanakosin kingdoms (Kutanan et al. 2014). Sakon Nakhon is consequently home to a diverse, multicultural population speaking diverse languages and practising the cultures of up to six main ethnic groups: Lao, So, Phu Tai, Yoi, Yor and Kaleung (Kaithong and Yongvanit 2016). Additionally, Chinese and Vietnamese migrants have settled in the province, as well as the nomadic Kula traders (Laimanee 2014; Saleepun et al. 2021). In addition to bringing new products and crafts to the area, this historic migration also caused exposure to a form of martial arts called *Zheng* or *Muay Zheng*, which originated in present-day Myanmar (Saleepun 2023). Traders would perform to show their strength but particularly to encourage crowds so that they could advertise and sell their products.

The *Muay Boran* traditions of Sakon Nakhon evolved from these origins. They were born from the combination of postures in traditional *Muay Thai*, the techniques of the Kula traders and new creations of Chamlong Nuanmanee, a famous local fighter who previously had expertise in *Muay Thai* (Saleepun 2023). Traditionally, the Sakon Nakhon *Muay Boran* dance is a defensive martial art. The dance is currently classified as a performing art unique to Sakon Nakhon due to the combination of different martial arts and the influence of Nuanmanee, who developed the style from the 1920s to late 1950s. *Muay Boran* is a traditional martial art developed from defensive human instincts. Participants use the hands, feet, knees and elbows as weapons of defence, which are manoeuvred through tactics, talent and improvisation. The basic boxing moves have now been adapted and incorporated into contemporary dances that accompany local Pong Lang orchestras, as well as a combat sport. There are also local statues of various fighters in Sakon Nakhon city that celebrate their strength, skills and tactics.

There is no limit on the number of performers. Depending on the style of the performance, as few as one individual can perform *Muay Boran*. There are solo renditions, dual combat forms and large group parades. In the past, men often wore the loin cloths they would have used as part of their daily lives (Figure 1). If performing for an audience, simpler loin cloths would have been replaced by a more elaborate, wavy cloth, held by an additional roll



Figure 1
Muay Boran performance costume
 Source: Sakon Nakhon City Museum, Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University

of cloth, hemmed from the bottom up and rolled inwards to the thigh. The cloth would then be tucked into the back of the loincloth and tightened. The upper part of the forearm was also wrapped in cloth and the head tied with an auspicious fabric or amulet. The fighter would sport tattoos conveying a variety of messages, especially on the upper thigh and chest.

***Muay Boran* postures**

The group parade version of the dance consists of nine techniques, while an individual performer may include up to 14 different movements. The techniques are all designed to invoke intimidation and to exhibit the performer's prowess. Each rendition is accompanied by traditional Pong Lang music.

The initial sequence of movements, known as *Tha Suea Ok Lao*, begins as the performer energetically leaps on to the stage, delivering swift hand slaps on each leg. They

then extend one arm, unveiling their body, and deliver a slap beneath the armpit, followed by a series of slaps beneath the elbows, the backs of the hands, the knees, the shoulders, the heels and the outer legs. The performer then leaps backward and sways forward, striking the upper chest with both palms. This is followed by a slap to the inner thigh using the back of one hand while jumping to kick an extended palm. The performer then adopts a crouched stance, pulling one leg behind, with elbows splayed and hands positioned at the waist. After a brief survey of the crowd, the performer extends their arms. Maintaining the rear leg stretched out, both legs are kept parallel to the floor. They then elevate the stretched leg to waist level, execute a rolling motion with their arms towards the lower abdomen, before pointing and raising their hands overhead. The sequence culminates with the performer looking upwards, a gesture meant to honor the spirit of *Phaya Taen*.

Tha Yang Sam Khum, distinguished by its pronounced trotting gait, follows the *Tha Suea Ok Lao*. It commences as the performer lowers their arms, resting one hand on the already elevated leg, and placing the other hand on the waist. Shoulders and elbows are extended as though in search of an adversary. The performer then exhibits a forceful forward movement by heavily stomping their feet three times and adopting a dignified one-legged stance, squinting as if sizing up an opponent. *Tha Mam Kratheup Rong* highlights the performer's balance, as they gradually rise and rhythmically swing both arms in a circular, fist-clenching motion. This is repeated several times before they lift their feet and stomp the ground robustly and decisively three times. The performance concludes with *Tha Chang Kalong Talai Pa*, the final move of the solo boxing performance. The performer swings their arms and extends one leg backwards, fully stretching both arms. Upon reaching shoulder level, the performer rolls their arms inward on both sides of the body and leans forward in tune with the music's rhythm.

The *Muay Boran* fight is a show (Figure 2). Participants will perform various dances to intimidate their opponents before striking. The attacker will not use a clenched fist; instead, they use the palms, feet, knees and elbows as a weapon. After striking, they will return to dance. However, changing socio-economic conditions are seeing the number of participants, and the art itself, beginning to disappear. At present, *Muay Boran* generally only appears as simulated performances for entertainment.



Figure 2
Muay Boran performance costume
 Source: Thailand Foundation, https://www.thailandfoundation.or.th/culture_heritage/high-kicks-and-graceful-moves-muay-boran-sakon-nakhon/

Depending on which narrative is read, *Muay Boran* has either been elevated to the national stage as *Muay Thai*, or is distinct and has been erroneously credited as the antecedent of *Muay Thai*. Regardless of the accuracy, what is clear is that *Muay Thai* has been popularised as an international fighting sport and is renowned on the world stage, while *Muay Boran* has fewer global performers but is increasing in domestic popularity in its combat form. Although both are similar, there are some distinct differences between the two martial arts. Combat *Muay Boran* is a little more like karate, and its nature is one of a martial art rather than a fighting sport. There is less emphasis on the fight, although there are fewer regulations. In terms of the costume, *Muay Boran* performers wrap their hands in hemp rope rather than wear gloves.

In *Muay Boran*, the fighters' fists are usually centrally aligned, while in *Muay Thai* they defend the outside of the head. The overall stance of *Muay Boran* is also lower and wider than *Muay Thai*, which enables swift transition into the ground fighting that is part of *Muay Boran* but not *Muay Thai*. There are fewer regulations in *Muay Boran*, which is understandable as it is an older art form. This means that fighters must protect all parts of the body, hence the crouched body position.

Muay Boran attacks target the opponent's limbs. This is not as common in *Muay Thai* due to the point scoring system (limb hits tend to score fewer points than other attacks); however, in *Muay Boran*, it effectively nullifies the opponent and gives a clear advantage. There are more

elbow and knee attacks in *Muay Boran* than in *Muay Thai* due to the need to win the fight outright.

Safeguarding

Muay Boran has now been incorporated into the formal curriculum and basic education system of Sakon Nakhon, especially as a form of entertainment. The ancient dance is also offered as a course at various educational institutions in Sakon Nakhon province. Local scholar Krisdakorn Banlue (personal communication 2022) comments: '[T]he Sakon Nakhon Educational Area has included *Muay Boran* performances as part of the curriculum in order to boost local arts and culture.' While being an extremely effective method of cultural safeguarding, this also serves to cement the identity of *Muay Boran* as a treasured local product. A Sakon Nakhon local, Chaweewan Phanthu (personal communication 2022), reflected that 'in the beginning, the performance was popular with local people and shows were organized to spread the art and culture of *Muay Boran* more systematically. This made it popular in the Northeastern region and eventually resulted in its elevation to the national stage as a unique performance with which Northeastern men could identify.' This is not entirely accurate, as *Muay Thai* has a mixture of origins, although it is undoubtedly influenced by a variety of regional boxing forms, including *Muay Boran* (Loong 2011). Appreciation of the dance at basic education levels led to its inclusion in higher education. Northeastern Arts and Culture Clubs and various tertiary gatherings promote the study of the *Muay Boran* dance. However, as academic Khamla Musika reports, 'at present, the ancient *Muay Boran* dance performance is only found at higher education institutions with teaching and learning courses on dance, and predominantly those in the Northeastern region'. Educational institutions are therefore responsible for the conservation of traditional values in northeastern Thailand. This has led to the development of male dances in northeastern Thailand based on the foundation of the *Muay Boran* dance.

Discussion

While *Muay Boran* has deep roots in the local traditions of Sakon Nakhon, its significance has expanded beyond regional boundaries, gaining prominence on both national and international stages. At the national level, *Muay Boran* has been embraced by the Thai government in cultural promotions and tourism campaigns, often

presented as a part of Thailand's heritage during major national festivals and international cultural expositions. Internationally, *Muay Boran* has been featured in global martial arts competitions and cultural exhibitions, raising awareness and appreciation among foreign practitioners and audiences. Such initiatives not only celebrate *Muay Boran* as a symbol of Thai identity but also leverage it as a unique aspect of Thailand's cultural diplomacy, aiming to foster a global connection through shared cultural heritage. The *Muay Boran* dance of Sakon Nakhon gives structure, style and meaning to former culture; however, through adoption by the national government as a symbol of Thai culture, it has become a classic example of Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) invented tradition – a legitimisation of national identity magpied from an ethnic diaspora. This relates to academic theories of nostalgia. French historians first dealt with the territory of memory or remembrance when discussing the importance of nostalgia in conservation and the evolution of culture (Legg 2005). Pierre Nora (1989) argued that the recognition of territory is the most important aspect of creating modern social memories, evoking emotions, dress, architecture and chants. Rules are written in history and continue as authentic heritage from the past. This concept indicates the importance of presenting stories from the past in simulated spaces to create a state of empathy flowing through periods of time. These stories create a state of impression or cultural aura when presenting primitive forms that stimulate old feelings of the past in memory. These memories cause the phenomenon of returning to the past and serve to stimulate interest in shows such as *Muay Boran*. The dances simulate the lifestyle of a young person. The fighting gestures and the show of strength make the style attractive to men in Isan society. The costumes and tattoos also invoke an ancient character, representing invincibility, protection and auspicious beliefs, further adding to the aura of the performer. More importantly still, the overall narrative of the martial art is inextricably linked to the modern retellings of the birth of the Thai nation-state. *Muay Thai* (not explicitly *Muay Boran*, but also by its negligible association as an antecedent) reflects the nature of the Thai person as inherently peaceful, but aggressive if required, a preferred fighting method of the historical kings of Siam and 'a form of martial prowess innate to Thai-ness' (Veil 2014b, 518).

However, there is some hypocrisy here. The argument holds that *Muay Boran* has been appropriated as a national symbol and its identity is a product of the dominant Thai

nation-state repurposing indigenous culture for its own needs (Vickery 1970; Loos 2010; Veil 2014b). Yet it must be remembered that Chamlong Nuanmanee created his version of *Muay Boran* from a combination of martial arts styles, including appropriation of *Muay Kula*. It was therefore an invented tradition of Sakon Nakhon before it became Veil's (2014a) invented tradition of Thailand. *Muay Boran* is now a novelty product designed for consumption. It has been rebranded for political and economic benefit. That is, the *Muay Boran* show is a tool for creating values and cultural heritage by using the cultural characteristics of Sakon Nakhon ancestors combined with the martial arts of the Kula people and *Muay Thai*. These disparate foundations have been mixed to create harmony in the form of a single dance. While there is the appearance of simulating former Thai society, *Muay Boran* is a tool to fight obsolescence in the virtual space. Its combination of various arts is intended to be interesting and exciting in an era where most contemporary dances are characterised by feminine postures and styles influenced by royal court dances. The *Muay Boran* of Sakon Nakhon is different. All the performers are men and the style reflects the strength, grace and valour of the performers. It reveals the social culture of men and women in the past, which is a selling point that creates interest and permits the development of male Isan dances in later eras.

The researcher used the concept of the national art and culture policy throughout this investigation to examine the nature of *Muay Boran* as a mechanism for furthering the interests of the Thai nation-state in the acculturation of northeastern Thai practices. *Muay Boran* has been used by the state apparatus to emphasise a single political nation and create an imaginary community based on the beliefs and traditions of its constituent parts (Anderson 1983). The nation becomes a hypothetical creation made possible by cultural nationalism. Anderson (1983) suggested that the adoption of culture, such as *Muay Boran*, into the national identity was a means of unifying people and maintaining state power. In particular, it enables this maintenance over a vast territory and multilingual area, consolidating its power and removing separatist sentiments. This has been the case with the Isan community, which is now firmly under the rule of a central Thai state. The people of the northeastern region now have a clear sense of Thai patriotism and emphasise the strength of the Thai nation. The name *Muay Thai* itself, which is a development of *Muay Boran*, clearly demonstrates the basis of the Thai-ness represented through boxing.

Despite the general theme of this paper, it must be remembered that traditional culture is not static (Burns 2001). Through the safeguarding of traditional practices such as *Muay Boran* and the creation of a staged authenticity detached from the original socio-cultural context, an impression of cultural superiority is created (Ivanovic 2008; Taylor 2001). Development is only encouraged until threats to the exotic 'otherness' emerge (Dolezal 2011). The culture must remain appealing, and adapt to do so, even if that restricts any organic development that may otherwise occur (van der Duim et al. 2005). It is therefore critical that authorities embrace *Muay Boran* in a similar way as *Muay Thai* and include it as part of the continuous evolution of modern culture. Criticism of cultural appropriation on the part of the national government is all well and good, but this should be with appropriate recognition of cultural dynamics, 'the formation, maintenance, and transformation of cultures over time' (Kashima 2014).


Conclusion

This examination of *Muay Boran*, from its roots in Sakon Nakhon to its role in shaping the Thai national identity, reveals the dynamic interplay between local traditions and national narratives. This martial art, while deeply entrenched in the local culture of northeastern Thailand, has transcended its regional origins to become a symbol of Thai heritage both nationally and internationally. The integration of *Muay Boran* into national celebrations and its portrayal in international arenas reflect its importance not only as a martial art but also as a cultural emblem

that carries the essence of 'Thai-ness'. The strategic use of *Muay Boran* by the Thai government and cultural institutions underscores the complex relationship between cultural heritage and nationalism. This relationship is crafted through the mechanisms of 'Thai-ification', where diverse ethnic and regional identities are woven into the broader fabric of the national identity. As this study highlights, *Muay Boran* serves as both a bridge and a tool in this ongoing process, balancing the preservation of local uniqueness with the promotion of a unified national culture.

However, as this research indicates, the romanticisation and invented traditions surrounding *Muay Boran* also pose challenges to the authenticity and historical accuracy of its narrative. It is crucial, therefore, for cultural scholars and policymakers to navigate these waters carefully, ensuring that the promotion of *Muay Boran* respects its historical integrity while also embracing its potential to unify and represent the nation. In conclusion, *Muay Boran* exemplifies how traditional arts are not only remnants of the past but active participants in the dialogue of national identity formation and cultural diplomacy. As Thailand continues to position itself on the global stage, *Muay Boran* will undoubtedly play a pivotal role in shaping and showcasing the nation's rich cultural landscape.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Mahasarakham University for providing funding for this project. 

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