

Cambodian Boxing

Story and photos by Tate Zandstra

The menacingly-pleasant face of King Jayavarman smiles down on the sun-washed ruins of Bayon temple, mute and crumbling evidence of a once powerful Southeast Asian empire. A blend of Buddhist and Hindu traditions revolving between the reigns of Khmer (Cambodian) kings, the immense temples offer a glimpse into the life of a fantastic, violent era. Carved on the walls are scenes of war with the Chams, the Burmese and the Thais. Long ago, the fighting Khmer men of the Angkor (region in Cambodia) developed the deadly martial art, Bokator, the knowledge of which has been passed down for thousands of years.

Because of an ideological difference, Cambodian fighters have refused in the past to participate in the SEA Games, Southeast Asia's most important sporting competition, until the "Muay Thai" event is renamed Kun Khmer (Paradal Serey), the sport version of Bokator which the Khmer feel is the true origin of the sport.

"The Thais copied Khmer boxing," says one taxi driver. Propped on their motorcycles against the shady side of the millennia-old Bayon temple, another "moto" explains that, "We have very bad memories of the Thais; our families always remind us." Another joins in; squeezing my bicep — for emphasis — he says I can't possibly compete. "Cambodian boxers are strong ... much stronger than Thais."

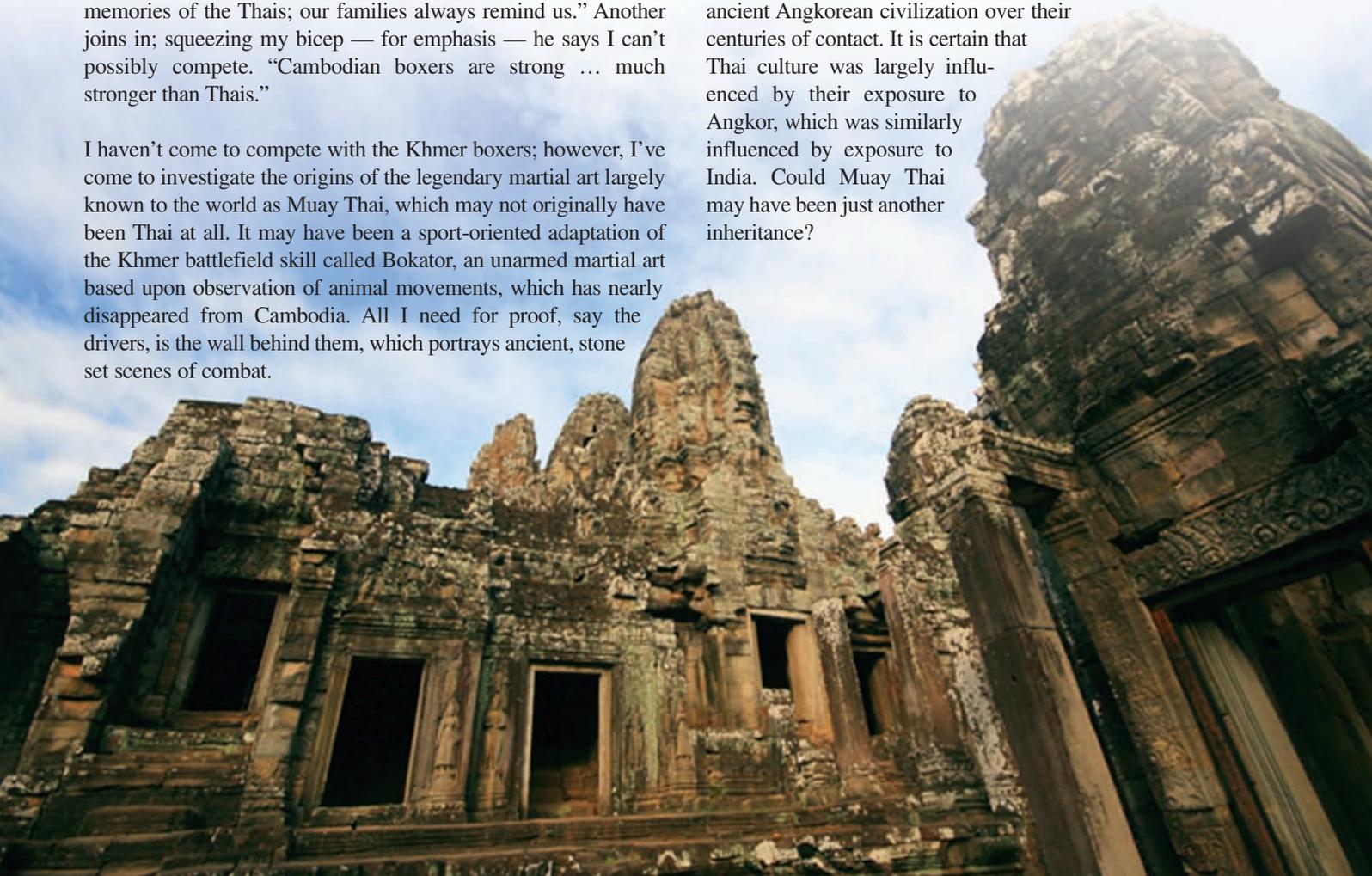
I haven't come to compete with the Khmer boxers; however, I've come to investigate the origins of the legendary martial art largely known to the world as Muay Thai, which may not originally have been Thai at all. It may have been a sport-oriented adaptation of the Khmer battlefield skill called Bokator, an unarmed martial art based upon observation of animal movements, which has nearly disappeared from Cambodia. All I need for proof, say the drivers, is the wall behind them, which portrays ancient, stone set scenes of combat.

"They copied us; they stole from us," says one temple tour guide. If Cambodians feel some resentment toward Thailand's success, it may be understandable; the kingdom the Thais seized was mostly Angkorean territory at one time.

The Khmer, as a race, have had a long slide from the power of the Angkorean period. Enduring Thai aggression, French colonization, Japanese and Vietnamese occupation, and genocide under the Khmer Rouge, their cultural heritage has been ravaged, while the neighboring Thai have enjoyed comparative success and freedom.

Thai people appeared late on the Southeast Asian scene when the Angkorean empire may already have been in decline. Pushed from China, the Thai fled southward and found gaps between the fertile lowlands (controlled by Khmer and Burmese armies) and the highland refuges, often the domain of Mon, Hmong and other indigenous groups.

Whether as slaves to, mercenaries for, or enemies of, the Khmer, the Thai absorbed a great deal of knowledge and culture from the ancient Angkorean civilization over their centuries of contact. It is certain that Thai culture was largely influenced by their exposure to Angkor, which was similarly influenced by exposure to India. Could Muay Thai may have been just another inheritance?

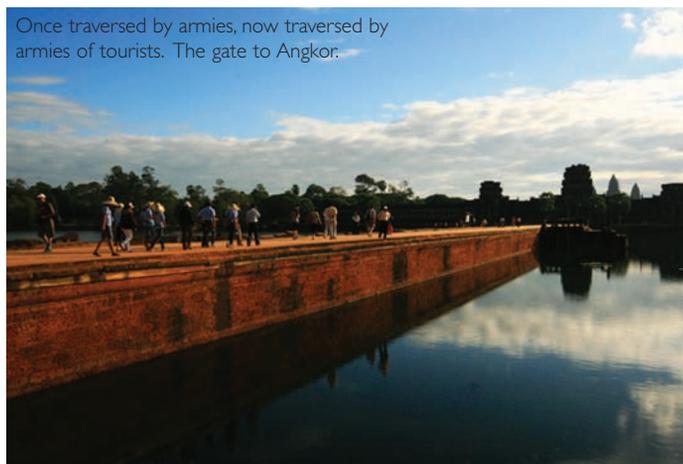


The wall I had come to see, reputed to show the earliest record of the ritualized Bokator, is stacked now in disarray; history jumbled, awaiting reassembly. On one wall only there is a carving in relief of two opponents — naked save loincloths — battling with fists and exhibiting a stylized attack which may be the most concrete example of Khmer’s martial tradition predating Thai arrival. It is slim proof, but the moto drivers don’t need it: “We invented it (Kun Khmer, Muay Thai).”



Cambodia, once the most powerful and culturally-advanced player on the Southeast Asian stage, thanks in large part to an ingenious irrigation system, imported Indian science, and beautifully-crafted temple complexes, has seen some dark times since the empire’s collapse.

Phnom Penh was established as Cambodia’s capital after Angkor was sacked by the Thais repeatedly in sustained warfare from 1353 to 1431. Redesigned by French colonialists, the city was prosperous until its 1975 capture by the Khmer Rouge. The regime held power for only four years, but the effects were devastating, and Cambodia is still recovering.



Once traversed by armies, now traversed by armies of tourists. The gate to Angkor.

After the French colonialists had left, World War II had washed over, and the US-Vietnam war finished spilling into Cambodian territory with guerrillas, napalm and toxic defoliant chemicals came Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. The new regime, educated in communism in France, desired to return Cambodia to a purely agricultural society. They found it necessary to execute between one and two million people, anyone with any level of

education and anyone who identified with traditional arts, like Kun Khmer (short for all styles of Khmer ancient arts) and Bokator.

Traditionally rivals, the Vietnamese finally chased the Khmer Rouge out after four years of horror, but subsequently banned Bokator and Kun Khmer. Thailand and Muay Thai, meanwhile, had enjoyed profit and worldwide exposure as the kingdom became a base for American GI’s during the Vietnam War. Since that time, Muay Thai has exploded in popularity throughout the world, while Cambodians have struggled to hold onto their own arts.

“The Cambodians will never fight in Thailand, and the Thais won’t come here,” says Paddy Carson, owner of Paddy’s Gym in Phnom Penh. He says that one of the biggest fight promoters in Bangkok (One Songchai) suggests it occasionally, but such is the ideological pride of Khmer fighters that they will not fight and will not concede the legitimacy of Muay Thai.

At 50 years old, Carson has been in the fight game since he was a kid in South Africa. He has settled into Cambodia and has



Paddy Carson, 50, training a fighter.

bigger things than nationalistic grudge matches in mind. “I want to create a world body, like the WMC (World Muay Thai Council),” he says. “You need a fighter with a good mind, a good jaw, good hands, a big heart ... you need all the credentials if you want to be world champion.”

At Paddy’s gym, beneath the Japanese friendship bridge spanning the sluggish, brown expanse of the Mekong (one of the world’s major rivers), he raises a stable of fighters. Not born into the sport like their Thai counterparts, Paddy’s fighters have a lot to make up for. They are young Cambodian men with hopes of becoming well-known fighters.

Paddy is quick to call his fighters novices; it’s a way of protecting them until they are ready for big fights. Until that time they learn the Kun Khmer techniques of antiquity: knee, elbow, kick and throw. The element that Paddy believes will make his fighters competitive on an international level, however, is the science of western boxing, to which the Thais have proven susceptible again and again.



Once part of Angkor, Lopburi is now in Thailand.

Training near Old Stadium, Phnom Penh.



Victorious fighter collects payout from the gambling pit.

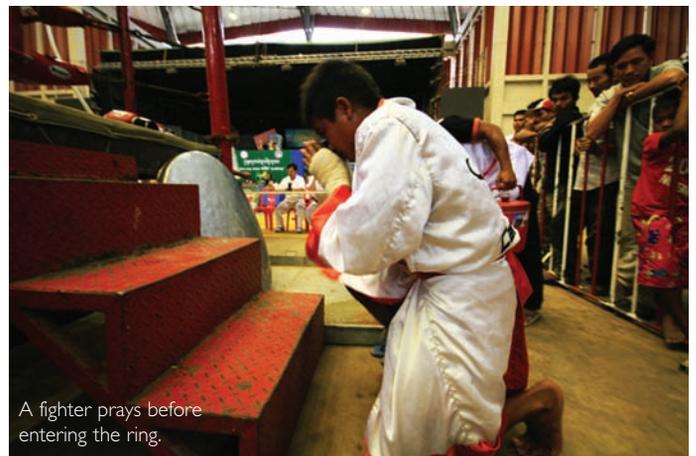
He has a couple of promising prospects — youths with fast hands and knockout power — groomed for international exposure. “Cambodia has the talent; we just have to train them,” says Carson. The thought is not so farfetched. Thailand has produced many international stars, and Filipino Manny Pacquiao is one of the most highly-paid boxers in the world.

The “old stadium” in Phnom Penh fills up early; gamblers take up ringside positions, waving white fans when they are taking bets, screaming into a brick of cell phones rubber-banded together between rounds.

A fighter kneels to offer a prayer before he vaults himself up and over the ropes, into the ring, and onto national television. The piercing music of the fight orchestra keens out the combat song, an irresistible call to battle for a true warrior.

With a theatrical flourish, a fighter draws an imaginary sword and runs his opponent through at the climax of his ritualized dance.

Following the opening bell, the violence is systematic; fighters kick at each other’s feet, calves, thighs ... testing one another’s balance hoping to find a flaw. The action gets heavier in Round 2. The fighters kick and punch, blocking with shins and elbows. It carries over to the screaming crowd, the slap of bone on bone. The fighters barely register pain, their adrenaline running high.



A fighter prays before entering the ring.



Baylon Temple



Cafe goers watch the Friday night fights, Phnom Penh.

The Khmer boxers are not as polished as the Thais, but they fight with more heart, from open to close, never running, never sleeping.

Early in the evening one fighter is forced out when an elbow opens a swollen egg under his eye, blood showering the hot canvas underfoot. Another leans over his trainer's shoulder — like a sack of rice — after a kick tears his knee cap up and to the side. When the fighters clinch,

Championship bouts may pay only US \$200 and lesser-ranked fighters command \$50 plus per bout. If they are able to fight each week, the boxers make a better wage than they could in many other jobs, and so the danger is worth the cash. They live in their gym — eating, sleeping and training — among their compatriots regardless of camaraderie. After all, it's still the fight game and a tough way to make a living.



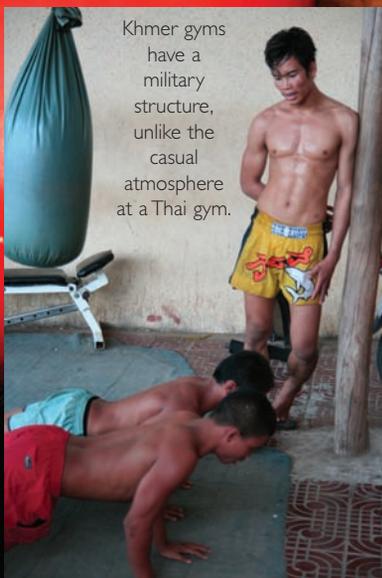
Purported Khmer Rouge victim, Tuol Sleng.

they wrestle for control, both shoving knees into the other's stomach with devastating effect. In the heavyweight match-up, action stops after a fighter takes a high kick to the shoulder. The force of it knocks his humerus bone out of the shoulder, and his corner men cannot make his arm work again no matter how hard they pull. He is forced to quit. The gamblers roar as the next fighter goes up.



Cornermen work to repair a shoulder dislocated by a kick.

These days, foreign investment is coming to Cambodia and opportunities seem to be opening up, so why take such risks? As the heavyweight champion Thun Sophear told me, "Before I fight, I not eat ... after fighting, I can eat." Question is, will the proud Cambodians face the Thais on an international stage for this December's SEA Games, or will they boycott the event on the grounds of cultural thievery?



Khmer gyms have a military structure, unlike the casual atmosphere at a Thai gym.