

Muai Thai and the embodiment of fighting forms in a rural, northeast Thai household.

by

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Abstract

This research is based on four months of fieldwork (May-August 2007) where I was part of a household in a rural, northeast Thai village, while training for Thai boxing (*muai Thai*). Thai boxing in general, and the cultural proliferation of fighting forms (such as cock-fighting) within the northeast region of Isan are examined in light of quotidian household and village practices. In utilizing a phenomenological, practice-based and pragmatic methodology, both technical, corporeal habit, as well as the hermeneutical grounds which contextualize intentional orientations are considered conterminously in contributing to embodied knowledge. I suggest that through their motions both in and outside of the ring, successful Thai boxers embody a cultural aesthetic of marginality through a confluence of animality, ethnic otherness and the spiritual world of death and ancestors, notions which all readily come into being amongst a masculine underclass in Thailand's rural northeast.

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The nature of this research obviates a substantial debt that I owe to the family I lived with in northeast Thailand.

I also greatly enjoyed bringing this research into being amongst a community of researchers at Carleton University. Among many others, I would like to thank: Peter Gose, whose efforts in conveying the subtleties of pragmatism and performance allowed me to appreciate the hermeneutic underpinnings within this research; Bernhard Leistle, whose insights into posture and cultural phenomenology similarly possessed me; Jen Pylypa, whose accounts of life in northeast Thailand prepared me prior to fieldwork and reassured me upon its completion; and Daniel Rosenblatt, whom, through numerous conversations, instilled me with a sense of the appropriate ways in which I might approach fighting, without doing discursive damage. Finally, I am especially grateful to Frances Slaney for introducing me to an anthropology which provides an active means of engaging in and appreciating existence, and whose guidance, friendship and encouragement saw every stage of this project through to completion.

While this thesis is thus no more of an individual effort than any enculturated action, any inconsistencies or inaccuracies within the text are a result of my own misinterpretations.

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Chapter One – An introduction to *muai Thai*

A *muai Thai* tournament in rural, northeast Thailand

May19, 2007:

Today, I am going to a Thai boxing (*muai Thai*) tournament for the first time. Friends and family members of the rural Thai family I have been living with for three weeks find transportation to the fight on the backs of motorcycles or crouched in the back of flatbed trucks driven by their neighbors.

As my presence is still somewhat of a novelty, my trainer drives me out of the village on the back of his own motorcycle. We skip briefly over the highway and continue down a number of gravel and clay roads for about ten minutes. Coming up on the neighboring village, the pathway of rust-toned clay we've been flying over turns to one of poured, albeit cracked, concrete slabs, maybe eight feet square, which form a road-wide walkway between dwellings. From the back of the motorcycle, I have a sped-up impression of housing development. The materials used for open-air housing in our own neighborhood: smoothed concrete floors poured at ground level or raised wooden platforms and crumbling concrete walls topped by corrugated tin ceilings are increasingly interspersed by houses with freshly painted blue shingles or iron fences. Stray dogs mill about the front of most houses, ignoring our motorcycle as we speed past.

The village and my motorbike ride come to an end at the source of this wealth: an expansive field of grass ending in the shoreline of an artificial lake dotted by partially submerged tree stumps. One massive, house-wide tree stands in the middle of this field. A boxing ring – four roped off corners: one red, one blue, with a stretched canvas floor set atop raised metal platforms, held about four feet off of the ground – has been set up beneath the shadiest branches. Several men wrap a string of

large blue tarpaulins on fifteen foot high poles around the circle of vending trucks. Inside this tarped off area, several trucks are corralled, busy unpacking their wares. Later, meals of rice-noodles and pork, candy and salt snacks, alcohol, ice-cream, ice-water and even children's plastic toys are all offered at a slight mark-up. Instead of making a perfectly sealed enclosure, the men pull the tarp's ends close together, but leave a small aisle through which admission fees will be collected. The charge for this match is 50 baht (about \$1.50 U.S.), if purchased in advance from one of the organizer's friends, or 60 baht at the tarp's seam. The massive blue tarp will come down about 2/3 of the way through the afternoon, after most of the younger fighters' families have paid their way inside and matches between elder, teenaged boxers largely remain to conclude the event.

According to the eight and a half by eleven inch photocopies of the fight schedule which circulate throughout the crowd, there are about 25 bouts scheduled for the afternoon. In addition to the families and friends of each fighter, groups of younger men on motorcycles wearing blue jeans, or older men with trucks and glinting metallic watches show up for the gambling, drinking and socializing, increasing the crowd's numbers to about 150 people. Once inside the tarped-off area, these groups congregate in clearings and corners behind the sales trucks or beneath ulterior sources of shade where bamboo mats are laid, food and drink is shared, and fighters change and prepare with oil massages, fabric hand-wraps, metal jock-straps and elaborately sewn boxing shorts colored either mostly red or mostly blue for their respective corners.

My trainer heads straight for a seat next to one of the beer trucks, orders a Leo brand beer and begins to catch up with two of his friends. His 11 year old nephew,

Suleth and Suleth's smaller friend, Jat, both of whom have been training intermittently with us in the preceding weeks, are fighting later during the day.

The fighting is announced by a set of speakers from which the music of a *muai Thai*-specific band sounds throughout the enclosure. At this particular tournament, a recording blaring from huge, chest-high speakers which have completely filled the back of one of the trucks substitute for what is usually a live, three piece band featuring rhythmically chimed cymbals, drums and a local variation of a high-pitched, wailing oboe. – Although, at one tournament I attended, this oboe was replaced with a rapidly twanged, variably tuned guitar, much as would be used in Isan's local *mor-lam* music or more noticeably, at the concerts held at Buddhist temples before young Thai men accept a temporary position in the monkhood.

That the tournament today relies on a pre-recorded band is by no means a more desirable situation than having its live counterpart, which would usually be featured at a larger, more organized tournament. A live band is able to increase its tempo to parallel or influence action within the ring, quite often encouraging two fighters that have parlayed the latter stages of their bout into a sauntering, braggadocios avoidance of physical exchange in order to flaunt to the crowd and one another their own confidence in being declared winners. Despite the fact that today's music is not live, when the recording is played at what must be maximum amplification and only during sanctioned periods of action, the wailing sound of the oboe still raises hairs on the back of my neck and brings an initial group of spectators to the ring.

Halfway through the third fight, Thai policemen wearing crisp, long sleeved, dark brown uniforms and polished white motorcycle helmets show up. Two Thai fighters that appear to be about eight years old sit patiently on stools placed in their

corners instead of fighting. The frenetic gambling exchanges that usually surround them in the ring are stalled for upwards of twenty minutes as a group of four police circulate on the edges of the crowd, talking to the judges and the ringside announcer, congregating mostly around the entrance where admissions fees have been collected. The spectators that had been so absorbed during the first two and a half fights instead shuffle sidelong, engage each other in distracted conversations and generally turn away from and ignore the presence of the ring. The police eventually settle on taking the tournament's main promoter aside for a discussion. This man is a former fighter turned trainer now in his mid-thirties. Last week I had seen him come by our house on his motorcycle, with cigarettes stuffed into his shirtsleeve, talking pleasantly with the family and leaving my trainer with an allotment of tickets to sell on his behalf. Between grinning introductions, my trainer had explained to me that the two of them had fought several times when they were younger. So now, my trainer's consociate or doppelganger from this neighboring village stood just outside the ring, talking assuredly with the police. Since his tournament had been rained out last night and rescheduled for the afternoon today, the police are requesting a relicensing fee of sorts.

Although no one in the crowd displays any outward hostility or bitterness toward the police (vendors offer them snacks, local acquaintances engage them in small-talk) there is a collective disavowal of the ring, the fighters, the huge speakers, the judges' chairs, the pens, papers and loose currency that had begun circulating in the crowd only moments ago. All these have abruptly ceased to receive any form of acknowledgement. The problem is taken care of by ignoring it out of existence. After about twenty minutes of discussion and shared cigarettes with the organizer and some of his chief financial supporters, a licensing agreement is reached and the police wind

their way back through the crowd, through the seam in the tarpaulin divider. Another minute after the sounds of their motorcycle engines depart, the two eight year olds stand again, the recording begins and the “illegal betting” surrounding the matches continues.

As the next few bouts get underway, Jat begins preparations for his own fight. I'm carrying a digital camera, and despite the boys' initial timidity, I am encouraged by their adult guardians to get a pre-bout photo of Jat and his opponent side by side, with fists raised, looking serious. After the flash goes both boys place their hands, palms together, in front of their foreheads and execute a formal Thai bow (a *wai*) to each other as well as to the surrounding adults. Once his opponent has disappeared to a shady corner on the other side of the ring, Jat's friends set about massaging lemon scented boxing oil into every one of his limbs, his abdomen, back and neck. Just before the fight, his entire face, save his eyelids, is coated in Vaseline. Chula told me that this is to reduce the chances of being cut by a particularly hard strike. It's a procedure that is carried out largely in preemptive, focused silence, albeit the odd burst of shared laughter between Jat and his friends.

Since my trainer is largely preoccupied in conversation with a friend of his behind the beer table, his elder brother Sap sets about collecting and verifying the initial sum of cash the opponent's guardians' peer group has collected and matching it. This money is left ringside, at the main judge's table, and will be handed to the winning fighter immediately following the fight.

With thin cotton hand-wraps and a metal jock-strap tied in place, Jat is almost ready for the ring. He stops briefly in front of our boxing camp's chief patriarch. My trainer's father, a thick, smiling man well over 65, ties a small length of torn red cloth around Jat's upper right arm and then removes the family's ceremonial boxing

headband (*mongkon*) from a vinyl blue briefcase kept always within arms reach. Jat kneels and repeats prayers back to the old man, who places the *mongkon* atop his head. The two-finger wide band of navy cloth slips down on Jat's smaller head and rests on the back of his ears. The hand-length tail, upon which a small width of gold thread has been stitched, rests on the back of Jat's neck. My trainer's father adds an additional decoration that is not usually worn before all fights: a red, white and blue Thai-plaid sash wrapped snugly around Jat's oily, virtually non-existent waist. This is a pattern usually reserved for elderly gentlemen. Following Jat's bout, both armband and headband will be transferred to my trainer's nephew, Suleth, who will fight later in the afternoon.

As the current bout nears its conclusion, a pair of red, 8-ounce gloves are carried through the crowd by friends from the previous fighter's corner to Jat. The referee will double-check and cover these with tape just prior to the bout, inside the ring. Now, Jat's whole entourage, myself included, shift expectantly through the crowd to settle in the space behind the red corner. Supporters of the blue corner are busy doing the same. Summoned from his seat next to the beer truck, my trainer materializes to hold the ropes down so that Jat may climb overtop of them. (Female Thai boxers, or *muai-ying* fighters crawl under the ropes to enter and leave the ring.) Once he has stepped over the top rope and into the ring, Jat immediately kneels and bows, first in the direction of his home village, and then to judges on each of the remaining three edges of the ring. His opponent does the same.

As Jat is one of his irregular commissions, my trainer, Chula has yet to teach him a complete honorific dance, or *wai-kru*. When the music that signals the beginning of the performance begins to blare, Jat follows through with a standard, walking circumvention of the ring, keeping his right glove on the top rope, stopping

briefly in front of each corner before tapping it three times in succession with his gloves, bowing with gloves clasped together in front of his face and continuing to the next corner. At about the same rate, but starting from the other side of the ring, his opponent does the same. Once both of them have returned to their original corners, Jat has no choice but to wait as his opponent continues with a more elaborate *wai-kru*, – which translates literally as a dance honoring one’s teacher – rocking back and forth on one knee in the center of the ring, arms tracing wide circles, carrying this demonstration out for each of the ring’s four sides. While this dance is a direct reproduction of the dance carried out by a mentor, trainer or former fighter within his boxing camp, the motions are also based on those carried out by animals such as water buffalo, or, in this case, fighting cocks with broad sweeping wings.

As this carefully scripted portion of the performance is carried through, Jat stands waiting in his corner, often looking out at the crowd, receiving last minute assertions and instructions from both Chula and his elder brother Sap, who uses this opportunity to remove the large, decorative plaid sash from around Jat’s waist. Jat can’t help cracking a grin again as Sap’s pull at the awkwardly wrapped sash almost drags him through the ropes, but he quickly regains his balance and focused composure. When Blue Corner finishes his *wai-kru*, the band’s recording shuts off. The referee calls both combatants to the center of the ring, where they will tap gloves and receive their final instructions. When Jat walks back to his corner, Chula stands up on the edge of the ring to exchange a final prayer over the ropes with Jat, who bows his head as the headband is removed. Waiting almost until the moment when I thought I would need to point them out, the collection of a half-dozen coin sized Buddhist amulets strung around Jat’s neck are removed and passed down to his father, who grins a Jat-like grin at me, and places them around his own neck.

In the center of the ring, the referee slices a hand through the open space between both combatants, a bell sounds and the recorded band begins wailing. Shouts go up from both sides of the crowd. We shout “ooay” to emphasize and socially reinforce any of the particularly good punches or kicks that Jat lands.

During a *muai Thai* bout, fists, feet, heels, shins, knees and elbows are used to strike any surface of an opponent’s anatomy, excluding the groin. When this negotiation of force happens in close proximity, opponents often enter a standing “clinch”, arms locked around each other’s shoulders or necks in an attempt to destabilize one another’s posture. From within this clinch, fighters most often land knees in their opponents’ midsections, and it is these knees that are most strongly encouraged by the crowd’s emphatic shouts. If either, or both of the fighters should be thrown to the ground during this process, or if the clinch becomes a kinetic stalemate of sorts against the ropes, referees will intervene and pull the fighters apart. No part of a *muai Thai* fight may take place upon the ground. When a fighter falls to both of his knees, is knocked down, knocked out, or more often, thrown to the canvas as a result of an improperly balanced clinch, action is halted and judges dock points accordingly. If the fighter is unable to get up on his own, a 10-count is begun.

Today, despite his opponent’s aesthetically pleasing *wai-kru*, after two of the five three-minute rounds have gone by, it is evident that Jat is controlling the fight. He continues to attack with a series of shin-whipping kicks, while Blue Corner largely backs away, preoccupied with defending himself. More than once, Jat simply throws his slightly taller, yet weight-matched opponent to the canvas from within the clinch. He lands a series of punches so effectively that as Blue Corner attempts to move forward into the clinch, Jat is even confident enough to attempt a strike with his elbow. Between two older, larger fighters with more concentrated, trained striking

joints, this particular technique might have drawn blood. (Many elder Thai men have collections of scars across their eyebrows, foreheads and temples (See Photo 22).) In Jat's bout, the elbows he attempts to throw have less force than many of his elder counterparts, becoming slightly muffled as his opponent changes the position of his shoulder, guard and neck. No blood is drawn.

Over the course of four months in Thailand, I witnessed dozens of fights between larger combatants, and a few between those even smaller than Jat, where blood was drawn. In only a few of the most dramatic cases did this result in the end of the fight. As long as a fighter remained animate and standing, the fight would continue. Quite often though, a facial cut, especially one which causes blood to drip into the eyes or obstructs nasal breathing, can contribute to a fighter's quick demise: a lack of visual perspective or physical faltering which results in aesthetically displeasing displays of technique. Often, between rounds, trainers and cornermen will affix dollops of Vaseline (or when attending to a particularly persistent wound, Vaseline mixed with ground tobacco leaves) above a cut, often waving menthol pastes or smelling salts below their boxers' noses. Nothing this serious is required of Jat's cornermen during his fight though.

Between each of the five three minute rounds, Sap and another neighboring man whom Jat is comfortable and familiar with will rush up, into the ring, lifting their much smaller fighter up from beneath the arms, shaking and revitalizing his limbs. Fighters are encouraged to maintain composure. When a bell rings to signal the end of a round or the end of a match, slumping with hands held below their waist would be a sign of exhaustion. Instead, arms are usually raised high, above fighters' upright heads, and stretching and even smiling to bettors in the crowd is encouraged. To be anything but exhausted or downward is more acceptable. Although weariness will

unavoidably begin to show on his face between breaks in the second and third round, Jat generally carries this aspect of the performance out with success. The only visible fat on his body appears in the dimples of his smile.

Once seated on the stool in his corner between rounds, each of Jat's limbs is massaged vigorously and independently, shaken from shoulder to glove, as with a whip. As he catches his breath, Sap reiterates technical tips and instructions. If Jat had a mouthguard, it would be removed as he caught his breath now, but few, if any, of the young fighters use them. Ice water is sipped, but never swallowed, by both boxer and trainer, who immediately spit or spray this liquid across each of the boxer's limbs. In many of the more established, sheltered urban stadiums, the boxer will sit on a stool placed inside a metallic, circular trough which serves to keep this excess liquid off the surface of the canvas. Referees carry towels, often thrown back to judges and refreshed between rounds, with which they will wipe off the fighter's drenched bodies and gloves before the bell announces the beginning of each round in the center of the ring.

A number of bets are placed, raised and hedged within the crowd during the first half of Jat's fight. Bookies in the crowd, (on this occasion, a couple of elder and middle aged men wearing golf shirts, gold watch bands and large amulets) stand between friends of the red and blue corner, taking and matching bets, largely through a process of eye-contact, nods, and most importantly, finger gestures which signal denominations (usually 100 baht per finger) to be matched. These bets are largely quelled as it becomes more evident that Jat will attain victory.

When the bell sounds to end the fifth and final round, Jat walks across the ring to *wai* (an honorific bow) towards his defeated opponent's cornermen, gloved hands pressed together in front of his forehead. A cupful of water is taken from their water

cooler and offered to Jat in the same drinking cup used by his opponent between rounds. After drinking, the referee calls Jat to the center of the ring, where as a formality, one of his arms is raised. Jat then proceeds to kneel and bow at each side of the ring, collecting the stack of bills from the scorers' table in the process, which Sap immediately removes from between the thumb and forefinger pad of Jat's gloves, dividing the winnings amongst his father, trainer and financially invested supporters accordingly.

Sap also stands up on the edge of the ring and holds the top ropes of the ring down, so that, as before, Jat may climb over all of them, walk down the metal staircase and make his way back into the crowd. Once degloved, and changed back into the relatively formal clothing considered appropriate for this event (jeans, a bright t-shirt and flat canvas sneakers), Jat seems largely unhurt and exchanges a thumbs-up with me. Though he seems to be an especially compact youth (his father, even by Thai standards, seems short and athletic), Jat moves slightly slower than before, breath still heaving. He comes over briefly to see the poorly placed photographs I had managed to snap of his fight scrolled through on my digital camera's viewscreen. He grins, shrugs and turns, following a couple of his friends off through the crowd. Somewhere along the way, he receives a few baht from his father and one of the other neighboring men most ardently invested in his fight. The boys will spend the rest of the afternoon converting this baht into vending snacks, circulating throughout the crowd, watching friends' fights and sometimes (especially in the cases where tournaments begin later in the evening), falling asleep on bamboo mats amidst blaring speakers from the band.

Perhaps because an additional bookie has arrived, even despite his slightly larger stature, Suleth's fight attracts extra attention. Sap is fairly confident in his son's

abilities here in the rural circuit. His mother, Nok attends today, well-dressed in blue jeans, a royal yellow golf-shirt and lipstick, tells me that “Suleth – knock-out.” As during Jat’s fight, I watch from a similar spot behind Sap’s shoulder, looming behind the red corner. Early in the second round, even as Sap’s eyes wander from his son’s steps in the ring to become more preoccupied with searching through the crowd for an additional bettor, Suleth provides the promised knock-out. After a quick flurry on the far side of the ring, his opponent falls to the mat, dazed. As the referee waves his arms to end the fight, the opposing cornermen jump into the ring to shake their unconscious charge’s head and shoulders until he becomes reanimate. Suleth kisses his right glove and waves it above his head, jogging half-way around the ring in mock-celebration before beginning the appropriate series of bows, drinks and prostrations which will precede his exit from the ring.

The afternoon’s remaining bouts proceed in much the same fashion. Each of these feature fighters matched by weight, and as most competitors are between the ages of ten and fifteen, that weight is usually between 25 and 45 kilograms. Towards the end of the afternoon, three or four fights between well mastered seventeen to twenty year olds take place. Kicks, and sometimes knee strikes absorbed during these fights leave immediately visible bruises on fighters’ ribs. Clinches are used extensively during the later rounds of these fights. About a third of these do not go the full five rounds. A couple of the fights feature bloody noses, and one involves a cut forehead. Many fighters of all ages are heavily tattooed, often with the thicker, jagged, dark pigmentations and esoteric lettering which are characteristic of the tattoos done by Buddhist monks.

Sandwiched, as though for comic relief, between two of the more powerfully inclined headlining matches, is a fight between two men in their late forties, one of

whom is visibly overweight by Thai standards. Though the thinner man carries out a highly complex *wai-kru*, throughout the fight, his thicker opponent never appears flustered while absorbing hits, and at one point, even brings his head up, out of the clinch to smile placidly, freeing an elbow to strike downward onto his opponent's back. The crowd roars its approval, and even though I think him to be clearly out-boxed, the thicker man is declared the winner.

Even as the last fight of the afternoon reaches its conclusion, judges, bettors, vendors' trucks, and the Nestle ice-cream motorcycle vendor all disband and dismantle, leaving a well-trodden circle of grass and polyethylene debris around the ring and large tree.

I pile into the back of an older Isuzu truck with Jat's father, Sap and a couple of the older men and uncles. Jat, Suleth and another one of their friends sit on the wheel-wells. Jat sips a plastic cup full of crushed ice and diluted Pepsi-cola.

Halfway down the gravel road that leads back to our village, Suleth's elder half-brother, aged 14, shouts at us from the back of his friend's motorcycle. He waves a plastic red cap-gun into the sky and fires it repeatedly as their bike darts between uneven potholes on the edge of the roadway, racing next to, and then passing our truck.

**

Ethnographies of *Muai Thai* and the significance of this research

Muai Thai is a martial art that continues to receive an increased profile on the contemporary international stage (Gartland et. al. 2001: 308; Monthienvichienchai 2004: 81), mirroring the transnational pliability of a resilient Thai tourist industry, as well as increasing popular Western and Japanese consumption of mixed martial arts. Mixed martial artists readily recognize *muai Thai* as a highly effective form of

standing combat (Sheridan 2007: 61), studying Thai boxing “for striking skills well adapted to close-quarter fighting” (Downey 2007: 208). Subsequently, there has been an increased focus on the transmission of technique. An ethnography of Thai boxing as it is experientially shared and brought into being in rural, Northeast Thailand may, as far as ethnographic and popular discourse might intersect, provide a useful corrective to the prevalence of sport-specific instruction manuals in which the communication of technique bypasses, glorifies or otherwise decontextualizes the lived experiences of those intergenerational, practiced social classes whose bodily capital is largely invested in propagating the continuation of *muai Thai* within – and beyond – Thailand.

The practice of *muai Thai* is not one that has remained outside of the scrutiny of anthropological inquiry. A number of ethnographers, especially in recent years, have portrayed and emphasized different socio-cultural aspects of Thai boxing. Pattana Kitiarsa’s (2003) account of camp life in and around the Northeastern municipality of Nakhon Ratchasima (Khorat) stresses boxing’s importance as an assertive form of Thai masculinity. Kitiarsa’s study also alludes to a number of social relationships entangled within the practice of boxing in rural villages. I am interested in these “boyhood experiences... [m]emories of Thai boxing-style fights with other ‘buffalo-feeding’ boys (dek liang khwai) and friends in the rice fields during the post-harvest season ... in my home village” (Kitiarsa 2003: 66), especially as they suggest a larger network of expanded kinship and sparring relationships in these settings. The configuration and intersections of boxing with other social and familial roles in Thailand may provide communicative opportunities through which individuals orient the intentional aspects of bodily and social movement which is

carried forth into their better known (more thoroughly ethnographically disclosed) worlds.

Boxing, as it is practiced, trained and shared as a way of life by a majority of young Thai men, also leads to a highly visible public performance. Peter Vail's doctoral thesis (1998) on the topic offers an extensive, useful account of the historical factors which have helped to shape contemporary *muai Thai*, as well as an analysis centered around the use of Goffman's performance frames (Vail 1998: 257-271). He writes that "[t]he social regulation embedded in the frame ... thus generates discipline (in a Foucaultian sense) which in turn forms boxers" (Vail 1998: 269), and that "the boxing frame's primary referent" is a form of controlled, or mitigated violence which "highlights the management of confrontation and public demonstration of self-control" (Vail 1998: 270). Insofar as "control" and "violence" may be emblematic of western concerns with a blood-drawing sport, I would like to step back from these performative analyses in order to reassess the modes and meanings of boxing in rural Thailand.

While still acknowledging the performative aspects of boxing in Thailand and without denying the potential for a practical analysis of (symbolic) violence, I intend to work toward the cultural meanings of *muai Thai* through considering its performance as an active, dehiscent expression¹ of enculturated, embodied knowledge. In recognizing the importance of embodiment in his own work with Capoeira and violent, masculine expression in Brazilian culture, Lowell Lewis notes that performance frames may often prove problematic in that they tend to separate performances from everyday life and quotidian practices (1995: 226-227). Similarly, Greg Downey (2005: 205) comments on the limitations of performance theory when

¹ The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes ontological grounds as opening, bursting or dehiscent through bodily perception (Morley 1999: 99-100).

approaching the lived experience of Capoeira. In contrast to analyses which may tend to view *muai Thai* as a heightened performance which plays out the drama of Thai masculinity on a raised, canvas stage between four roped corners, in developing an understanding of the attentions, cultural meanings and experiences of both boxing participants and audiences alike, I would like to especially focus my research on the activities outside of the ring that are implicit in the cultural lives of the impoverished rural Thais that most readily engage in *muai Thai* culture.

Muai Thai has also proved to be a decidedly fluid, rapidly changing, (Monthienvichienchai 2004) constantly disputed cultural field. The increased visibility of female boxers on the fighting circuit, for example (see Dort 2004) is one of many local changes spurred on by an increasing international appetite for *muai Thai*. In this respect, Thailand offers a particularly expedient setting in which to explore cultural practices, as the prevalence of tourism and its expectations make it virtually impossible to view any activity, event, practice or performance as fixed, “traditional” or a universe unto itself – even in rural “hinterlands” (cf. Lindquist 2000) such as Isan.

That being said, I feel that a study of *muai Thai* in the region from which it draws its most ardent competitors and resilient, intrinsically cultural support networks is still most warranted. This is not because I feel that the most authentic form of boxing in Thailand is to be found in the impoverished, rural Northeast. Questions of authenticity, identity and *muai Thai*'s ‘roots’ become moot points when superseded by questions examining the meanings that Thai boxing attains in people’s social and cultural interactions. What I find striking, literally and figuratively, about boxing in the rural Northeast, is that it is so firmly and ubiquitously entrenched as one practice among many there. I would like to examine the numerous ways in which individuals

promote, recreate and share in this particular display of fighting prowess (along with a multitude of other fighting forms) as audiences, hopefuls, participants and culturally astute narrators.

With this study of *muai Thai*, then, I want to move towards an understanding of the corporeal intentions which color people's creative interactions and social (dis)positions within rural Thailand. Although perfect cultural understanding remains elusive, I aim to arrive in a cultural place where the meanings of fighting forms and displays are avidly "misrecognized" (Bourdieu 1990, 122-134), accepted and further incorporated as opportunities for creative agency. In short – a place where the 'fighting' makes sense; where "the sentient body is culturally consumed by a world filled with forces, smells, textures, sights, sounds and tastes" (Stoller 1994: 636).

What I feel is missing from the current ethnographic literature examining Thai boxing, (and, if one may pardon an evolutionist metaphor, what I feel may provide the "missing link" between relevant sociopolitical commentary on *muai Thai*'s classed, historical, geopolitical distinctions and a more immediate, lived understanding of 'violence', control, risk, labor and self expression in rural, underclass, masculine Thai terms) is a specific understanding of the lived, bodily experiences and expectations inherent in everyday, rural Thai life. The corporeal dispositions exercised through the "fuzzy" (Wacquant 1992: 19-26; Bourdieu 1990: 87) experience of social reality in northeast, rural Thailand both legitimize and are correspondingly delineated by somatic habits which unfold through the practice of boxing.

I would like to entertain the hypothesis that by approaching *muai Thai* primarily as a question of embodied knowledge I will allow for a broader understanding of the ways in which boxing finds significance, credence, transferability and meaning for its audiences and participants. Considering the

immediate, striking physicality of Thai boxing, I think it wholly appropriate that anthropological studies of this cultural practice approach it accordingly, through an understanding of the network of bodily habits reinforced through and around the activities of *muai Thai*.

For this reason, the descriptive passage I have included above does not attempt to present the experience of boxing as a performative event outside of the everyday experience of social life felt by its participants. The expanded network of kinship relations (i.e., the sparring partners and elder friends of Jat's father who literally handled, massaged and invigorated Jat between rounds inside of the ring) instill and set in motion a relation to one's own limbs which promulgates various possibilities for motion and sociability within a cultural lifeworld. The yanking and whiplash-centered assertions massaged into fighters between rounds are completely relevant to the successful styles of comportment (where one's own shin is used as a whip during kicks) within the ring itself. The communications massaged between boxers, trainers and supporters within the community bring into being an active understanding of a bodily-self which transcends the ring itself and is found in the accustomed social experiences and labors.

The experience of boxing, for Jat or other young boxers, while undoubtedly part of a masculine system of underclass labor and apprenticeship (cf. Herzfeld 2004), also "turns out to be a continuous and contested construction of the efforts to determine its understanding, description, and interpretation; that is, of efforts to determine how and what the work [in this case, Thai boxing] will be taken to be, which amounts, pragmatically speaking, to how and what it actually is" (Shusterman 1988: 409). The pragmatist suggestion, that the cultural activity of boxing will make its meanings (and thereby define its fluid field of power relations) through the *efforts*

of its participants and audiences; its interpreters, assuredly finds itself in line with phenomenological theory which sees the goals and means of corporeal outreachings as unfixed, both temporally and spatially, and only located insofar as intent may be found, immersed in doing. Following these compatible inclinations, one may take the active practice of Thai boxing to be without specific roots or foundations, but rather, caught up within a sense of practical, embodied beliefs (cf. Bourdieu 1990: 66-80). My research on Thai boxing therefore strives to position itself within the cultural dialectics of both belief and doing: the ontological grounds within northeast Thailand (which, given my current linguistic shortcomings, I will largely have access to via previous Thai studies within the ethnographic record), as well as the bodily and proprioceptive interactions construing a rural Thai habitus. The cultural meanings and realizations of Thai boxing are formed by (and informing of) a number of corporeal experiences in the rural Thai cultural milieu. Consequently, the majority of this thesis will be devoted to descriptions which place Thai boxing amongst similarly felt practices and bodily ways of knowing in a rural Thai household. The unique contribution that this study will make to the body of ethnographic literature surrounding Thai boxing will be to relate an account of the bodily habits and social relationships exercised by members of a household involved in recreating multiple forms of fighting in the northeast. In the process, the particular locale of northeast Thailand and the practical field of Thai boxing itself may also offer ideal conditions through which to examine, coalesce, and broaden anthropological notions of embodiment and cultural practices.

An anthropology of the martial arts, practices and cultural phenomenology

Fighting, or the pseudo-orchestration and recreation of fighting is an inherently social activity. (As my disciplinarian gradeschool principal once explained

to me, “It takes two to fight.”) So, the martial arts provide ideal contexts in which to explore a variety of cultural dialectics: individual and group affiliations; structure and agency; aesthetics and expression; body and culture. While an absolute focus on any one of these relationships is decidedly limited, the martial arts lend themselves quite readily toward sociological schools of thought that can explore – or alternatively, explode – such dichotomies.

The Japanese martial arts provide an interesting case in point. Following the post World-War Two disarmament of the Japanese military and the outlawing of civilian-carried firearms, forms of unarmed combat, particularly that of karate, developed into highly aesthetic systems, primarily on southern islands that were heavily occupied by American troops. The ‘empty hand’ of karate became symbolically opposed to the more efficacious weaponry of modern warfare: guns, grenades, and ultimately, one might argue, the threat of atomic warfare. In the shadow of technologically irradiated battles where hand to hand combat was not only impractical, but ill-advised and foolish at best, combative, human, bodily expressions were momentarily absolved of their previous meaning. The as(th/c)etic disciplines of the Japanese martial arts required new purchase in a shifting cultural landscape, and changes resulted (See Mathews, 1996 and Donohue, 1991.). The many rules, regulations and axioms of martial arts practice were only added in the past fifty years, in order to emphasize the spiritual aspects of Japanese culture as they were interpreted abroad (Chan 2000). The combat systems, (as Ohnuki-Tierney writes of rice agriculture), were “valourized into aesthetics” and “became formalized and legitimated to become symbolic capital for the imperial system” (1995: 230, 245). A similar suggestion might view participants of Thai boxing to be ensconced with the

production of a cultural capital that supplicates to a broader system of global, intercultural relations and imperial debts.

Furthermore, with their “emphasis on the corporate nature of some groups, a stress on hierarchy, and the importance of superior-inferior relations” (Donohue 1994: 108), the martial arts potentially provide ethnographic material in which the individual labors of martial or athletic participants might be misinterpreted as pure structural fodder. Without completely discrediting the notion that many martial arts participants are indebted to cultural “systems” in which supplication to imperial or hegemonic ideals may become part and parcel of participation, anthropologists carrying out research in the ethnographic sub-field of the martial arts have been particularly astute in recognizing the creative, agentic qualities of participants’ actions.

But how are the lives of Thai boxers to be understood in this respect, or the activity of Thai boxing itself? Is boxing in Thailand a subordinate form of underclass labor and adolescent sacrifice which feeds an entrenched hegemonic axis of royalty, global market interests and cosmological preternaturalism? Are the adolescent thoughts and intentions of change literally pounded or knocked back out of existence by gloved fists before they can take shape, or are these assumptions dystopian delusions, far removed from the flow of actual experience?

In other respects, it is difficult to consider the usually impoverished youth that make Thai boxing their livelihood to be persons with a preemptive disposition for symbolic capital standing on par with the often older, richer men that set matches, place bets upon and train them. Thai boxing trainers are surprisingly laissez-faire and from what I could see, youth boxers were not directly conscripted. At the same time, one might argue that fewer avenues for the accumulation of symbolic and economic

capital available in peripheral, rural locations demand that youth adhere to the prominent artistic and sporting forms made available within their own communities.

In trying to explain northeastern Thai contexts, a vicious cycle of structure versus agency quickly ensues. As fieldworker or global interlocutor, this still leaves the experiences of others ever-distant and inaccessible. Is it ever possible to speak of or even perceive others without first objectifying them on some level? In an attempt to move past these subjective-objective dualities, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice has proved to be a particularly fertile theoretical field. In following Bourdieu's earliest logic of practice to the letter, there is a tendency to eventually speak of realities in objective, structural terms, or remain anchored to dualistic theory (Farnell 2000: 413). Bourdieu however, "wants to convey the idea that people are motivated, driven by, torn from a state of in-difference and moved by the stimuli sent by certain fields" (Wacquant 1992: 26). One might easily produce an ethnography exploring the political and economic 'structures' of global tourism that impact the lives of Thai boxers. In that regard, I might just as well have had greater access to technical instruction, sparring partners of similar size and cross-cultural transactions by attending a tourist-oriented training camp. While these fields are undoubtedly valuable to consider, an ethnographic exegesis of their functions risks becoming removed from the embodied states and ways in which a Thai boxer (or audience member, or other involved subject) actually knows, engages with, or finds the potential means to interact with their lived world.

As it has been developed, debated, revised and corrected in terms of individuals' potential for agency within systems, Bourdieu offers researchers of embodiment a useful construct in the form of "habitus" (Bourdieu 1990, 1992, 2000), bodily habits and tics which constitute collective cultural predispositions. Ultimately,

for Bourdieu, the “habitus ... is ... not a destiny” (2002: 29). Individuals are not automatons, but there is at the same time nothing to transcend. The truth of existence is based and embodied in logical action and practice.

In differing from the “logical indeterminacy” (Csordas 1991: 9-13) or “fuzzy” understanding of social practices offered by Bourdieu, phenomenological theory narrows in on the temporal-perceptual conflux of corporeal reality, offering an “existential indeterminacy [which] becomes the basis for inalienable human freedom” (Csordas 1991: 11; also see Csordas 1993: 149-152). Despite these philosophical and more minute methodological underpinnings, the chiseled core of Bourdieu’s theory of practice still remains active within my own methods. As culture is what people do, the bodily habits that they cultivate are especially pertinent: in this case, I look especially for the repetitive, bodily actions which surround the practice of *muai Thai*.

With sports –among which we might include Thai boxing–, Bourdieu was predominantly concerned with attributing class affinities to various practices (1990b: 156-161). Considering the objective inclinations of Bourdieu’s earliest receptions of practice theory, it is perhaps not surprising that he “gave little attention [to sports *training*]” (Noble and Watkins 2003: 521, 527). However, it is during the process of training in which one encounters the subjective agent’s most time-consuming pursuit of particular forms of physical capital and agency. Therefore, I was determined to weight the bulk of my ethnographic research with an attention to training. While Bourdieu was aware of training as a potential area of study, he has left it to others to expand.

The problems raised by the teaching of a bodily practice seem to me to involve a set of theoretical questions of the greatest

importance in so far as the social sciences endeavor to theorize the behaviour that occurs, in the greatest degree, outside the field of conscious awareness, that is learnt by a silent and practical communication, from body to body one might say. And sporting pedagogy is perhaps the terrain *par excellence* in which the problem can be raised that is raised ordinarily on the terrain of politics: the problem of understanding conscious awareness (Bourdieu 1990b: 166).

Thus what might be considered a subjective, personal, kinesthetic experience; the proprioceptive becomes political. Pragmatist theory similarly stresses that somatic care and attention to the individual body in research or active contemplation need not necessarily be a narcissistic, “selfish retreat from the social” (Shusterman 2000: 158). In effect, by practicing a bodily discipline such as Thai boxing, I was in pursuit of a mode of kinetic knowledge that would subsume conscious awareness, determining my social pliability – or lack thereof. In turn, this would change the way I situated myself in relation to socio-cultural forums and policies which need be successfully misrecognized in order to be wholly incorporated into the self. The physical byproducts of training, be they calloused shins, bruised ribs or increased lung capacity would also become markers and habits by which the body signifies its own usefulness, pliability or mode of interaction in the social realm. A particular type of adjusted body invites particular social constructions, shelters, niches and employments as its lot. In adjusting the habitus then, one ultimately adjusts their relation to and capacity for the accumulation of symbolic capital, power and violence.

These terms helped to communicate some of the possibilities of social life, however, yet again, for the particular method through which practice theory might

best be nudged toward social experience, I turned to “phenomenology[, which] gives us embodiment in order to understand being in the world” (Csordas 2000: 184). “[P]henomenologists generally have a more dynamic and fluid notion of the habitus as a lived-through structure in process... a structure which takes shape in the interaction of body-subject and world” (Crossley 2004: 39). In order to execute an aesthetically pleasing (aesthetically pleasing meaning socially accepted and indicative of symbolic power) kick, punch, dance-step, speech or musical note² for that matter, one must exist from within the center of the practice itself. The subject is not oriented towards a particular goal, but rather, just immersed in the interactive processes of ‘doing’. The “aesthetics of improvisation” (Bryant 2005: 234) develop from within the corporeal schemata of culturally informed practitioners. As I aimed to become one of these cool-headed, multicontextually improvising practitioners, I also aimed to lose myself in practice, becoming pure, active intention. Thus, the expansive collection of fieldnotes I created would be vital in recording the pedagogical/social suggestions I aimed to eventually subsume. Recognizing the elaborate aesthetics developed from within practice, I would come to inhabit a separate intentional arc and capacity for motility that was not in opposition to the “cognitive” aspects of Thai culture, but rather, inseparably entangled with them. Thus, while I admittedly lacked the Thai language skills to absorb cosmological or metaphysical lectures, the Theravada Buddhist amulets, absolutions, bows and motions routinized into practices remained codified practical constructs to be further made sense of.

Cultural phenomenology and apprenticeship as methodology

² David Sudnow (1978) provides an account of learned improvisation in Jazz piano: a postural, embodied process in which a new self is guided towards and found through each note.

In an effort to work towards an embodied understanding of the potentials, changes, shapes and sensorial/corporeal tones of Thai boxing, I adopted practical apprenticeship as my primary fieldwork methodology. Apprenticeship is an inherently social process through which a sense of style, as well as moral and ethical principles are imparted (Bryant 2005: 24). In working towards proficiency in Thai boxing, I would also be encouraged to adopt a set of moral principles and dispositions that would allow me to thrive in that milieu.

How though, are these cultural principals imparted during boxing training, or bowing, or gambling or greeting for that matter? Apprenticeship in *muai Thai* is not a visible matter of discipline, monitoring and master-apprentice relations, as in other martial arts. Granted, a masculine ethos is promoted in boxing clubs or centers where younger boxers will often assist senior fighters, ladeling them water from the water cooler between practice rounds in the ring or massaging their limbs, backs and stomachs, however, the externally reinforced verbal instructions that provide “somatic cues” (Bar-On Cohen 2006) for engaged practitioners in so many Japanese martial arts are largely absent in *muai Thai* training. In fact, in many Thai boxing clubs (cf. Vail 1998: 184-185), the process of socialization and learning happens primarily through mimesis. In the milieu of a boxing club, “initiation into boxing is ... effected collectively, by imitation, by emulation, and by diffuse and reciprocal encouragement, the trainer’s role being to coordinate and stimulate routine activity, which turns out to be ‘a much more powerful source of socialization than the pedagogy of instruction’[Jean Lave (1988)]” (Wacquant 2004: 102). Younger Thai boxers are more often given minimal instructions by their trainers, and are instead encouraged to watch and do as other boxers do.

At the family home that doubled as boxing club in Thailand, however, I would find several obvious blockades in my efforts to locate opportunities for mimesis or even more rarely, the eminently reshaping social tool of sparring. I was too tall, too old, too weak, too heavy and too slow: an adult who was for some reason preoccupied with a pastime largely afforded to children. One approach to overcoming these differences was to practice not with the express purpose of imitating the cultural other, but with the purpose of inhabiting shared means of practice. Thus, I would be “introduc[ed]... into contexts which afford selected opportunities for perception and action” (Ingold 2000: 354). I did not mine thoughts or biomechanical secrets from an other’s mind, but adjusted the environmental/social/cultural factors around my own body so that I might become ensconced within a different form of bodily knowing. As an inexperienced initiate, my attitudinal intentionality provided the limited orientation from which I attempted to understand more experienced boxers, and through efforts to instead inhabit similar contexts, I factored intentionality into my phenomenological methods.

Many other communities of practice centered upon the transmission of combat techniques have provided anthropologists with appropriate contexts in which to conduct research concerned with ritual and performance (See Jones 2002; Phillip Zarilli’s studies of Kalarippayatt (1979, 1984); Joseph Alter for studies of Indian Wrestling (1992); Lowell Lewis’ work on Brazilian Capoeira (1992, 1995, 1999); John Donohue’s apprenticeship and cross-cultural reflections on the Japanese martial arts (1991, 1994); Tamara Kohn’s studies of self and identity in aikido clubs (2001, 2003); Thomas Ots’ account of tai chi and political agency in China (1994)). The field, for these anthropologists, is not necessarily designated by a single geographical space or place, but is instead, a field of practice (Bourdieu 1990), where the habits,

tics and repetitions that characterize people's communicative actions may be approached.

The martial arts provide advantageous areas of study for anthropologists, in that they offer an unprecedented level of participation and immersion among others. The time-honored research method of participant observation attains a new level of engagement through apprenticeship. In many of these communities, a coherent social framework is already in place, in which an anthropologist may merely insert themselves upon the bottom rung. By accepting the niche of novice within a martial arts community, anthropologists also open themselves up to instructions, discourse and bodily challenges which may be used constructively in working towards an understanding of culture.

In my own research, I was fortunate to have reference to the methods, inclinations and suggestions of anthropologists who have recorded their own apprenticeship experiences in martial arts communities. Greg Downey's study of Capoeira provided me with a textbook example of the ways in which a phenomenological, bodily sensitivity to the motions of physical training provide data that are readily applicable to a broader cultural milieu. I was especially intrigued by the sport-specific bodily techniques that Downey found reappearing in everyday labor activities in Brazil (2005:191-193), and owe much of my own awareness of technical and quotidian similarities in Thailand to this example.

I also found Loic Wacquant's work in a boxing club in inner-city Chicago (1998, 2001, 2004) particularly compelling, especially as it addressed pugilism as a form of classed labor. The detailed narratives of boxers and trainers included in Wacquant's principal work (2004) set a standard for detail, cultural sensitivity and reflexivity during apprenticeship research.

The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) describes a patient, Schneider, who is unable to reach for or differentiate between points on his arm that a doctor touches, considering them in objective, secondary or “abstract” fashion. Yet, Schneider is capable of pinpointing the precise location of a mosquito that attempts to sting him. The reasoning for this is not found in neurological pain thresholds, or conscious distinctions. Rather, Schneider’s abilities indicate that consciousness is of the body, and that intent and bodily sensation exist in simultaneous, inseparable fashion (1945: 140-146).

The prevalence of consensual, objectively considered, heavily choreographed motion in aikido practice is comparable to Schneider’s secondary, objective, physiological evaluation of the senses: the doctor’s prodding. The “sting” of a [*muai Thai*] punch (Wacquant 2004: 89), however, is just like the sting of Schneider’s mosquito. It is exposure to activities of this sort that gradually reorganize the body’s perceptual capacities, and implicitly reorient individuals within their social worlds. After two months of abandoned aikido classes in a Canadian club, and a week of awkward form-repetitions in various kung-fu or *wushu* classes, I tried a local *muai Thai* class, immediately broke a sweat and was hooked. Not only was *muai Thai* training physically satiating, but I was also intrigued by the prospect of developing research in a setting that from what I knew of it, might be more thickly enmeshed in global inequality and cultural misrecognition. I packed my bags for Thailand.

Cultural phenomenology and an anthropology of human motion

The martial arts are, most clearly, active practices, and in that respect, provide clearly defined topics for anthropological study. Despite this, I do not want to focus on the overarching social structures or stratified combat systems made evident when viewing these cultures from without. In the same way that the phrase “bodies in

movement” improves upon discussions of “dancing bodies” (Lewis 1995: 226), I would like to view Thai boxing not as a subset of the anthropology of martial arts, but rather, as one variant within an anthropology of human motion. The key difference here being that with studies of “dance” or even “martial arts”, there may be a tendency to portray individuals as autonomic puppets, following scripted routines and steps.

Studies of cultural phenomenology, practices and pragmatics allow for an approach to different ways of being-in-the-world that do not harbor a dependency on dichotomies of structure/agency, self/other or subject/object: analyses that would necessarily fall short of a more complete understanding of bodily and social experience. I strove to maintain this sense of lived possibility in carrying out my own apprenticeship fieldwork. The particular motive apperceptions of engaged practitioners, carried forth into the world as culturally significant, consequently unfold and again take hold of the perceptual capacities of social beings. The kinetic expressions of Thai boxing thus are characteristic and come into being with active representations, changes and constructions of the Thai social world.

Chapter Outline:

This initial chapter has been written to familiarize readers with the practice of Thai boxing in general and its tournaments staged on the prodigious fight circuit in the rural northeast. While Jat’s fight may be less avidly followed and aesthetically precise than many of the Bangkok-area bouts that are popularly and critically acclaimed via Thai television, radio, newspaper, and boxing magazine-weeklies, his experiences (while arguably not less or more representative of Thai boxing’s fluidly contested ideals on a whole) are situated more closely to a social milieu where the primacy of certain pedagogical and cultural relationships intersect to ensure a

competitive pool of participants with which to continue more widely celebrated public expressions of Thai boxing. It is not a stretch to say that Jat, Suleth, or perhaps one of their competitive opponents, will become tomorrow's briefly celebrated national icon.

Chapter two will provide a description of the household and family dynamics that characterize the place in which the vast majority of my fieldwork was conducted: a fighting household situated in Thailand's peripheral northeast. Chapter three will examine the corporeal dispositions cultivated in this setting, primarily as they are brought forth through interactions between people and animals, particularly during cock-fights. The fourth chapter will further develop this understanding of Thai propensities toward motion by situating the specific techniques of the body cultivated during Thai boxing training amidst quotidian Thai uses of the body. Chapter five will present an account of the ways in which social mobility is experienced through fighting and travel among rural Thais. The sixth and final chapter will serve to summarize the findings of this research and suggest potential areas for further inquiry.

Chapter Two – Setting and Place

Joining a fighting household in rural Isan

Three weeks before seeing my first *muai Thai* tournament, I had crammed my oversized western frame into a relatively luxurious sleeper-cab for the ten hour journey from Bangkok to the northeastern provincial capital of Ubon Ratchathani city, which doubled as capital for the impoverished region of Isan. Fumbling through a series of expiring local calling cards, increasingly obscure bus depots and motorcycle-taxis, I eventually found myself waiting at a local bus depot, where I was approached by a short, broad shouldered local man in his mid thirties with an unmistakable, extensive collection of scars criss-crossing his forehead and eyebrows. Chula introduced himself in broken English and quickly ushered me onboard yet another bus. After another hour of this, we disembarked and hopped into the back of brightly painted, canopied, oversized truck popularly referred to as a *seong-theow*. There we sat on narrow vinyl benches and as the truck drove further into the countryside, Chula explained my presence to the few curious villagers sitting across from us.

As Chula's broken English was much better than my virtually non-existent Thai, we communicated in that fashion. A perennial extrovert, Chula had learned his English working at one of the more popular tourist-oriented *muai Thai* camps. I had received his contact information by admitting to one particularly entrenched expatriate trainer that I was more interested in training somewhere where I could observe everyday life in the rural northeast. During our initial bus-ride together, I was able to gather from Chula that with the exception of the foreign owner who had put me in contact with him, none of the other Thai trainers at two different camps had found him agreeable to work with, and his employment experiences there had been

either cut short or completely unfulfilling. After I mentioned my wish to carry out a study of *muai Thai* culture, Chula launched into a series of self-identifying assertions about boxing and how proud he had made his family.

I was eager to ask him about the surrounding countryside: the rice paddies, fish farms, Buddhist temples and grazing water buffalo visible from the highway. Most of all, I wanted to learn more about regional differences between the northeast and Bangkok. I knew that Isan in particular was known for producing *muai Thai* fighters, yet the region itself was generally impoverished (Vail 1998: 238-243). While these economic factors were evident, I was also interested in the social and cultural storehouses of *muai Thai* capital. For example, among northeastern Thais, economic constraints were often overridden by moral Buddhist social imperatives (Keyes 1983), which were especially influential in designating the methods through which men would achieve social merit (Ockey 1999: 1035). As distinct as Isan's political-economic situation is, so is its cultural landscape. Villagers in Isan used an altogether different dialect, more closely resembling that of the Lao people directly to the east. "Isan people refer to themselves as 'Lao,' and the Lao on both sides of the international boundary share the same food, music, religion, and traditional health conceptions and practices" (Pylypa 2004: 14). This different way of caring for and socially knowing the body is also indicative of an anterior way of relating to the world – or within the ring, to opponents' bodies, and (con/de)structive openings. It is this perspective that most readily interacts with the Thai central or "galactic polity" (Tambiah 1974: 102-141) to more smoothly exist within a 'system' of radial economic, agricultural and cosmological tributaries, providing a similar offering of performed, corporeal sacrifice within central, contemporary, media-savvy Bangkok. Certainly, historically, a variety of distinct regional boxing styles developed, and

these were often played against each other during performances for royalty at festivals, or more often, funerals. “[T]he few matches in the pre-1920 period were truly tests of the individual boxer’s skills as well as a method for honouring a special occasion *or the dead* (Monthienavienchai 2004: 24 [italics mine]). (Before my first and only competition, my trainer’s father, while placing the *mongkon* on my head, had also sprinkled some charcoal dust from a nearby cooled firepit in my hair: the dust of ancestors, Chula had later explained to me.) In some respects, the performance of vitality in the ring accounts for a peripheral grasp of Buddhist power, iconicity and timelessness, as exemplified by the king, who sits closest to concepts of immortality. At the same time, within this activity that is so centrally Thai, boxing performs a marginal grasp of death, ancestral power and, considering the marginal state of the people of Isan (and historical performances pitting peripheral Thai minorities against one another) in relation to central Thai political royal and political powers, cultural otherness. Considering these factors, as well as the animal aesthetics displayed within the performance itself (See chapter 3), it is possible to see *muai Thai* as a form of Thai primitivism, and the assurances of success realized and risked for performers and spectators alike conform to this notion.

The anthropologist Michael Jackson describes an unfixed, ephemeral truth charted through these ‘counterworlds’ and social recognitions of otherness. “Truth is on the margins. It is lost when it is claimed. It makes its appearance fleetingly, when systems collapse and dogmas are exploded” (Jackson 1989: 187). Although I did not assume globalization had lit the spark of social combustion, I was looking for those instances unknown to me – a blink of an eye, a collapsed kick, or a missed punch – through which the people of Isan recognized motions and opportunities for creative expression. Thai boxing “is recognized as a valuable heritage from the Thai

ancestors” (Tapsuwan 1984: 87), and both Chula and his family made an effort to express it as such. Even on that first day, before we had even reached his house, Chula told me fondly of how his father had had no one to practice with, and thus, had trained with water buffalo in the fields, practicing to dodge their kicks. While implicitly this became one example of the sharing of animal and human motions and forms (which I will develop in my third chapter), it simultaneously brought a suggestion forward to be understood between us: the possibility that Chula’s father was a human bellwether of sorts, injecting the intentions of ancestors who had passed into another world back into this one, among the living.

I am not saying that through our idle chatter, Chula harbored any sort of communicative agenda. “[H]uman intentionality, consciousness, and coping do not always find expressions in the ‘practical functions’ of language or the objectified forms of economic and matrimonial [or funeral] exchange” (Jackson 1996: 21). These stories (or myths, if one would prefer to use them in that context) and interpretations of ancestrally charged boxing generated possibilities to skirt along the margins of our perceptions and life in rural Isan: the importance of people, patriarchs in particular, restless animals, and confrontations or negotiations with the world of death.

I will not say that these qualities of *muai Thai* were evident to me then, or that the family’s account is not situationally charged and perennially in flux. Initially, Chula repeatedly redirected our conversation towards his interpretations of “heart”, strength, family and loyalty, all of which were interspersed with some anecdotes about his previous fighting experiences, travels, fame and interactions with other foreigners. At the time, I bit my tongue and largely brushed his comments aside as an invented tradition or false interpretation of *muai Thai*. The subjects he emphasized in relation to Thai boxing, especially during our initial interactions (as much as they

sounded endearing, yet suspiciously like a sales pitch) recognized boxing as an “object of discourse” (Keane 1995: 104), offering me a cultural text translated in terms of his expectations of foreign and local representation (Keane 1995: 116-117). Nonetheless, the dialogue Chula offered at that point created an active representation of the relevant issues in his social world. In finding meanings with the speech he gave to me, I was to “understand its novelty and not to recognize its [efforts to create] identity” (Voloshinov 1973: 68). The themes of boxing offered an opportunity for novel, creative interaction, and a world of significance was manipulated around his generated suggestions.

In retrospect, I have come to understand that so many of the images and issues he offered me then were what made boxing real for him, and furthermore, how Chula felt that boxing in Isan would be made relevant for perceived foreign tastes (cf. Bashkow 2006). The countryside was a good place for training, he said, because the distractions of city life found in tourist camps: junk food, noise and women to name but a few, were absent. The latter were especially assumed to instill effeminate weakness in fighters directly preceding a fight, and abstinence was not only encouraged, but expected prior to fighting. Wacquant records the same instructions imparted to boxers in inner-city Chicago, as well as the subsequent masculine discourse (2004: 157-158) which ultimately serve to keep women objectified and distant. In this sense, boxing served as a sort of masculine initiation, creating a social distance between genders, as with the Sambian nosebleeding rituals recorded by Gilbert Herdt (1982). As a form of labor requiring intensive apprenticeship, there was the possibility that boxing also imparted “a series of institutional norms (surrounding issues of social class, gender, ‘race’ and sexuality)” (Parker 2006: 699).

Once, I watched Chula's older fourteen year old nephew swerving and pedaling a bicycle between the house, lavatory, chickens and irrigation ditch. One of Chula's 3 year old nephews was perched upon the frame of this bicycle, pitched awkwardly forward, clinching the handlebars, as though his fall from a tightrope had been suddenly arrested. This boy, who was barely old enough to keep his own feet beneath him, let alone remain balanced atop the bike as it sped around the yard, was screaming at the top of his lungs. I assumed that with his older cousin taunting him like this, "he must be scared".

"No," Chula had laughingly corrected me. "He wants candy." This was shortly after a time when Chula's sister had been married, and each time she returned to the household with her new husband, they would bring an assortment of fruits or fish bought from the market, and occasionally, processed food snacks such as chips or soy milk from the corner store nearer the highway for their nephews. On this particular occasion, the sister and her husband had not expected to find yet another one of her youngest nephews at the house (his parents often left him under grandparents' and aunts supervision while working in a neighboring village and/or Bangkok), and the bags of snacks could not be divided accordingly. The older cousin was not playfully attempting to instill a sense of fearlessness in his younger cousin, as I had assumed, but was instead merely cheering him up by taking him for an exciting ride: one similar to the motorcycles that he watched carry his mother away on other occasions.

While in one way, this was an instance of socialization where a playful consideration of what might otherwise seem to be a precarious balance was promoted (motorcycle driving and fighting with one knee raised are two other situations I'd seen many young children grown accustomed to), it was also an instance of collective child rearing. Child nurses, as Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead describe in Bali

(1942: 212-213), are also found in Thailand. Passing a coddled child amongst an extensive connection of family and community acquaintances is the norm, rather than an exception to the rule. This early understanding of person, self and sociability sets a standard for later travels and social interactions working away from the nuclear family unit, among which, for men, we might count requisite adolescent stays in monasteries, and perhaps, to some extent, journeys to boxing tournaments beyond one's own village.

I get ahead of myself here, though, describing the actions of people I've yet to introduce. While this account of balance on a bike frame screams out the importance of navigating through an extended family network, at the time, it heralded the checking of all my assumptions regarding the motives of others' activities. The principle weakness in my own fieldwork methods (a lack of Thai or Lao/Isan language skills which would carry me beyond initial phrases) were now made plain. In observing, and mutely interacting in so many of the events around me, I often lacked knowledge of others' stated opinions, popular discourse – and most distressingly, in-depth conversations with the busier family members who worked in Bangkok and passed through the house were well beyond my means. Compounding this, I more often than not had to accept the explanations and interpretations of my trainer, Chula, at face value, as they were the best I had.

And so my knowledge of Thai boxing culture would be accented by the extent of knowledge Chula managed or chose to pass on to me. In so many ways, my chief informant, and the individual I would become enormously dependant on and inversely responsible for validating through my presence, might not have been a “standard” Thai character, although no such thing actually exists. Chula's desires, wishes, expectations and business sense were decisively influenced by his previous

experiences in international boxing camps: employment that had been indirectly attained as a result of his proficiency in the ring. These experiences also added to the fighting status that separated him from other members of his family and the community.

To be fair, perhaps Chula was not all I had expected, yet I was undoubtedly not all he had expected either. One glance confirmed that I was not a serious boxer: tall and postureless, without powerful musculature in my arms, shoulders and neck, I even maintained a prominent, soft, straight, unbroken nose. What a character I must have been. Chula especially had to reconfirm the extent of my previous martial arts experience: I had none? I mentioned the aikido classes I had tried and even the two months of Tae-kwon-do lessons I had dabbled in during evenings after teaching ESL in South Korea – thereby exhausting the extent of my choreographed combat experience. As I expected, all of these were quickly dismissed as inferior martial arts with laughably ineffective, orchestrated techniques. Unlike the handful of other American and Swiss fighters Chula had trained in the past, I did not have substantial previous competitive experience in *muai Thai*, kickboxing or at the very least, American boxing.

Methodologically, this was not a problem, but rather, a strength of my project. My account of *muai Thai* is not clouded by technical assumptions I have already attributed to the activity. My fieldnotes offered a record of my encounter with different bodily habits promoting different perceptions. As with other aspects of social life, the tools I would use in relating to boxing postures were garnered from my own previous physical dispositions and sporting activities: being on my toes playing basketball or on hotter days, breathing in a sauna. “For the novice, her[or his] lived experience is likely to be informed, not from a lived practice of the meaning of the

particular technique as it serves a whole, but rather from other areas of her life, with which she[or he] can handle the newly encountered situation” (O’Connor 2005: 191). I was aware of my apprenticeship as a meeting then, between two clashing habitus’: a meeting in which I would attempt to find and record a balance. Unsurprisingly, finding a social role proved to be almost as difficult as finding physical ease in a new collection of bodily references, habits and assumptions: the two were inseparably connected.

On my first ride into the countryside, however, my lack of ringside experience hardly worried me. What became increasingly distressing was that Chula refused to name a specific price for the training and accommodation that would be provided, instead parlaying any mention of costs with assertions of his love for *muai Thai*. Yet, I knew that at some point, I would have to pay, and that the longer this payment was postponed, the more irrevocably indebted I would become to him. I told myself and Chula that I might stay for a week or perhaps more, depending on whether some friends of mine contacted me in the south or not. Before meeting his family and seeing their home, I did not imagine that I would stay there for three and a half months: the vast majority of the four month term I had designated for fieldwork in Thailand.

Although I spent a large period of time in the countryside battling digestive woes, and, after expressing my reluctance to be quickly entered in a second fight, received little to no specific *muai Thai* instruction while continuing my training, given the relatively short period of four months I had designated for my fieldwork, I did not imagine that time invested with my other potential contacts would lead as quickly to a fruitful living arrangement wherein I was able to observe as much family life firsthand. Aside from the fighting techniques and technologies that so readily

challenged the physical flexibility and stamina of my habitus (techniques I admittedly had little pedagogical feedback on), it was these social aspects of embodied knowledge in the northeast that I was most interested in understanding.

After disembarking from the *seong-theow*, Chula and I started down a concrete pathway laid between village housing. An assortment of loose dogs, most of whom were permanent residents of the homes on either side of the path, immediately took to the pathway to bark at me, but shied away, ignored by Chula. (During the course of my three and a half month stay there, I was never able to walk this pathway without being followed by barking, growling dogs at my heels. Perhaps they had a sense of my foreign comportment.) After we had stepped off the *seong-theow* and paid our rider's fee, Chula had made a call on his cell-phone and about a minute later, his sister Thien appeared, driving the family motorcycle up the path, followed by Suleth, driving Sap's motorcycle. Chula took over the driving duties of Sap's newer motorcycle while I sat behind Thien with my horrendously oversized, top-heavy backpack stuffed with notebooks, light clothing, laptop, sleeping bag, jogging shoes and embarrassingly new, oversized, too-soft (by Thai standards), 16-ounce boxing gloves. We drove forward through the rest of the village, the motorcycle wobbling as it adjusted to this excess weight. On our left, we passed several houses built low to the ground. On our right, more houses built in the same fashion backed onto a mile wide network of rice paddies which for the most part were only just beginning to sprout. A few water buffalo grazed free-range on both sides of the low, barbed-wire fence strung between the pathway, each dragging a length of thick cord tied between its septum. A few chickens pecked at the half-burnt piles of polystyrene debris dotting the grass in front of most households. From inside one open doorway, people enjoying a late afternoon meal were seated on mats around the flicker of a television,

looking up to laugh and nod briefly as their younger children's stares and shouts followed us up the road. The narrow concrete pathway we had followed from the highway turned to a rural roadway of crushed red silt and gravel, hemmed on each side by an almost bone dry, concrete irrigation ditch. Once the rainy season reached full swing, these ditches would carry water constantly flowing westward, from the direction of the dam projects several kilometers down the road, closer to the Lao border. Wobbling on the back of the motorcycle, we passed a couple more family farms where cows grazed. Usufruct privileges prevailed throughout the village, and on weekends or quiet days, cows or water buffalo were often seen feasting upon the lawn of the local elementary school, which was located quite near to the highway where I had first disembarked.

The house and boxing gym

On board the motorcycle, I expected to drive for miles into the countryside, however, after sliding onto red gravel, the road turned abruptly and we came upon the family home. Two of the several, darkened wooden slabs that had been partially nailed together and laid across the drainage ditch to create a narrow bridge jumped beneath the weight of our motorcycle as we pulled into the property. In retrospect, this short, initial motorcycle chaperone had been a dramatic, unnecessary formality, but especially throughout the first few days of my stay, and with some apprehension, I was treated more as a customer and tourist. Chula at first told me that one of his sisters would wash my laundry, for example, an arrangement that I never bothered to take them up on.

Both of the motorcycles were parked at the mouth of a well-worn path, on hard-packed, multi-purpose sandy grounds between the family home and an in-ground latrine, both of which were built with poured concrete walls, floors and corrugated tin

ceilings. I do not mean to give the impression that the house was a closed, concrete structure, however. Such an arrangement would only have cooked the inhabitants during the mid-day heat and humidity. While the bottom three feet of the front wall of the house was a type of poured off-white concrete, a series of wooden slats had been placed between there and the ceiling so as to allow for ventilation. Every other wall, though concrete, had a series of hollow, ventilating bricks placed atop the solid, yet oft-cracked concrete wall and the ceiling of corrugated tin. This was especially advantageous on the western side of the house, where smaller anterooms had been set for members of the family to sleep in, as well as at the very back of the house, where nitrous fumes from the small ceramic grill in which food was often prepared would quickly fill up the room. There were doors, usually left ajar, on the back, front and east side of the house.

The roof of the house sloped down toward the front entrance, so much so that I was constantly reminded to duck my head when entering and leaving, finding my own flip-flop sandals amongst the collection that had been deposited there in the entryway. The whole house was approximately twenty feet from east to west wall, and perhaps 30 feet from front to back. A series of six rooms had been constructed along the eastern wall, the closest of which held a collection of dusty trophies, motorcycle parts, unmatched bricks and miscellaneous rubber hosing. The rooms behind this were divided so as to allow separate portions of the family sleeping quarters, most of which featured bamboo mats and square Thai throwcushions spread out below clotheslines. Mother and Father kept the room at the back of the house, sleeping on top of a light mattress next to a polished dresser which held the family's valuables.

Upon entering the house from the front, however, one's attention was dominated by a thirty-five inch wide color television set against the eastern wall, atop a waist-high display case. This television played almost constantly during mealtimes, showing translated Korean, Japanese or Chinese soap operas, soccer games, or evening news reports which highlighted the daily activities of the Thai royal family. Two or three long bamboo mats usually lay below this television, unrolled only as far as the house's first main support post: a stripped log which was sunk into the center of the floor. Three more sturdy, thigh-thick logs were sunk into the concrete floor at regular intervals behind this first one, from which a network of wooden support beams spread out, beneath the corrugated tin ceiling. A number of items were tacked, nailed or hung from these beams, most prominently, portraits of the Thai king, queen, and previous king. Further down the eastern wall, a charcoal-pencil portrait of Chula with longer hair, collared shirt and sunglasses was taped next to a leaflet featuring a photograph of him and an opponent standing, shaking hands on either side of a Bangkok promoter.

The western wall of the house featured a single wooden bench, a store of dry rice bags and chicken feed, and another dresser holding kitchen implements upon which a single large mirror was propped. Two bare light bulbs hung at the front and back of the house, and they would be turned on for a couple hours after sundown, during the evening meal. Since the family home was not raised on stilts, items of importance (such as medicines for Boon's pregnant wife and the family *mongkon* used in boxing competitions) were stored hung from the rafters or support beams of the house: the concrete floor itself was especially not used for storage of anything organic.

Often times, especially during the mid-day heat, the family would take their lunch meals on a wooden platform constructed beneath a thatched platform outside, between the front of the house and a ten by thirty foot pond created from the irrigation ditch's superfluous run-off. While multiple types of plastic debris, discarded tires and bottles fell along the edge of this pond, so did fishing nets, plastic bottles on the end of short hooks meant to snare toads or fish, and at the rainy season's peak, a large, enclosed net which served as a sort of fish farm for the family. Outside of these afternoon mealtimes, however, the sheltered platform's chief occupants were a fluctuating group of between 4 and 10 of the largest fighting cocks. Indeed, the wooden cages that housed the most prominent, beautiful animals were often moved to the front of the house itself during the middle of the day, where the cocks could become accustomed to the heat. The entire eastern wing of the property was a collection of dry grasses and pens devoted to raising chickens.

The *muai Thai* ring had been built three feet off of the outside of the house's west wall, leaving another path of compacted sand that doubled as a drainage ditch in the lengthier part of the rainy season. The ring constructed next to Chula's family home differed from those used in major stadiums or competitions though. Instead of canvas, a loose collection of burlap bags had been stitched together to form the floor of the ring. This burlap was stretched and tied at numerous points over the perimeter: a two-foot high wall of thinner concrete blocks. Beneath this burlap, the inside of the ring had been filled with empty rice husks from last season's harvest that would soften the landings of those practicing clinching. Four thigh-width tree trunks were sunk into the ground at each corner, supporting another corrugated tin roof fifteen feet above the entire ring. Beneath this roof, one naked fluorescent bulb hung, so that even

as training sessions continued and finished after sundown, neighbors might also gather for meals or drinks on bamboo mats spread beneath this light in the evening.

Later that week, Chula would show me a site about 400 meters up the road, leading back, towards the highway. Here, on another side-road which led to the back of the local elementary school, between two lots devoted to large, artificial ponds, was a square of bricks robbed of its burlap covering. Rice husks, grass and dirt had all blown together overtop the remnants of this abandoned ring. A sliced, deflated mid-sized punching bag lay amidst high grass, just behind the ring where it was quickly being overtaken by untended growth. Three or four tires and some concrete cinders lay strewn around a half-built latrine at the front of the property. This ring had had ropes before there had been some disagreements between Chula and his former business partner – a man who doubled as the announcer at a few of the local, rural *muai Thai* tournaments I would attend in the coming weeks. As the rental fees on this property had gone largely unpaid, it had only made sense to build a ring on the family property. Chula's ex-business partner had claimed the ropes. This meant that for the first few days I was at Chula's home, and until my initial training fees were put towards the purchase of thicker nylon ropes from a hardware store in Ubon, the younger boxers that practiced clinching in the ring exercised a silent agreement wherein their most aggressive throws or kicks were reserved for the center of the ring, where there was no danger of falling directly against the exposed concrete perimeter.

Two smaller punching bags, patched with athletic tape in several spots, hung from two beams at the front of the ring. The ground in front of these bags, between the latrines and wooden benches set against the west wall of the house was well worn and packed by use. Along the side of the ring furthest from the house, three hammocks had been strung between three thick trees which indicated the edge of the

property. Aside from providing a good location to spend a lazy afternoon, these hammocks also provided ideal perches for visiting friends or guardians who wanted to see or encourage their acquaintances training in the ring. A set of wooden benches placed just behind the latrines, these hammocks, and the piles of half-burnt debris behind them signaled the end of the property, where it was immediately met by a neighbor's rice field.

Directly behind the ring was the boarding house, a twenty foot by ten foot wide structure with two separate entrances – my room would be on the right – and a high, thatched ceiling. The floor here was also made from poured concrete as well, but instead of the concrete and wooden walls that made up the family house, the boarding house had walls made of thick, large leaves, dried and woven between a supporting skeleton of thin wood strips. There were two removable square sections of this wall at about waist height, which functioned as open windows. My back window, I discovered, was already decomposing, looking out on the rest of the property, a small ginger garden that ended abruptly in a neighbor's pond.

My bed, I discovered, was actually a well-used boxspring whose baseboards had been warped and sharply indented in the center, either from the weight of its previous owners, or perhaps from the cumulative effects of rainfall on one side of the boxspring. Every portion of the thatch ceiling was remarkably effective in even the heaviest rainfalls, except for a small, thinned grass panel positioned directly above where I slept. The inside of the boarding shack was split in two by another seven foot high wall made of the same thin wood strips and dried, large leaves. On the other side of this wall, Chula slept upon the box-spring's matching mattress. It seemed appropriate, since as a boxing trainee, I would enjoy the same ascetic practices as monastic novices, who would only ever sleep upon hard surfaces.

The family

Upon my initial arrival, I was introduced to a series of family members and neighbors that passed through the ring. Roles and distinctions were difficult to establish at the time, but over the coming weeks, I gained a clearer picture of who lived where and in relation to whom.

Household compounds in Thailand are often named after the oldest person there (Tambiah 1985: 176). My trainer had named his boxing gym (which was sandwiched directly up against the side of the family home) after his father. Although he would sometimes pause when rolling a home-rolled cigarette to encourage or demonstrate a stance to the smallest children punching the bags, the patriarch's chief preoccupation was the business of raising and selling of chickens and fighting cocks. When not tending to his birds, he would often spend afternoons selling them, an activity which involved socializing with friends from other villages, while watching his grandchildren, or resting in the hammocks. While mother helped tend to the toddlers and younger children that stayed within the household, she was also responsible for holding and distributing the family's finances, as well as preparing and selling or trading any surplus fish family members might catch at a market closer to the border. Her responsibilities and dealings with local produce at the market were consistent with roles of "*maeling* ("mother-nurturer")" (Keyes 1987: 164), while also reflecting a sexual division of labor in Thailand where men were more often than not involved in bureaucratic networking outside of the local village³, and women were involved in entrepreneurial activities within the community (Kirsch 1985). Often times, early in the morning, Chula's mother would prepare plates of sweet rice

³ I recall one evening of masculine networking, spent eating dinner and sharing drinks in a neighboring village with one of Chula's financial backers, where the preliminary bets and stage-rental fees for a local *muai Thai* tournament were debated.

wrapped in intricately woven bamboo leaves, to take about a kilometer up the road, to monks at the local Buddhist temple. Many of these offerings were made in acknowledgement of family members who had died.

The Mother and Father, had brought nine children into the world. The eldest brother had died several years ago due to AIDS-related complications. This was never directly discussed, and the second oldest, a robust, watchful woman named Hansa, now lived with her husband in a village in the southern corner of the province, yet often returned to visit us with her own four young children, 3 girls between the ages of 9 and 4 with a smiling younger brother aged 3. When the girls were not with their father's relatives in another town, they stayed several hundred meters down the road with their eldest uncle, Sap, his wife, Nok and their son Suleth. The youngest boy, however, (whom I have previously described balancing upon the frame of his cousin's moving bicycle) stayed at the family's home for the majority of the rainy season, where two male cousins of a similar age could be found. Hansa stayed in Bangkok for weeks at a time, where she cooked and prepared meals for her husband and a few other welders who had found employment there building the structural supports for new apartment complexes.

Chula's eldest living brother, Sap, a broad shouldered, mustached man now in his early forties, lived several hundred meters further down the road, with his current wife, Noom, and their son, Suleth. Sun spots or chemical burns in the shape of a harness had pocked the skin across his back. Unlike other men in the community, even when holding pads and encouraging Suleth to kick in the ring on a blistering-hot day, he would seldom be seen without a shirt on. I learned that although the family had previously held a large amount of land, much of this had been lost through gambling on cock and *muai Thai* fights, most of which I assumed was now owned by

the families living between Sap's house several hundred meters down the road and the main property where the ring was. Sap now worked various labor and agrarian jobs around the community, including planting or harvesting rice in neighbors' fields, and less frequently, being a part-time boxing trainer for Chula. Due to his elder brother's relatively large size (by Thai standards), Chula had tried unsuccessfully to establish a routine where Sap held blocking pads and signaled punches and kicks for me within the ring, especially in the days preceding my own competition. While this routine was only temporary in duration and daily consistency, it was the closest social experience I had to actual fighting prior to the competition I was entered in.

Although Sap was often seen inside or around the ring, training Suleth or commenting on the other fighters' abilities, Chula's next oldest brother, Boon, was more likely to be seen handling his guitar, the family's fishing nets, or fine tuning the radio dial so that it might play *mor-lam* – a fast paced, rhythmic type of Isan music featuring the *khaen*, a vertical, local variation of a reed flute or mouth organ, swinging piano, simmering drums all accompanied by distinctive, melodically rapped vocals. In contrast to his younger brother Chula, Boon was excessively quiet: a smiling man in his later thirties with elaborate, non-Buddhist tattoos covering his back (a large dragon) and front (an intricately etched fish swirling amidst flowers of black ink which curled up the right side of his rib cage). Boon had also been co-opted onto the same welding crew as his elder brother in-law, but came home from Bangkok for a short time early on, and then finally, remained in the latter half of the rainy season, awaiting the birth of his first child. His humorous, but oddly distant young wife (she was present and working, but never at the center of a meal or attention), was ballooning at the waist: six, seven and eight months pregnant. Earlier during the

pregnancy, trips to the hospital had left the family with the impression that the expected child's health was somewhat indeterminate.

The sibling closest in age to Chula –his next youngest brother and childhood training partner who had eventually been conscripted into the army– had also died only two years ago, when he had been struck by a vehicle while driving his motorcycle along the edge of the highway. “We don't worry about that. That could happen anytime,” Chula told me –and indeed, several minor motorcycle accidents, even within the short duration of my stay, definitely did.

The seventh sibling, Liae, was a taller Thai woman my own age, 29, whose husband also worked on the same welding crew in Bangkok. While she was not present upon my arrival in the village, mid-way through my first month there, she arrived at home with her two youngest boys and remained. Her husband would return to visit twice throughout the summer, staying for up to two weeks at one point. The boys, aged 20 months and three and a half years were perfect playmates for Hansa's youngest boy. Liae often prepared food for the entire family, including me, while watching her boys.

The next youngest sister, my initial motorcycle chauffeur, Tien, spoke very little broken English. She lived in the family home, but stayed there only intermittently as the rainy season progressed. At first, her behavior (socializing with a man her age from a neighboring village and often staying away from the home) was often frowned upon by both Chula and his parents. Her friend was largely unacknowledged and maintained a peripheral seat during meals or social meetings until, early in the rainy season, their marriage ceremony was announced and carried out.

Ging was the family's youngest child. Although cerebral palsy had prevented him from participating directly in *muai Thai*, he was well known throughout the village and as with Thien, had a very small repertoire of English words to draw from. Some afternoons, with legs sore from training, my own gait would match his while we traded language lessons on impromptu tours of the neighborhood.

Life and sustenance inside the house.

I took morning, afternoon and evening meals with the family inside of the house. Generally, I did not have or need access to any of the anterior sleeping rooms arranged along the eastern wall, but I was always encouraged to stay and eat just inside the entrance to the house, as was any other local person who might appear during or just prior to mealtimes. The number of family members present at these meals fluctuated according to work schedules, seasons, school holidays and festivals.

Any number of these individuals might have attended morning, midday and evening mealtimes in fluctuating numbers, yet there always seemed to be enough food. Sticky rice (which could be grown and harvested in half the time that non-sticky, white rice could,) was kept in between three and five small bamboo baskets, which would be brought out at mealtimes. Bite-sized portions of this rice, rolled between fingers and thumbs, provided the main staple at meals. This was dipped in a number of chili-tinged, spiced sauces or consumed in mouthfuls with the torn portions of protein rich items: usually barbequed fish, cuttlefish, frogs, toads, blood-based gelatin, ants and ant eggs. Chicken eggs, soups and broths were also more common sources of protein. Less commonly brought home from market were servings of pork and especially beef. Seaweed, green beans, zucchinis, tubers, mint leaves or lettuce provided vegetable servings. I was also fortunate, in that the majority of my period in

the field coincided with the local mango harvest. During May and June, there was such a surplus of these that we had more than we could eat.

When it came to the actual mechanics of eating, I also had much to learn. As most meals were shared almost directly after training, I often found sitting cross-legged on the concrete floor especially challenging and would shift the bulk of my weight from one foot or hip to another. For a period of two weeks in June, my discomfort was so evident that the family implored me to take most of my meals sitting on a bench just inside the entrance of the house. This was a terrible position for an ethnographer (sitting above and even apart from others), but I admit that my legs and back were often too sore to safely sit cross-legged without pulling a number of muscles. Over the course of the summer, as I settled into a training regime that included a much longer run each morning, I learned the value of cleaning all available protein off of each part of a soup bone. Once, on an evening when Boon, Liae's husband and one of their co-workers in transit had arrived home from Bangkok, the family settled down to a meal of giant scallops and lobster, items of such rare delicacy that I ate the first one offered to me as slowly as possible. When I thought I had cleaned all the meat from this first lobster, I feigned a satisfied appetite and sat back. As the meal reached its conclusion, Chula reached for my discarded plate and pried apart additional seams in the lobster's arms and head. With Suleth following suit, they ate all of the lobster meat I had missed.

The production and consumption of both food and water were of interest to me not only for the ways in which they regulated and passed through the body, but also for the social roles and duties digested by those who provided the substances. The tastes of the Isan dishes also further flavored the sensory qualities of a world (Stoller 1989: 15-34; Howes 2005; Feld 2005). Like the anthropologist Paul Stoller who ate

amongst the Songhay in Niger, I more often than not found myself with a terrible case of diarrhea. With the wash-house/lavatory only a few feet from both the front of the family house and the training area itself, my troubles with food were increasingly evident to all, as aerobic training activities within the compound would increasingly be interrupted as my face took pallor and I rushed to the facilities. Though I purchased bottled water at first, I was encouraged to make the transition to the family's in-ground water supply. I eventually gave up hope of drinking this water without dire results. Often, a week prior to a particularly challenging fight, or during a lull between local competitions, Chula would ensure that some of his fighters took a laxative. This was the last thing I needed.

Perhaps it was sticky rice, or perhaps it was the calories I burned during training, but by August, I found myself sneaking off of the property each day just after breakfast to order a plate of fried rice, chicken and sliced cucumber from a woman who ran a diner out of the front yard of her home, closer to the highway. On my way home, I would purchase ice cream, snacks and an additional ration of bottled water from the village corner store.

The final indication of my gastronomic defeat came toward the end of my stay, when the family had served non-sticky, white rice for perhaps only the fifth time that summer. Although my appetite had declined noticeably in late July and August, given a bowl of non-sticky rice, I quickly set about devouring it. Half-way through my meal, I looked up to realize that Chula's most promising live-in student, who was scheduled to fight a couple days later, was staring at me, and asking for a bowl of this rice as well. My knowledge of Thai had progressed enough at this point that I understood the implications of Chula's conversation as he told his most promising fighter that she could not have her own bowl of white, non-sticky rice, because it was

sticky rice (as he had explained to me during my earliest days there) that allowed fighters from his neighborhood to “make power”. I, on the other hand, ate my weaker, softer food ravenously.

Expanded kinship, sparring and training

Chula’s most promising fighter and most important investment was a large, 14 year old girl named Doan from a neighboring village who also lived and ate with the family on a daily basis. Though her parents would often come by on the family motorcycle with her 3 year old brother, she would only return to her family’s home about three kilometers away immediately following another one of her successful competitions, or during public holidays. While her two elder brothers had been decent *muai Thai* fighters in the past, she was nothing short of phenomenal. Before my arrival, she had trounced a more experienced opponent in a bout where she had been expected to lose, and Chula had immediately agreed to train her on a longer-term basis. Over the course of the summer, Chula entered Doan in fights approximately twice a month, all of which she won, and most of which were stopped early by referees as her opponents were either knocked down or kneed into corners of the ring where completely defensive postures ended the contest.

Perhaps because of her father’s investment in the gym and financial support of the local *muai Thai* tournament Chula organized, but undoubtedly also because of her promise as a fighter, Chula rightfully concentrated the bulk of his professional attentions on training Doan. *Muai-ying* (or women’s Thai boxing) not only offered a smaller pool of competition to overcome at the local level, but there was a growing need to develop female Thai boxers who might compete with their international counterparts in competitions which would receive attention on national and perhaps even international stages (Dort 2004: 62-63). On a more tangible level, Chula aspired

for Doan to eventually succeed fighting in Bangkok, thereby attracting more foreign students, some of whom might even be matched as her opponents and training partners. Through her successes, Chula's boxing camp would gain some level of renown, which would eventually lead more (female) international competitors to train with him.

Although several younger boys sometimes trained at our camp (most notably Chula's nephew Suleth and his friend Jat), I do not consider the locale in which I trained to be completely typical of all *muai Thai* camps within rural Thailand. Chula's choice to train female boxers, although far from the norm for Thailand, perhaps reflected his astute business-sense, but was also the result of inter-village social factors I was only partially aware of. Although over the course of the rainy season, three or four Thai men in their late teens and early twenties would pass through to train for an evening or two, they would never stay for long. Three of these young men I saw boxing at local tournaments, and assumed that they must have been training, yet for some reason, not for more than a day with Chula. Although the surrounding sub-districts' villages must also have had boxing facilities, I was unable to find them, without suggesting that I might be leaving to try and train at another camp. This most especially, would be breaking a vow of loyalty to Chula, as he could not ensure that any techniques offered in other camps would be "real" *muai-Thai*.

From what I could gather, approximately four of the dozen or so aspiring international boxers who had formerly trained at Chula's camp had been female. Once, as we were observing two fighting cocks sparring, Chula pointed out that one of these cocks was considered more powerful and potentially more dangerous because it was half Malaysian and half Thai. (The magazines devoted to describing Thailand's fighting fish and fighting cocks often feature pages charting the particular pedigrees

and lineages of these animals.) He went on to tell me that if he too was to mix his genes, then his offspring might be truly awesome *muai Thai* fighters: big, like foreign fighters but fast and full of stamina like their Thai counterparts. Fighters such as these, in so many ways, would further embody the marginal, fringe elements of Thai culture which would be pertinent in their successful demonstration of *muai Thai* aesthetics.

By ensuring Doan's success as a fighter, Chula would have access to a more immediate promise of international renown. I have presented Chula's desires and aspirations here as part of a capital equation heavily influenced by tourism and the need to construct gender identities that are no longer marginalized by socioeconomic factors, in a fashion similar to the female migrant workers Mary Beth Mills describes moving between Bangkok and rural Thailand (1999; 1997), yet his actions were not consciously dictated by an external global-economic vision of gender roles. The inclinations accrued through his experiences of fighting, training and appreciating bodily conflict (whether between boxers, foreigners or chickens) provided him with "a means of entering into communication with [the world]" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 529). More often than not, Chula carried the intentional threads of these international aspirations through a more subtle embrace of loyalty and playfulness with his immediate social connections: nephews, parents, siblings and friends.

Life in the village

On my first afternoon at the property, I was told to begin training by going for a jog around the neighborhood. The village was a collection of about thirty homes which spread outwards from the local elementary school that had been built up against the highway. Poured grey concrete, or more often, silted red gravel made up the roadways, most of which were flanked on both sides by concrete irrigation

ditches. At various crossroads, the causeway was controlled by rusted lever and pulley systems. At the time of my arrival, these ditches were all but bone dry; however, on several days in the coming rainy season, they were filled almost to capacity.

There were at least three barber-shops in the small community as well. (Later, in the larger neighboring town where I had switched from bus to *seong-teow*, I counted ten of these businesses within a three block radius, on two main streets.) Care for and presentation of the head and hair in particular, reflected its importance as a center of Buddhist iconography (Leach 1958: 159). Especially before a fight, great care was given in preparing a fighter's hair, and haircuts were most often prescribed on the morning or day before a fight. Even the ways in which hair was cut also reflected a method of engaging the world which exhibited an aloof awareness of dangers faced directly. When I received a haircut from a local barber, for example, he had insisted on attempting to shave my face with a dry straight-razor, finally abandoning the attempt altogether after four or five snags wherein I sat completely motionless. There was no need to apply shaving cream or some other such medium which might obscure a demonstration of the precise control of violent possibility. (I had very much the same sense of potential corporeal damage controlled through obtuse awareness when riding as a passenger on the back of two or three different motorcycles driven by younger men. My impressive chauffeurs saw the need to move at a blistering pace, and the best I could do was to sit as still as possible.) At the barber's, the point was not that the grain of my skin or beard had been too foreign to continue shaving, but that the barber's approach to care for the face and head assumed a razor's-edge confrontation with the probability of blood needed be commonplace. This precise care for the body and face was evident around the household as well.

Often times I observed Chula, Boon or Sap tweezing the hairs off of their own chins while their attention was focused elsewhere. I was also encouraged to keep my hair short, and in the heat, found it much more comfortable to do so.

Crossing the highway, jogging behind the police-station, I followed the arc of the gravel roadway, jogging past several water buffalo grazing in rice paddies. On this side of the road, homes were fewer and fields were wider. After several minutes of running, I was well behind the highway, but could see the local Buddhist temple (*wat*) across the field, displayed prominently against the highway. Inside the grounds of this temple was the water tower: water which I later learned was filtered and pumped to houses on this side of the highway, but not to those houses on the side of the road where I lived, trained and became sick to my stomach.

Most mornings, as my own training began around 6 am, I would come into wakefulness with a combination of three sounds. On many mornings, the earliest sound was of the *wat*'s bell ringing across the fields, signaling the beginning of the monks' alms round. This was sometimes preceded, but often followed by the crowing of the fighting cocks (which I noticed less and less as the months went on), and finally, but unavoidably, a loudspeaker mounted on top of a convenience store just outside of the elementary school would blast the national radio for kilometers across the rice paddies.

On my way out of the property to begin what became my daily, morning run, I would pass three of the local, resident Buddhist monks – men who appeared to be between the ages of fifty and seventy who were beginning their alms run. After running down the highway, towards the dam for twenty-five minutes, I would come upon another community next to the dam's causeway where one elderly monk was often doing the same. On one morning, three or four citizens had rushed out to the

road to kneel and make offerings before this monk. Their timing had been perfect, as two trained elephants, wearing bells around their ankles, were being led down the highway towards the dam. The simultaneous convergence of both monk and elephant, the latter of which was associated with royalty, and by relation, brought good luck through social duties performed (Tambiah 1985: 181-182) bode well for them.

The *wat* itself worked as a spiritual and social focal point for the community. On two different mornings in June, I heard a lengthy, almost psychedelic concert played out across the fields from the temple grounds for upwards of three hours. The extended drumming and Thai-style guitar playing (oddly similar to *muai Thai* bouts, minus the wailing viola), were orchestrated to send a young Thai boy off to a temporary, Lenten-period internship in the monastic order (cf. Keyes 1987: 168-169).

The household I lived in demonstrated an active awareness of their place as one unit within the larger village by contributing offerings of food and decoration to the local monastery on a regular (approximately weekly) basis. Women and men also gathered at the *wat* on holiday festivals honoring the king and the dead. Men and women from the *wat* would enter it from separate doorways: men sitting at the front of the temple, and women, at the back with children. During an annual 'rocket festival', prominent members in the community would pool their resources for the construction of wax statues, flowers and phallus-inspired rockets which were constructed upon a heavily decorated truck and driven to neighboring communities where they were set off, as well as into the provincial capital of Ubon Ratchathani.

Thus, the community was aware of itself as performing and competing among neighboring villages. The boxing tournaments staged in rural communities were another way in which the villagers made socially real and understood their place in a natural and cosmological order. Thus, the social networks and pledges reinforced

through activities surrounding the *wat* instilled an appropriate sense of progression, transition and social mobility for boxers. More successful Thai boxers hail from the rural northeast, and in some ways, this is due to the fact that more religious activity reinforces an acceptable method of performative social mobility there (See Tambiah 1976: 288-326-338 for a further description of the monkhood as an avenue of social mobility for rural, idealistic youth.).

There were a number of small businesses in the community too. There was a local welding shop, where I might often find Ging in the afternoons, working with a man his own age who had been apprenticed in welding. Over the course of the summer they welded and painted a set of elaborate fence posts which would be placed beneath the large photograph of the king mounted in front of the local elementary school. Hung above their heads at the welding shop were a series of portraits and photographs, many of which featured the king himself, but still more portraits of popular local forest-monks (cf. Tambiah 1984). One day, I pointed at a photograph of one monk hung prominently in center, albeit slightly lower, among these pictures. The welder told me that this was his father, who had passed away. But by displaying the photograph as such, he emphasized the natural ancestral order within the monastic and galactic polity (Tambiah 1976: 102-131).

The flow of water, agricultural resources, men and performances throughout the community were reinforced as such. Water was an important element, not only because of its consumption, but because of its social and ritual uses, as reflected by boxers before, during and after competition. There are accounts of tournaments held in local Buddhist temples (Fang 2005: 79), and although I attended several just outside the grounds of a temple, including one beneath a water tower at a local police station, the confluence of water and its elements in the ring were also

astoundingly consistently reproduced. When traveling to tournaments in Ubon, for example, great care was taken to transport a jug of local water with us, and those that won the fight were graciously obliged to replenish themselves by sipping from their opponent's (superior?) water source. The soaking, ice-cube strewn red and blue corners of an active *muai Thai* ring in some sense provide a point of convergence for the water supply.

The *wat* also provides a place in which community activities may be organized according to a gendered, cosmological code of space and position. One neighboring community, for example, was busy redecorating and making beautiful the very roads upon which they had been informed that the royal prince would travel when making his visit into the community that August. Needless to say, the prince's official destination was a monastery beneath a massive water tower there.

On my first day at the household, upon returning from my jog around the neighborhood, I sat on the edge of the ring to remove my blisteringly-hot shoes. I wondered what I might do next, watching as Jat and Suleth began a series of half-hearted kicks on the smaller punching bags. Chula emerged from his meeting with neighbors inside of the house, wearing a pair of faded red, satin boxing trunks from his competitive days, emphasizing the level of his actual inebriance in a dramatic play on punch-drunkenness, stumbling from foot to foot with hands half raised, humming "dum-dum-dum-dum-dum." Everyone laughed together. It was another month before we unearthed the bilingual wooden sign which read "Thai boxing Camp" from underneath a pile of slash and broken bottles kept against the side of the boarding shack and carried it out to be displayed on top of two large stumps at the front of the property, but, looking back, I understood this as the moment in which Chula's business aspirations were rekindled.

After an extra moment of pantomiming, Chula dropped his hands to say, "First day, first day – not too much." Then he proceeded to show me a pacing, high-stepping, tip-toe exercise which would develop my kick-blocking and kneeling abilities. Long before I'd even had a chance to put my gloves on, the evening's training was concluded with a few other largely calisthenic drills: sit-ups on a bamboo mat placed in the ring and chin-ups (mostly attempted, in my case, and successfully performed in the children's case) done grasping a bamboo branch tied between two trees next to the latrine. I quickly shelved any expectation that I would receive any specific attention or verbal instructions when learning Thai boxing. Although I was shown hand wrapping and striking techniques, how much I wanted to learn was largely determined by how much stamina I could muster each day, and how eager I could look around the ring. Without previous experience, and considering my size and lack of sparring partners, I wasn't able to garner that much time in the ring, even with Chula and his brother.

For the first few mornings, Chula would shout my name over the divider at 6 am, whereupon I would emerge from the bedroom. After a week or more of this, I no longer needed to rely on him and found myself awaking beneath my mosquito net on schedule, just after the cocks had crowed and begun pecking around my open back window. On some mornings Chula would emerge earlier from his room, usually to train Doan before she caught a bus to school in a neighboring village. Mornings and evenings, after my run, I would carry out two to three hours of calisthenics, skipping, practicing kicks, knees, clinching on the bag and a little glove-work which would usually leave my fingers pulsating later in the evenings. Unfortunately, there was no 180 pound, stretched Thai, or even European boxer to mimic or spar with me, but I

kept my eyes on the children, visitors and family members that were all moving throughout the household and the ring as I trained.

And so on, and so on, ad infinitum... almost.

Chapter Three – Animal – human relations

Animal – human interactions in the rural northeast

The world I skipped, balanced and sweated in was not a perfect system locked in repetition, which would eventually become both static and without meaningful intent (two states which are impossible in the active experience of human existence) (Alston 1956; Shusterman 1991), as much as the endless boxing routines may have seemed so. Rather, there were intuitions, mysteries and movements toward areas of social indeterminacy in which human life could maintain a sort of playfulness. Every morning as I trained, only two strides beyond the bag, there was the elder household patriarch, squatting with a cock held between his knees, communed, entwined, employed, occupied; well, doing something (which I would later attempt to record in practical detail), with those fighting-cocks. He would clean their gizzards by thrusting a feather down their throats or wash their plumage with warm water as I gloved up. Usually, I would first sweep the mat below the bag, as it was invariably covered in leaves or chicken feces. Some mornings, the patriarch would do this for me. Invariably, his stamina for the communion with and upkeep of these highly trained animal-entities/athletes would far outlast my own stamina for communion with the punching bag. On any given day, one or both of us would spend a large portion of the afternoon napping – after all our energies and attentions were respectively spent. After a few weeks, it was apparent to me that maintaining the fighting cocks was the patriarch's modus operandi. Not only were the more widely attended cock-fights held outside of the household public performances where “meaning can be more powerfully articulated” (Geertz 1973: 433), but within the household, the raising, training, buying, and tending of cocks prompted a whole series of meaningful

interactions. These were carried out between people that would pass through the household or village to purchase the chickens, but also through the communicative dialectics and forms co-opted between humans and other species, as is suggested in an “anthropology of life” (Kohn 2007) within the rural Thai world.

These instances of human and animal expression came together to reinforce recognition of the appropriate ways of interacting and being-in-the-world, promoting human kinetic potentials and expressions that unfolded in a distinctly Thai fashion. Before addressing the technical aspects of Thai boxing then, I would like to impart a brief survey these animal-human interactions, insofar as they may give a larger sense of the animal categories (See Tambiah 1985) and social standards by which entities make motion throughout the Thai world.

Chula’s story of his father’s *muai Thai* training with water buffalo⁴, for example, stands as one of many accounts of Thai men who coolly come to terms with a dark, wild, animalistic otherness. Stanley Tambiah’s study of the popularly acclaimed nineteenth and twentieth century northeastern Thai forest-monks (1984) similarly describe hermitages in the forest where these men “savored encounters with wild animals” (1984: 283). Return from meetings with ferocious, feared tigers (1984: 86-91), snake infestations (1984: 286), and even demonic monkeys (Tambiah 1984: 269-270) all provide the means by which these men achieved status recognition and symbolic capital.

⁴ Stanley Tambiah writes “The buffalo is of vital importance as a work animal... the buffalo alone of all animals is attributed *khwan* (spiritual essence), a pre-eminently human possession... [the buffalo is not required to plow on the Buddhist sabbath and thus,] is again singled out as a being toward which man must act ethically” (1985: 187). The story of Chula’s father learning boxing’s labors from buffalo thus appropriately emphasizes a marginal navigation of this spiritual realm through an intersection of human and animal essences.

This mythic or ontological understanding of animals comes into being amongst numerous quotidian Thai (bodily) dispositions toward animals in which individuals are “acting upon and being acted upon by the world, ... living with and without certainty, ... belonging and being estranged” (Jackson 1989: 2). Although the following field observations are imparted outside of a traditional narrative format, I feel that, taken together, they may provide a sense of the appropriate cultural proclivity for interactions between humans and animals in rural Thailand.

Toad-stomping, mantis-rending, cat-pounding action

At the height of the rainy season, it rains all night and we wake up to puddles at ringside and next to the house. Mosquitoes that have flown all evening are beginning to lose heart and disperse in the heat. The morning sun begins to dry their spawning puddles out, but giant toads are still found all over the property.

Liae’s three year old son, Bi, is chasing a particularly large toad around the property and upon catching it, is slamming the full force of his heel down upon it. When the toad bounds up into the ring he shouts happily and kicks it back to the ground. Once it’s been kicked into the three foot wide path between ringside and house, he lands his strongest stomp yet, holding his heel down as the toad’s stomach inflates like a balloon beneath it. He pulls his foot back and squats, hands and chin on his knees, considering the pressed toad, which shortly recollects its limbs and somehow resumes motion, bounding around the corner of the house. Bi leaps after it.

**

In the afternoon, Boon’s wife, now seven months pregnant, is resting on a mat in front of the television, both of the fans directed on her, her already pale face partially daubed with baby powder behind the ears. After training late, I have come inside to have a quick mid-day snack. I am doing my best to understand fragments of

the more casual conversation she puts towards me, which are, for some reason that I greatly appreciate, never really slowed down on my behalf, unlike the simple phrases other family members repeat to me. We are alone in the house except for a small, dark crab which has escaped from one of the storage buckets used for fresh fish captured by the family at the lake. The crab moves sidelong across the smooth, grey concrete floor between us. Seeing my gaze fixed upon our visitor, Boon's new wife leans over on one hip; snatches the crab up from the floor and absently sets about removing first one, and then another of its front claws.

Unburdened of its chief grasping pincers and placed back upon the ground, the crab is once again forgotten. Dropping each of the front pincers on the floor in front of her, Boon's wife settles back to her original resting posture while the crab, still dripping fluid from its freshly exposed joints, continues its sideways shuffle across the room, over the bamboo mat in front its pregnant disarmer, finally scampering beneath the television stand and out of sight.

**

Sap has found a bright, florescent green preying mantis and surrendered it to the children, who squeal excitedly, placing it between square pillows on the bamboo mats in front of the television, tapping and pulling at its legs. Later, I see the mantis, forgotten, sliding across the floor, missing half of its limbs, which Liae sweeps up along with the dust and tosses outside the house, among the chickens.

**

I am eating a bowl of noodles on the edge of a crowd at a *muai Thai* tournament, and Suleth approaches me with one of his friends. They are each carrying beetles in the palms of their hands, and place them briefly face to face upon the table,

but then just as quickly, cover each insect with their palms again, scooping them up and disappearing into the crowd.

**

Liae and Boon arrive home from the dam with buckets of fish. Liae's young boys, aged 1 and 3, especially peer over the rim of the plastic bucket the fish have come home in. As Liae sorts the bucket of finger-width fish by type, she passes one to her eldest son, who carries it away, squishing it between his fingertips, dropping it into a dry plastic cup, sluicing it momentarily through a puddle and then carrying it out to the roadway. Later on, I see the cup and fish discarded next to the drainage pipe.

**

After one of Boon's all-night fishing expeditions, the family gathers around a large plastic bucket full of water. A light-skinned, golden catfish the size of my forearm is kept there in water, apart from the others. Chula tells me that this golden pigmentation is a great omen and that the family would rather keep the fish, although sold live, at market, it would fetch a great price. He is planning to purchase an aquarium for it so that he would be able to display his good fortune to all visitors.

After two days, the bucket and the golden fish have been sold by Mother at the local market.

**

Several men in the neighborhood, including Sap and me, are sharing drinks in the ring after returning from a particularly lucrative, exciting regional tournament in the afternoon. We are celebrating victories by Doan and Suleth.

The sound of another truck comes to a halt on the gravel outside the property, and Mother comes out of the darkness carrying bags from the local market. This

evening, she has a special treat. She pulls a head-sized chunk of a hornet's nest out of her bag. Sap reaches over the ring and takes a large portion of this, splitting it open on plates in the center of the ring. I watch Sap sort deftly through the split nest, flicking stunned mature hornets aside with his fingertips to get at edible pieces of their nest. Almost as quickly as it is divided among men and boys, the octagonal chunks of pale yellow larvae are devoured. Next to me, Suleth taps a few squirming hornets off his portion of the nest and offers me a chunk.

It *is* sweet.

**

Unlike most families in the village, dogs are not allowed in our compound. Chula tells me that long ago, his family had a dog, but when it attacked one of the chickens, it was taken away. I have seen a neighbor's dog pass through the property on several occasions however, and it is usually ignored.

At each meal, the resident cat, which, "is clean, useful, and cools the house" (Tambiah 1985: 185) – mews and mews and mews at our elbows, slinking between the bowls of food until fish bones or other unwanted food is dropped on the floor beneath it. This was a less than advantageous arrangement for me. If "the Buddha created the cat in order that it may eat the rat" (Tambiah 1985: 184), then why was this cat not chasing the rat that lived in the rafters of the boarding shack? For the most part, it was an animal that seemed ignored. If the cat got too close or threatened to interfere with the meal, Father, Mother or anyone involved would merely swat or brush it back outside of the eating circle.

At meal times, Liae's three year old son Bi would often walk around the circle of cross-legged adults, eating whatever was made available. He was sometimes grabbed by an uncle, grandmother or mother who would offer him balls of rolled rice

dipped in the various meat relishes and sauces. Having been thus satiated, Bi would eventually escape their grasp and walk around the periphery of the circle or settle in front of the television.

More than once, I saw him settle upon the cat and begin a series of all out downward punches, dragging both hands against the cat's body as it mewed in irritation. Once he had learned to walk, his little brother followed suit. The adults appeared not to notice and continued eating.

**

I am jumping rope in front of the ring: part of my training routine. Chula is inside the house, watching television. Jat and one of the other boys who have arrived to train have stopped wrapping their hands to attend to two small chicks that have wandered from the coops on the opposite side of the house into the training area. Placing these two smaller chicks head to head, they crouch down and begin to shout avidly. As one chick ducks its head below the other's wing, Jat shouts "oooay", "ooay", "ooay". His friend, Toom, walks over quickly to inspect the situation, feigning a bet.

Chula comes out of the house and scatters the chicks with a swipe of his hand, directing Jat and his friend back toward the truck tires they will jump on to warm-up.

**

In a Bangkok market, I find stalls selling fighting fish: each one is sold in a plastic bag covered by newspaper. Two teenage boys are sorting through a Styrofoam box full of bags of these fish. They hold individual bags up carefully to inspect the churning fish, then pull the newspaper screens quickly back into place, covering the fish from sight again.

**

In the afternoon, prior to training, I take a seat on the edge of the ring next to Doan where we tie our shoes for jogging: me with my hundred dollar athletic running shoes and precious, freshly washed socks and her, sockless in one of the two pairs of flat, canvas shoes kept around the ring. This pair is hers, though some of the younger boys will also wear them at times. I've seen these shoes sold on the side of the highway, painted the same red-brown tinge of the gravel-clay stains left by the previous owner. Or is that the same rust color of an eminent monks' robe? Sometimes she runs barefoot on the sand pathway in front of the house, but this afternoon, as she plans to use the roadway, she begins to put her first shoe on, but drops it after finding a toad with her invasive toes. The toad hops out of her shoes.

Hansa has brought her children over this morning, and her youngest daughter, a five year old who has been playing in the ring with her younger cousins, laughs delightedly and pounces after the toad, capturing it between her palms. She shows it to the other toddlers, who seem mildly interested, and finally carries it across the clearing in front of the ring, surrendering it to her grandfather upon his request. Almost all of the half a dozen individuals sitting around the ring have lost interest in the frog, but I look up from my own shoelaces on time to see the patriarch, who is otherwise preoccupied in conversation with his eldest daughter, pressing the frog's head backwards between his clasped thumbs until a tiny snap announces the end of its motion. He then lays the body belly up on the bench next to him, and continues to roll his own home-grown cigarette.

Noticing I've paused and am looking directly at the frog with my eyebrows raised, the five year old smiles at me, shrugs and then climbs over the edge of the ring to play at toppling her three year old, toddling brother against a set of gloves that has

been left out in the sun. Later that morning, I see her grandfather feeding the frog through the top of a cage to one of the fighting cocks. Mincemeat.

**

Liae's one and a half year old boy walks into a pathway of red ants and begins crying, having no idea why he's being stung. "Mot, mot, mot." Chula yells to his sister. This sort of thing happens with such regularity that there's a momentary delay before she picks him up and brusquely brushes at her youngest son's feet and ankles. She puts him back down, two feet to the left of the winding, red, live pathway of ants. Not all of the ants were cleaned from beneath his toes. He is still crying profusely. One of the smaller neighboring girls, a friend of Doan's who hasn't shown as much promise in the ring but still trains under the watchful eyes of her father on the odd day after school, picks the young boy up and carries him to a puddle under the awning, where she dips his feet in the water and then lightly slaps the bottom of his thighs three or four times, until his crying ceases abruptly.

**

One evening after training, as dusk is bringing on dinner, I step out of the thatched wood boarding house behind the ring which I've been housed in and readjust my step in mid-stride. With the ring's single overhead fluorescent light still on, I've spotted a black scorpion half the size of my hand on the pathway between the house and the ring. This is the first I have ever seen and I call Chula over from in front of the house to ask if it is poisonous. (It is, but considering my adult-size, probably only has enough venom to give me three days of cold sweats and fever.) The almost invisible shadow that makes up the scorpion moves slightly, slowly beneath the light and we both hold our breath, watching it.

Chula bends at the waist to peer at the scorpion, then pulls a foot long shoelace upon which his motorcycle key has been attached out of his pocket. Leaning forward, he whips this key downward between his legs, slightly in front of him and it strikes the scorpion perfectly. It's black body snaps upwards from the ground, following the trajectory of Chula's keystring, to land, curling, motionless beneath his spread legs. Picking up a board stacked against the side of the house, Chula taps the corpse into a thicker collection of debris around the back of the house. He tells me, "I don't like to do that, but we must do, or else the boys [his hands motioning inside the house to his nephews] will play with that."

**

On the pathway leading back towards the highway into town, Chula points my eyes toward the ground. A snake slithers across the concrete path in front of us, holding a silenced mouse, clamped head-first between its jaws.

**

In the darkness, the sound of bullfrogs surrounding the property is too loud to ignore again. As his mother had done earlier in the week, Chula takes a large, brick-sized alkaline battery hanging off the support beams and slings it onto his shoulder, attaching a headlamp worn on his baseball hat. In one hand he carries a bamboo pole with a meshed hoop-net affixed to one end; in the other, an empty burlap sack which had previously contained processed rice.

When he returns to the property, he is carrying the burlap bag, tied with a length of cord at the top. Dropped upon the floor, parts of the bag bounce and move on their own. Tomorrow, spiced bullfrog legs will be eaten at dinner.

**

Four younger men have arrived from the larger town to the east. They will spend the afternoon eating and relaxing here with us, because as Chula tells me, “They are mafia, and can not be in [the town] today.” The possibility of violence has led them to seek refuge with the family here. A couple of them lounge in the hammocks and glove up to play at *muai Thai* in the afternoon. One of the other men stays inside, talking with Chula, watching a soap opera on television. Three of them have elaborate, intricate, non-Buddhist tattoos on their ribs: heavily shaded fish and flowers which spiral up one side of their rib cages, similar to the tattoo on one side of Boon’s chest.

A week later, two of these men return on a motorcycle in the morning to inspect a fighting cock. They share breakfast and spend a while talking with Father and Chula. Finally, they move to inspect a fighting cock. This takes almost an hour. The bird of choice is first chased around the eastern side of the compound, where its brethren scatter and dart over fences and pens. There’s some confusion during this time, and Chula guides the men’s attention to several different birds during the commotion. One is finally pinned against the mesh nettings which divide the pens from the front of the house and picked up by one of the men. This cock is brought out front and its plumage is compared to one of the cocks which had been stored in the cages beneath the awning. Chula and the two men set about examining the cocks, speaking with friends on their cellular phones to confirm prices. “When one man is allowed to handle the cock of another, the men change places rather than the cock changing hands. The newcomer slips into place behind the cock, and the man who was holding it slips to one side” (cf. Mead and Bateson 1952: 25).

Seven hundred baht is settled on – seven hundred baht and two dinner-sized fish pulled from the fish farm in the expanded irrigation ditch/pond behind the

awning, clubbed and thrown in a plastic bag which the men will take with them.

Chula tells me that the cock will pass through another set of middlemen: buyers who will pay perhaps 3000 baht, and yet another buyer who may pay up to ten times this amount if the cock is to be taken over the Lao border.

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With animals (and likewise, with one's own bodily and social energies, as I will discuss in Chapters 4 and 5), the visible output of a person's physical efforts and situational awareness is minimized, while the exercise of will is maximized through entities/others that offer an extension of one's own body, and therefore, a culturally realized extension of one's intentionality. The Balinese postures and bodily habits recorded in Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead's *Bali* (1942) are taken from a separate Southeast Asian cultural milieu, but in keeping this in mind and in taking lightly Mead's Freudian interpretations, their photographic study may also serve to illustrate some of the ways in which people relate to selves through habitual interaction with entities that may express or display tangential control of animate intentions within this world. In discussing Balinese children's play with animals upon string, Margaret Mead writes, "[t]he sense of a body part symbol which is attached, but by a thread, and which has a life and willfulness of its own, becomes strongly developed" (1942: 25). For a three year old Thai boy such as Bi, the motions and responses of mantis', toads, cats and the squirming cuttlefish between his fingers indicate bodily expectations and the abrupt, halting techniques appropriate for moving amongst other entities in this world. The will for creative motion, indeed the will to establish a living presence in the rural Thai milieu, must preferably be expressed through an almost detached consideration of one's own physical abilities. The further these abilities can be extended in their orchestration of control and interaction, the

more beautiful and successful, and aesthetically pleasing these motions are. Thai Buddhist murals, for example, portray upper-class, highborn heroes who “express their internal power with minimal, controlled movements, while the lowborn commoners and rambunctious individuals portray dynamic face and limb movements and even excesses of conduct” (Tambiah 1984: 229).

By pounding upon the household cat, or in reconsidering the reanimated efforts of a recently crushed large toad, Bi was becoming familiar with the extent to which he might exercise his intentions in the animate matter and world around him, and likewise, the leaping, bounding, ducking or evading of such contacts by animals constituted appropriate suggestions for the handling of one’s own body in the Thai cultural milieu. The staging, heightening or pursuing of fights between animals (the sudden revelation of fighting beetles, fish or chicks, for example) offer instances in which one’s will can be made to display a separate, individually animate quality. To be aesthetically appropriate, this minimally controlled motion is either played out just beyond the reach of one’s own fingertips (in animals), or alternatively, at the furthest extension of one’s own corporeal construct: with the flick of an elbow, or the flash of a shin. As with the fish, beetles, mantis’ and chicks mentioned above, many animals offer a heightened sense of minimal, visible intent and appropriate interaction in the world when they are further staged in combat. In seeking, recognizing and bringing these common forms of competitive play (or fighting) into being, rural Thais are reinforcing a bodily way of communication, and socially successful, real engagements in their world.

While Chapter 4 will more clearly illustrate further instances where bodily aloofness and the exercise of one’s will via extensible limbs and objects are carried out, a closer look at an animal-based expression of this fighting form is itself

worthwhile. I would like to briefly describe a cock-fight I witnessed in Isan, not only to make apparent the practical similarities it shares with Thai boxing, but also to further illustrate the cultural ways in which rural Thai men learn to extend their bodily wills and intentions.

Towards a cock-fight

Since arriving in Isan at the beginning of May, I have mentioned my interest in seeing a cock-fight several times, and Chula has assured me that at some point, I will have the opportunity to do so. I don't feel as though my own eagerness to observe one of these competitions has fabricated a social concern where there may not have been one. Especially with the family I live with, the cocks are everywhere. Often in the weeks beforehand, I had been told that Father would take me with him to a cock-fight in the afternoon, only to have the circumstances altered by the sudden absence of my intended guide or by unforeseen rain. One afternoon, after eating breakfast at a cousin's house down the road and following Ging to what he assured me would be a cock-fight, I found myself in the middle of another village festival, watching a parade that featured groups of young women of similar age from various townships, heavily made-up, wearing brightly colored, long silk dresses and dancing barefoot along the road. These women spiraled wrists, fingertips and elbows, weaving a dance number along the roadway with their abruptly turning heels. I paused to take a picture of one of the women's ankles, which a bell had been fastened to – it reminded me of the bells I had noticed tied to an elephant's ankles, and in another fashion, the Buddhist strings tied to individual's wrists, amulets tied around the waist, as well as during competition, *mongkons* and “magical threads tied around the [boxer's] upper arm to boost their self-confidence and morale” (Kitarsa 2003: 70) all of which were prevalent at Thai boxing matches. My picture, however, included a shadow of the

young woman's posed hands which strongly resembled a chicken. This awareness of animal shapes in shadow-play, which I had also seen reproduced in artwork on local phone cards, further hinted at the animal sensibilities which might inform local aesthetics (See photograph #15). The circular motions performed within the dance, while themselves an enactment of corporeal balance achieved through a separate rhythmic animation of individual limbs, also finished with a flourishing halt of fingers. Whether the resultant shadow was intentional or not, the pointed extension of the body's furthest limbs shared corporeal and habitual forms with the abrupt directional changes of a fighting-cock's beak.

Although my day at the festival eventually included a journey on the back of a family friend's motorcycle, driving throughout a village next to the festival, to find the neighbors in their front yards who might know where a cock-fight was, none was found, and I was returned to the parades. These parades ended in a clearing where the village rocket festival was held, an event which featured men from local villages placing large, waist high wooden drums with skins whetted from water, and pounding on them in a face to face confrontation. The slick canvas surface of the drums had some consistency with the canvas corners of a boxing ring, covered with ice-water between rounds. The drums were also used in a way which would appropriately demonstrate the poise of a Thai-masculine confrontation. They were prepared with floral decorations, slicked with water and repeatedly tightened, then presented in a brief, pounding confrontation where the loudest, deepest possible notes would determine a victor.

In another section of the festival grounds, the lines of dancing women from different villages repeated their performance for judges. Beckoned by Sap, I followed him along one side of the line, buying ice-water and snacks to match the beers he

purchased and shared with friends. At some point, I wandered ahead of him in the crowd and looked back to see him in close, earnest conversation with a female acquaintance behind one of the beverage tables. I looked into the crowd on the other side of the dancers to see Sap's wife (and Suleth's mother) Nók, watching Sap out of the corner of her eyes, her arms crossed and lips pursed.

I turned quickly to head back to the other section of the field, where more large drums were being arranged by the men upon a platform. The chosen drummers from each village (usually thicker, stronger men), when signaled by a referee, pounded the drums with drumsticks five to ten times, and then ceased altogether.

Unlike the music at a boxing match, these drums were not played for an extensive period of time. Instead, as physical loci for competitive masculine demonstrations, their sonic intervention in this world was to be sudden, abruptly powerful and once again absolved in an austere silence. Though I was yet to observe a cock-fight that afternoon, the activities I encountered themselves were contingent upon the same aesthetic principles and ways of engaging the world found in boxing matches. On that one particular occasion, I did not feel robbed of my opportunity to see a fight between roosters, but instead felt as though my requests to find a cock-fight was at odds with the family's festive spirit.

Sunday, July 15th, 2007-

The next time Chula informed me that his father could take me to a cock-fight the following Sunday, I waited for the day to arrive and then limited my morning training to activities around the front of the property where I could completely shadow the patriarch until he was bound to remember to bring me with him. I was somehow unsurprised, when mid-way through morning training however, a truck stopped on the road outside the house and Chula told me to stop training and skip

breakfast, since we would first be going to a weigh-in instead. (None of the children would eat or drink that morning until after they had stepped on the scale.) At that point, although I had watched countless instances of cock-sparring and training, I gave up hope of ever seeing a proper cock-fight. Twenty people piled into the back of the truck. Most of them were young fighters, along with a handful of adults. The truck's tailgate was left open to accommodate a few extra people. Though I thought myself to be sitting at the furthest possible ledge of the cab, Sap stood directly behind me on the truck's open tailgate, hanging onto the thin metal frame which supported a plastic awning pulled overtop the flatbed. I recognized Jat's father as well, sitting on the furthest corner of the tailgate; one hand grasping the extreme edge of the truck. Jat and three of his friends sat just inside the truck, their shins and haunches slung casually together. With the truck thus packed to capacity, we drove for upwards of forty-five minutes on the highway headed south. The truck finally came to a stop in the middle of another village, in front of a family home that served rice noodles. Other vehicles, similarly full of children, had already arrived. A week in advance of a well organized local tournament, a number of the children, including Doan and Jat, were weighed upon a scale and matched against opponents of similar size while an organizer took preliminary registration fees and marked down the match-ups.

After our return trip on the highway, the truck came to a stop in front of the family property and Chula, much to the visible chagrin of his sister Liae and Mother whom would cook, invited everyone in the truck inside for a late lunch. I remained outside the front of the property, looking for Father, whom I assumed would already be at the scheduled cock-fight. Before I felt obliged to ask yet again, Chula remembered the cause of my restlessness and instructed a neighbor to take me to the cock-fight on the back of his motorcycle. I have no choice but to accept this offer: I

have no idea of where the cock-fight is myself. Shortly, I was to discover, neither did the family friend who had agreed to drive me even though my trainer had given him the name of the town, surprisingly only ten minutes down the road. (I was confused as to why I had not been told this before: I could have walked there even, each Sunday on my own.) As before, my driver asks several men and women in the neighborhood where the cock-fights are. No one seems to be able to point us there. Finally, we give up and head back towards home. Half way down the gravel roadway, an older man on a motorcycle passes us. A younger man is sitting behind him, holding a large cock in the cradle of his arm, its bloody, swollen head cushioned beneath a towel. They give us directions.

The cock-fight

The cock-fights are held in the front yard of a large private residence across from a local school. The location seemed oddly appropriate. Whereas the schoolyard would have been a place to establish and maintain relationships amongst a cohort of young men, beyond these years, the cock-fights still offered a context in which the older men could meet and reaffirm their social ties.

Given the number of vehicles parked upon the pathway heading up to the yard, it seems impossible that my chauffeur could not have been directed there more easily. Dozens of motorcycles and trucks are parked up the length of the pathway leading to the larger home. This house is itself built next to an abandoned, half-dug construction site which has now become a murky fish farm. At the end of the driveway, a smaller thatched wood hut sits on stilts at the very edge of this pond. In the clearing next to this hut, in front of the main house, a stand with coolers full of chilled Leo brand beer and whiskeys has been set up. Another table sells the standard *pad Thai* noodles with vegetables, fried chicken claws and bags of light pork chips.

Where the motorcycles and trucks stopped at the front of the property, several cages for roosters began. A large, white feathered hen was kept in a cage about four feet tall, covered in an intricate, suggestively effeminate, light, white doily. Most of the fighting cocks, however, were kept in standard, lower, circular cages about three feet high: the same style of cages used in the front of our yard at home. Sliced and mounted on the insides of these cages, plastic bottles provided food and water spiked with nutrients and special feeds.

Spread in front of the house, a length of two foot-high rubber matting had been uncoiled to create a circular ring with a diameter of approximately twelve feet. When I first arrived, mid-way through the afternoon, there were two separate rings in use. One of these rings sat in the main clearing in front of the house. The second ring had been placed out of the sun, underneath a high canopy of corrugated tin, beneath which bags of rice and farming machinery had formerly been parked. Here, most of the cock-fight's audience had crouched around the ring, and some sat back on the set of discarded tractor tires. Recognizing me, Chula's father immediately called me over to stand with the group of men watching this ring as one of several shorter-term cock-fights transpired. None of these fights seemed to last more than two or three of the eight potential twenty minute rounds, and many were cut short as concessions were made by the owner of one fighting cock to the other: one bird would be clearly more dominant or attacking than another, which might assume what were clearly more defensive positions, or in some situations, jump over and outside of the ringside barrier, which would lead to their automatic loss. The betting that took place during these preliminary bouts was often limited to owners and closer spectators.

Once a match had ended, owners of the next fighting cock would carry it into the center of the ring, holding it in both hands, in front of their bodies. Cocks did not

fight successive matches, but were taken from the ring upon winning or losing and preened, evaluated and rested by their owners. Finally, when the owners of each new fighting cock had settled into the center of the ring, they would crouch upon their haunches and make final preparations for each bird in the fight. A third party would supervise the taping of the fighting cock's thickest, sharpest, rear, spurred claw, wrapping even lengths of small white athletic tape around the fighting cock's shank – the very same tape which was used to create customized pads beneath hand wraps and boxing gloves, against a Thai boxers' knuckles. With these sharpest natural weapons guarded and gloved, the cock-fight became a slightly less deadly, and lengthier performance. Once these preparations had been made, wing feathers ruffled and final brushings given, the owners turned their birds face to face, released them and stepped outside of the ring.

The two birds faced off, ducking, jumping, clawing and pecking at each other. In close range, the cocks might become entangled, and in situations where one bird's neck appeared inevitably lost underneath the other's, an observer might reach over the partition to separate them, reestablishing the promise of a moment of indeterminate danger to be faced. Over the course of the next three hours, I watched several minor, shorter matches. Though strikes from an attacker's beak often appeared to pull at or snap its opponent's reddened head, none of the birds appeared irreparably damaged by a single strike.

From watching sparring earlier, I had learned: if a bird appears to back down, cowers or ceases fighting, it loses. If a bird turns bloody and begins moving without an evident sense of attack or direction, it obviously loses. I write "obviously", because the verdict which determines one winning cock and one losing cock must be exactly that: collectively arrived at and evidently agreed upon by all present. While there is no

cock-fighting judge per se, the men gathered around the ring must all be able to agree upon the result. If both fighting cocks are still attacking, and if it appears that one might reestablish mobility and be able to conquer the other, the contest continues. This may go on for upwards of eight rounds of 20 minutes.

The entire crowd of spectators is made up of men, save for one older woman who stays closer to a man in the crowd and is largely interested in his bets, two women selling noodles and beer at the edge of the crowd, and one younger woman who usually waits, slouched on a motorcycle seat at the edge of the crowd with her arms crossed. Most of the men circulate around the two rings, betting usually through a combination of hand signals, eye contact, and nods. As with *muai Thai* fights, men who signal denominations most prominently with their fingers have adorned their wrists with expensive, metallic wristwatches. Each man records his bets with pen and paper, exchanging money appropriately upon the conclusion of each fight. Owners, and the men invested most heavily in training their fighting cocks, crouch in front of the two foot high partition which makes the ring.

In some sense, the energy extended by participants around the ring ties them to the action by sending intentional, vocal reverberations towards the fighting cocks of their choice, coaxing a certain result, but also emphasizing a social belief in front of their peers so that a particular strike reverberates especially effectively. This reverberation passed not only through the air, the cocks and the eardrums of others in the crowd, but also through the very sensory centers which have been thus co-opted in the action of speaking. Letting such sounds as “oooay” escape one’s lungs and come into the world at a particular moment is also a way of reinforcing or sonically shaking within oneself the recognition of an intended result.

“We must therefore recognize as an ultimate fact this open and indefinite power of giving significance –that is, both of apprehending and conveying a meaning– by which man transcends himself towards a new form of behaviour, or towards other people, or towards his own thought, through his body and his speech” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 226). In shouting and creating agreement amongst the crowd, the particular will of an audience member is not only demonstrated, but added to the changes which make up the world. This persuasion and realignment of potential result takes place not only within the speaker (or shouter), but also as it is temporally subsumed in action, throughout the social milieu – the crowd of men thus gathered which thus emphasize their own existence in rural Thailand. “[T]he fight, with its dramatic twists, exerts on the spectator a fascination, and provokes his active participation” (Csepregi 2006: 80). Gambling at a *muai Thai* bout likewise exhibits and instills trust in a fighter, making a gambler’s parlance with the active potentials within his own world conterminously evident and realized.

As the afternoon’s preliminary cock-fights proceed in two rings, some of the men wander across the clearing towards the thatched hut mounted on stilts above the fish pond. Just inside the thatched entrance to the hut, a small, twenty-inch television plays *muai Thai* bouts throughout the afternoon. A few bets are even placed on the live matches broadcasting on the television, especially during a fight between two six year old boys which has been front-page-worthy news in the national media and weekly boxing magazines during the proceeding week.

As afternoon gave way to early evening, the attentions of most men were redirected towards one cock-fighting ring in front of the house. Here, the day’s main event was taking shape. Two stronger cocks appeared evenly matched throughout the first two rounds of their fighting, and bets around the ring were rising accordingly.

Between each of the twenty minute rounds, the owners of each fighting cock took them outside of the ring, retreating to respective corners of the yard –one beneath a tree amidst a circle of motorcycles, and another on the far side of the canopy that had sheltered farming tractors– where these animals could be lavished with attention for an average of ten minutes before the next round began.

Crouched on their haunches, holding the fighting cocks lodged between their knees, the men (when I observed, the owner of the bird, as well as one particularly engaged bettor) set about the task of reinvigorating and reinvesting their fowls with the will for an attacking motion. Throughout the break, the neck and head of the fighting cock was also treated with the utmost care. The damp cloths used to clean these ruddy orange necks come away red with drawn blood. Various salves and eucalyptus oils are applied to slicken and reinforce the skin of the neck and head. To prevent the fighting cocks from becoming heavy headed and slow-footed within the ring, and in order to keep blood from gathering around the cock's brain, a small incision will often be made with a razor across the top of the cock's head. The cock's owner will then proceed to suck any excess blood from the top of the bird's skull, spitting it aside (See photograph #19). The bird remains largely immobile throughout this procedure. Between rounds when the cock's face appears most swollen, its eyelids are stitched open using thin needle and thread so that visibility will not be hampered throughout the remainder of the match (See photograph #20).

Washcloths, towels and rags kept doused in hot water were usually held over the fighting cock's head while others were used to wash the fighting cock's wings, neck and claws. These washcloths were kept warm on ceramic tiles held over hot coals kept burning inside a large tin can. This same smoldering can, kindled by dry twigs and strips of burlap was even held beneath the animal's body during the final

minutes of the break, smoking and heating the chicken. Warm water is dripped over the body of the fighting cock. While heat is applied in various ways, ice is also used on the bird's wings or swollen appendages. The bird is fed cool slices of cucumber, rice and hot chili peppers. After this feeding, the cock's beak will be opened and a long tailfeather is inserted into its throat, clearing its air passages. In the final moments of a round-break, a chili pepper may be pushed into the cock's anus and cold water may also be quickly massaged and splashed across the animal's tail and hind-quarters. Thus encouraged to maintain motion, the cock is released temporarily in open ground, allowing the trainers to ascertain the extent of its excitability and mobility.

Released back into the ring, shouts of "lay-o, lay-o" encourage the animals to perform with speed and force. Ducking, pecking, fluttering and leaping on the dry ground within the ring, neither bird appeared to clearly dominate. Throughout the third and fourth rounds, alcohol, cigarette smoke and betting spread throughout the crowd, with men signaling ever-greater numbers of baht with their fingers.

As the third round transpired, I joined an off-duty policeman and his unusually obese son, who sat next to the house amidst a collection of bottles. His son functioned as a partial translator between my Thai phrases, and the assertions of his father, who claimed to never be inaccurate when determining the outcome of cock-fights. A gaunt man in his mid-thirties wearing a bandana circled next to the table, and when my interest in Thai boxing was mentioned during our strained conversation, he proceeded to give his own sarcastic rendition of a fighting posture. When prompted by the policeman, he pulled back the bandana which had been covering his forehead to show me an uneven, inch deep indent the diameter of a fist in the frontal bone of his skull.

This had happened, he explained, when he had absorbed an elbow strike in the ring at the age of twelve (See photograph #22).

Dusk arrived between the third and fourth rounds, and as it did, a florescent light was brought out and hung over the ring, strung between one corner of the house and a tree between two parked trucks. The fight lasts six and a half rounds, and it is not until the sixth round that one bird begins to largely cease attacking, betting dies down, and supporters of the doomed cock have fewer opportunities to shout “lay-o” or “ooo-ay”. Midway through the seventh round, the losing bird has not died, but definitely ceased functioning in any active, excitable capacity, as it absorbs peck after peck, the skin of its neck stretching, tearing and bleeding beneath the sharpened beak of its attacker.

When this final cock-fight had thus come to an end, I appeared all too conspicuous, peering over men’s shoulders as they cross-referenced their penned accounts-owed lists and exchanged bills amongst each other. I opted to instead move back over to the edge of the house, where the policeman I had talked to before appeared to have been on the losing end of the bet and was paying a portion of his funds to another man. I sat next to the inebriated police officer and he began to communicate to me his own prodigious knowledge of *muai Thai*, raising a fist next to his jaw and then elbowing me repeatedly beneath the ribs. I remained motionless and nodded to indicate I had appreciated and understood his technical demonstrations, but continued to receive increasingly forceful jabs against my gut. It was just at that moment that Chula may have recognized the occasion for our escape, pulling up in front of us on the family motorcycle. I hopped on back.

Although his own budget for the afternoon had been limited, Chula had supported the efforts of the winning cock, and was able to come away four hundred

baht (approximately twelve American dollars) richer, while his brother Sap took home almost twice that amount, going with friends afterwards to celebrate his winnings with a banquet. In comparison to the prize-purse offered at Doan's next fight however, Chula's winnings were largely irrelevant. Upon arriving in darkness at home from the cock-fight, Chula's father pointed him towards the ring, where Doan, who had already carried out the bulk of her training routine independently this evening, remained, waiting for Chula to don the striking pads.

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Some evidence would also suggest that activities within the *muai Thai* ring (the *wai-kru* dance in particular), are modeled upon animal actions, and that the presence of animals or animal-inspired performance further provide a metaphorical discourse through fighting bodies. In Thailand, animal metaphors are used extensively in the treatment and categorization of illnesses (Bamber 1987/1998). These animals are classified according to their kinesic qualities: particular motions such as wriggling being suggestive of ways in which an illness enters a body (Bamber 1987: 186). It follows that the performance of animal motions within the ring may offer a metaphorical discourse emphasizing health and strength.⁵

The names given to some Thai boxing techniques roughly translate as: 'crocodile sweeps its tail' (for a spinning kick with the back of the heel), 'deer looks back' (for an avoided punch that becomes an opportunity to deliver a kick), 'breaking the elephant's tusks' (for an elbowing technique that involves grabbing your opponents' knees), and even 'bird somersaults' (for lower kicks that will preempt an opponent's attempt at a higher kick) (Kraitus 1989: 101-102). These metaphoric terms indicate the potential for a direct mimesis of animal behavior – and certainly, when

⁵ The linguistic classifier "tua" is also used to designate the body, as well as living, moving creatures and animals (Tambiah 1985: 195).

watching the halted motions leaps and pecked jabs of a cock-fight, the timing and rhythm seems to have some continuity with Thai boxing. Other Thai boxing techniques though, are named after a variety of other Thai, social gestures: extinguishing lamps, offering flowers, monks sweeping floors, etc. (Kraitus 1989: 102). The mastery of techniques within the Thai boxing performance (or perhaps more accurately, the Thai boxing *ritual*, with its definite possibility of failure), when taken together, may capably become a multifarious social discourse. To quickly impart the performance of three separate *wai-kru*'s I witnessed: One, done by a young fighter in Bangkok's Lumpini stadium, featured a kneeling, raking motion and turning of the head, as though casting one's nets for fish. Another, more common, performed by an elder, established boxer in Ubon, featured elaborate turns of the arms which were based on the wings of chickens (See photograph #3 for a photo of a similar *wai-kru*). The third *wai-kru*, I witnessed in an upper-class stadium in Bangkok where high-school boys sparred while wearing thick pads, was concluded when the fighter launched an imaginary grenade at his opponent's corner, landing resoundingly on the canvas with his own head tucked between his knees.

For rural Thais, animals which are neither completely domestic, nor wild, (such as the chickens which are partially controlled, but may not wander freely into the house or ring without being shooed away) fall into a category which is specifically associated with the dangerous aspects of courtship (Wijeyewardene 1968: 91). Although the field of understanding itself may be contested and in flux, through this common understanding of animal categories (Tambiah 1985) and the appropriately recognized motions which signal interactions with animals, the potential for a (Thai primitivist) discourse (albeit an exploding or shifting one, as the imaginary grenade suggests) on strength and masculinity exists which may be enacted for fighters and

audiences alike. This discourse is further developed through the peripheral social status of Thai boxers from the northeast, marginalized, impoverished ethnic Lao individuals whose spiritual ablutions around and within the ring also readily connect them to the marginal world of dead ancestors.

Animal-human metaphors become meaningful as they suggest qualities and characteristics of individuals within and around the fights themselves. At the same time, the cultural guidance of motion (and the guidance of meanings themselves) are also experienced through people's movements through their everyday social worlds.

“The Thai villagers' relation to the animal world ... expresses neither a sense of affinity with animals alone nor a clear-cut distinction and separation from them, but rather a coexistence of both attitudes in varying intensities which create a perpetual tension” (Tambiah 1969[1985: 208]). The acute social performances of *anima(l)te* fighting are instances in which a perceptual influx of the forms of these tensions may be heightened and made accessible in known experience. The harnessing of this ‘perpetual tension’; in beetles, squirming fish, stunned hornets, chicken's claws, expanding toads, fingertips, elbows, knees, shins and fists (all of which constitute the anatomical edges of the body's purchase in space) provide the existential grounds through which human beings in Thailand, especially men, bring forth bodily interactive forms that will emphasize their place in the world.

Chapter Four – Bodily Techniques

Muai Thai techniques and Thai bodily comportment

The elbow-jabs and rib-shots I absorbed briefly after the cock-fight were not the first I had encountered in Isan, although I had been given virtually no opportunities whatsoever to engage in sparring at Chula's residence. Often, when walking through a crowd at a rural tournament, or when sidestepping through vending stalls in the local marketplace, I would feel a thumb and forefingers grasp me just above the elbow joint. Other times, a hand would tap me slightly above the hip. Whenever turning to find the source of this contact, I was usually confronted with one of a series of elderly Thai men.

There was something distinctly Thai though, even in the way that the pressure of such contact was usually applied. Once, an older man from another village had come to visit our property, and after sitting on the edge of the ring, massaging a sore callous on one ankle and talking a bit about the upcoming tournament Chula was organizing, he stood up and made his way to the front of the house to talk with Father, who was roughly his same size and age. The two men stood close together, talking quietly, speaking past each other's shoulders, their gazes directed at the collection of fighting cocks, the fish farm, the weather coming across the fields. As their conversation disengaged, and as a sort of parting afterthought, both men reached out with one forearm to momentarily grasp each other's elbows, not shaking each other's limbs, but more or less – checking for presence. I would almost like to rescind my description of this sort of contact as 'tapping'. The similar greetings and corporeal checkings I received from strangers in the streets were not quick in the way that strikes or taps might be, although they were also not moments of contact that lasted

long enough to be considered pawing. Rather, the grasp of elbows between men was precise and firm, in the same way that an overly-measured, campaigning handshake might be in North American or European contexts.

The extra tactile pressure exerted in these instances was likewise repeated, reinforced and inversely incorporated into perceptual understandings via actions around the family home – brushing ants from a child's feet, moving a cat aside from the dinner table, shooing a chicken that had wandered into the family home or training area, dealing with the threat of a crab's pincers. One morning, for example, after he had wandered too close to a fire-pit his Grandfather was preparing, I had noticed Liae discipline her son Bi (who at full height, was just above her knees), by swinging downwards upon him, not to hit him, but almost to whip him with her palm, which instead settled forcefully at the last moment, establishing a hold on his upper-arm.

The same percussive reverberation were involved in the most mundane training activities. The endless rounds of sit-ups in the ring, for example, while a monotonous callisthenic exercise, as described by Vail (1998: 183), were also often social activities, where one boxer would administer strikes upon another's mid-section with a blocking pad between each sit-up. I had plenty of time to observe how the children, and on a few rare occasions, Chula himself, performed sit-ups, even when there was no one to strike them. Although I was accustomed to smoothly curling my body, or bringing my back up slowly and evenly throughout the 'crunch', for Thais, there was something extra to this activity; a motive hiccup or wave within the chest as they collected momentum upwards; a rolling and then almost yanking or whiplash of the stomach musculature at the very end of the sit-up. While I almost always draped my knees over the bottom rope in order to have a point at which to

anchor my weight, for Chula and the children doing their sit-ups, this was hardly necessary.

So many ways of moving I witnessed in rural Isan involved an application of force that emphasized the extreme, extendable edges of the body by inculcating a whipping motion just prior to contact. This was a culturally distinct style of motion which, entrusted within the body, carried it forward through a culturally defined set of postures and appropriate positions for limbs. While there was a general sense of comfort in the body, there was also an element of aloofness.

One of the bodily techniques related during Thai boxing classes, for example, appears to be the whipping motion required of hips and legs when executing kicks (Crossley 2007: 88). For students who are unfamiliar with such kicks, this technique involves a reknowing of the body, which may imperceptibly alter the dexterity in one's legs, posture, mobility, walk, etc. It follows that this knowledge of technique influences the perception of others. Thai boxers view an exposed knee accordingly, as "a lived sense of an opening" (Downey 2004: 140). Kicks to the inside of the thigh are especially painful. The cultural recognition of these openings (and the cultivation of their recognition) need not necessarily be limited to the ring or boxing gym.

Sitting packed in the back of trucks, or onboard public transportation, I became accustomed to feeling people's shins, knees or lower legs brush or rest against my own. Often times, male friends or neighbors would share a hammock next to the ring in this fashion, lower limbs draped together. Yet, the Buddhist prohibitions on contact with the head were discernable here as well. When traveling to a soccer game, for example, most of the team had piled into the back of a truck, where our shins and haunches rested together in the crew cab. The man sitting next to me was completely at ease, until I raised an arm to steady myself against the back of the cab.

Although our shins rested against one another, and although my arm had not come in contact with him, the position of my forearm against the cab was now too close to his shoulders and his head for comfort. He appeared ill-at ease and shifted away from me, until I removed the offending limb and propped it beneath me:

On the seats mounted in the backs of the large trucks *-seong-teows-* designated for public transportation, I would often observe mothers resting their children in this fashion, draping their feet across other passenger's laps. As previously mentioned, the bodies of children, or beings without mastery of motility, are often passed among adults in similar fashion.

On an evening when neighboring men had gathered to share beer, sticky rice and fish in the household ring, Liae had been washing her two sons, as well as Hansa's three year old boy in the washhouse only a few feet away. After he had been passed to his Grandmother, dried briefly with a t-shirt and roughly powdered with baby/boxing powder⁶, Hansa's son (she was not present that evening) escaped and began to run around the ring. Running naked, circling in closer for the food, he was grabbed by one of the neighboring men in the circle and pulled into his lap, in front of the drinks and plates. In plain view of everyone present, and to my surprise, without uproar, the elder neighbor began to tickle the boy's genitals. This went on for twenty or thirty seconds, until the boy was released back amongst Liae's children, outside the ring. In this respect, an effort is made to approach children as objects to placate or quiet. Margaret Mead describes Balinese children whose experiences handling animals on strings as toys mirror their own treatment of body parts such as boys' genitals, which involve a "sense of a body-part symbol which is attached, but by a thread, and which has a life of its own" (Bateson and Mead 1942: 25; also see 136-

⁶ Penny and John Van Esterik relate an account of Thai mothers smearing "flour paste on the baby to give it a bright skin when it grows up" (Van Esterik 1980: 68).

141). As the way in which we come to know our own bodies, and relate to others' bodies is 'culturally determined' (Csordas 1993:140), in the Thai context, the consideration of a child in this apparently objective, distanced fashion is culturally imbued. Through interactions such as these, individuals also learn to stress a relationship with their own limbs that was likewise distanced (and unsurprisingly, would lend itself quite readily to efficacious, leveraged applications of shin-whipping force in a *muai Thai* ring).

The resulting embodiment of technical possibility leaves a body with a certain repertoire of social actions. In Thailand, during one 30+ men's league soccer game between cohorts from two separate villages, I watched a defender deliver an elbow to the top of an offensive player's head that left him dazed and brought a steady stream of blood which poured off of his scalp. The defensive challenge and injury which had taken place was not an extraordinary occurrence, and the game was only momentarily stopped so that the bleeding offensive player could be carried off the pitch and taken by motorbike to a nearby hospital. On another evening, a news broadcast displayed a street-fight in which attackers flailed a weary victim, swinging downward with their elbows. Perhaps Thai boxing's field of practice also provides individuals with a set of techniques which are carried over and reflected in broader social settings such as these, but at the same time, one must also consider a broader social milieu through which appropriate uses of the body come into being and find expression with a *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990) expecting such maneuvers. Although it is not improbable to think that soccer players and street brawlers earlier practiced Thai boxing, it is also likely that *muai Thai* is but one assertion of the existential and anatomical edges of socially creative change and expression (Shusterman 1988) found in Thai society.

This distanced management of one's bodily efforts when addressing an unknown force is also evident in Thai social expectations. I once observed the same general techniques employed during a vocal disagreement between both Sap and Chula. As the argument between them progressed and drowned out the five other men who had sat down to eat and drink with them in a circle at the edge of the ring, Chula turned to one side, as did Sap, as though voicing their displeasure at a point just outside the circle, making a precise effort to ignore the actual source of confrontation. Finally, as though, "[i]n the midst of an altercation, one party will suddenly leave off and turn his back on the whole thing" (Benedict 1952: 37), the situation was thus diffused. With the brothers' argument at least temporarily redirected and abandoned, the sharing of drinks continued with quieter, neutral conversation between all the men present. The same general techniques of conflict and confrontation (disarmingly disorienting to me) had been employed en masse at the first *muai Thai* tournament I had witnessed, where police had stalled the competition.

Through all of these interactions, individuals came to understand the ways in which they might use their bodies, and the corporeal schema imparted in quotidian Thai terms likewise informed *muai Thai* training. These techniques of the body (Mauss 1934), when repeated indefinitely during training, had the effect of gradually reorganizing one's senses, and the ways in which one related to the world. Such techniques are culturally constructed and the body-culture dialectics experienced in rural Thailand offers a distinct aesthetic through which to live this potential for motion. It was not unusual during the longest weeks of training and rainfall to find myself half-awake in the middle of the night, trying to throw a knee-strike from within the fetal posture I used for sleeping. As one might first set about the motions which pretend at going to sleep, in order that the embodied self may come into such

an activity (Merleau-Ponty 1945), in reorganizing the habitus through the routines of running and training, Thai boxers are engaged in tasks that allow them to merge with a separate intentionality and way of being. I pretended to sleep and pretended to Thai box, as trusting that I would come to understand that which could never be temporally frozen or rationally, perfectly understood was the only way in which I could continue to operate – training or resting. While training sometimes provides individuals with the grounds for self-reflection (Hunter-Csikzentmihalyi 2000: 19-23), (or if one prefers: for self-construction), training also serves to bring the body into line with potentials for action, allowing individuals (and their corporeal selves) to move expressively outwards into the world in a fashion that may be, if not kicking and screaming, at least kicking and kneeling. Chula had likewise once described ‘*teep*’ kicking (a short, forward-front kick using the bottom of the foot) his now deceased brother out of the bed they had shared when they were both younger. When the majority of one’s waking day was spent in training, the effects of corporeal routine, thus experienced, were not uncommon. And their results were carried over into the waking, meaningful, social world as well.

Brothers were not only knocked out of bed, but all around a culture of Thai boxing, visible and recognizable change in the world also became evident in people’s approach to other people, objects, speed and situations. As can be seen clearly through the efforts of apprenticeship, as one realigns their relation to the ‘other’; to opponents or punching bags or chickens or other objects, the body will also project a world of habit around itself (Lindsay 1996: 211). In Thailand, this might dictate an appropriate approach to litter – which is not publicized as a popular ecological concern in the same fashion as it might be in North America. A superfluous plastic bag, for example, is there in one’s hand at one moment, but then at the edge of one’s body,

and thus ignored and distanced, drifts into the high grasses of the roadway. This is not carelessness, but rather, a cultural understanding of the spatiality of one's body which in turn plays into one's cultural sense of objects appropriately placed within the surrounding environment.

A large, sharp cutting knife, for example, (the most tenuous of household items), was kept sheathed high between two rafters just inside the entrance of the house. Storing the knife thus demonstrates a spatial outsourcing of bodily and cosmological recognition (stooping when in the presence of an upper-class individual and maintaining care not to touch the heads and upper extremities of others, especially one's elders), and further places it within the household architecture. The possibility of bodily destruction and power in the world thus belonged preferably at an appropriate cultural height and within the extreme reach of one's limbs. A slicing, effective kick was carried out on one's toes, as high as possible. During Thai boxing competitions, judges awarded high scores for techniques where one fighter might briefly jump atop another: where disarming spectacles were carried out from above. Consider Ruth Benedict's account of yet another fighting form (that of kite-fighting) in rural Thailand: a gendered performance, in which a larger, more maneuverable male kite must "capture" its female counterpart (Benedict 1952: 43). It is significant that the male kite "must not get too close to the body of the female kite", but instead achieves success by snagging a thin cord which trails from the female kite (Benedict 1952: 43). From the ground, without a clear view of this trailing cord, it must therefore appear that the male kite has achieved a successful execution of this gendered performance by indirectly imposing its will on its adversary. Launching a direct attack with the brunt of the kite's visible body would signal a loss of aesthetic

form on the part of the male kite, whereas a minimally visible, precise involvement of the victor's bodily directions and will signals a successful performance.

The resulting spectacle of the kite fight is followed so raptly (Campbell 107 in Benedict 1952: 43) precisely because it is representative of the oblique exercise of control, and also because these intentionalities are quite literally suspended by a thread (cf. Merleau-Ponty (1945), who describes intentionalities metaphorically as intentional threads which pull at an individual; also, in a more literal sense, Mead and Bateson (1942: 25, 136-139) describe Balinese children playing with birds on strings, which, like displays of kite fighting on a thread, may be competitive, animate considerations which extend into a masculine propensity for bodily empathy).

Training, proprioception and lifted limbs

The number of hours involved in training for *muai Thai*, as well as the intensely social settings in which the activity is carried out, also serves to blur the distinctions separating training from everyday activity. If a number of children arrived from other neighborhoods to train, their efforts at practicing clinching together might maintain an air of seriousness, but also involved a level of comfort that allowed them to laugh while attempting to unbalance or strike each other. This sort of play-fighting (Vail 1998: 186) was another way in which the boundaries between activities in and outside of the ring were dissolved. In the clinch during competition, Thais "are able to stay loose, stay on their toes, and breathe" (Sheridan 2007: 22). A Thai fighter more likely has thousands of such training instances associated with positive laughter, by way of which a particular level of comfort is achieved. This is not a psychological state, but is instead a felt sense of the familiarly social which promotes the appropriate physiological feedback mechanisms; mechanisms which themselves further establish proprioceptive familiarity with given intentions and actions.

A successful Thai boxer will not only be acclimatized to humidity, the training minutiae of a circadian rhythm, diet and muscular exhaustion, but will also have a pre-reflective, pre-objective understanding of the bodily adjustments that take place within these trained settings presented through opponents' postures within the ring. The concepts of personal space, reflected in the quotidian Thai habitus, are found not only in the official rules and stated techniques of Thai boxing, but in the creative offensive and defensive motions participants display within the ring. My earliest recollections of *muai Thai* fighting involve briefly televised highlights which I became aware of through the western media. To be quite honest, rather than appreciating the techniques, I more often than not quickly changed the channel in frustration. I found the "violent" spectacle compounded even more so by off-kilter rhythms and disconcerting approaches. Contrary to the more straight-forward application of force visible in an American-style boxing match, the fighters appeared to apply their force indirectly, swinging kicks from the sides of their bodies, using knees that remained shoved into opponents' midsections for a moment longer than I had expected necessary. It was this Thai understanding of bodily movement (which incidentally appears to be much more efficient when directed toward the destruction of corporeal matter) that even as a visual spectacle, seemed more completely at odds with my own habitus' expectations.

"The specific Buddhist formulation, then, is that detached action is also pragmatically the most effective action – by being removed from the immediacy of desires and entanglements, it is all the more encompassing and creative" (Tambiah 1984: 335). Direct, forward-moving applications of force are not only at odds with the culturally recognized openings and weaknesses in *muai Thai* stances, but are also indicative of an uncreative sense of self. Thai forms of creativity are generally

practiced in the very extension of one's limbs, as well as through the extension of one's own will in the world; in interactions with others; objects; babies; animals, etc. I am not suggesting that Buddhism has been the sole determinant in mapping a Thai corporeal schema, but its tenets have proved to be particularly salient within the sets of interactions that come into being within a rural Thai worldview.

Certain Buddhist doctrines (i.e., keeping one's feet out of sight, not touching others' heads), do not preclude or determine these other varied bodily techniques, but instead provide the suggestions through which people may come to perform and view motion. The *wai*, or Thai form of greeting, is interesting to consider not only as a bodily technique indicating awareness of social hierarchy and cosmological recognition (bows are *lower* and hands are clasped higher when encountering an elder or more religiously ranked individual), but also as a technique that allows this ritual a practical, embodied place in the habitus. "[R]ituals are body techniques which harbor the powers and potentialities of both our subjectivity, as an embodied way of being-in-the-world, and those of the social world" (Crossley 2004: 46). While the *wai* is technically suggestive of other uses of the body, its postural potentials, when embodied, also serve to bring one closer to a socially prestigious performance, or an understanding of the hierarchies governing interaction. It seems no coincidence to me that a *wai*, properly performed, while wearing gloves, draws inward the limbs and shields the body's exposed chest and organs, placing the hands above the nose, in perfect position to protect the delicate tissues of the face, and that another variation of this familiar bowing might be found in the clinch, where the head of an opponent locked beneath one's own arms is ideally brought *lower*, down into a knee strike.

If one considers the popular cosmologies and ontological pretenses found most strongly within Thailand's rural northeast (the social tenets of Theravada

Buddhism are particularly evident and appropriate), the hermeneutic understandings that circulate throughout rural Thailand are not fundamentally inferior contributors to notions of embodied knowledge, habits, labors and the “structures” of any given society, but rather, also contribute to the same ways of knowing: of locating oneself and one’s social expectations. These pliable, interpretive factors have equal purchase when considered next to bodily habits as contributors toward embodied knowledge:

The foundations of ‘belief’ in any given society, be they cosmologically influenced (as with Thai Buddhism) or otherwise, provide the grounds for social guidelines pertinent to the governing of embodied interactions. *Muai Thai* culture, in rural Thailand, thus provides a coherent milieu in which to explore questions of embodied knowledge and the social grounds in which such understandings take place.

At the risk of stating the obvious for enthusiasts of the sport, *muai Thai* is a unique form of *standing* combat. “[S]tanding is achieved in opposition to the force of gravity, and constitutes a concrete symbol of the encounter of human will with nature” (Csordas 1994: 228). The motions and (e)motive contractions of balance and bodily force within the ring are derivative interpretations of a vertical realm: a plane which flaunts the distinction between alert, mobile matter and lifeless, earthly carbon. The heuristic limbs and bodies that actively participate as such are imbued with an intentionality that places them apart from the rest of the world. The limbs of a boxer (or Thai laborer for that matter, many of whom I witnessed laying scaffolding, unharnessed, several stories above the ground), willed amidst motion, are filled with a “*heft*” or “*lift*” (Csordas 1994: 246). The cultural sense locating this trust articulates a resistance to gravity. This sense of intention that suffuses each limb (shin, elbow or knee in the *muai Thai* ring), reaches out into a world of possibility and is weighed upon in turn. One’s “belief in the body” (cf. Bourdieu 1990: 66-79) is realized on a

social level in divisions of labor, class and gender (Bourdieu 1990: 66-79). It is only human, and changing, that the sense of posture or attack habitually enacted within a *muai Thai* ring should not proceed in perfectly linear, rational fashion, but rather, through the angles of attack most strongly perceived or misrecognized within surrounding social fields.

Marcel Mauss developed his call to study the cultural variations of human bodily techniques from ruminations regarding the walking patterns of soldiers from different countries (1934: 72). I might submit that the angular limb motions of fighters within a Thai boxing ring are one variation of an enculturated, Thai style of moving and carrying oneself. This “[h]uman gait is, in fact, a continuously arrested falling... [;it] is an expansive motion, performed in the expectation that the leg brought forward will ultimately find solid ground” (Straus 1966: 148). The forms of trust that individuals come to express through their steps, walking, dancing, fighting and balancing (upon bicycle frames, or in the throes of a clinch in the ring) are defined through these indeterminate notions of appropriate sociocultural action which we may come to embody, experience motion through, and thereby bring selves to bear upon the world.

Chapter Five - Mobility

Travel and experiences of bodily and social mobility in the rural northeast

July 2007-

Suleth's fighting record on the local, rural circuit has been impeccable thus far, with the majority of his recent opponents suffering knock-outs. In mid-June, Chula arranged a fight for him in one of the major stadiums in the provincial capital of Ubon: his first. Suleth attacked from the outset, winning this bout handily – both Chula and Sap were so sure of his victory that they waved to him from the corner of the ring mid-way through the fifth round, signaling for him to disengage his opponent and begin a sort of confident, celebratory posturing which demonstrated for the judges that he too was sure of his victory. Driving home from that fight, Suleth had slept in the front cab, next to Chula and the driver, while Sap, myself and several other men rode in the back of the truck. Our truck had only stopped once along the way, at the roadside butcher's where a cut of beef was purchased to be brought back, grilled and shared among the men.

By late June, Chula has again been able to leverage the latent interest in his own reputation for fighting with Suleth's recent record to organize another match in Ubon, at a more high-profile tournament, for his nephew. While I had usually seen Suleth and his friend Jat training with us in May and early June, in the weeks preceding Suleth's second competition in Ubon, they were most often absent at training time. Some evenings, while I was jogging out of the neighborhood, I would pass them, taking turns on an oversized bicycle, pedaling further away from the house, going to visit friends, or stopping to swim in the pond next to the elementary school. One morning, while I finished training on the large bag hung next to the cages

of fighting cocks kept at the front of the house, Suleth and Jat stopped in for an early breakfast and came out of the house with white powder covering their faces. “What’s that?” I asked Chula, gesturing with a gloved fist at the boys’ powdered faces.

“Oh – they use that because they want to impress some girls at school.” Chula said. Jat raised his chin and gave his best impression of a seasoned fighter with a tough, sore jaw, smiling and walking past us to where the bicycle waited. Although Suleth and Jat had sometimes showed up to train quite early after their schooling for the past several weeks, Chula had ignored them each time, disappearing inside the house to watch soccer or donning the trainer’s pads only to work with Doan inside the ring until the boys had lost interest in bouncing on tires and swinging light kicks at the smaller punching bags. He showed even less interest in the boys now.

Later at dinner, and again, when he sees me during the afternoon the next day, Suleth’s father Sap makes a point of inviting me to see Suleth’s fight, and each time I tell him that I will go along, double-checking our departure time. Chula tells me that he will not go to Ubon to watch Suleth compete a second time because he is not convinced that his nephew has trained consistently, or with enough effort. He also mentions to me that he is disappointed in his older brother Sap, who has been drinking more often and has not helped him train anyone in the ring. Shortly after I declined to be entered in a second match, Chula had told me that he planned to compete in an upcoming tournament. His training, begun approximately ten days before the fight, had consisted of five minutes or less of jogging, sometimes up to twenty sit-ups, but most especially three or more rounds of percussive striking against the pads Sap held for him in the ring. The two read each other’s signals and body language flawlessly. Perhaps a portion of Chula’s earlier success in the ring might be attributed to the training offered by his older brother Sap, and even, I guessed, to the

availability of a back-up sparring partner that his previously deceased brother might have provided. (Chula eventually cancelled his scheduled fight, telling me that his opponent had weighed more than had been originally promised.)

Boon himself, I could not imagine sparring with Chula or anyone else. His masculinity was expressed through more free-wheeling musical types and trips away from the ring and home. One of the sorest points in my fieldwork experience was not being able to discuss these roles (or the experiences of welding he had in Bangkok) with him. After a lengthy absence in the middle of the summer, Boon's return to the property, along with the temporary visit of Hansa, her husband and another friend they worked with, had been heralded by communally enjoyed gifts such as bagged rice, chicken feed, and a new sheet of tin to be added to the roof, solid iron cooking pots and large mortars and pestles which Liae would put to use when preparing meals.

In the weeks preceding his second fight in Ubon, although he seldom trained around the ring, on many evenings, Suleth arrives at the property to have dinner with us. Sap, Chula tells me, is still spending many evenings drinking with friends. Suleth's mother, Nok, has been absent from their household for two weeks now, having left after the drumming and rocket festival to work as a masseuse on a southern resort island. One evening, she called Chula's cell phone and demanded that I translate her broken, inebriated English to an older Italian woman whom she had befriended. "Migrants' consumption is not simply a reflection of material interests or economic need but is also a cultural process, engaging powerful if often conflicting cultural discourses about family relations, gender roles and Thai constructions of modernity" (Mills 1997: 54). Perhaps Nok's choice to engage in migrant work, like the modern Thai migrant women that Mary Beth Mills describes, while allowing for a straightforward pursuit of economic capital, also provided her with an air of

modernity and foreign familiarity that may have allowed her to further redefine and strengthen (if even through her own absence from home) her position as primary wife and irreplaceable mother.

On an afternoon about five days before the fight has been scheduled in Ubon, Sap and Suleth arrive at the property at three o'clock: about an hour before regularly scheduled workouts are to begin. Sap puts on the thick, padded trainer's belt which, despite its dilapidated, torn, synthetic leather front, will allow him to absorb knees to the abdomen. Although they were not scheduled to fight, Jat, and another boy who sometimes helped Suleth work on his clinching techniques waited patiently next to the ring as well, bouncing on tires and kicking or kneeing the smaller bags. One of the boys was at the edge of the ring and he reached over the ropes to help Sap buckle his wrists into blocking pads which he would hold up, communicating for a series of knees, kicks, punches and elbow strikes. I started my own warm-up as usual, by skipping in the clearing next to the ring, listening as the rhythm of Suleth's work-out progressed.

With my limited knowledge of the Thai language, Sap's shouts to Suleth sounded like appreciative encouragement. As father and son paced back and forth across the ring, exchanging strikes upon the pads, I found myself impressed by Suleth's stamina, as well as the improbable, repetitive force that he was capable of creating at his age. In fact, I could not recall ever seeing him train this hard before. Perhaps he would be ready for Ubon after all.

With the sound of the pads reverberating throughout the property, Chula appeared from within the house to take a seat upon a bench in front of the latrine, draping one leg over a crossed knee and smiling contently beneath the chin-up bar. I turned with my skipping rope and gestured to the ring behind me, giving a thumb's up

to Suleth's performance. Chula nodded sagely to indicate his approval of the workout, but at that moment, I realized I had completely misunderstood the situation. The sound of the pads ceased behind me and Suleth was climbing out of the ring, his face red with tears. Sap had turned sideways to rest the blocking pads against the top rope, facing away from his son. Suleth pulled the red, velcro-strapped gloves off of his hands, tossing them haphazardly back into a corner of the ring and then clutched at the amulet which had been tied around his waist with a thin, dark cord – a thin, metallic scroll inscribed with powerful Buddhist lettering which had been rolled into the approximate dimensions of a cigarette. Suleth finally succeeded in tearing this off his waist and throwing it into the thick grass below a bench which delineated the edge of the property.

This display was too much for Sap, who finally removed the blocking pads, stepped out of the ring and first retrieved the amulet-scroll, immediately hanging it from a nail affixed high upon the ring's nearest corner support beam – next to the collection of threads tied to nails, closer to the high horizontal support beam, (the same beam upon which I had once hung my socks and immediately been reprimanded). As the timbre of his voice increased, Suleth flinchingly recollected his gloves, and by the time Sap had picked up a leg-long piece of lumber lying below the hammock and carried it threateningly towards Suleth, he had already taken position in front of a punching bag, sniveling and breathing heavily, but continuing to train. Sap placed the board back behind the ring, and a few minutes later, Jat and his friend returned from the hastily-chosen wind-sprints they had run at the front of the property.

On the day of the fight, I make sure that I stay around the property and shorten my own evening's training to prepare for departure. I share an early dinner in

expectant silence with Suleth. It is unusual, only the two of us eating, sitting on the room's only two chairs, eating off of the small wooden table just inside the front of the house. Though the food is especially fresh and delicious, I pretend to be full so that Suleth will help himself to the better part of our afternoon meal: fried eggs and green beans eaten with the usual balls of rolled, sticky rice. Sap paces around the house's inner-room, collecting the family *mongkon*, stored in the vinyl-blue briefcase stored in the highest rafters of the home, finding a small bamboo mat, the plastic water cooler, a towel, a bag filled with jars of "C" brand boxing oil and Vaseline from around the ring. Sap's uncle, Jat's father, and a couple other older men from around the neighborhood arrive. It seems as though we will leave any moment, but it will be another hour of pacing and even another later evening meal for the men. With Chula, his mother and sisters gone to fish and sell fish at the market, this evening meal of fish, rice and chicken-bone broth is largely consumed in silence, the attentions of the elder men remain riveted to a translated television drama chronicling the lives of a fictional Japanese women's volleyball team.

Darkness, the rain and another of Sap's friends with a neighbor's flatbed truck (unfortunately, without an overhead canopy) all arrive at the same time. When I see that none of the men will ride in the back of the truck in the downpour and notice how packed the truck's cab will be, carrying seven men, I offer to stay at home, but no one will hear of it. I climb into the front seat, Suleth crammed on top of my legs. We drive like this for about ninety minutes: seven men, Suleth and one of his younger friends, cramped together in the truck while the rain pours outside, Suleth drifting in and out of sleep, curled up, his head resting on the dash.

When our truck finally arrives at the stadium in front of Ubon, the rain has partially let up, but a young woman dressed in shorts and carrying an umbrella comes

out from between the vending complex next to the stadium and steps carefully through the grass in front of our headlights, ensuring that our truck is guided safely into the only obvious spot. The truck engine and headlights both die at once. In this fresh silence, no one moves or breathes until the young woman alters her path back toward the stadium. Then, the sounds of windows rolling; doors unlocking; seats moving.

Admission to the fights is 200 baht, or 150 baht (about five American dollars) if we would have been prepared to confine ourselves to the wooden bleachers that form an upper promontory in the spectator's zone. Suleth and Sap are both admitted free of charge. As soon as we are inside the arena, Sap sets about quickly preparing Suleth, who lays upon the bamboo mat as each of his limbs, his chest and abdomen are massaged with boxing oil. Sap applies a small amount of Vaseline to his son's face and ensures that his hands are wrapped tightly. After pausing to stand for the national anthem, blue gloves and an approved groin protector are retrieved from the scorekeeper's table as the evening's first fight begins. Suleth will fight second on the bill, just after 9 pm. This is perhaps the least glamorous time slot available on the evening's fight card. Unaccompanied by the national anthem which announces the first bout, Suleth's fight merely maintains the omnipresence of *muai Thai* and carries it toward more highly anticipated matches later in the evening. Hardly a third of the eventual crowd (and perhaps the least vocal contingent of bettors) have taken up places around the ring. Two of the men who had come with us in the truck, both of whom are well dressed with thick cotton t-shirts and blue jeans, and I follow behind Sap and Suleth to take our places on a vacant set of benches behind the blue corner.

Just before entering the ring, Suleth again kneels at the edge of the ring, saying a prayer. Sap pushes the top ropes down so that his son may climb over them

without any problems, and after the *wai-kru*, removes Suleth's *mongkon*, exchanging another prayer over the top ropes of the ring. The betting that surrounds Suleth's match is tepid at best. From the outset, it is obvious that he has been slightly overmatched. Although he lands a number of good punches, and absorbs more than his share of them, it is his opponent that kicks relentlessly, consistently forcing Suleth back along the ropes, and then into clinches that twice end with Suleth landing on the ground beneath his opponent. Suleth is actually undersized in comparison to his opponent – only by a kilogram and a half, I hear later, but this seems to be more than enough to tip the balance of the scales between the fighters. Between rounds, Sap and one of his friends who doubled as an announcer at the rural bouts leap into the ring and massage cold water onto Suleth's limbs, lifting him from beneath his arms, encouraging him to demonstrate animation. There are a few frightening moments in the fourth and final round, when Suleth takes another series of punches and is tripped easily during the following exchange. Even as he seems to be largely backing away though, he still defends himself well enough to stay in the match and land a couple punches. When the bell that ends the fifth round sounds, his opponent is declared the winner.

Following the match, Suleth gets redressed and wanders throughout the crowd inside of the stadium, sipping soft drinks and wandering through the spectators with his friend Toom. Sap and the other men who arrived with me are dispersed throughout the crowd, standing on short concrete benches or the red and blue plastic chairs in their efforts to gain a clearer view of both the action and the betting partners or bookies stationed between the corners. Between rounds, men standing on the benches and chairs placed on the floor around the ring will often glance backwards to find another set of counter-bettors in the bleachers who are willing to become a buffer to

their own monetary commitments, altering the nature of their investment by betting another denomination against their original decision.

By 11 pm, and until 2:30 am, when the last of the fights has been carried out, the boxing stadium is cloaked in a wall of sound comprised mostly of the amplified band's instruments, but also of the spectators' shouts. Mid-way through the evening, one fight features two women, whose bout proceeds in much the fashion that a men's fight would, except for the fact that both must climb underneath the bottom rope in order to enter and leave the ring. The betting and interest surrounding this one match is vocal, and despite Suleth's initial loss in the ring, Sap will tell me later on that his winnings from the evening total 7000 baht, largely thanks to his correct predictions regarding this fight.

Accustomed to sleep at dusk and a running routine at dawn, I make a poor showing of myself for most of that night in Ubon, usually sitting on the edge of a concrete bench other spectators stand on, often slouching, shifting my weight off of a swollen ankle, my head sometimes nodding off between my legs. Despite the inescapable amplified music of the accompanying live band, for much of the evening, when I glance backwards, next to the chain-linked, fenced entrance, I can see Suleth sleeping, curled atop the bamboo mat brought from home which was left spread across a low planked platform set next to a large, formal, weigh-in scale.

During another fight, a lightning strike atop the metal ceiling affects the electric lighting, and the entire ring is plunged into darkness for about fifteen minutes. When the lights come back on, the referee is standing against the ropes closest to the judge's table, one hand holding each of the fighter's elbows, who sit, waiting on their stools, placed on either side of him. A swarm of beetles attack the overhead lights as the bout is finished, covering the floor of the ring so thickly that they need to be swept

out before the following fight can take place. An appliance manufacturer offers a promotion throughout the evening, thrice holding raffles from ticket stubs between the fights, giving away electric ovens and microwaves, ensuring photo-ops feature prominent displays of their merchandise held next to the *muai Thai* veterans competing in most of the evening's later bouts. After the headlining fight, the company representatives leap into the ring with decorative flowers and stacks of money to be distributed when winning fighters collect their prizes from the judge's table.

When the evening's final fight comes to its completion, the skies are clear and I follow Suleth outside, where we wait in the dampened back of the truck for Sap and one of the men who came with us. Most of the vendors outside the stadium entrance are beginning to pack up their wares. One of the last defeated, headlining fighters, a teenager with a sharp haircut, still dressed only in his boxing trunks, is walking, or rather, hobbling and shuffling of his own accord out of the stadium's entryway. His triumphant opponent is already striding through the grass between the restarting cars, redressed only in blue jeans and wearing an amulet/scroll around his waist. He bounds up, onto the tailgate of an older truck behind us, whereupon a friend of his passes him a t-shirt. Walking past this truck in the grass, the appliance company's sales representative reaches up to tap this fighter's hip and shake his forearm in congratulations. The fighter responds with a polite *wai*. Both trucks lurch over the grass in the parking lot, our truck following this older fighter's vehicle out of the stadium. For a mile of roadway beneath Ubon's streetlights, both vehicles share the highway. Eventually the roadway's lanes part, and as we branch onto the darker eastern highway, I watch the successful fighter, still perched atop the tailgate, his face

turned into the night as his friend's truck banks away from us, accelerating to highway speed.

Driving home this time, we stop twice, both times so that our driver may take what's left of the ice-cold water brought in our thermos and splash it on his face. After this, the truck drifts less often across the median, or alternatively, onto the gravel roadside. When I finally arrive home and creep blindly past the ring into the boarding house at 4:05 am, Chula's voice calls over the partition between our rooms "Paul – Suleth, win or lose?"

"Lose. But it was close." I said, laid down and fell asleep.

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The next day, when speaking of the fight with Chula, we would emphasize the fact that Suleth fought hard and that his opponent had been noticeably bigger – somewhere, there had been some inconsistency with the weight scales. Suleth's fight was an obvious mismatch considering the number of fighters available to choose from in his age group and weight class. I lacked a bit of vital knowledge that would help me to understand the relationship between Suleth and Chula, or more acutely, Chula and his elder brother Sap. I could still only guess at the reasons behind Chula's decision to stay at home during Suleth's most important fight in Ubon. However, as it was not my place to press for further explanations, I was instead left wondering what this fight might have meant for Suleth.

Certainly, in the short time that I had been living with the family, it seemed that his flawlessly polite demeanor and stature had not changed much, yet as an eleven year old Thai boy who was perhaps just leaving the most prolific stage of his young boxing career, the day to day make-up and meanings of his experiences in the world were being drastically altered.

Masculine mobility

In a field dominated by culturally informed projections of masculinity (Kitiarsa 2003), to step out of this social environment and interact with women could be viewed as threatening to a boxer's habitus (cf. Wacquant 2004: 154; 1998). The boxer's belief that a social situation could threaten the body and its skills supports the concept of a lived-through, embodied, but also embodying habitus. On a more competitively apparent level, boxers who find themselves denied or less interested in training and its social reassurances –be they amulets, massages or diets–, or who spend too much time away from a gym, may simply not 'feel' as prepared for competition.

Alternatively, in placing one's efforts and hours into the homosocial realm of boxing, a distance between genders is created and maintained. If Suleth is to spend a vast portion of his younger years engaged in training (as Chula undoubtedly had), he might grow up with only a distant understanding of the opposite gender. Peter Vail describes boxers in training camps who communicate with passing women through a series of cat-calls and even resort to hasty performances of their most visibly impressive boxing skills, for example (1998: 186). While the masculine expression of boxing was an especially open social avenue at Suleth's age, suggestions as to other areas where his attentions and energies could be appropriately expressed throughout his lifecourse (working, wandering and perhaps in his eldest years, cock-fighting) were avidly demonstrated by the friends and family members all around him.

Muai Thai fighters may find, in practice, a masculine identity in which they may realize their roles as breadwinners (Kitiarsa 2003: 83) and present an alternative to stereotypical masculine Thai roles of "*nakleng* (gangster), *jao pho* (a 'mafia boss' or 'godfather') or corrupt *kharatchakan* (civil servant) (Kitiarsa 2003: 86). The role of

breadwinner, however, and the symbolic capital achieved through journeys in which danger is faced, are also readily embraced through the conditions of migrant labor that rural, northeastern Thai men are employed in. I often observed trucks of field workers (wearing hoods, balaclavas, and long-sleeved clothing which would shield them from the sun) shuttled along the highway, hanging off of the back of fast-moving trucks as the successful Thai boxer had. The economic gifts and family feasts that announced the return of Suleth's uncles after periods of work in Bangkok, and not to mention the absence of his migrant-working mother Nok, may all have provided a sense of potential alternative forms of labor in Suleth's future. Within the community, another one of Sap's friends was going to visit his wife in South Korea, where she was employed in a shoe-making factory. While migrant labor was obviously not a male-dominated sphere, forms of employment in which evident risk of corporeal capital was entailed, most definitely were assumed by Thai men. This included drilling or cutting concrete in sandals, unharnessed construction work laying rafters or roofing several stories above the ground, as well as underwater logging: an occupation which had apparently led to the death of one man from a neighboring village and partially paralyzed another. In his ventures outward from home and village, an awareness of the appropriate methods for engagement expected in these activities on his social periphery was imparted, and Suleth was learning what it meant to be a Thai man.

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On what would become one of Suleth's final afternoons of official training in the ring, before his second bout in Ubon, both Jat and Suleth had been pacing back and forth across the burlap canvas as instructed, alternately raising right and left knees, thrusting their hips forward, practicing strikes on their invisible opponents. Even thus occupied within the ring, it was impossible to avoid noticing the unfamiliar,

rusting black pick-up truck full of middle-aged men which suddenly came to a halt on the gravel road just in front of the property that day.

Grandfather went out to exchange greetings with one of the men that had stepped out of the truck, and then walked around the hatchback to exchange pleasantries with its occupants. After a short time, Chula's brother Boon came out of the house, pulling a shirt on. After talking briefly with some of the men, he hopped on the family's motorcycle, drove down the road and returned with Sap. Jat, Suleth and I continued to go through our own separate training routines, but with one eye kept on the front of the property. Several of the men were now outside of the truck, walking and talking absently in front of the property.

This area, just beyond the shaky bridge built over the irrigation ditch, had just recently been refurnished with Chula's boxing sign, a herb garden sheltered by perforated black vinyl sheets, as well as some large flowers dug out of a neighbor's lot. Just in time, as it was now serving as the staging area for a larger meeting. Boon carried one of the largest bamboo mats from out of the house and spread it on the ground between these flowers and some large wooden logs which Doan's father had delivered to the front of the property. These were now serving as benches for a few of the older male visitors. After some discussion, Sap sped away on his own motorcycle and returned to the house with a plastic bag filled with several large bottles of beer. He then went inside the house to find glasses.

It was at this moment that Suleth's elder, 14 year old half-brother – whom Chula had quickly explained to me to be Sap's son via another wife I had never met, yet I suspected may have been the child of the eldest brother, now deceased – chose to arrive with one of his friends on a motorcycle, smiling and joking in front of the men. This was the first time I had ever seen him smoking a cigarette, although upon

emerging from inside the house, Sap immediately demanded he drop it and went on to scold him as the other men looked away, inducing an altogether more morose expression.

At this moment, both Jat and Suleth had completely ceased the pretense of practicing knee strikes, instead coming to rest with arms slung over the edge of the ring, their eyes completely fixed on Sap's conversation with his 14 year old son. Chula came out from inside of the house and instructed them to return to their training, which they did overdramatically at first, but looking sideways at the meeting once Chula has wandered off. Within a few minutes, Suleth's stepbrother was seated with the older men, pouring them drinks as Sap discusses the form of compensation and labor that his son will undertake in order to make good for crashing into and destroying another family's expensive motorcycle earlier in the day.

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A similar recipe for moments of danger faced and returned from was employed by the family's youngest sibling, Ging, when he was sent to prison. Although his cerebral palsy may have closed the masculine avenue of *muai Thai* to him, he was able to make his reputation in other ways. One evening in particular, I had come home to see the entire family distraught and an uncharacteristically heavy bout of drinking underway, Chula good-naturedly entertaining the girls, children and family friends that showed up around dinner time, playing the part of a lecherous drunk. While he was a generally ostentatious or gregarious personality, even this level of brevity seemed out of the ordinary for him. What was even more surprising was to see his generally quiet, inactive brother, Boon, stand up in the middle of this melee and suddenly deliver two quick kicks to the largest punching bag, which hung from the tree in front of the house's main entrance. In my four months in Thailand, this was

the only time I had seen him even touch a punching bag, with the exception of a moment or two where he carried his year-old nephew on his hip, holding the boy up to the bag and saying “oooayyy!”, shaking the giggling toddler whenever he threw a punch at the bag, or eventually, at Boon’s own face.

The sound of the largest punching bag when he kicked it however, shook the entire house and paused everyone in the yard, but only momentarily, as his older sister Hansa, who had also come by that evening, letting her children loose in the yard to laugh at and chase Chula, immediately dismissed her younger brother Boon’s kick with a laugh. Boon responded with a shrug, returning to a spot beneath the fighting cock’s awning to drink and talk with his co-worker. That night, Chula, his mother, me, along with a number of other neighbors rode inside the sheltered back of a pick-up truck for over an hour and half, headed towards another late-night *muai Thai* tournament. How would Chula act as Doan’s ringside coach, I wondered, if he was unable to even stand up, slumping instead on the floor of the truck, one arm resting on my shins, his head fallen back in his mother’s lap. Fortunately, when we arrived at the fight location in the middle of the night, it was determined that the bouts had been postponed for a day because of rain. The next day, we didn’t drive back. Three days after that, while training, I commented that I hadn’t seen Chula’s youngest brother Ging in a while – even on my afternoon jaunts around the neighborhood. A couple weeks before then, I had met him at the corner-store in front of the highway, where he drank beer, I drank soy-milk and both of us watched his friends pass bottles while gunning their motorcycles up and down the side of the highway.

Finally, it was explained to me, that’s Ging’s jaunts around the neighborhood had reached their logical conclusion. The family had discouraged him from fraternizing too heavily with these other youths, and now, during a night of drinking

and being prompted by his friends, he had slashed another man lengthwise across the face with a knife, and had now been imprisoned indefinitely. Chula emphasized to me that “We [the family] told him not to keep going with them. He can never come home now. He *is* mafia now! Mafia!”

In this case, I had had to check the translation: “You mean, *Nakleng?*” (cf. Kitiarsa 2003: 86).

“Yes.” Chula replied, and this was followed with another shrug and an immediate demonstration on training stances for the children. The conversation was over. The mistake had been dismissed, and the family had correctly disassociated themselves from these actions with an evening of blitheness and social disengagement.

Five days later, I walked up to the corner store at the highway to buy myself more bottled water. On my way out of the store, I was surprised to hear a familiar voice call my name. Ging, who had not yet been home, stood slightly askew on the roadside just past the front of the convenience store, only two hundred yards from where the local police station sat on the opposite side of the road. He was dressed in his usual blue jeans, the pair that he had once proudly told me had cost him 700 baht – relatively expensive by Thai standards, at about 22 American dollars. Instead of the black t-shirt he had worn so often before though, Ging appeared to have invested a new portion of his economic capital in a brand new t-shirt made up of thick, horizontal black and white stripes and a red skull and cross-bones splashed across the chest, an outfit which seemed to emphasize his recent experience of incarceration. Upon recognizing him thus, I turned around immediately to walk towards him, using my phrasal Thai to ask where he would go, and if he would go home. His expression changed at this, and as one of his friends came out of the corner store and started a

motorbike, he said to me “No. No home.” while climbing on the back of the bike. They drove off, down the highway, away from the police station and towards the cities.

I was worried that Ging might not actually return home, and it was two more days before I saw him as usual, eating breakfast next to Mother and Father, lounging in the hammocks next to the ring and being generally avoided by Boon’s pregnant wife. Later, I was told that the queen’s upcoming birthday had provided him with a pardon. This verdict somehow seemed more consistent with other stories of civic justice in the countryside. A Dutch expatriate in the next village also told me that one local man had served a year sentence for a murder committed with a machete during an evening of drinking and cajoling. Upon his release, the murderer had returned to the community with a more warily considered, albeit, infamous reputation.

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Thai boxing, and especially boxing at tournaments outside of the community, most notably in the urban center of Bangkok, offers a form of cosmological/royal patronage (scheduling and bouts in the two main stadiums in Bangkok, particularly Ratchadamnoen, fall strictly beneath the jurisdiction of royal sports administration) in which people move along radial pathways, between central and decentralized principalities, echoing the ‘pulsating’ forms of power historically realized by warring Thai polities and religious institutions (Tambiah 1976: 124-125, 102-131). This radial form of tribute comes in the form of boxers traveling from the peripheral northeast to urban Bangkok, but simultaneously, boxing provides an opportunity for men to rewrite their own versions of what might otherwise be misunderstood as a scripted Thai masculinity. As the height and position of the fading posters of Chula’s fights in Bangkok which remained taped to the family home’s wall attested, such activities

were deserving of recognition and elevated social status. When Chula and I were given a ride back to our village in the back of a truck driven by a member of the opposing soccer team (a team which was made up entirely of police officers), although I had mentioned nothing, Chula suddenly spread one of his arms out towards a collection of houses across the field next to the roadside and shouted through the wind at me "Everyone around here knows me!" Social recognition and travel beyond the immediate community was an important aspect of masculine status acquisition, even as it should be communicated to a foreign boxing-trainee such as myself, who might rightfully expect to train with a famous boxer.

As I have mentioned previously, the myths or stories of danger faced directly and dealt with coolly, through detached contemplation, minimal action and return from the threat of the wild, figure prominently in heightening the historical, political and spiritual status of highly respected forest monks [men considered higher and closer to Buddhist ideals than their female counterparts] in the rural Northeast (Tambiah 1984: 81-110). While the temporary apprenticeships in monasteries that so many rural northeastern Thai youths take more readily ensure northeast Thailand's predominance as the chief regional influence upon the country's monastic community (see Tambiah 1976:275), the social experiences of monastic apprenticeship carried out in this region also provide significant memories of these times apart from kin, family and immediate village communities in which collective, idealized masculine routines and approaches to the world are reinforced. One monk, for example, told his pupils to meditate in dangerous locations such as the mouth of a tiger's cave, where they might better come to terms with the possibility of death and danger (Tambiah 1984: 106). This understanding of danger and risk (cf. Lupton 1999: 1-5, 124-129), as

it is made significant through cultural histories and invested beliefs, is actively experienced and confronted within the world.

Suleth was on the cusp of a transition which might potentially lead him toward other avenues of masculine expression and self-extension as they appeared in his wider travels, as well as his views of his elder-half brother, cousins and uncles, all of whom presented suggestions for demonstrating a comfortable awareness of danger – either through hazardous motorcycle excursions, ‘*nakleng*’-like behavior, or return from manual labor in Bangkok. Through his fights in Ubon, Suleth faced a higher degree of immersion in the competitive world of Thai boxing, but his masculinity may have also eventually found expression via a combination of the abovementioned suggestions. While during the time I had lived with his family, Thai boxing had been an effective fit for Suleth’s excursions into the greater world, to what extent pugilistic practices would remain viable for him remained to be seen.

Chapter Six - Conclusion

Conclusion

Fighting is not an innately aggressive human activity, but is instead inescapably informed by culture (Gorn 1985: 42; Downey 2007). “Culture is the word we give to this potential world of images, stories, objects and ways of acting to which we may have recourse in our struggle to exist. But culture is not what determines the acting, or the need to act. These are existential imperatives” (Jackson 2005: 103). In giving credence to the bodily habits and expressive motions shared in the cultural milieu of rural, northeast Thailand, I have hopefully been able to communicate some of the forms that “existential imperatives” for action and change take there. In taking Pierre Bourdieu’s suggested attention to cultural practices (1977/1990) as my principle methodological guidepost, I have worked outwards from the practice-based, bodily habits taken up by inhabitants of a household in rural, northeast Thailand towards some of the social forms and expectations that permeate their world. These forms or expectations for appropriate interaction provide the basis for a masculine, underclass, rural Thai worldview. The beliefs held imperative in these contexts adhere to a fundamental hermeneutic orientation. In embodying these moral inclinations for action through ritualized expressions and habits (such as training), individuals bring a lived sense of meaning to the cultural texts, metaphors and practices brought forth in their world – be these cock-fighting, Thai boxing, manual labor or traveling.

Recognizing a distinctly Thai approach to creative motion, where individuals “express their internal power with minimal, controlled movements” (Tambiah 1984: 229), this research makes a record of the cultural etiquette that masculine (underclass) men in Thailand learn not only to negotiate the liminal edges of (by hanging off the

tailgates of trucks or seats of motorcycles on the highway, swinging sharp elbows in the ring, or taking up risky forms of manual labor) but also to construct, congeal and reinforce through a world of meanings hermeneutically consistent with the effects of their labors. As with popularly acclaimed forest monks in the nineteenth and twentieth century (Tambiah 1984), *muai Thai* fighters from the rural northeast in particular embody the marginal worlds of ancestral death, otherness and animality (as Chula's discourse regarding his Father's buffalo-boxing and his family's interactions with fighting animals such as cocks demonstrate) which necessarily permeate the cultural aesthetics of this successful, masculine, "Thai" activity. The multiple fighting forms and competitions in Thailand's northeast are thus logical (in a practical sense of the word) extensions of a bodily way of knowing or relating to this marginality.

In attempting to speak of embodied knowledge, it is important to realize that "[w]e are involved in the world and with others in an inextricable tangle" (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 528). The cultural dialectics implicit in the embodied actions that constitute a Thai lifeworld are likewise made real through the quotidian activities of everyday life. As I have emphasized through my descriptions of animals, children and laborers that passed through a northeastern, rural Thai household, the pragmatic social attentions of the rural Thai habitus adhere to a cultural aesthetic which is continuous in its approach to mobility – be it social and/or bodily. This study provides a unique contribution to the body of ethnographies concerned with Thai boxing, in that it presents rural household, village, class and kinship connections that influence the practical habitus.

Questions for further research

Considering this clearer understanding of the household and village backgrounds embodied by masculine, underclass Thai men, it may now be fruitful to

more carefully examine the habits, routines and minutiae of bodily ritual similarly inscribed through other forms of migrant labor in Thailand. In a fashion similar to Wacquant's study of American boxers (2004), a lengthier, linguistically fluent study may also compile the lifestory narratives of the boxers, managers and guardians around the ring which may also provide an account of the varied types of labor they engage in.

Despite the fact that the fieldwork for this study was carried out during a four month period in the rainy season, I was still able to observe several rural *muai Thai* tournaments. However, this was not considered peak season for boxing in Thailand, which was instead between February and April, making it similar to "warfare [which is] being conducted chiefly during the dry season" (Tambiah 1976: 120). A lengthier period of research in the field might not only allow for an investigation of the temporal, seasonal aspects of training embodied by practitioners, but may further explicate the social impact that this seasonal cycle has upon travelers, laborers and villagers within Thailand's northeast.

For sporting purists, I might concede that for an ethnography centered upon the practice of Thai boxing, my description has been relatively sparse in terms of the sport's technical details and social, managerial or business networks. While to some extent this reflects the social reality of training in my primary fieldsite, I feel that this research may also be relevant for *muai Thai* sporting enthusiasts, as it provides an account of the rural village life that most Thai boxers are familiar with – and by association, an account of the cultural milieu upon which camp training is predicated.

I also feel that a lengthier apprenticeship study might also document a more in-depth understanding of the technical, practical and bodily details of Thai boxing,

which, in furthering an understanding of the rural Thai habitus, also constitute an important way of taking hold of, or clinching social existence.

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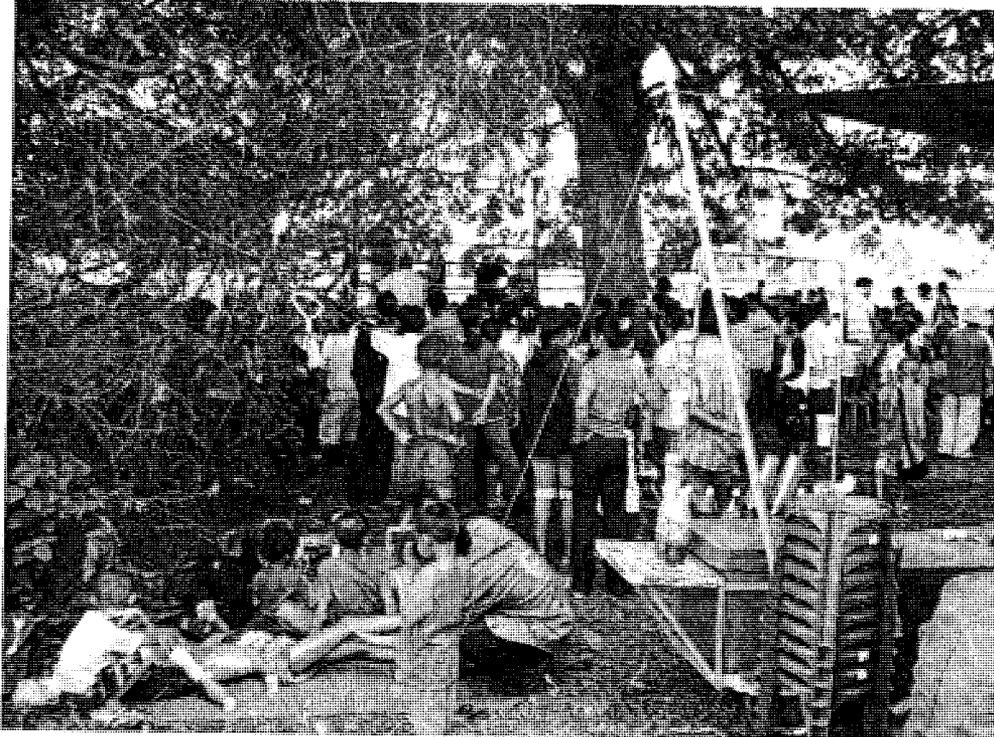
Photographic Appendix:

Photo 1: Families and friends gathered around the ring at a rural tournament. Note the ceremonial *mongkon* (head-piece) hung high, on the branches above the young fighter being massaged in the foreground.

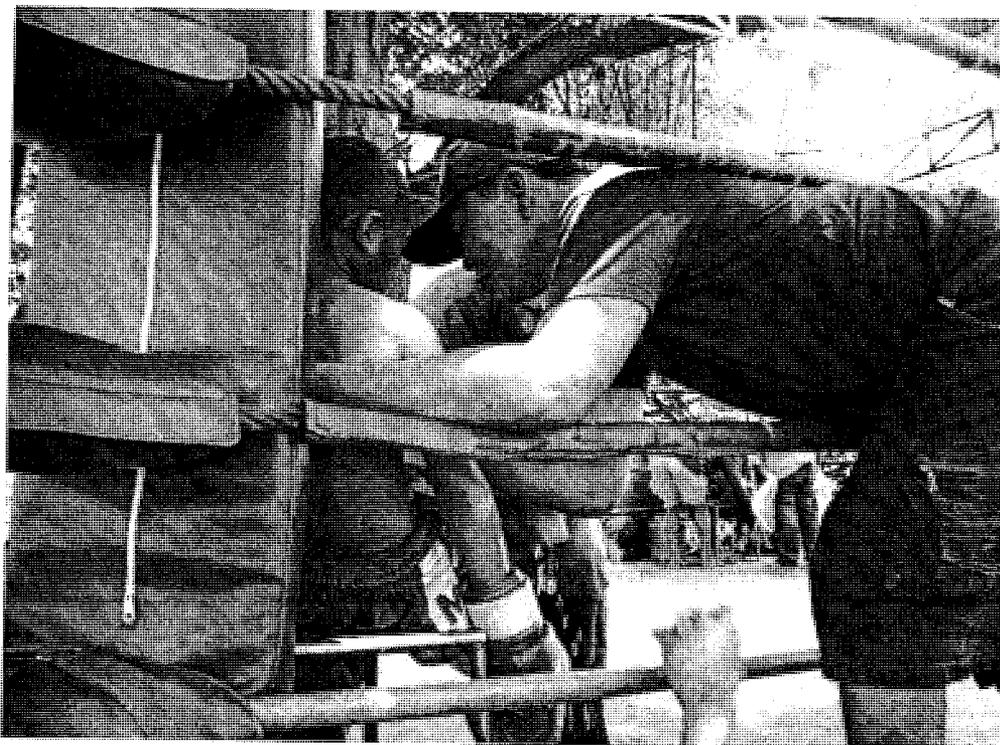


Photo 2: Jat receives advice between rounds from one of his father's friends as Sap, in the ring, massages his limbs with ice-cold water. (Notice the water cooler in his opponent's corner as well.)

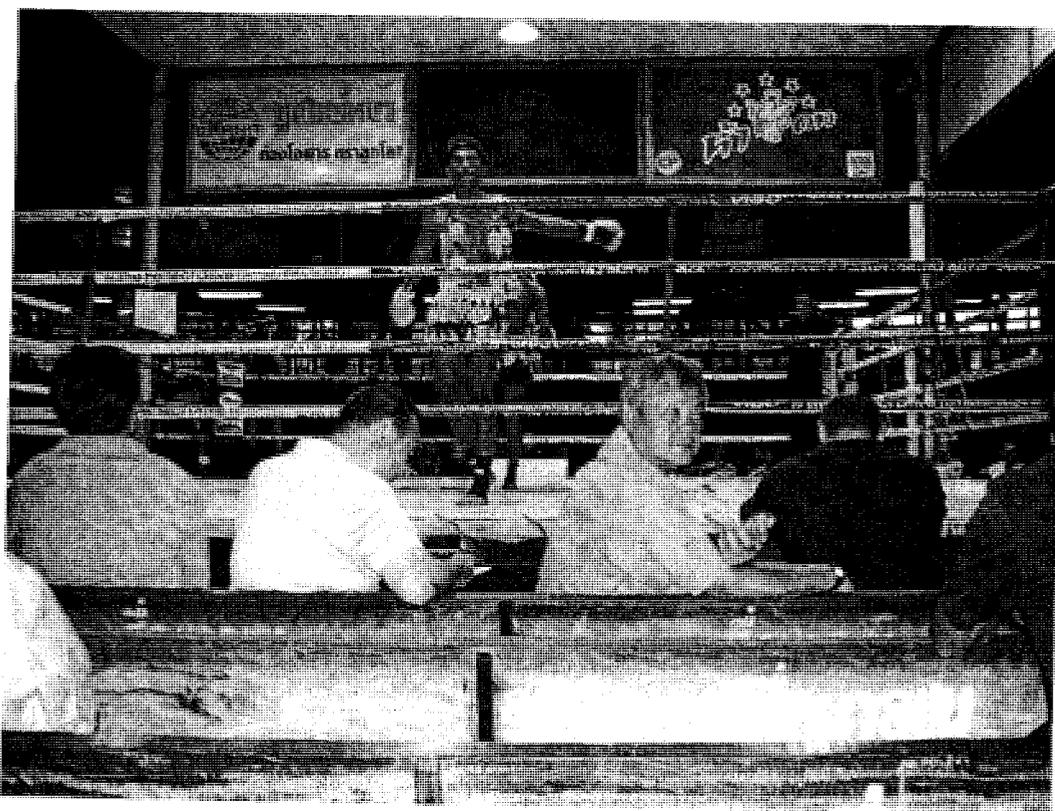


Photo 3: Fighters in Bangkok's Lumpini stadium perform their pre-bout *wai-kru* (honorific dance). The three men wearing solid colored golf shirts in the front-row broadcast insider information to pay-per-minute bettors in the bleachers, as well as outside the stadium via their cellular telephones.

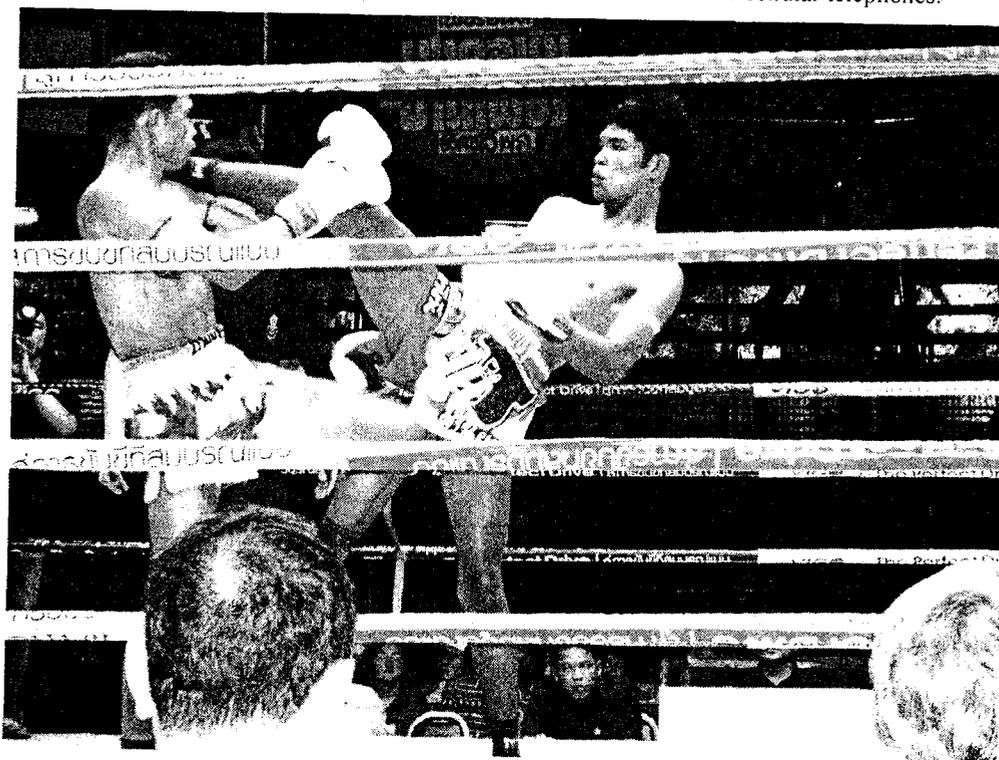


Photo 4: Two mastered opponents trade kicks and knees in Lumpini stadium.

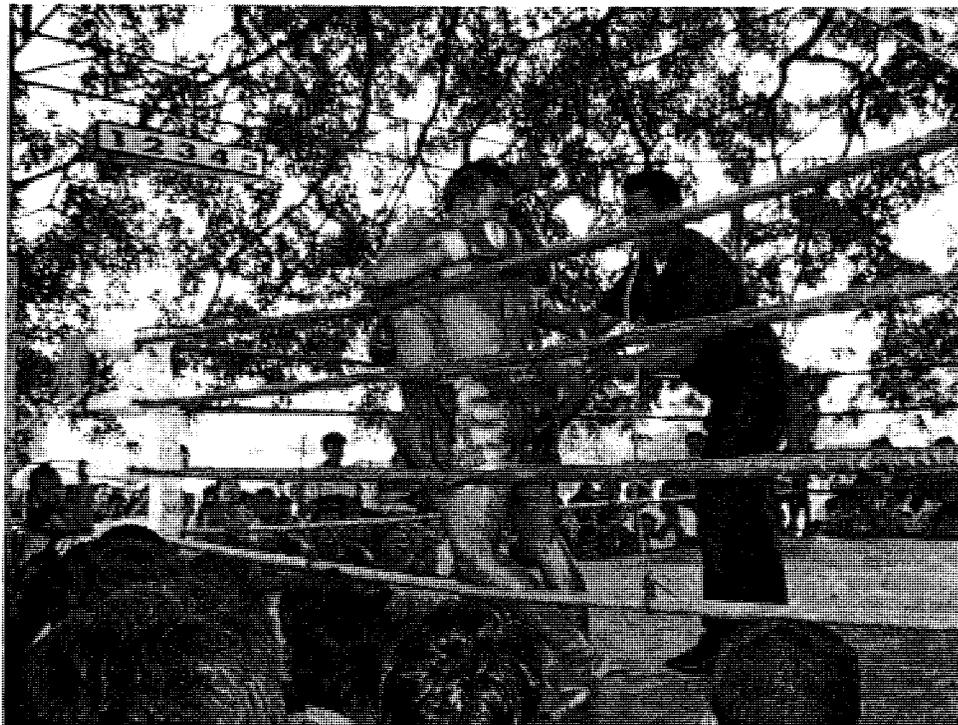


Photo 5: A referee intervenes as two veteran fighters become locked against the ropes in a stagnant clinch during the fifth and final round.

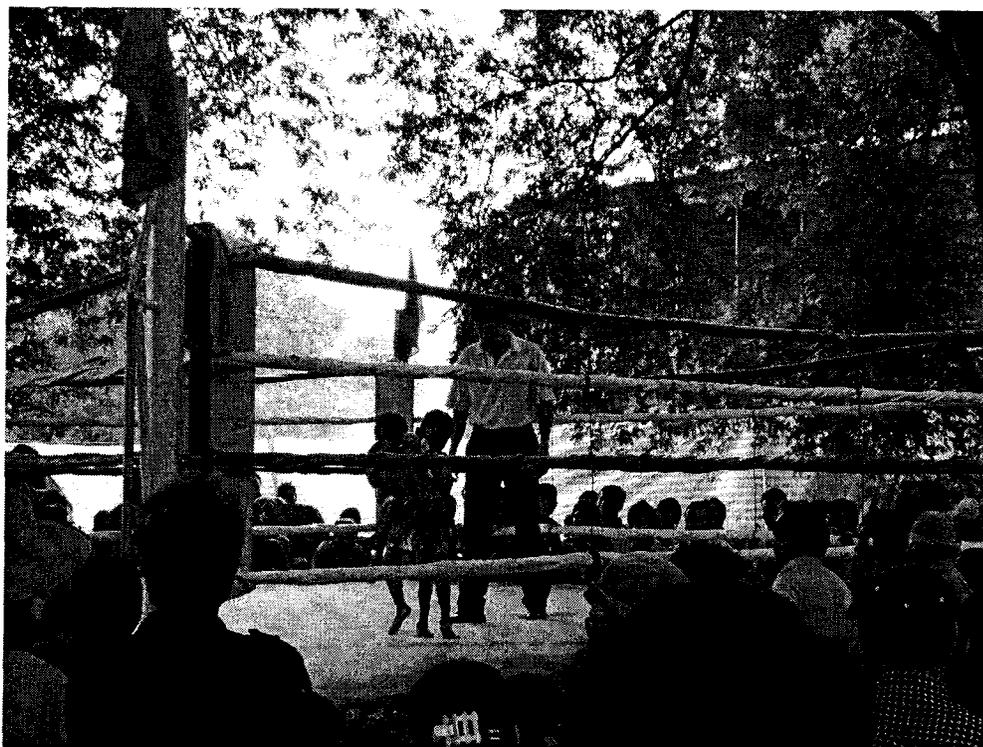


Photo 6: A novice fighter successfully delivers a knee from within the clinch. The younger combatants in this particular bout had not quite developed the specific skills required to put on a performance that would prompt vociferous betting. Most fights on the rural circuit take place between opponents aged 9 to 15, and the majority of these bouts compel the crowd to shout and gamble – often more so than when watching fights between older, veteran fighters.

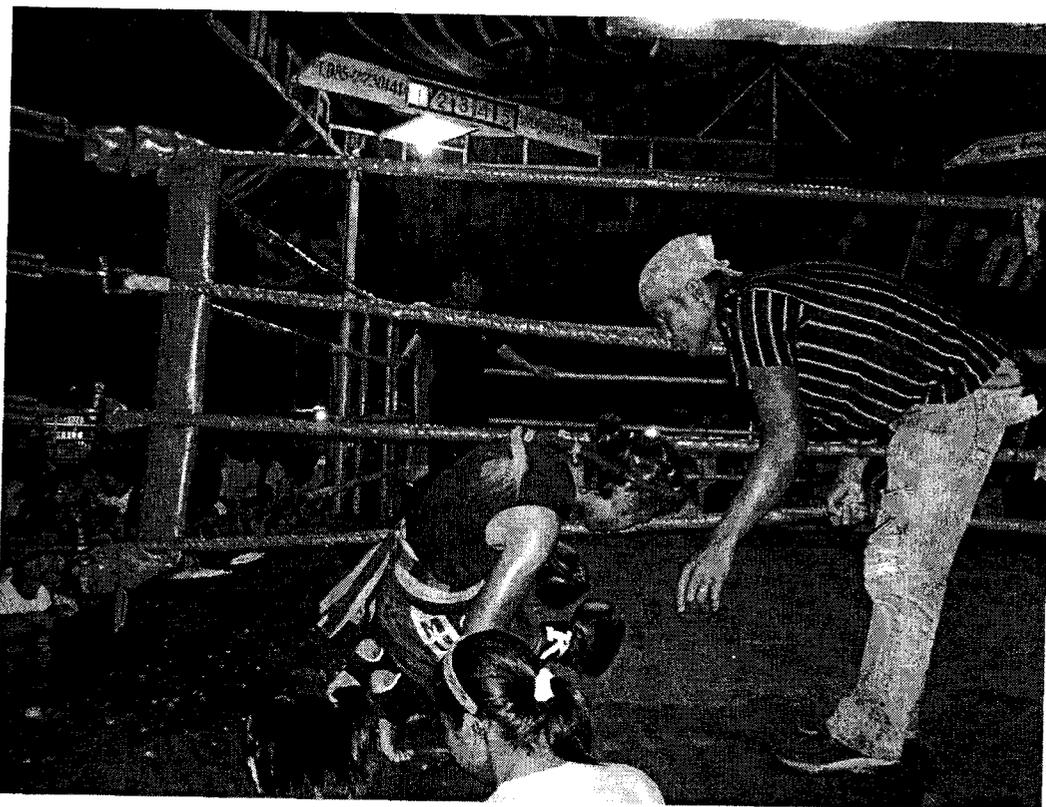


Photo 7: Before and after competition, female Thai boxers (*muay-ying*) enter and leave the ring by going under the bottom rope. Their male counterparts go over the top rope.



Photo 8: Young fighters of similar size stand up on a wooden platform to be matched after weighing in. Each person has a denomination (in kilograms) written in ink on their wrist.

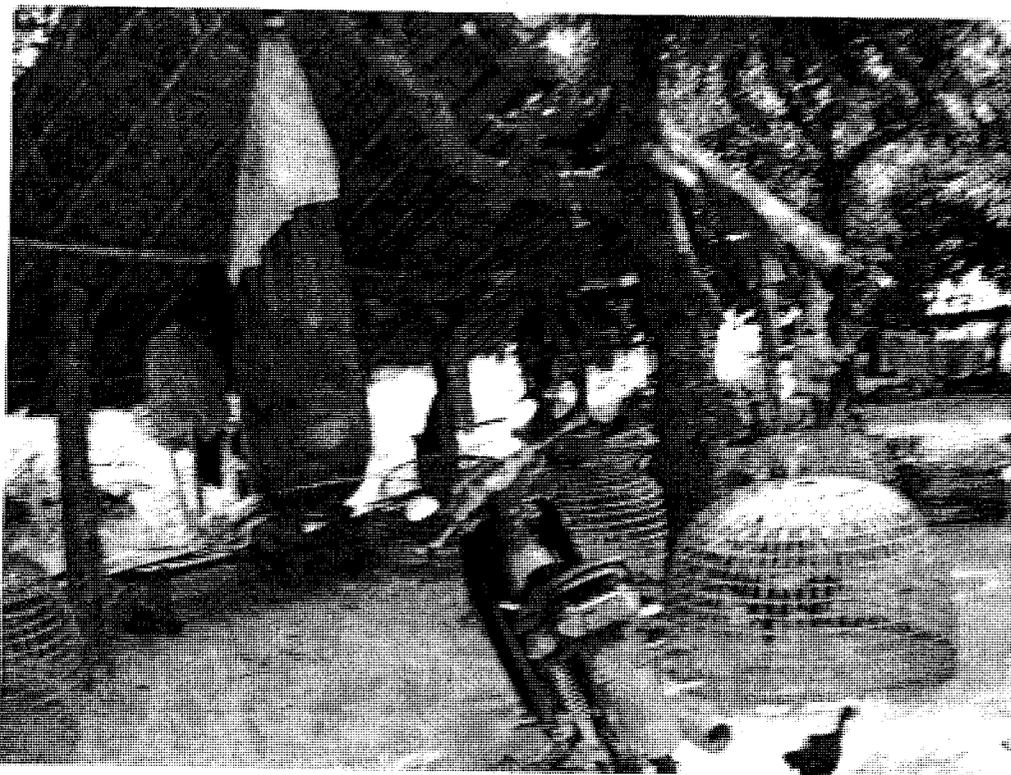


Photo 9: The sturdiest punching bag hung from a tree at the front of the household. The awning built directly behind this provided a shaded spot for visitors and family members to meet or eat in the afternoon, but also a rain shelter and display area for the largest, engaged fighting cocks. The expanded irrigation ditch (visible to the left of the punching bag) served as a fish farm/pond.

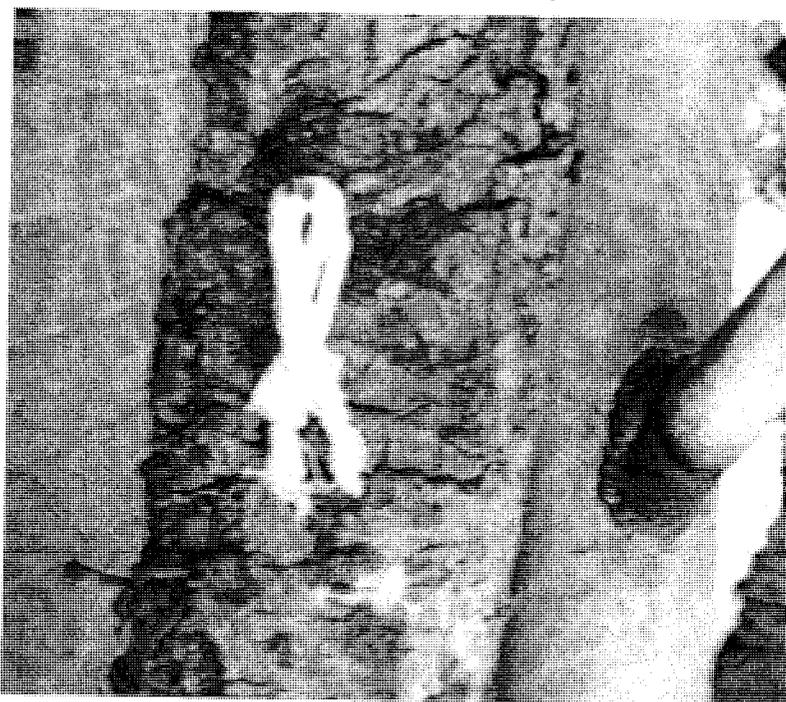


Photo 10: This string, blessed by local monks, was kept at eye-level, tacked to one of the ring's corner support beams. Once, at the end of an evening of worry and drinking, I noticed my trainer removed this string and tossed it into the ring. Upon finding it thus discarded in the morning, his father tacked it at eye-level to the tree in front of the house, directly above where the fighting cocks were kept.



Photo 11: Between the awning and the front of the family home, Grandson watches Uncle and Grandfather wash two fighting cocks. Behind the vinyl fence are the chicken coops on the far side of the house. The tackle box on the ground is full of vitamins, salves and injectable drugs for the cocks.

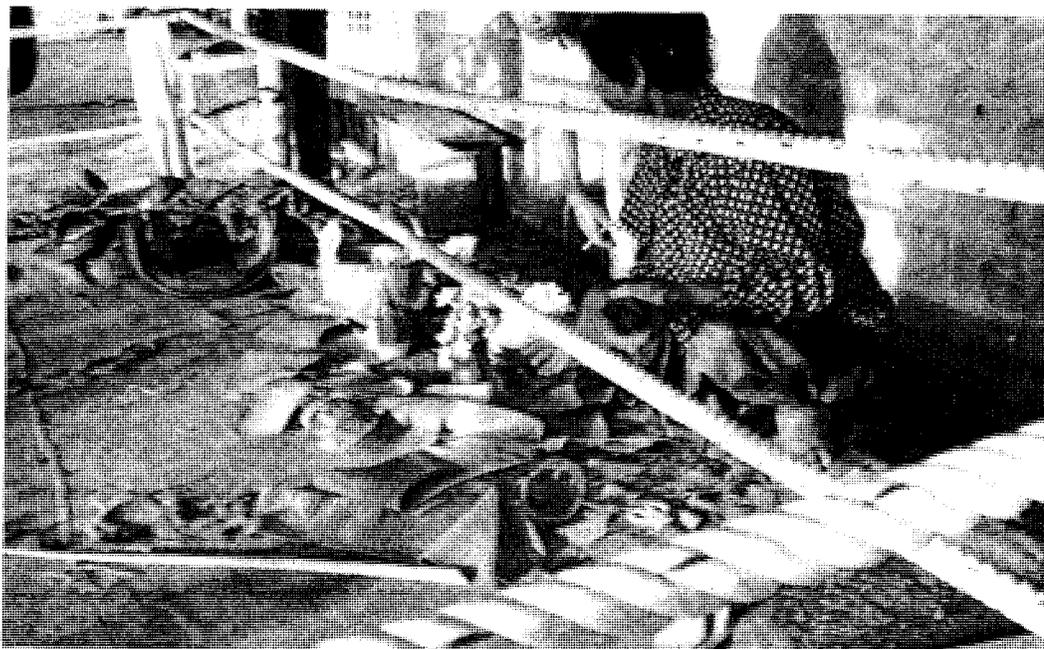


Photo 12: At ringside, mother and daughter weave and pin bamboo leaves into a conical centerpiece for a plate of sweet rice snacks which will be carried up to the local Buddhist temple.

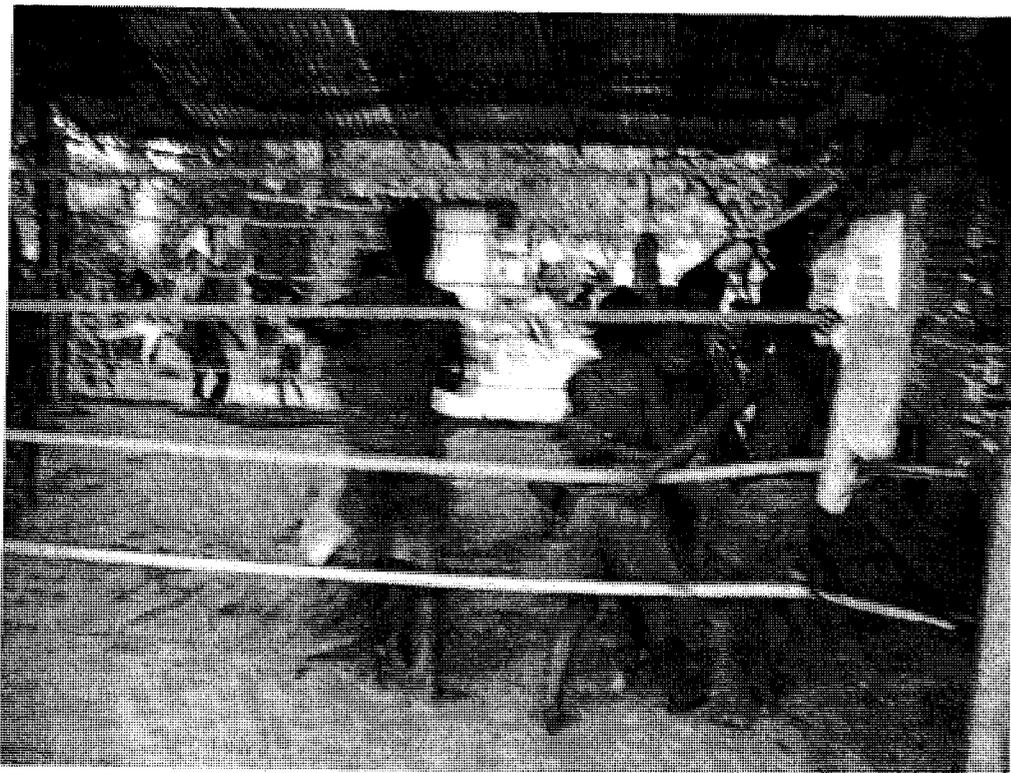


Photo 13: At home in the ring, several youths play at the practice of clinching. The family home is to the right. The washhouse/lavatory is in the background. (This photo was taken standing just outside one of the boarding house's two doors, five feet from the room I was given for the duration of my stay.)

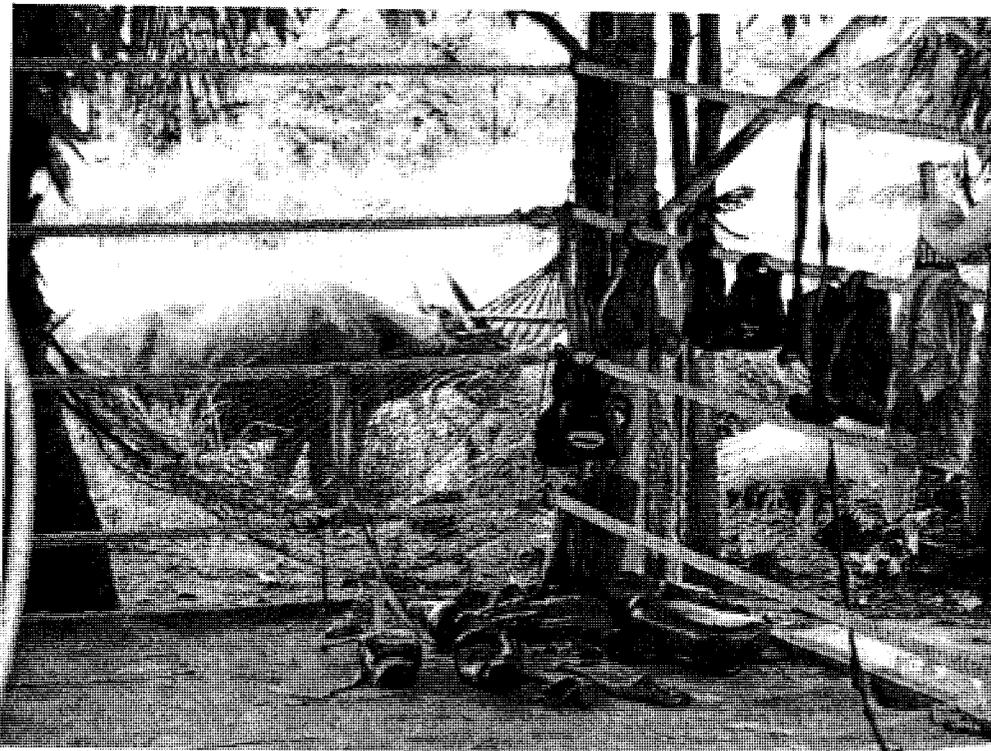


Photo 14: Beyond the hammocks strung next to the ring, a water-buffalo grazes in the neighbor's rice field. A wide variety of boxing equipment: thick handwraps, gloves, shin pads and trainer's wrist pads are left out to dry both day and night.

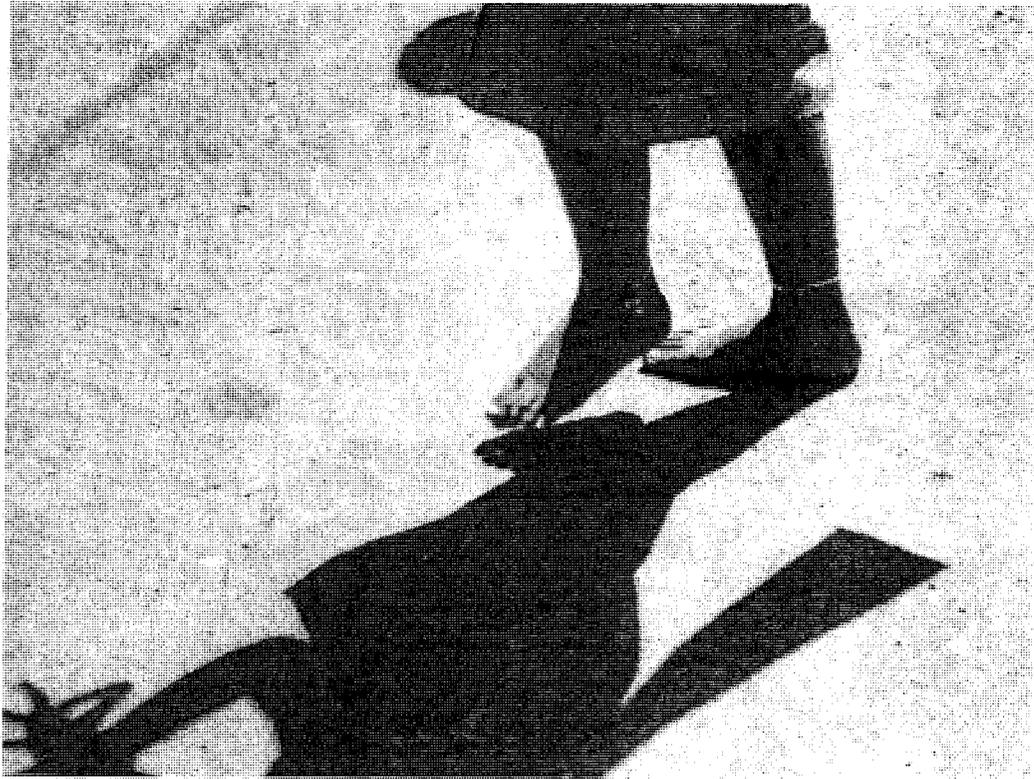


Photo 15: This young woman was one member of a line of dancers from her township entered in a parade at a local festival. While bells were tied around her succinctly turning ankles, the precise, twisting motions of her arms and fingertips revealed a series of surprising shadows.

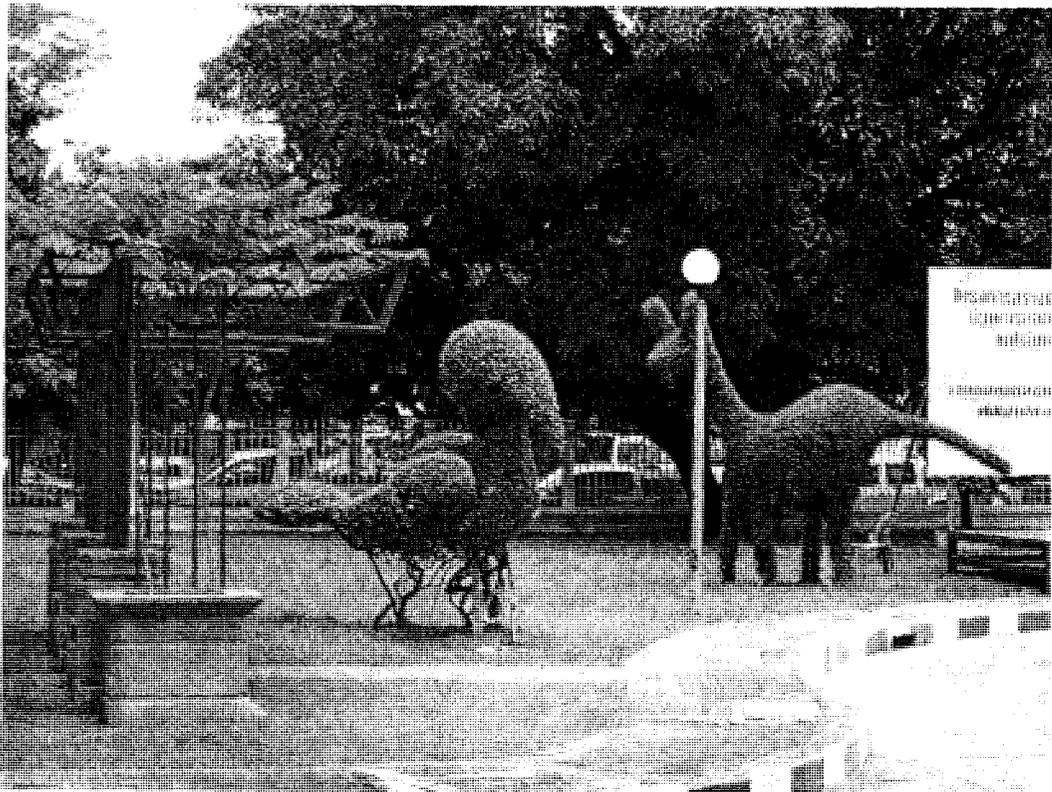


Photo 16: Animal-inspired lawn art outside of a government office building in Ubon Ratchathani.



Photo 17: Men indicate amounts to be bet through hand and finger signals as two fighting cocks duck and peck within the ring. The same hand signals are used to make bets at a *muai Thai* bout.



Photo 18: Recording the bets. The exact same procedures are followed at a *muai Thai* bout.



Photo 19: After creating a small incision with a razor in the top of his charge's head, the fighting cock's owner sucks any excess blood out of the cock's skull, spitting it aside. This prevents the fighting cock from becoming too heavy headed within the ring.



Photo 20: Sowing the fighting cock's eyelids open ensures that they will not swell shut during later rounds.



Photo 21: The owner poses for my camera between rounds with his fighting cock. Note the damp rag held over the cock's head, as well as the can of warm, smoking coals, dry shredded burlap and kindling held below its body. Eventually, this cock went on to win the day's main event.

Photo 22: Seeing my camera, this man pulled up his bandana to reveal a large dent in his forehead, left after he had absorbed an elbow strike in the ring as a youth. Many former fighters carry numerous scars, most often across their eyebrows and foreheads. Invariably, the vast majority of these scars are explained by stories in which a former opponent's sharp elbow is prominently featured.



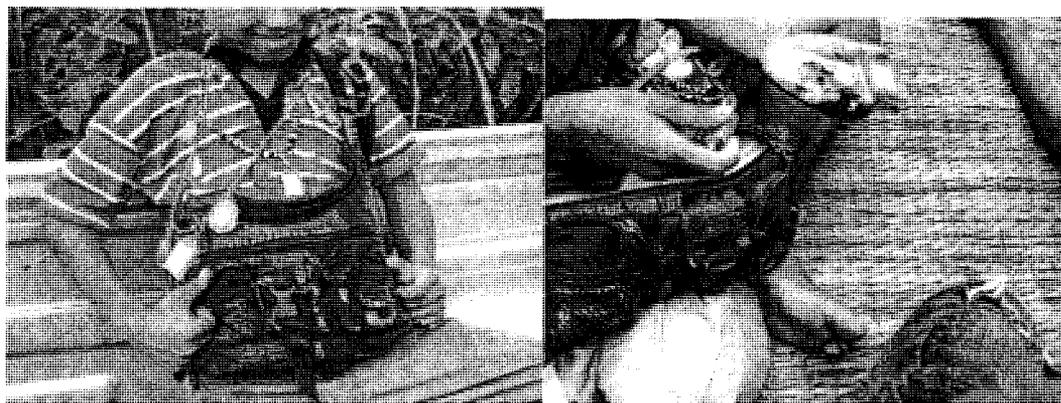


Photo 23/24:

Jat displays the collection of amulets, phalluses and necklaces entrusted to him by his father. An English phrase legible on the medical-themed bag he carries this paraphernalia in: "MAY SAVE YOUR LIFE".

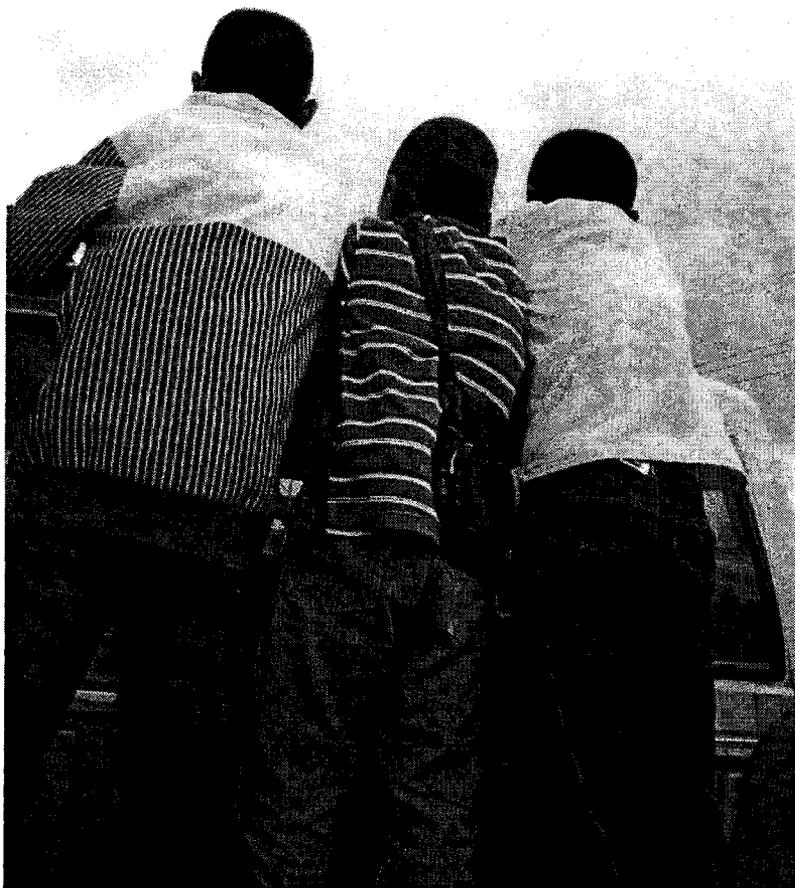


Photo 25: With their best thick-threaded shirts, blue jeans and fresh haircuts, Suleth, Jat and their friend, Toom, stand up in the back of a neighbor's truck for a better view as we race along the highway toward another *muai Thai* tournament.