MARTIAL ARTS IN MYANMAR:
TRANSFORMATIVE TRAINING AND FIGHTING RITUALS

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

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May 2014

ABSTRACT

Myanmar martial arts, specifically the *let-whay* style, or Myanmar traditional boxing, are practiced by multiple ethnic groups, as well as among the Burman majority, and they offer almost an entirely unstudied field of inquiry. With a history of the Myanmar government continuing the British categorical system of ethnic groups and contributing to ethnic minority separatism how do the martial arts play a part in community development, and subsequently, identity formation? *Let-whay* is popular among students, military personnel, and professional fighters in the city of Yangon. The question arises whether the presence of a *let-whay* center plays a positive, cohesive role in Yangon local society, or what its role is.

My thesis is that martial arts centers promote a community environment among its students despite the presence of differing ethnic groups. I propose that through the "power of movement", practitioners and trainees feel a sense of "community", regardless of age, nationality, ethnicity or gender. I shape my interpretations through the lens of Arnold van Gennep's theory of "liminality". In my thesis, I attempt to build a new interpretation of "liminal" experiences. Perhaps these "liminal" experiences are not disappearing in an era of increasing industrial nations and instead are alive and functioning in Myanmar in the context of the martial arts in a country caught in its own ongoing political, social, and economic transitions.

First I describe a shared martial arts historical narrative as a liminal "commonality" for the participants. Secondly, I determine that *let-whay* practitioners from Yangon local society, a modern city, and foreigners from industrial nations embody a sense of community by experiencing shared phases of liminality. Furthermore, I suggest that despite "liminoid" characteristics, practicing the martial arts in Yangon is not necessarily by "choice," the leading

factor determining what is “play” versus ”work.” I argue that the practitioners experience “liminal rites of passage” therefore they embody lived martial arts.

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Yangon, Myanmar using methods that included participant observation, formal interviews, informal conversations, and questionnaires in a five-week period over the winter break of the academic year 2013 – 14, and also by email during three week after my return to Cornell University. I observed three separate martial arts centers in and around Yangon City, Myanmar. However, most of the data collected for this paper comes from only two of these centers – the *Thut Ti Let-Whay* Myanmar Boxing Club (*Thut Ti*) and the Ko Kyaw Soe’s Let-whay gym.

I conclude that a sense of community exists at the *Thut Ti* center despite the presence of novice, amateur, and professional fighters, of various ethnic and national groups and religion, of both genders. Since foreign fighters can embody similar liminal experiences that national fighters endure, they too participate as a member of the Myanmar boxing club.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Marjorie Alicia Mosereiff was born near Manila, Philippines, but grew up in Pennsylvania since the age of three. She completed her first BA degree in Russian Studies in 2000 at West Chester University and her second BA degree in Political Science with a Social Studies teaching certification in 2009 at West Chester University. She is receiving her M.A. in Asian Studies with a concentration in Southeast Asia from Cornell University in 2014.

To my parents, who took a chance on me and demonstrated and excelled in the value of hard work, integrity, and humor.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is so much to be thankful for and so many people to thank so I am not sure where to begin. First, I would like to give my thanks and gratitude to my two committee members, Professors Magnus Fiskesjö and Kaja McGowan who have provided so much encouragement, advice and humor to every situation. My 2012 Asian Studies cohort needs a huge recognition for all the luncheons, laughs, stress release sessions, and for being there on the day of my defense. Thank you for all your support to Nguyet Minh Tong, Chairat Polmuk, Jinglin Pao, and Genie Yoo. I want to give a big thanks to Aldrich Sawbwa for providing contact information and for a place to live during my fieldwork, Wyn Soe-Lin for translations and interpreting, and Maw Tun for conversation lessons. I want to thank my Burmese teachers, Sayama Daw Swe Swe, Sayama Kyi Kyi, and Saya U Saw Tun, for their fantastic Burmese lessons. I want to recognize Cornell's Southeast Asian Program for providing monetary contributions to fund my research trip and an academic year of learning. I wouldn't be here in graduate school without my parents' encouragement and confidence in me. Lastly, there are no words to convey my thankfulness and love for my loving spouse who has been there from the very beginning of this journey. I only survived with her unwavering support when I felt low, her smiles and laughs when I discovered something new, and her constructive criticism where I couldn't see it.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SLORC, State Law and Order Restoration Council

SPDC, State Peace and Development Council

TBB, Thaing Byaung Byan

PREFACE

My personal journey into the martial arts began as a child. But I didn't pursue it quite the same way that most youngsters inevitably did in America of the 80's. See, I was adopted at three years old, from the Philippines into a Caucasian family. This family was no ordinary Caucasian family, although they would disagree. I had the grand privilege of growing up on an 80-acre dairy farm, and yes, with cows, pigs, and kittens and the sweet smell of manure. My playground existed of cornfields, tree houses, and streams that run through open cow pastures. With surroundings like these and two older brothers, I naturally developed into a tomboy and eventually became interested in martial arts. How does martial arts play a role in my story. More importantly, how does my story relate to this thesis?

Around ten years old, I was beginning to question where I fit in the world. And when I say "world", I mean it as it encompassed my immediate and extended family and elementary school. Besides my adopted sister, also from the Philippines, no one else looked like me. I noticed that my parents didn't share the same thick black hair on my head. Neither of my brothers had wide brown eyes nor skin that quickly tanned into dark brown in the sun. My cousins shared characteristics with my siblings, that I didn't share. Ultimately, I began to understand that I was different, but I didn't want anything to do with being different.

The day my family bought a VHS player for the first time, three videos also arrived at our front door. I remember opening up the wrappers to Ghostbusters, Robert Redford's The Natural, and The Karate Kid starring Ralph Macchio. I watched the Karate Kid at least once a day for the next two years. What followed was an intense interest in the martial arts film placing myself in those fantastical worlds.

I also have fond memories of my youth watching low budget kung fu films. With heartfelt gusto, I imitated the incredible kicks, quick punches, and farfetched flips, while also mimicking the dubbed voiceovers. Although, as an adult, I savor the nostalgic enjoyment that martial arts films evoke and inspire in me personally and intellectually. Martial arts in general have grown in importance as a popular culture phenomenon, thanks to the Bruce Lee films of the 1970's. These genre films successfully evolved to showcase mythical interpretations of Chinese historical figures such as the Yip Man (teacher of Bruce Lee) or to advocate Buddhist values through Thailand's *muay Thai* (kickboxing). As popularized film narratives exhibiting martial arts choreography, they conjure a tangible sense of national and transnational pride and ethnic identity (Teo 2009; Pattana 2007).

I had fantasies that I came from a long line of martial artists, and I had to keep it a secret. Retrospectively, looking back, I didn't want to be stereotyped as a typical Asian. I wanted to be like everyone else. The martial arts secret identity was my lived experience: Experiences I forged within these martial arts films.

This thesis has been written in recognition of my confused youth. It is a study of a martial arts style trained at separate gyms around Yangon city, Myanmar. It reveals secrets and keeps others private. It values the fantasy, but also reveals the "real" of martial arts training. It touches upon ideas of identity through the martial arts.

As an Asian-American I myself felt compelled to practice the martial arts. Do all Asians, particularly Southeast Asians, practice the martial arts? Pop culture may suggest that many of them do. However, I didn't, because I didn't want to be stereotyped. What about practitioners who are not Asian? It opens the lines of communications on transnational martial arts. Who can become a martial artist? What childhood stereotypes do I break down? Why do the martial arts

as a child versus as an adult? What kind of meaningful experiences form from practicing the martial arts?

My thesis explores the martial arts in Myanmar and asks how a martial arts center provides a safe and communal space for trainees of various ethnic backgrounds, nationalities, religion, and gender. I first chose to research on Myanmar from a prior experience eight years ago while teaching English in Thailand. I had the fortuitous opportunity to meet individuals from Myanmar who were living and working in Thailand. While drinking tea in tailor shops these interesting individuals also told personal stories about their immigration to their new home. Ignorant and curious about Myanmar, I naturally read up about the subject and quickly learned of its isolation from the international community and its human rights violations of ethnic minorities.

In 2012 I entered the masters program in Asian Studies at Cornell University in hopes to fight for the rights of these ethnic groups and communicate to the world the atrocities that are happening. But then I came across an article in the *Journal of Burma Studies* that discussed the traditions of Burmese martial arts. Since then, I was hooked on the subject. There was also a shift of my way of thinking about Myanmar. Many scholars and activists were already writing on the conflict between the government and the ethnic minorities, refugees on the Thai-Burma border, and the politics of military rule. Although, I am concerned and aware of these issues, I decided I wanted to focus on a cultural phenomenon that affects the everyday population within the country – the martial arts. On a smaller scale, I wanted to see a facet in the quotidian lives of individuals who live in the city of Yangon, and how the martial arts influences the trainees' way of living. I also wanted to research a topic where unity is encouraged and the values of integrity, hard work, and community are respected.

Introduction

Beautifully brutal art...I'm happy they are on our side.
- Lord Mountbatten, 1937[1]

1. The Challenge

Bare knuckles crunching bone to bone; blood, sweat, and spit spattering, flying skin to skin; calloused toes twisting, pounding passion on passion. With sharp eyes and a focused application of ferocity, these are sensual descriptions of the movements integral to *let-whay*[2], or Myanmar traditional boxing. This is the dramatic force that fighters exhibit during a match or a competition. Eyes widening, fists pumping, palms clapping - the sincerest cheers reassure the nearly defeated. These are the reactions to such fights. *Let-whay* is indeed a brutal and intense activity and is one of several categories under Myanmar martial arts, also known as Burmese fighting or combative techniques.

The historical origins of the martial arts traditions in Myanmar (Burma) began during the reign of King Anawrahtar of the Pagan Empire[3] between (approximately) 1044 and 1078 A.D. A monumental shift from Indian to Chinese influence occurred at that time thereby also affecting the martial arts styles in which only the nobility could engage. As the ethnic groups competed for territory, they systemized their unique fighting techniques that later developed into the modernized versions of martial arts in Myanmar. However, the British piecemeal colonization of Myanmar in the 1800's disrupted the development of the combative styles. For fear of rebellion and retaliation from the indigenous groups, the British colonial administration in

[1] See Donn Draeger and Robert Smith's "Comprehensive Asian Fighting Arts" (1980). They were the first to

[2] This is the Burmese word for "traditional boxing." Some other transliterated versions include *letwei* or *lethwei*. I choose to use the "let-whay" spelling because the martial arts center I observed uses this version on their promotional banner.

[3] Also written as Bagan.

Burma/Myanmar[4] banned all forms of indigenous fighting techniques. Ironically, in the 1930's and under the supervision of the British, the Gurkha Rifles (a branch of the British Indian Army in Burma/Myanmar) publicly formed the Military Athletic Club in the attempt to restore the Burmese traditional fighting arts. In the midst of World War II, the Japanese military officers stationed in Burma/Myanmar also encouraged the proliferation of indigenous styles while incorporating the Japanese martial arts. What followed independence (1948) was the gradual development of modern martial arts practice with the resurgence of *let-whay* boxing tournaments and the formation of national martial arts organizations.[5] Today, Myanmar martial arts continue to be practiced by members of multiple ethnic groups, as well as among the Burman majority in Myanmar, and yet intriguingly, they offer a hitherto almost entirely unstudied field of inquiry. The various styles are categorized as either combative and self-defense, sport for competition, or performance art for exhibition.

First and foremost, regardless of international location or era, participating in the martial arts promotes unity and community. On one hand, while the application of the martial arts was first primarily intended for military or defense purposes and the skilled fighters were often referred to as "warriors,"[6] [7] the onset of nation-states engendered abstract views of the martial arts as symbols of nationalism and ethnic identity.[8] As Denis Gainty chronicled the incorporation of martial arts into the Japanese physical and public education curriculum during the Meiji period (1868-1912 A.D) to extend and maintain a sense of nationalism (2013:95-117),

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[4] During British colonialism, Myanmar's country name was changed to a more Anglo-cized sounding name -Burma along with changes of city names (ie Yangon to Rangoon; Ava to Inwa; Pegu to Bago) .

[5] See chapter 1.2 for more explanations on the different Myanmar martial arts styles and techniques and chapter 2 for the history. Also, see Green 629-632 and Draeger and Smith 155-157 for more detailed, but still limited, history.

[6] For a detailed account of the origins of the Chinese martial arts military traditions made famous through the legendary stories of the Shaolin warrior monks be sure to read Shahar especially chapters 1, 2 and 3.

[7] Also see Lorge, "Chinese Martial Arts: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century," for a detailed historical development of Chinese martial arts.

[8] Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities" is the groundbreaking scholarship on the origins of nation-state formation and nationalism.

Adam D. Frank described how *taijiquan*, the most popular slow-moving martial art in China, was "part of the construction of a whole national discourse about 'strengthening the national body' that arose in China in the 1920's…as a kind of 'master symbol' (2006:159)." In America, although practitioners engage in the martial arts for personal reasons, dojos, or training halls, provide a space to feel a sense of belonging, to form friendships, and to build a collective identity (Donohue 101-110). These are a few examples where a sense of community or nationalism occurs in a martial arts framework.

Myanmar, however, is a unified nation only in theory since ethnic strife and civil war still continue on the borderlands of Kachin, Shan, and other states within Myanmar despite the recently adopted new constitution and ongoing reconciliation efforts. Nor is Myanmar as a nation recognized for its martial arts, due to a lack of scholarly research on the topic. With a history of the Myanmar government continuing the British system of categorizing ethnic groups and thus contributing to ethnic minority separatism, I wanted to ask, how do the martial arts play a part in community development?

Let-whay, in the city of Yangon, is popular among professional and amateur fighters from diverse Myanmar ethnic groups, as well as from the international community. With this in mind, the question arises whether the presence of a *let-whay* center plays a positive, cohesive role in Yangon local society, or what is its role, whereas a sense of community does exist in martial arts gyms of other nations. My hypothesis is that the center promotes a community environment of cohesion and unity among its students despite the presence of different ethnic groups among those who train there. Most importantly, this cohesion overcomes the differences between the diverse ethnic groups and international community.

2. The Significance of van Gennep and Turner

I propose that through the "power of movement", practitioners and trainees, regardless of age, nationality, ethnicity or gender, feel a sense of "community." I will shape my interpretations through the lens of Arnold van Gennep's theory of "liminality"(meaning "threshold" in Latin). Victor Turner, one of the most influential anthropologists on performance and rituals of the 20th century successively championed van Gennep's work. Simply put, according to van Gennep in his *Rites of Passage* (1960), all small-scale societies practice transitional rituals during periods of life changes. These rituals exist in order to demonstrate and achieve the passage to a different stage of life or the transition into the next level of society. For example, transitions can occur during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, initiation rites into fraternities, or the ordination into monkhood are just a few examples of these rites of passage.

Individuals in small-scale societies such as the Hopi of Oraibi in Arizona (Turner 1960:43) and Lillooet in British Columbia (Turner 1960:69) participate in three separate phases during transitional rituals. The "preliminal rites phase" refers to the period when the individual(s) separate him or herself from society in order to prepare for the transition. The "liminal phase" is when he or she transitions to the level or class in society. The final stage is "postliminal rites" in which the individual(s) reenters society in their new transitioned body or status in society. During these phases the individual(s) perform certain duties, acts of respect and/or demonstrate knowledge or a skill in order to transition.

Turner extended van Gennep's ideas in his work "From Ritual to Theatre" by distinguishing certain kinds of "liminal" rituals (required in small-scale societies) from the

characteristics of "liminoid" rituals that are performed by choice. He went on to make distinctions within the binary opposition of the idiosyncratic "liminal" acts of "work" versus the "liminoid" actions of "play" or "leisure" (Turner 1982:20-38). However, he claimed that "liminoid" experiences only exist in industrial nations where "liminal" experiences, which according to van Gennep existed in tribal or agrarian nations, have been diminishing altogether. In my thesis, I challenge this view and attempt to build a new interpretation of "liminal" experiences. Perhaps these "liminal" experiences are not disappearing in an era of increasing industrial nations and instead are alive and functioning, as in Myanmar in the context of the martial arts, specifically in *let-whay*, in a country caught in its own political, social, and economic ongoing transitions.

3. Aforementioned arguments and analyses

Literature on Myanmar martial arts is virtually non-existent. In developing a methodology, I want to recognize three authors who have done research on South Indian, Malay, and Westernized mixed martial arts. Once I introduce their work, then I intend to refer back to them throughout the ethnographic portion of the paper.

Prior to the 1990's, the general literature, and the even scarcer scholarship references on martial arts focused primarily on the history and on the technical or instructional aspects of combative systems. In the past two decades there has been a surge of scholarship not only concentrating on the history of martial arts but also on aspects of embodiment, theories of performance, and identity formation (Jones 2002, Frank 2006, Shehar 2008, Farrer and Whalen-

Bridge 2011, Gainty 2013). The martial arts, although still obscure in terms of the availability of resources, is developing into a respected and innovative scholarly field.

Phillip B. Zarrilli, the leading western scholar of the South Indian martial art *kalrippayattu*, who is also a choreographer, director and actor, quite vividly and poetically described the embodied power emanating from the practitioner. The technique comprises of acrobatic movements, meditative and dynamic combative poses, and expressive facial articulations. He contended that all these exercises are meaningless unless embodied through appropriate practice and habituation. Only then can the practitioner reach "higher stages of meditation," or a new stage after performing ritualized movements. Moreover, he confirmed that practicing and training in the martial arts "is a ritual process" and individuals engage in "radical and effective transformation…as what occurs in healing or life cycle rituals" (Zarrilli 1990: 133) which hints at liminal experiences. He has contributed to the body of literature that acknowledges the presence of "ritual rites" in and "transformative" states of physical being in practicing *kalrippayattu*. Nonetheless, despite Zarrilli's descriptions of ritual processes, *kalrippayattu* is still performative or an act and the practitioners become, temporarily, a "character" which perhaps runs parallel with Turner's description of liminoid experiences. By contrasting the training and fighting in the boxing ring to *kalrippayattu* training and performing, I determined that participating in *let-whay* is liminal.

The anthropologist and avid martial arts practitioner, D.S. Farrer has published a well-researched and extensive body of work on the relationship between the indigenous aspects of the mystical and magical role of shamanism and ritual with performance and embodiment of the Malay martial art practiced by the Haqqani Islamic Sufi Order, called *silat*. By providing detailed evidence combined with illustrations he formulates "theory of the enchantment of

performance and the performance of enchantment" in Sufi religion and styles of *silat* training. To make his theory clearer, I draw attention to his claim that Westerners who go through the religious conversion to become Muslim and train in *silat "*miss the real magic of *silat*, which is the ability through arduous practice to transform the body and self to attain psychophysical power *(zahir batin)* (Farrer 2009:70). He also posits that for some trainees in *silat*, to "frame a situation, space, and time is linked to their knowledge, experience, beliefs, interests and group membership (70)." In other words, he argues that foreigners cannot perform certain prayers to Allah correctly, therefore they "misinterpret the liminal for the liminoid, efficacy for entertainment, and vice versa, and that this phenomenon is cross-and intercultural" (Farrer 70). I propose that Farrer may underestimate the ability for foreigners to attain proper cultural knowledge and illustrate the reverse in my examples. On the other hand, although foreigners may not embrace all of the martial arts rituals, that does not minimize a foreigner's seriousness in participating nor limit the possibilities of advancement. I demonstrate this phenomenon by describing the participation of two foreign *let-whay* fighters.

The final author whose work has informed my research is Dale C. Spencer, professor and a mixed martial artist, who published the first book on the *embodiment* of ultimate fighting. Mixed martial arts (hereafter MMA), or ultimate fighting, is a competitive sport for all sexes and social classes that combines and utilizes the techniques of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, Judo and wrestling, boxing and kickboxing, and karate. As a practitioner himself, Spencer delves deeply into the psyche of fighters as well as the importance of time, space and ritual in MMA gyms. Although Spencer does not directly refer to MMA fighters' experiences as liminal or liminoid, his descriptions are perhaps still evocative of van Gennep's original theory of the liminal space and experience. He contends that even in this commercialized competitive sport, MMA gyms

experience “rhythm that is not altogether perceptible to outsiders” (30) and the space is “reverential” revealing “informal and formal rules and proceeds according to a logic that is only perceptible to members” (37). This confirms a sense of rules and duties similar to what small-scale societies adhere to in order for MMA gyms to function efficiently and appropriately. In his chapter “Being an MMA Fighter,” Spencer evokes similarities with and expectations from *let-whay* fighters. Many of his informants confirm that an individual is not an MMA fighter until he or she competes in an actual fight and also insist on *why* that is significant to gain respect from the MMA community (Spencer 2012: 72-85).

Zarrilli, Farrer, and Spencer have made relevant and compelling contributions to the field of martial arts covering topics on embodiment, ritual, and liminality; broaching styles that are obscure (*silat* and *kalarippayattu*) and new to academia (MMA); and experiencing and practicing first hand each of their respective martial art. By building on the insights gained in this already existing body of literature, I researched two conditions to reach a new conclusion: Myanmar, a previously isolated country, and its mysterious martial arts gym subculture reveal an underlining sense of community.

3. Community formation in a martial arts liminal experience

First, I describe in what ways a shared martial arts historical narrative produces a liminal “commonality” for the participants. Secondly, I determine that *let-whay* practitioners from Yangon local society, a modernizing city, and foreigners from industrialized nations embody a sense of community by experiencing the phases of liminality. Some practice all three phases of *let-whay*, others only grasp the first phase. Nonetheless, they all perform the same activities to

experience the three phases. There are common warm-ups and exercises that progressively get more difficult in relation to experience and time spent training. Also, before a trainee can compete in a *let-whay* match, he or she must demonstrate success in the ring, as well as receive an endorsement from the head coach. Only the committed, the sincere, and the skillful advance to the professional competitive level, and sometimes reaching the honor of becoming a national champion. Despite "liminoid" characteristics, I maintain that practicing the martial arts in Yangon is not necessarily by "choice," the leading factor determining what is "play" versus "work." I argue that the practitioners experience "liminal rites of passage" thereby embodying lived martial arts.

Can a multicultural environment enjoy a sense of community? For the purpose of this particular paper, I define "community" as a small subcultural group of the martial artists and martial arts trainees who share the same beliefs, intent, resources and activities in *let-whay*. What activities or "rituals" do the trainees endure in order to be valued and respected? How does an individual determine self-actualization and sense of belonging and how is this important in determining what constitutes an activity as "work" or as "leisure"?

4. The Methodology

I conducted ethnographic field research using methods that included participant observation, formal interviews and informal conversations, and questionnaires in a five-week period over the winter break of the academic year 2013-14 and again by email during the three months after my return to Cornell University. I also undertook library research on available literature that I could find on Myanmar martial arts. First hand experience with martial arts

participants as primary sources was critical to my thesis since there is a lack of literature on these aspects of Burmese society. Unfortunately, I found this to be difficult, but with time, I was able to understand the fighting style and in turn establish a close rapport with the Myanmar people and foreigners involved in the martial arts so as to find out further information about the role of the martial arts in society.

I observed three separate martial arts centers in and around Yangon City, Myanmar – the *Thut Ti Let-Whay* Myanmar Boxing Club (herein *Thut Ti*)[9] (See Figures 1 and 2), the Ko Kyaw Soe's *let-whay* gym (KKS gym) (See Figures 3 and 4), and the *Thaing Byaung Byan* school (TBB) (See Figure 5 and 6). However, for the purpose of this paper I mostly refer to the data collected from the two *let-whay* gyms. My training at *Thut Ti* allowed me to become closer to the trainees and observe the professional fighters. I also engaged in the training schedule, rituals and the internal senses accompanying in *let-whay* drills. I did not get an opportunity to train at the TBB school, but I was encouraged to observe training sessions. I enjoyed the hospitality of the grandmaster in his home, where I was fed and treated as his "other daughter." I experienced impromptu meetings (hangouts) with people who were engineering students by day, and martial artists by the afternoon. Rather than interpret these moments as simply part of my 'data collection', I saw them as meaningful experiences.

[9] In media publications, on its business website, and Facebook page, the club has also been called, interchangeably, *Thut Ti Letwei* Burmese Boxing Club.

FIGURE 1: VIEW OF THUT TI MYANMAR BOXING CLUB FROM THE ENTRANCE

FIGURE 2: SECOND VIEW OF THUT TI.

FIGURE 3 VIEW OF KO KYAW SOE'S LET-WHAY GYM FROM ENTRANCE.

FIGURE 4: SECOND VIEW OF KO KYAW SOE'S LET-WHAY GYM.

FIGURE 5: ENTRANCE TO U AUNG THEIN'S THAING BYAUNG BYAN SCHOOL WITH HIS STUDENTS.

FIGURE 6: TRAINEES DOING DRILLS AT THAING BYAUNG BYAN SCHOOL.

As with most ethnographic research, I encountered many limitations, which may have affected the quality and perhaps the nature of my conclusions. First, Burmese is not my first language. Despite, having about five semesters worth of Burmese language training and having attained a certain level of proficiency, I was still not at the advanced fluency level necessary to engage more deeply one-on-one with informants. However, this conveniently contributes to the notion of the "power of movement". In other words, learning an embodied art form such as *let-whay* allowed me to partially suspend the importance of verbal language, thereby circumventing a specific cultural difference. As I noted earlier, my time was limited to only five weeks. Unfortunately, it was cut shorter when I succumbed to food poisoning, dehydration, and heat exhaustion the first week. After recuperation, I knew I *had* to remain steadfast. My advisor's words finally reverberated in my mind - *Your time there is precious. Make every moment count.* And I did. The difficulty to gain access to martial arts centers, especially *let-whay* gyms, was a major, and final, hindrance in my research process. It was difficult, though not impossible, to locate and contact *let-whay* coaches and TBB grandmasters in such a limited timeframe. The martial arts world has a reputation for secrecy and mystery. This, according to martial artists, is normal across all cultures and nations.[10] I will refer more to this issue in the *let-whay* chapter.

I divided my thesis into three chapters and a conclusion: In Chapter I, I first introduce Aldrich Sawbwa, who is a crucial informant and the gatekeeper to all things martial arts in and outside of Myanmar who fortunately was able to provide me with a network of multiple contacts and centers. I then describe the various martial arts broad systems and specific techniques in Myanmar. In the final section of the first chapter, I paint a picture of the current situation and the various perspectives of the presence of the martial arts. Chapter II focuses on the historical

[10] Sawbwa, Aldrich. Personal interview. 11 Dec. 2013.

development of the martial arts in general and the history of Shan *thaing byaung byan* (TBB) and *let-whay* in Myanmar. I also discuss the importance of historical narratives and how they inspire practitioners. Chapter III focuses on the practice of *let-whay* and the role it plays in the lives of individuals. Here I introduce U Win Zin Oo, the gym manager and owner, five professional fighters and an aspiring amateur fighter. To most of these fighters *let-whay* is more than just a sport it is a lifestyle**.**

5. A Note on Myanmar versus Burma

Finally, I want to provide a note on my use of the term Myanmar for the country. In 1989, when the government in Burma (Myanmar) transitioned to a military junta that would deny power to the National League for Democracy (the political party that won the elections of 1990), the junta changed the country's official name in English from Burma to the Union of Myanmar (Myanmar for short). Since then there have been debates internationally on the appropriate name – Burma versus Myanmar. When using one name over the other in conversation, debate, or in presentations, an individual can (usually) determine what "side" of the political spectrum the presenter supports. For instance, if a presenter uses "Burma" in the presentation, more than likely, he or she may be an activist in support of the autonomy and human rights of the ethnic minorities within Burma/Myanmar. On the other hand, if an individual uses Myanmar, then supposedly he or she supports the government's political and economic processes. Of course, that is not wholly correct and they are dubious assumptions, also the use of "Myanmar" is gaining acceptance internationally. For my purpose, I choose to use Myanmar in this thesis for the simple reason that the majority of Myanmar citizens that I

interacted with, trained with, or interviewed used Myanmar…though they sometimes also revert to Burma. The *let-whay* center where I observed and trained with uses Myanmar on their banner. Although, I am aware of and concerned with the ethnic strife and human rights violations along the borders of the country as well as inside of the country, I am not politically involved in these matters, nor am I attempting to formulate any political/activist theories or policy. My goal is rather to highlight and explore a cultural phenomenon engaged by individuals in Myanmar from various ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds. Therefore, I choose to use the name Myanmar.

CHAPTER I

Martial Arts in Myanmar: The Naughty "Little" Secret

1.1 The Gatekeeper: Aldrich Sawbwa

The evening breeze outside the Yangon International Airport greets me with inviting translucent walls and ceiling and floor. Wearing a beige straw hat, Aldrich Sawbwa fluently and effortlessly commands his lean sinewy frame to advance toward me. He greets me with a firm handshake and a warm smile. As a martial artist since the influential age of seven, he projects a self-awareness of his moving body. For the next five weeks, Aldrich more than adequately functioned as my gatekeeper to the realm of martial arts, as well as my landlord and soon-to-be, I'm expecting, lifelong friend.

Martial artist. Businessman and entrepreneur. Instructor. Aldrich wears many hats all to promote martial arts, physical fitness, and self-awareness and he is easily the nicest and most humble guy with whom to get along. Fluent in English, Burmese and Chinese, he shifts gracefully between the foreign and the indigenous, between the novice and experienced, and between the spiritual and the practical student of martial arts. Given my limited Burmese language abilities I thanked him profusely for I don't know how I would have written a paper without him.

Let-whay and Shan TBB were part of Aldrich's everyday life: surrounding his community, strengthening his internal mind and spirit, and pushing his external physicality. Without having much of a choice growing up in northern Myanmar, as an ethnic Chinese, (his ancestors were traveling caravan traders from southwest China) he had to learn to survive and

protect his family. Inhaling and exhaling combative skills to live. Ebbing and flowing into a sustaining lifestyle connecting, balancing, focusing on family, partner and friends, and work.

I first found Aldrich on one of his three websites, combatbando.com. Aware of the social and political changes in his country, his brilliant business sense reached out to the international community creating online networks to first, gain business as a martial artist and fitness trainer, and second, to inform the outside world on the various Myanmar martial arts. Now individuals can easily make appointments to train privately with him in either Yangon or in London, England, depending on where he is during the year. Aldrich generously provided me with three contacts - U Win Zin Oo, the manager and owner of *Thut Ti*, U Aung Thein, a Shan TBB Grandmaster, and Ko Kyaw Soe, the national *muay* Thai coach and *let-whay* trainer.

Despite his willingness to help and after explaining my purpose in Myanmar, Aldrich also cautioned me to tread lightly in, outside of, and around these centers. He advised me to keep my training activities and observation sessions private from between each of the masters and coaches. These masters and coaches take pride in keeping the loyalty of their trainees and entrusting them to preserve and protect their training techniques.[11] Aldrich confirms that secrecy is normal among all martial arts communities. Interestingly, in later observations and interviews, all three managers eagerly desired foreigners to promote the spread of *let-whay* or TBB to the international community.

There is also another perspective in reference to secrecy. Practitioners fear of judgment from peers and even strangers. When I asked an informant, who asked to be anonymous, at the TBB school and student at Thanlyin Technical School, if he tells friends and neighbors that he is training in the martial arts he hesitated, shook his head and replied, "No, of course not." "Why?"

[11] Sawbwa, Aldrich. Personal communication. 8 Dec. 2013.

I asked. "Because we are peaceful people in Myanmar. If I tell my friends and strangers that I do this, they will think I am violent and not peaceful. I don't want them to think I am violent. I am peaceful. They don't understand. Martial arts makes me peaceful and focused."[12] This notion for the need for secrecy suggests a specific kind of cohesion between the practitioners to maintain a certain level of secrecy to participate in the martial art.

This could be compared with the experience of Michael Ashakenazi, an anthropologist and currently a senior researcher and project manager at the Bonn International Center for Conversion, who wrote on the anthropology of ritual and society formation in a Japanese karate gym. As an expert in qualitative methodology and fieldwork, Ashakenazi emphasized the process of gaining entry and mutual respect from the other trainees. His side project ended as a yearlong project. With some experience in karate, he decided to formally train at the gym, which eventually granted him full access to all the rituals and nuances of training, acknowledgements of status, and individual duties (Ashkenazi 2002:99-118).

My experience was similar. Due to the similarly secretive nature of Myanmar martial arts, I to encountered challenges as an ethnographer whose aim was to gain access to martial arts centers. The *Thut-ti* gym exhibited a sense of secrecy when it came to sharing the training drills of the professional fighters. Although, I was granted permission to observe a professional training session the day before my departure, I only observed a fraction of the actual training exercises. Unless I actively participated in the martial art system or become an active participant by paying for lessons, entry was very difficult and full access was essentially impossible.

I will next describe the various techniques and systems that exist in Myanmar followed by a brief explanation of the current perspectives on the martial arts.

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[12] Anonymous informant. Personal communication. 8 Jan. 2014.

1.2 Techniques and Systems

There are multiple martial arts styles or systems in Myanmar. Some of them are indigenous; others are imported from China, India and Japan; and some foreign styles have influenced the existing indigenous systems, although purists would argue with that. The Burmese language does not have a direct translation of the English language phrase "martial arts".[13] As the initial champions for the field of 'martial arts" in academic research, Donn Draeger and Robert Smith were also the first Westerners to publish a definition of Asian "martial arts" or "fighting arts" as the "combat techniques, armed or unarmed" that contribute and impact "the diverse peoples of Asia" and focus specifically on "organized weapons systems" (1980:9). Later scholars of the martial arts followed with various other definitions for the term "martial arts." Thomas A. Green expanded Draeger and Smith's definition:

> Martial arts are considered systems that blend the physical components of combat with strategy, philosophy, tradition, or other features that distinguish them from pure physical reaction (in other words, a technique, armed or unarmed, employed randomly or idiosyncratically would not be considered a martial art) (2001:xvi).

David E. Jones proposed that "martial behavior" includes the following three conditions "combat, ritual, and performance" and inevitably occur…

> …in any particular martial art, but in varying degrees. Combat effectiveness may be the primary focus in one martial art, whereas others are expressed as an almost stylized dancing, or a kind of balletic gymnastics. Others stress ritual aspects of repetitive patterns: body movements, manner of breathing, visualizations, chants, or vocalizations, which are felt to be of some therapeutic benefit although acted out in a martial form (2002:xiii).

[13] The term "martial arts" used to describe combative cultures and techniques is actually a modern term. Unpacking the complete history of the term goes beyond the scope of this paper.

The authors demonstrated similar interpretations of the term "martial arts" to encompass the use of combat skills that require formal training. Therefore, to begin with a common point of reference, this section will provide a brief background of the appropriate indigenous terms designated to the combative or martial arts systems and their descriptions I will also illustrate the current situation of the martial arts subculture in Myanmar and worldwide.

Thaing (total combat) and *bando* (unarmed fighting) are the two most prominent words used in Burmese to describe the martial arts in general and are often used interchangeably (Corcoran and Farkas 1983:13-14; Draeger and Smith 1980:155-160; Green 2001).[14] Being the more commonly used term, *thaing* refers to all the indigenous fighting systems so that *bando*, *banshay* (armed or weapons use), *let-whay* (traditional boxing) and *naban* (grappling or wrestling) are all indexed under its definition as defense and attack movements. The term *thaing* also includes the various systems associated with the following ethnic groups: Burmese, Mon, Kachin, Chin, Shan, Wa, Karen, and Chinese. Shan *thaing byaung byan* (hereafter TBB) is an example of a documented ethnic martial art. I will discuss this later in the history chapter. There are, however, rare accounts of systems among the borderlands peoples or hill tribes such as the Wa (Green 629). Since the government does not openly or actively approve *let-whay* due to its primal and violent nature, it rarely sponsors *let-whay* competitions, though it has done so far for past New Year festivals. The government has also sponsored martial arts exhibitions throughout the year where Shan TBB and other ethnic styles along with *bando* can showcase their skills. The government allows ethnic styles to participate on such occasions, surely because they are

[14] My Burmese teacher in the United States also suggested *kai kan pa nya* (defense) as a term used in Myanmar. However, during the five weeks, I did not hear anyone use this phrase when referring to the martial arts. My teacher is a Burmese refugee and has been living in the states for about ten years. Perhaps, it is an older term or a term used for people who are not practitioners of or knowledgeable of the martial arts subculture.

performative in nature and not for combat or for money. Otherwise, many ethnic systems may be gradually disappearing.

The government and the elite consider *bando* as the official Burmese or Myanmar national martial art. It is also the style that is most transnational which, perhaps could be the reason for the incorrect usage of the Burmese word. Online blogs, articles and encyclopedias have translated *bando* into elaborate and fantastical meanings such as "way of the steel" or "way of discipline," however, it simply means, "unarmed fighting" or "hand-to-hand combat."

Myanmar created the National Bando Association in the 1930's. Subsequently, an American Bando Association was created in the United States under the direction of Sayagyi U Maung Gyi in 1966. As a Burmese *bando* practitioner, Sayagyi U Maung Gy first immigrated to the United States in the early 1960's bringing with him the fighting art. By the mid 1960's he began teaching and spreading *bando* in American universities. Eventually, he spread the Myanmar style beyond North America to France, Great Britain, and Spain, where practitioners collaborated to form the International Bando Association. All three associations still exist today and continue to increase in membership. As the *bando* system increased its notoriety in the international martial arts community, participants gradually replaced the word *thaing* with *bando* as the general term for Myanmar martial arts since it was easier to pronounce and sounds similar to the Japanese martial art – *budo* (Martin 148).

Whereas, *thaing* encompasses the broad systems, *bando* comprises many specific systems that deploy animals. In *bando* a practitioner may train in only one or two animal systems depending on his or her abilities and personal connection to the animal. For example, a practitioner will train in the snake (python or cobra) system if he or she prefers close contact. According to my main informant, Aldrich Sawbwa, when a snake slithers along your leg or arm

and encircles a neck in order to attack and strangle its victim, a martial artist specializing in this system uses his or her arm to mimic a snake's body movement around the opponent. Furthermore, the practice of *bando* was primarily used for self-defense in real life and death situations before it transitioned into a sport activity much like other Southeast Asian martial arts systems such as the Filipino kali.

Banshay in combat is an extension of the *bando* system where practitioners use weapons. Perhaps *banshay* is not an extension, but the original style of fighting. Michael Charney, an authority on Southeast Asian history, reiterated that between 1300 to 1900 AD warriors in Southeast Asia handled weapons such as swords and daggers, long and short sticks, rocks, bows and arrows, and even war elephants (2004:22-29). However, he did not give evidence on the execution of hand-to-hand combat. According to my *kali* instructors, practitioners carried at least three to four knives on them to protect their families in life-threatening jungle environments of the Philippines. This is a custom still in practice in other parts of Southeast Asia.

Let-whay, Myanmar's traditional boxing, is not internationally well known nor is it broadly favored in the country due to the fact that it is much more violent in nature than its sibling system *bando*. To an untrained observer *let-whay* can be mistaken for its cousin *muay* Thai from neighboring Thailand. Although, the fighting systems in their original forms were to strike and kill quickly with similar fighting elements, the *let-whay* technique is more brutal and slower, and not identical. Regulations absent in *let-whay* matches, but present in *muay* Thai competitions also make it appear more chaotic. The combination of traditional boxing fighting elements, with kicking strikes using the shins and top of the feet, knees and elbows to strike their opponents' head, stomach and rib cage region, and top of the head, and grappling skills (*naban*)

produce severe, and in some cases, deadly effects. The use of head butts and the prohibition of boxing gloves also suggest that *let-whay* is more brutal.

Although Myanmar nationals compete in *bando*, *let-whay* and international systems, there are also lesser known martial arts systems practiced by multiple ethnic groups such as the Mon, Chin, and the Wa. Some documentation is available for the Shan and Kachin martial systems. The Kachin system is similar to *bando*, except *bando* has fourteen animal fighting systems, whereas Kachin has sixteen. Shan TBB is similar to Japanese Karate and Jiu Jitsu. Movements flow in somewhat circular, yet sharp directions until limbs touch bones, hands grapple, and fingers squeeze joints. The ethnic Shan also claim to have its own historical narrative for the origins of this martial art.

Not only do the people of Myanmar practice *bando* and *let-whay*, they also enjoy other international traditional martial arts and are quite proficient at them. At the 2013 Southeast Asian Games, a Burmese athlete progressed to the semi-finals in Indonesian *pencak silat*[15] and the Burmese team in Chinese Wushu received five gold medals.[16] The Myanmar *Thaing* (Martial Art) Federation is the governing body that decides which martial arts systems will be preserved, sponsored, and promoted in Myanmar through offering funds and supporting competitions (Martin 2001:147).

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[15] For more details see "Burma through to semis in pencak silat," DVB.com, last modified December 10, 2013. https://www.dvb.no/dvb-video/burma-through-to-semis-in-pencak-silat-myanmar-sea-games/35147

[16] See "Burma's wushu team delighted with medal wins," DVB.com, last modified December 9, 2013. http://www.dvb.no/news/burmas-wushu-team-delighted-with-medal-wins-myanmar/35099

1.3 The Secret versus the Public Subculture of martial arts:

Myanmar was an isolated country for almost 50 years. Once a vibrant nation teeming with intellectual exuberance in the arts and sciences, innovation and culture in the past four decades have been in decline while under military rule, first under a socialist military regime then with a military junta (Steinberg 2013). Art, literature, and activities marked by ethnic minorities are specific examples of cultural movements and happenings where the military government in the past sought to block foreign access, as well as blocked citizens from access to Western foreign media and business. Only recently, since the government transitioned from a military to a civilian government in 2011, has the country witnessed administrative changes and reforms that include reconfigurations of the relations between the state and sectors of society. These include the positive acceleration in economics, media openness, education, a central bank, ethnic reconciliation, and the negotiation of border ceasefires with ethno-nationalist armed groups. On the flip side, there are challenges such as capacity building, infrastructure (especially in the larger cities), the distribution land rights and understanding what the social and constitutional reforms mean for the future.[17]

Prior to undertaking my research trip, countless friends and graduate students urged me to travel to Myanmar before it "completely changes," before "modernization kicks out the traditional customs," and before "the West can ruin its charms." Will transitioning to a civilian government destroy the very fabric of what is "all Burmese or Myanmar?" Can all facets of openness and the ebbing of xenophobia bring the collapse of Myanmar and Burmese identity? Will McDonalds, Starbucks, and Westernized malls wipe out the mystical in everyday life? Is

[17] Maitrii Victoriano Aung-Thwin, National University of Singapore, *Roundtable: Myanmar: The Dynamics of Positive Change* at Association for Asian Studies 2014 Annual Conference, Philadelphia, PA, March 28, 2014.

democracy stirring the pot for the potential and endless anthropological ethnographic research? This topic is certainly beyond the scope of this paper, but what I did notice of Yangonites was the extensive use of mobile phones, the ability to travel domestically and internationally, and the younger generation speaking their mind through media outlets, art exhibitions, and taking up extreme sports like skateboarding. The upsurge of vehicles imported from Japan, I was told, eradicated the 1970's rusty, beat-up, floorless taxis and replaced with Honda Civics and Fits. This became and will continue to be an issue of providing adequate training and training resources for car mechanics, who are skilled in the mechanisms of older cars, in repairing modern electronic and digital engines. I could watch the Hobbit in 3D at an air-conditioned mall boasting five floors, a fully functioning fitness center (an expensive one at that), and an official Mac store. Hotel prices tripled in the last year, a hasty and necessary response to the escalation of tourism.[18] It is obvious that change is inevitable in Myanmar

But what about the martial arts? Has this Western concept of "leisure" and "sport" permeated Yangon "modern" society? When I first began formulating my thesis questions, I wondered if I would find multiple martial arts gyms scattered throughout the city like they are in the United States. My expectations were not high, but information gathering was very difficult. Furthermore, I did not discover many martial arts gyms throughout the city of Yangon. The only gyms that I encountered on my own were fitness centers geared toward wealthy Yangonites or foreigners that advertised *bando* training, but with inexperienced trainers. On one occasion, when Aldrich challenged (requested) a "trainer" at one of the undisclosed fitness centers to demonstrate his *bando* skills, the "trainer" sheepishly fabricated an excuse that he could not display his abilities. In normal gym settings, an experienced and well-trained martial artist

[18] See "Myanmar records 1 million tourists, surge in tourism income," CNN.com, last modified January 21, 2013. http://travel.cnn.com/myanmar-records-one-million-tourists-67-percent-increase-tourism-income-037441

would gladly present a demonstration or even spar with a fellow martial artist. Perhaps, these stories and the challenge of investigating Myanmar martial arts in the midst of tremendous changes in society was what drew me to the topic in the first place and also maintained my interest.

Let me first explain that in the beginning searching for literature on Myanmar martial arts, especially scholarly publications, was much like strolling through a huge book barn - the kind of book barn that is red, or maybe brown with multiple floors, skinny aisles, and rickety wooden staircases to inaccessible bookshelves. While sliding along, my head bends to the side, eyelids squinting, skipping titles hours on end, whiffing musty aromas. Aha! Catching a glimpse of familiar words – Asian Martial Arts. Martial Arts of the World. As fingertips spider their way to the top of the binding, plucking the top, clutching the title. Sneezing off the dust, thirsting for answers, tickling through the pages of obscureness.

I was so excited to finally find *something*. Draeger and Smith, two famous martial artists and writers on the subject, wrote the first comprehensive, but obscure, compilation on Southeast Asian fighting arts (1980). Very few writers have written on or referred to Myanmar martial arts in these encyclopedias, instructional manuals or on Internet websites. Many scholars of martial arts did not even broach the subject of Myanmar.

The *Journal of Burma Studies* at Northern Illinois University once did publish a ten-page article on the historical traditions and technical aspects of Burmese martial arts written by a *bando* practitioner (Martin 2001) but it lacked substantial references to any introduction to the subject matter. The majority of the author's resources were personal conversations, which didn't necessarily diminish the value of his findings, however, it did bring into view the question of source materials. In the same year, Zoran Rebac wrote and sold the foremost instructional and

historical publication on *let-whay or* Burmese boxing, in English and with an accompanying video of specific boxing matches.[19]

One prominent reason for the lack of scholarly literature on Myanmar martial arts has been the inadequate and difficult access to the subculture as discussed earlier and the clandestine presence that researchers have had to maintain in the past. This is much due to the development of Myanmar modern politics in which I will now give a very brief outline of the history.[20] During the 14 years following independence in 1948 from Britain, a civilian government led the country - the Union of Burma. However, the Union was unstable due to rebellions by the Chin, the Kachin, and Shan ethnic minority groups who sought autonomy from the Union, which had promised to them earlier in the Panglong Agreement of 1947; clashes between political and social parties (Red Flag Communist Party, Burma Communist Party, and People's Voluntary Organizations), and poor economic planning (Steinberg 2013:41-45). The most radical political transition occurred after the military coup of 1962 when the military dissolved all civilian leadership roles that threatened their power and on the belief that only a militant government could stable the Union. The military and the civilian Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) shared power as Myanmar entered its socialist period.

The following 1988 military coup erupted due to the military dissatisfaction of the BSPP civilian leadership that failed to improve economic policies and to regulate the continuing conflict between the government and ethnic minority factions who fought for autonomy. The military interim government held civilian elections in 1990 to assure the nation that they intended to rule only as a "caretaker" government until new leaders took control. However, the

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[19] Watch *Burmese Boxing: The Last Gladiators of Asia*. DVD, 2001, for vintage *let-whay* matches.

[20] For an overview of Myanmar political history see Steinberg 2013; other suggestions for in depth analyses of the history of contemporary military leadership include Callahan's "Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma" (2005), Fink's "Living in Silence: Burma Under Military Rule (2001)", and Steinberg's "Burma, the State of Myanmar" (2001).

military did not accept the electoral winnings of the National League for Democracy (NLD), the political opposition party along with the personality of Aung San Suu Kyi[21] that became iconic symbols for democracy nationally and around the world, and instead the military leaders (State Law and Order Restoration Council or SLORC, 1988-1997, and then changed to State Peace and Development Council or SPDC, 1997-present) tightened its grip on the Union socially, economically, and politically.

To embrace the country's prosperous years prior to British colonialism, SLORC returned the country's name back to the Union of Myanmar. In addition, it focused more on internal affairs and endorsed Burmese culture by preferring Theravada Buddhism, supporting the Burman majority ethnic group, and nationalizing the Burmese language, thus continuing the marginalization of the ethnic minority groups on the borders. United States (US) and European Union (EU) governments publicly accused Myanmar of human rights violations, implemented economic sanctions on the country, and discouraged their citizens from visiting or contributing economically, which also further isolated the country. There are accounts of SLORC, later SPDC, imprisoning members of national political opposition groups to the military as well as silencing all media communication that criticized the country or the government. However, for the first time since 1990, Myanmar held elections in November 2012 and a civilian president now leads the country. The past two years has seen a gradual media openness and a transition to a democratic government permitting academic researchers, businesses, and tourists to enter for longer periods of time and a certain flexibility to travel around the country more than they experienced in the past, yet there is still much to develop and to consider before establishing a positive conclusion to the current state of Myanmar.

[21] There is so much to be said about this woman and the NLD. Aung San Suu Kyi is the daughter of the late General Aung San who led the resistance against the British and helped to win independence in 1948. ASSK was under house arrest for the 15 years between 1989-2010.

Still even during this long period of isolation there have been investigators, some of whom are actively engaged in studying Myanmar martial arts. Vincent Giordano, a martial arts filmmaker, at 18 years old set out to travel the world learning martial arts. Three years ago he hosted a film screening of his culminating documentary, *Vanishing Flame: A Film Maker's Journey to Document the Endangered Martial Arts of Asia*, which includes discussion of Myanmar *let-whay*. Unlike Rebac, he does not sell his videos or books to the general public. He does, however, email newsletters on his latest findings (most are just drafts) to a select group, which I am now a member. When I asked Giordano why he refuses to publish and provide the documentary for the general public to purchase, he passionately commented that he does not want it commercialized for fear of foreigners watering down the traditions. Furthermore, the martial arts in general is a secret society everywhere in the world:

> I am non commercial in a world of commerce and ego driven selling especially in the martial arts. I pay for everything myself through whatever means and thus i own and control them and do what i want when i want. I have been working on a book for the last eight years because the history of the martial arts in those countries needs proper care and proper presentation and that hasn't happened-- that means finding the last masters, translating documents and recording oral tradition when writing is not available. I teach for free throughout the world, People in the modern era don't understand the ancient traditions of non commercial and doing martial arts the original way. I was taught that way and continue that tradition and have been traveling the world training since I was 18 learning, training and documenting. Thats a long time. I share projects when I am able to and when they are ready. One part of our tradition is we only share the deeper material with our chosen students and those who are in the tradition thats how it survives (Giordano, Vincent. Personal communication, 18 Feb. 2014)

> I have nothing against commercialization. I am happy to see the arts grow. Its my mission with my book to present the arts in their authentic form through historical documentation and complete recordings. But commercialization is a double edged sword, the first people commercializing are usually the ones who speak english or try to gain the most audience through media thus pushing back possibly the greater people. Problem is usually physical education and military step in and get the funding and control and thus promote those they want to promote especially in SE Asia(its a totally different thing there than in the US). In Thailand, the older great masters were pushed aside. This is what my book is about ancient combative tradition and great masters and why they were forgotten. Its a massive topic and I have my own beliefs on it that are not popular at all

> but so be it. Commercialization happens and it spreads the art but usually under some dominating control that is not always the best source or outlet for that commercialization. Sometimes its good sometime not. You will have to understand deeply how it works specifically in Burma and when you do you will understand what I am saying. Nobody usually gets beneath the surface because they don't dig deep enough. In Burma, I battled ferociously with the Thiang (Giordano's spelling) heads and the Thiang association, because they wanted me to film the masters they "deemed" where the highest and best but i kept finding the great masters who were not on their list and they tried many times to have me ejected from the country for doing that. But in the end, I documented them and they lost their chance to do it and they will regret that endlessly. In Burma suddenly one promoter tries to dissuade me from filming another promoters lethwei event. Before the country was open, everyone was happy, I went everywhere. But i now i see the control mechanisms and teeth starting to show. I have the rare insight because i was there over a decade before and now i can see clearly what is going on after the opening. You will never see nor experience that and if you don't ask you will never know. Thus you will have limited access into what is going on, Thats crucial. It happened in Thailand during my years living and training there, so I see the same replay and its going the same way, so its like writing on the wall (Giordano, Vincent. Personal communication. 20 Feb. 2014)

The idea here is that keeping *let-whay* non-commercialized and indigenous would allow it to maintain the pure liminal qualities of its traditional "rituals" - training, competition, and bare-knuckle traits. Giordano admits that as Myanmar unlocks its doors to the media and lifts restrictions on online websites, more and more outsiders have access to Myanmar martial arts. Is this a good or bad thing for the traditions? Today, anyone with the Internet can type in a search engine – Burmese martial arts and the inquiry will display over one million results in English. Seekers have the choice ranging from video clips and photos, to online martial arts magazines, and to official organization or gym websites. If a researcher does not have access to the Internet, martial arts encyclopedias and compilations still offer a few pages on *thaing*, *bando*, and *let-whay*.

In addition, the real-life practice of Myanmar martial arts is also becoming increasingly accessible. Today both locals and expatriates are welcome to train for international, national and

regional professional competitions, for sport and physical fitness, and for self-defense. Local practitioners also perform in national martial arts exhibitions. Giordano would argue that all of this attention is ruining the traditional aspects of Myanmar martial arts and that foreigners will never have the "real" experience in the secret subculture. His thoughts run similar to Farrer's views on foreigners' failures attempting to embody *sufi* mysticism. But in an era where the global community is getting widely and more closely connected, fresh interpretations of traditional embodiment are also necessary.

Practitioners of all nationalities and ethnicities are training in non-native martial arts. For instance, my Filipino *kali* instructor studied under the great Filipino-American Dan Inosanto, who was also a student of Bruce Lee. In class he not only instructs in the systems, but also offers advice on embracing *kali* to increase fitness, improve body and soul, and to live a mindful and virtuous life. These are not the words of someone who trains in martial arts because it serves only as a pastime. My instructor has experience in deep, intense and transformative training sessions (liminal) with major martial artists in jeet kune do, *muay* Thai, and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and he is neither Chinese, Thai, nor Brazilian. He professes that if it were not for the martial arts, he probably would not be standing in front of us because he would have wasted his life.[22]

Nonetheless, while conducting my original research it was clear there would be no deep theories to analyze, no historical narratives to synthesize, nor published ethnographic monographs with which to grapple. In chapter 2, I will discuss the history of martial arts in Myanmar based on the sources that do exist. But given the lack of published materials, I concluded that I needed to go to Myanmar and (attempt) to experience the martial arts myself knowing full well that many doorways would be sealed and the information inaccessible.

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[22] Seaman, Kevin. Personal communication. October 2013.

By introducing the circumstances of my field research and the current situations in regards to the perspectives on the martial arts in Myanmar, I have now set the stage for the following chapters. What follows is a brief history of Myanmar martial arts.

CHAPTER II

History of Myanmar Martial Arts

2.1 Legend of U Che

In the mid 1800's, before the British completed their colonial take over in Myanmar, royal bodyguards protected the *sawbwas* of the ethnic Shan hill tribe in northern Shan state. A *sawbwa* was much like the western concept of a prince.[23] One particular bodyguard named U Che exists in Burmese martial arts narratives as the preeminent grandmaster of the *Thaing Byaung Byan,* or reverse *thaing*, fighting system (TBB) or *Khu Kar Chant* in Shan language. According to oral accounts, U Che left his royal position as a *sawbwa* bodyguard and traveled southward from northern Shan state to what are now Taunggyi and Kengtung areas in northeast Myanmar. As U Che braved the jungle and mountainous environment he demonstrated proficiency in TBB, a secretive and privileged martial fighting system, by challenging and defeating other martial arts masters throughout his journey. These triumphant fights earned him the title, *Sayagyi* or Grandmaster.

As Sayagyi U Che approached old age, he became apprehensive about the lineage and future of his beloved martial art. Who would be worthy enough to cultivate and promote the TBB traditions? It would require someone with integrity, physical strength, and eagerness to represent and teach the martial art, but at the same time maintain its exclusivity. Ultimately, the Grandmaster broke tradition and chose three students of various social classes instead of

[23] For a more detailed explanation of political and social organizations of hill tribes in Myanmar, look at Edmund Leach's Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure. Although,

choosing from an elite populace. In 1916, Sayagyi U Che began training his youngest student, U Maung Lay. After following in the combative footsteps of his master, U Maung Lay was the only one out of the three students who committed his entire life to the traditional teachings of TBB. Despite being ethnic Shan, Sayagyi U Maung Lay believed in sharing TBB with other ethnic groups, as well as other social classes. Due to his openness, various TBB teachers thereafter continued to instruct students from all backgrounds throughout Myanmar. His one student, U Aung Thein (See Figure 2.1.1), today continues teaching the TBB martial arts tradition to anyone willing to learn with only a modest payment in return.[24]

FIGURE 2.1.1: GRANDMASTER U AUNG THEIN INTRODUCING A STICK DEMONSTRATION BY TWO OF HIS STUDENTS.

[24] International Thaing Byaung Byan website, http://itbba.org/; also Aung, U Thein. Personal communication 9 Jan. 2014.

2.2 Legendary Narratives: How is Martial Arts Meaningful?

The story above is common knowledge among contemporary TBB practitioners. Practitioners credit Sayagyi U Aung Thein with preserving the history of TBB in the Burmese language. He has also written extensively on the biographies of his grandmasters U Than Shwe and U Maung Lay. However, there is no evidence in English or in Burmese documenting the specifics of Sayagyi U Che's expedition. Adding to his mysterious and legendary status, there is also no documentation confirming the origins of TBB or if Sayagyi U Che himself was the inventor of the technique. Nevertheless, he existed and he brought TBB to the Southern portion of Shan State.

Despite the compelling mystery of the grandmaster, my thesis does not intend to argue the authenticity of these "facts" and "events" related to the history of TBB. What would be the purpose of that? What would be lost or gained by shuffling through bits and pieces of documents or oral accounts to reach the "truth" of a story? Would debunking or confirming the story bring or takeaway personal gratification to a practitioner? Practitioners of martial arts in Myanmar, either in TBB, traditional boxing or *bando*, do not train in a martial art because they believe in the *accuracy* of the historical narrative. Instead, they embrace or embody the *existence* of a narrative. When asked why they participate in the martial arts, none of my informants in Myanmar said it was because of its accurate history. They train because they are experiencing and feeling the benefits of the martial arts as they live it in the present.

Why is this approach and perspective to practicing the martial arts significant? Authors on martial arts throughout Asia (East, South, and Southeast) write on the connection with national and sometimes ethnic identity to a martial arts system or technique. Needless to say, *a*

historical narrative *is* necessary. It is necessary in order to provide a foundational inspiration to novices and veteran trainees. Knowing the foundation affects the training engagement in the present.

Thut Ti brandishes a huge banner above the boxing ring. It reads, "*Thut Ti* Myanmar *Let-Whay* Club: 1000 years Ancient Fighting Art of Myanmar " (See Figure 2.2.1). Some informants contend that *let-whay*, which is very similar to Thailand's *muay* Thai, was first brought to Thailand from Myanmar in 985 A.D. Legend has it that after the Burmese king conquered a city in northern Siam, he married a Siamese princess. The king then taught the princess' brother in Burmese *let-whay* and other martial arts, thus introducing the martial arts to Siam for the first time.[25] This embodied knowledge is part of the "real" as it relates to the practitioners' lives. For nothing about training in *let-whay* is a fantasy. Thus, they do not view, or rather; they do not debate if the history of *let-whay* is true or not.

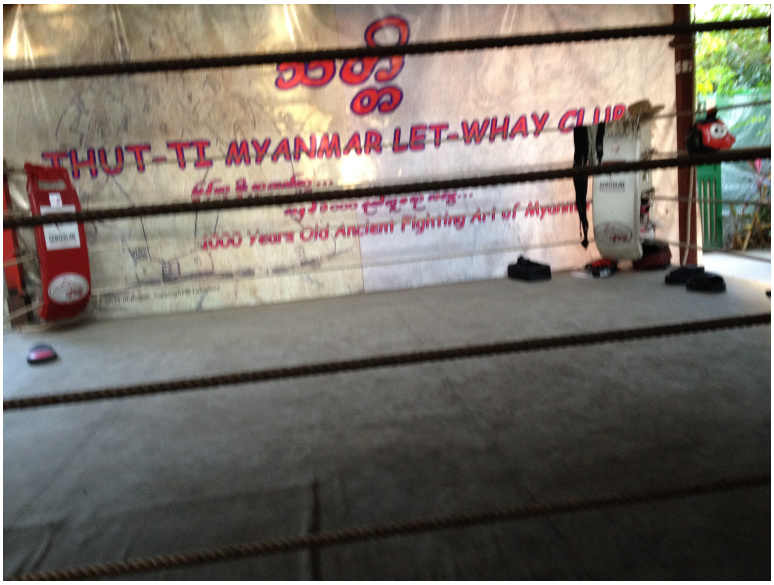

FIGURE 2.2.1: VIEW OF THUT TI'S BOXING RING.

[25] Thein, U Aung and *TBB* student. Personal communication. 9 Jan. 2014.

Myanmar martial artists may embellish the narratives together, but it's this unified approach that makes it "real" to them. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, a Haitian anthropologist, examined how the "production of history relates to power and its many forms – mostly invisible, and vice versa" and further probed into the understanding that "some narratives" are "powerful enough to be accepted as history rather than fiction," therefore, "narratives are always produced in history" (1995:23). Trouillot contends that power, in various forms, is a fundamental part of historical production, combing facts and sources and more importantly, silencing some as the history gets written (29). The author in the first chapter contextualizes notable past events such as "Remember the Alamo", the Jewish Holocaust, and slavery in the United States to analyze the ambiguity of the term "history" and how it is perceived/understood, developed/produced, and disseminated/observed.

First there are *actors*, who are part of what happened (or the facts of the matter). In this case the original Grandmaster U Che and *let-whay* fighters are the actors. The *narrators* are the ones who told what happened (U Aung Thein, U Maung Lay (*bando*) and future trainees), or the narrative or story-telling of those facts (Trouillot 2). In other words, the facts, or positivism in this case, and the constructive fiction written according to the actors and narratives must combine in order to produce an accepted historical narrative. In Myanmar's case, the historical narratives on the martial arts must be a product of fact and fiction. The narratives that narrators chose to tell came from a point of fact (U Che existed; *let-whay* began prior to Buddhism). Recognizing the difference between the two is not important.

TBB and *let-whay* historical narratives are transmitted in the same vein as many other martial arts narratives. Schechner writes, not in reference to martial arts but to a performance that "In all versions of the Rama story throughout India and south Asia journeying, wandering,

pilgrimage, and marching – movements large and small, secular, religious, adventurous, and military – are decisive. Virtually every Indian knows the Rama story; many believe it to be historical fact (132)." The journey of U Che is an important element in the TBB historical narrative. The grandmaster struggled and pushed through all adversaries and succeeded.

The characters and the characters' accomplishments give inspiration for modern practitioners to emulate. The characters had reasons for their journeys, just as present-day martial artists. For instance, TBB fighters can imagine what Sayagyi U Che experienced on his journey in order to inspire them on their individual journeys through life. The story accommodates their needs. It was similar for *let-whay* fighters a thousand years ago. Fighters fought to survive. Today, fighters fight to survive to earn a living, to literally survive, and to ensure physical strength.

To make my examples above clearer, I will provide descriptions of other martial arts systems that exhibit and popularize a nationalist perception. Stephen Teo wrote about the relationship between famed Chinese martial art *wuxia* (wushu) and Chinese nationalism. He discussed how *wuxia* is the centerpiece of epics and "becomes a showcase of Chinese history, seeking to be universally accepted while at the same time located itself within the historicist confines of the nation-state" (Teo 2009:172). Jason Ingram, professor of Communications, also analyzed the influence that Hong Kong martial arts film *Once Upon a Time in China* has on the historicization of the reunification of Mainland China. Centered on the historic figure Wong Fei –hung that has been portrayed in over 100 films, Ingram examined the film producers' "attempt to construct a sense of communication and collective agency through inventing tradition" (2003:51). East Asian martial arts have been in the forefront of popular culture and film contributing to and encouraging collective national identities. For example, China is most

notable for its *wushu* and *kung fu* styles, whereas in Japan it features the fighting skills of samurai warriors and ninjas.[26]

Southeast Asian nations also historicize their martial arts systems, thus attaining a sense of national pride. The late Pattana Kitiarsa, former professor of Southeast Asian Studies, utilized his firsthand knowledge of *muay* Thai to write essays on the construction of national manhood and Thai masculinity through the practice of *muay* Thai and Buddhism, Thailand's national religion (2003). He acknowledged, "boxing and Buddhism are perhaps the most critical traditional masculine institutions in Thailand, instrumental in the country's nation-building process and in everyday life" (Pattana 2013). Thai nationals claim historical ownership of *muay* Thai.

The martial arts is a subject, a theme, and an asset to the celebration of national pride. Both China and Thailand exert this phenomenon through martial arts film pop culture. In Thailand, *Ong Bak* and *Tom Yung Goong* are two examples of action films under the sub-genre martial arts. Where *kung fu* is predominately the style of choice in Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong martial arts films, Thailand proudly showcases *muay* Thai, the national sport. Patsorn, an expert on media communications, defines 'Action Film' as:

> A film with fact-paced narrative featuring a lot of violence and physical action such as chases, fights, stunts, crashes and explosions, and where action dominates over dialogues and characters.' In Thailand, action films are called 'nang bu.' 'Nang bu' not only contains violence and physical action, but most of this genre also presents the right wing ideology of the three institutions of nation, religion and the monarchy (2008)."

A common character development and plot synopsis permeates throughout Prachya's to *muay* Thai films that are typical of 'nang bu.' First the main characters, both play by Tony Jaa, are

[26] *Seven Samurai*, 1954. Film; Hero, 2002. Film

from the rural areas. Likewise, the two protagonists are men from a close-knit familial village who already possess the skills and knowledge of *muay* Thai at the mastery level, and are devout Buddhists. These films also highlight and perpetuate aspects of male "Thainess." Pattana pointed out the disparity of scholarly attention given to Thai male gender studies compared to the literature focused the Thai female gender. Using four *muay* Thai films as examples, he identified and argued the characteristics of "Thai Masculinity" after the 1997 economic crisis:

> …Thai men are consciously eager to shoulder the nation's economic development failures and cultural chaos, brought about by economic globalization and trans nationalization of cultures since the 1960's. Messages from the movies convince their audiences that it is, and should be, men's historical burden to defend the country.

Muay Thai films illuminate Thai men's desire and imagination to reclaim their patriotic heroism needed to restore the country' troubled economic image.

Why are these stories so important in martial arts? How are they meaningful when told through film? They bring a sense of personal connection and spirituality to the activity as well as a sense of national pride.

Valerio Valeri argued that knowledge is socially fundamental when being shared and not being shared in a culture. *Muay* Thai films described apply Valeri's elements "of institutionalized processes of symbolic production" (1994:355-356). He described two variants of knowledge – propositional and procedural knowledge. Propositional knowledge is demonstrably considered to be true (philosophically) and collectively shared in a group (anthropologically). Procedural knowledge is 'knowing' to 'how to' or in other words, performing knowledge. Although, they are different in the process of acquiring knowledge, they both use a form of intelligence (habitually obtained or trained) (1994:350-352). And finally,

knowledge can only exist if there is a collective idea of what constitutes as an adequate performance and adequate truth (1994:352). Based on Valeri's theory the values that a practitioner of *muay* Thai should exemplify are national collective ideas formed from traditional Buddhist values. A historical narrative developed to shape a masculine national identity through a martial art.

In Myanmar's case, do the *let-whay* trainees reveal procedural or propositional knowledge through liminal experiences and space? Since Myanmar does not have a film industry that produces martial arts films to generate a sense of national pride or identity in the same way that Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Thailand do, do the trainees rely on habitually gained knowledge? It is possible that trainees feel a sense of community at the gyms because there is no pop culture to dictate the definition of "national identity" invented by film. Perhaps, instead of relying on a historical narrative to create a community or sense of identity through the martial arts, trainees experience common liminal "ritual" transitions, in turn strengthens the community relationship.

Martial arts is their inspiration and their vitality. There is power. Not just physical power, but mental and spiritual power behind practicing and honoring martial arts in Myanmar. I suggested that practitioners participate in lived martial arts through the "power of movement" or the power of non-verbal communication. Take for example a TBB practitioner, Ko Maung Maung, a juvenile delinquent in his early teens who "picked fights," 'destroyed property", and was "very disrespectful" to others.[27] In Myanmar culture, the younger population is required to respect and honor the older generation. When Ko Maung Maung was about nineteen (he is now twenty-nine), he knew his life was taking a bad turn. Struggling with depression and a lack of

[27] Ko Maung Maung (This is a pseudonym. He did not want his name revealed.) Personal communication. 9 Jan. 2014.

self-worth, he found comfort in Bruce Lee films. Soon after, he decided to take karate and *bando* lessons, then moved on to Indonesia *penkat silat*, and eventually about five years ago began TBB. Training in these martial arts grounds him, gives him a sense of purpose, and since training in TBB makes him proud of his country. Currently, he is an elementary school physical education teacher in Yangon.

2.3 Western historical narratives of the martial arts in Myanmar:

Before I move onto the ethnographic portion of the paper, I should first discuss the historical narratives that are available in the English language. As I mentioned before, I discovered very few resources on Myanmar martial arts as a whole. Giordano is the only individual that has extensively translated Burmese documents into English, but has not offered these translations up for the general public.

For the duration of my research trip I lived in an apartment directly in the heart of Chinatown. Not being accustomed to city life, hearing everyone outside my window prepare for the day was still comforting – clinking of metal pans, swishing of water, scrubbing pans, clunking plastic bins. Hearing workers setting down little plastic chairs in the restaurant next door. Engines running against the backdrop of birds chirping. My apartment was a guesthouse with a fully equipped kitchen, bathroom, and a lounge area. When I walked out of my room, I stepped into the small martial arts gym area where Aldrich provided private lessons to foreigners.

The bookshelves in the lounge area were lined with English language novels, Chinese and Burmese publications, and literature and manuals on a variety of martial arts systems. Apart

from one book about Myanmar boxing, I noticed none of the English language books were about the martial arts in Myanmar. Rather they focused on Bruce Lee and jeet kune do, Filipino martial arts systems, Japanese karate, Judo, and etcetera. On the right side of the shelf, Aldrich kept his Burmese language publications on the martial arts. I could read Burmese so I knew they comprised of manuals on Burmese *thaing*, Shan TBB – two of which were written and signed by U Aung Thein, *bendo* (*bando*), *let-whay*, spear and sword fighting, and Burmese fencing. Aldrich's collection confirmed I found all that I was going to find on the topic.

The Internet is the first, and the most convenient, resource to learn about Myanmar martial arts. The American Bando Association (ABA) has the most complete and extensive information on the *bando* and traditional animal systems.[28] Secondary sources on the Internet reference the ABA site or Green's martial arts encyclopedia (2001:629-637) and Draeger and Smith's collection of Asian martial arts (1974). The two published sources in English that focus solely on Myanmar martial arts are Zoran Rebac's manual on traditional Burmese boxing (2003) and Michael Martin's article on the traditional arts in Myanmar issued in the *Journal of Burma Studies* (2001).

It is comforting to identify common truths between the resources. At the same time, it is also perplexing to witness a total disregard for citations on the Internet and missing references on martial arts resources either in Burmese or in English publications. The sources rely on each other and it is impossible to discriminate which source actually spearheaded the historical narrative, if any did. Martin affirmed that the martial arts traditions have been "orally transmitted from teacher to disciple during the course of training" which made it "difficult to accurately discern facts from myths and legends" (142). Is it a universal belief that India impacted martial arts techniques until the Indianization period ended to then allow the Chinese

[28] American Bando Association. http://www.americanbandoassociation.com/. Accessed on March 12, 2014.

influences. The ABA reports that *bando* originated from China and others say it first came from India, but the approximate century is unknown. According to Martin, China influenced Myanmar martial arts in the eighth or tenth centuries (143). Zebac acknowledged that the bareknuckle or bare handed and feet fighting technique go back one thousand years, but the exact originating dates are ambiguous. Furthermore, he reiterated the ancient narrative:

> …there are manuscripts mentioning Burmese boxing in the earliest documentation of Burmese culture. Inscriptions have been found on the walls of the royal palace in Pagan that refer to the period before the founding of the Burmese state. According to the stories, an order of warrior monks, (the djidji) ruled long before the Pagan kingdom was founded…The inscriptions tell us that these monks practiced exhausting exercises in their monasteries that included fencing, fighting with lances, riding, swimming, and rowing, and that they were particularly skilled at wrestling and boxing (which were, at that time, part of a single discipline)…With time, the process of developing the martial arts was separated from these monks, who gradually lost their control. On the Nagai Pagoda (dating back to the 11th century under Pagan Kingdom), a relief scene shows a fight between two boxers (9-10).

These are colorful and grandeur depictions of the martial arts, however, Rebac does not provide a citation of his sources! Green cautioned that *lethwei* (his spelling) "only entered oral traditions of this struggle during the eighteenth century. Specifically, according to the Thai tradition, in the 1770's, a Thai prisoner of war, Nai Khanom Tom, was awarded his freedom after he defeated a dozen of his Burmese captors in boxing matches (Green 630). This story contradicts U Aung Thein's story that a Burmese king brought over the martial arts to Thailand.

There is no scholarly or historical document in the English language that directly writes about the origins of the modern concept or definition of the "martial arts." The term "martial arts" does not appear in American English colloquialism until after World War II when soldiers

returned from war having been exposed to Japanese fighting techniques.[29] Instead authors wrote on ancient warfare practices, use of weapons, and warfare dances when referring to the period prior to the 1930's. Miettinen, a Finnish expert on the art of dance, stated that theater was a platform to showcase dance movements that resembled martial arts techniques:

> Early Indigenous features can also be traced in dance and other movements techniques utilized in performances. In most theatrical traditions in Asia the movement technique makes use of ancient forms of martial arts, and South-East Asia is no exception. The dance movements of the most sophisticated forms of court theatre can still repeat the exercises of warriors from a thousand years ago or the animal movements enacted by hunters of ancient times (1992:3).

Miettinen made reference to the animal systems within the *bando* technique. In contrast, a specialist on Japanese theater, Faubion wrote that in lower Burma theater focused on dance which the movements did not resemble combat. On the other hand, the tribes of Upper Burma (Myanmar) practiced sword dances (Shan TBB). This is highly likely since the Shan today still practice and perform two-handed sword dances:

> Even in war Burmese good nature asserts itself. Burma in the middle of the 18th century after her victorious war of conquest against Siam and the sacking of the Siamese capital brought back as captives whole troupes of actors and dancers. Their punishment was to dance at the courts of the Burmese kings. Burma also, except for the hill tribes and fierce peoples of the Upper Burma, is the only country of Asia lacking fighting dances and the elaborate, stylized sword dances of mock combat which appear elsewhere in Asia almost with supererogation (1956:109).

Martial skills originated as part of the warfare tactics developed in the ancient warring states. Charney (2004) and G.E. Harvey (1967), the late British historian, each wrote accounts of performance dances prior to entering warfare called shield dances. During the colonial

[29] See http://voices.yahoo.com/the-growth-spread-asian-martial-arts-the6497384.html

resistance by hill tribes in Upper Burma, Burmese accounts described the role and technique of guerilla warfare by ordinary soldiers:

> The tactics that the resistance leaders employed made maximum use of the advantages given by terrain and environment. There would be a sudden assembly of men, sharp and furious attack on British troops and, before the British could organize and marshal a superior force, a dispersal into the countryside. These were the methods of irregular warfare…(1983:38).

- as well as by soldiers with weapons:

> Myinzaing's plan was to launch a large-scale attack on Mandalay in May 1886. According to the plan Bo Manga, with 300 swordsmen and 100 musketeers, would attack the police station and march towards the city, destroying the telegraphy wires; Anaukwindawhmu U Paung, with 200 swordsmen and 1,500 Shan and Burmese musketeers would attack the city directly and kill those Burmese ministers and officials who were in British employ; (48).

- and by fighting monks:

> Religion was another vital issue in the struggle against the British and monks came to play a prominent part…But although the monks were active in resistance, their main role was that of organizers behind the scenes…At the time of the outbreak of the war U Ottama was in a monastery in Pyilongyaw a few miles northwest of Minbu. Feeling many other monks did, that the sasana was endangered, he rose up against the British in the region around Minbu and north of it about the same time as Bo Swe was waging a struggle in the South. A natural capacity for command, in combination with the social influence exerted by monks, made it possible for him to build up a powerful resistance movement (62-63).

Resistance in the form of martial arts especially performed by monks has played a part in the development of national identity. Stories from China illustrate the Shaolin fighting monks rising up against the Mongol Genghis Khan in the 13th Century; secret martial arts societies rebelled against the Han dynasty; and in the 20th Century, the "Boxers" rose up against foreigners (Finn 1988:17-42).

During colonialism the British banned the martial arts. The administration feared a rise in forces if training in combat skills was permitted. However, specific students of martial arts styles in Shan State, Thaton district, and the Hanthawaddy District secretly trained (Martin 144). In 1933, The Gurkha Rifles formed the Military Athletic Club to revive the Burmese traditional fighting systems combining Indian, Tibetan, Chinese, and Nepalese martial arts, which resulted in the modern form of *bando*. During WWII, the Japanese encouraged the Burmese to resist by training in Myanmar with Japanese martial arts. In 1948, nine military officers of different ethnicities formed The National Bando Association (Green:632). Another historical narrative believed Burmese *thaing* was revived during the Saya San rebellion. These historical narratives tell the story of the rebirth of Myanmar martial arts in times of resistance and rebellion just as they in happened in China and Japan.

CHAPTER III

Let-whay

3.1 Introduction:

Because of its authoritarian bent, Myanmar's government has been regulating *let-whay* since the 1950's. It is reported that Burmese boxer, Kyar Na Byein, who competed in the 1952 Summer Olympics, was the pioneer of the modern *let-whay* system by instituting modern rules and regulations. Furthermore, the brutal and primitive qualities of *let-whay* impede its admittance into the national Myanmar collection of honored and encouraged sports activities. Instead the government prefers to promote more "civilized" sports.[30] Take, for instance, football, which is enormously popular and respected around the world. This past December Myanmar hosted the 2013 Southeast Asian Games throughout three different cities – Naypidaw, the current capital, Mandalay in the central region, and Yangon in the southern delta.[31] Tens of thousands spectators attended the football matches at Thuwunna Stadium in Yangon, which now accommodates 50,000 seats.[32]

At 2,000 kyat (about $2.00) per ordinary ticket, purchasing queues stretched forever. The last match in Yangon, before the finals in Mandalay, was between Myanmar and Indonesia. Myanmar's advancement to the finals hinged on this match. I couldn't miss this rare opportunity to witness firsthand a national past time on an international level. Skipping closer to stadium gate E, stretching my ticket out with pulsating excitement, I could hear spectators shouting, chanting, echoing. Cheering, Ahhhhing, Oooing! Thrumming and pounding of feet. It was

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[30] Oo, U Win Zin. Personal communication 19, Dec. 2013.

[31] The last time Myanmar hosted the SEA Games was in 1969 before the military took control of the distribution of sports, culture and government processes.

[32] The Myanmar Times. http://www.mmtimes.com/2010/business/551/biz55114.html. Accessed February 5, 2014.

electric! Hopping up the stone steps two by two I could feel the energy emanate from the spectators. Unfortunately, Myanmar lost 0-1. Riots ensued! Spectators ripped off their Myanmar t-shirts and bandanas and burned them in a cultish like circle; kicked down poster boards and gates; and threw trash onto the football pitch and ripped out seats. Perhaps, though this match backfired and the government's hope to display a sense of civility among its people to the world diminished.

Regardless of what the government promotes or believes in, *let-whay* endures in Myanmar. Where broken knuckles, stitches of train tracks, vomiting, and running in 90 degree temperatures are all part of a days work at the gym. Enter the world of *let-whay* - It certainly is not for the genteel. In this chapter I hope to convey some semblance of a community through various interesting characters. From a proud father figure to a five-time national champion and an inspired hopeful, they all sense something meaningful in *let-whay*.

The First Day

A wide metal green gate greeted me as I arrived for my first day of *let-whay* training held at *Thut Ti* Boxing School (See Figure 3.1.1). It took an adventurous hour-taxi-ride to the outskirts of downtown Yangon to reach it. Connecting roads between the communities of martial arts centers, I found out throughout my stay, are long, arduous and difficult to ride.

On that early Thursday December morning, Myanmar's air exhaled goose bumps on my skin. Excited, but uncertain of the appropriate process to enter the facilities, I waited and sheepishly peeked through the gate's horizontal slits. I was about thirty minutes late for my 9am lesson and no one came to greet me right away. *Is this the right place? Am I supposed to wait*

for someone or can I go in on my own? How do I get in? I thought. Out of the corner of my eye, a male in his early twenties spotted me and languidly shuffled over to lift up the latch of the gate. I offered a small grin with a formal hello in Burmese, "Mingalabar," and a nod of the head. "Is this the let-whay boxing school?" I asked in Burmese. He gently smiled, returned the nod and continued to languidly shuffle away from me to allow me in.

The open-air gym is the front "lawn" of U Win Zin Oo's (manager/owner) home covered only by a tin roof to offer protection during the rainy season. I was to learn later that about two years ago the front area was U Win's wife's garden. As the gym's popularity and fighters' winnings increased, so did the need for more space. Instead of renting space somewhere else, his wife sacrificed her garden space for the welfare of the gym. What used to be a rectangular space outside to the right of the house whose capacity only held minimal exercise equipment expanded to three times the original size. Now the gym enjoys a standard sized boxing ring on a platform and with ropes.[33] Above the ring are five banners showcasing each of the male professional *let-whay* boxers. All are in the fighting stance with fists near their face, are shirtless, and wearing boxing shorts with serious facial expressions (Figure 3.1.2).

Victor, U Win's youngest son who I have contacted to schedule lessons, while wearing a Burmese longyi,[34] introduced me to my personal *let-whay* trainer and head coach, Lone Chaw. I glanced over Lone Chaw's right shoulder and noticed his banner - he was dressed in medals and surrounded by trophies (See Figure 3.1.3 and 3.1.4).

Before I began to warm up, Lone Chaw, leisurely searched for a stopwatch. My fingers vigorously tap my thighs as I wait standing on top of a rubber tire. The seriousness that comes

[33] A standard sized boxing ring ranges between 16 to 25 feet for each side. The height is usually three to four feet off the ground. The floor is covered in 1" stretch canvas material. Each corner is covered in padding and three ropes are attached between each corner.

[34] A longyi is a traditional cloth that men wear around their waist, it knots in the center, and reaches to their ankles. Most males, young and old, still wear longyis.

with scholarly research could not cloak my youthful eagerness. My eyes darted around the modest surroundings. A concrete floor weathered by the constant pounding and twisting of calloused feet glares up at me. Behind me a row of six twenty-liter jugs smiled offering an incentive after an exhausting hour of kicking and punching. To the left stood the standardized boxing ring on a platform where boxing gloves haphazardly cling to the ropes. The concrete latrine and laundry space to the right were constant reminders that the boxing school is housed outside of U Win's home.

Within ten minutes into that first day of *let-whay* training, I vomited my recently consumed bananas. Sweat licked away my early morning goose bumps. Lone Chaw placed his palm over his heart, chomping on red betel nut, insisted with his eyes - *I understand. I know*. In retrospect, I experienced the preliminal stages of *let-whay*.

FIGURE 3.1.1: LOCALS PLAYING NATIONAL CHNLONE GAME IN FRONT OF THUT TI'S FRONT GREEN GATE.

FIGURE 3.1.2: BANNER DISPLAY OF THUT TI'S FIVE PROFESSIONAL FIGHTERS.

FIGURE 3.1.3: COACH LONE CHAW, RETIRED AND MULTIPLE NATIONAL CHAMPION.

FIGURE 3.1.4: BANNER OF RETIRED PROFESSIONAL FIGHTER, LONE CHAW.

3.2 A man and his vision: Sayagyi U Win Zin Oo

In his younger more hearty days, Sayagyi U Win Zin Oo strolled around his neighborhood, confident and strong, looking for fights. Not to be a bully, but to prove to himself and to others that he was the ultimate *let-whay* fighter. When growing up there were no official matches. No referees. No boxing ring, just a circle of people surrounding the two fighters in a dusty pit. No shiny sparkling belt after a win. And to win, he simply had to knock the other guy out before he knocked him out. Fight after fight after fight, he was unbeatable. Now in his 50's, he prefers to train others to be national champions and chooses whom *he* believes will be potential winners.

Sayagyi U Win, like Aldrich, wears multiple hats. As businessman, trainer and humanitarian he has been, for decades, relentlessly in the forefront advocating and promoting *let-*

whay across his nation while also reaching out to the international community. After the devastating Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar and witnessed his government's lack of response, he was compelled to take action as the new Disaster Response Manager with an international emergency aid and childcare NGO. Never skipping a beat in his original role as trainer keeps him constantly moving, negotiating and mentoring. His *let-whay* training gym began as a small homemade center for the underprivileged naming it *Thut Ti* because it means "courage" in Burmese. He envisions expanding his gym even more and at the same time ensuring accessibility for all. It may take motivation to begin *let-whay*, but it takes courage to train and courage to live a fulfilling life.[35] A newcomer may believe training in *let-whay* will make him or her a champion, but it takes more than just physical training. Trainees must embody the willingness to train.

With the Myanmar government relaxing on the number of foreign tourists that can enter the country U Win hopes to uplift *let-whay* as a positive and respectable sport. Instead the government sanctions *bando*, *chinlone* (Aung-Thwin 2012: 1341-1352)[36], and football as national sports. In contrast, they are safer, appear to be more "civilized," and are beloved by the general public than *let-whay*. More importantly, they promote unity. However, Sayagyi Win argues that at a typical football match, not including the 2013 Games, only 500-1,000 spectators attend, but at *let-whay* matches as much as 3,000 – 5,000 spectators come to watch their favorite boxer. One reason is that matches are organized around the time of special holidays such as Christmas, New Years and thingyan (water festival).

He adds that it is disappointing that the "rich and powerful look down on *let-whay* because it actually encourages positive qualities in a fighter – integrity, commitment,

[35] U Win Zin Oo. Personal communication. 9 Jan. 2014.
[36] See Gregory Hamilton's documentary, *Mystic Ball,* for more information and visual accounts of chinlone.

determination, and a warm heart. These are the qualities that you want your citizens to have, right? It (*let-whay*) can grow with financial power, but right now no way is that going happen in Myanmar."[37] For example, around 2006 Sayagyi asked Japan if they could organize a friendly *let-whay* match between his champion, Lone Chaw, and their champion martial artist. Japan rejected the request thinking the sport was not worthwhile and of course "uncivilized". But in 2007, Japan came to Yangon and observed *Thut Ti* gym and was so impressed by the technique, they undoubtedly, changed their minds and revisited the request. However, the Myanmar government blocked funds for the trip to Japan, but somehow the gym was able to gather enough funds for Lone Chaw to travel and fight. Being in his peak performance, Lone Chaw knocked out his Japanese opponent with a knee jab to the ribs in the first five minutes.

Thut Ti is a very popular fitness center for long-term expatriates and foreigners passing through. With a brand-new website, eager professional and amateur martial artists, athletes of other sports, and individuals who never heard of *let-whay* can email Sayagyi U Win to schedule a lesson any day or every day from 9am-noon and then again between 5pm-9pm. A one-hour lesson costs 5,000 kyat that equals to about $5. The trainers are Sayagyi U Win's professional fighters. I will talk about them more in the next section. I also had the opportunity to train next to both males and females (U Win claims the male to female ratio is 50/50), but intriguingly I came across more women than men in the morning sessions. In the evening, there were more men and maybe one or two women would train.

My Burmese-American translator, Wyn Soe-Lin, who I met and befriended at *Thut Ti*, offered a bit of inside knowledge on the perspective of *let-whay* foreign trainees in Myanmar (Standing on the left in Figure 3.2.1). Wyn has been a trainee at *Thut Ti* for several years.

[37] U Win Zin Oo. Personal communication. 9 Jan. 2014.

Me: Why did you choose to train at Thut Ti?

Wyn: The other gyms really don't like foreigners. They're kinda mean. This gym is actually very nice to foreigners. To anybody actually. The others are just mean to foreigners.

Me: Really? But you speak Burmese…fluently…(he cuts me off)

Wyn: Yeah, that really doesn't matter. They just don't like foreigners, period because they're amateurs. And the other gyms only train serious professionals. And they're all Burmese.

Me: You think I can observe them? Or are they really strict about foreigners.

Wyn: I can try finding out where they are, but they really don't like foreigners. Maybe because you're just observing they'd be cool with you. But I don't know.

Since the other *let-whay* centers did not speak English, it was difficult to locate and communicate with other gyms. However, with the help of Aldrich's network and Wyn's fluency in Burmese, I was able to observe a second *let-whay* center, owned and managed by Ko Kyaw Soe, the national *let-whay*/*muay* Thai coach and former student of Sayagyi U Win's, for a few hours during their training session. In contrast to Wyn's observation and Sayagyi's claim that other *let-whay* gyms do not accommodate foreign trainees or train serious students, Ko Kyaw Soe offered us, Wyn and I, to train with him and his students, who have won national championships and a gold medal at the 2013 Southeast Asian Games (Games), anytime.

Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to train at Ko Kyaw Soe's gym (KKS gym), but at *Thut Ti* my usual co-trainees were three Japanese housewives, who, in their own words, "have nothing else better to do" and Medy, a self-proclaimed "sporty housewife" from Indonesia married to a westerner.[38] All of their husbands live and work for foreign companies based in Yangon. I also trained briefly with Western couples sometimes bringing their children and their

[38] Medy. Personal Communication. 15 Dec. 2013.

children's nanny to the session, a single Asian-American male who was backpacking through Southeast Asia, Western *muay* Thai fighters, and educated and wealth(ier) Myanmar nationals. Regardless of experience and gender, every trainee engages in the exact same warm-up exercises and stretches. Depending on how many weeks an individual has been training, athletic propensity and prior experience, he or she will progress through the different techniques at various speeds. Nonetheless, all the technique and skill exercises are identical for everyone.

At this point, I would like to make a distinction between these trainees and the participants I will describe in later sections. I argue that practicing *let-whay* can conjure up a sense of community within the "liminal" space and experiences and that calling a foreigners' experience in *let-whay* as "liminoid" is perhaps misplaced. However, Turner would undeniably argue that these foreign trainees are absolutely choosing a "leisure' activity and are therefore "liminoid." Spencer and Zarrilli would agree that it is impossible for the novices to gain respect from the professionals and spectators because they cannot embody the "real" meaning of mixed martial arts or *kalariipayattu* respectively. However, I agree with them in reference to only these amateur trainees. I will claim that the Japanese housewives and Medy are not trying to enter the "let-whay" community, therefore, a rites of passage is not necessary or desired. Their training experiences are liminoid because they don't expect to be professionals or even amateurs. They choose to train for physical fitness. Furthermore, referring to their experiences as "liminal" or "liminoid" is irrelevant. These actors are temporary and moving in and out of the lives of the *let-whay* community permanent members – indigenous and foreign professionals.

In contrast, I refer to the permanent actors when I talk about 'liminal" experiences. These participants who engage daily and devotedly to *let-whay* experience the three phases of van Gennep's rites of passage. In the next sections I will describe the professionals and the

training process and how these experiences are liminal.

FIGURE 3.2.1: WYN SOE-LIN, A BURMESE AMERICAN AMATEUR FIGHTER AND AUTHOR AFTER A MORNING OF LET-WHAY TRAINING AT THUT TI.

3.3 National Let-Whay Fighters: Lone Chaw and Ko Shan Ko aka "The Archer"

The majority of *let-whay* competitors are adult males (18 years – 30 years). Though, I personally have not seen females or children compete in matches, the Internet is a quick option to access unofficial videos of young females and males as young as six years fighting in competitions and matches, and they fight quietly brutally.[39] Ko Kyaw Soe[40] is the prime advocate to make *let-whay* more accessible and accepting for women participation. This gym

[39] To watch videos, go to Burmese-Boxing.com and SoutheastAsianBoxing.com. Website, videos, and photos are produced and maintained by AndréRené, a photojournalist.

[40] Ko Kyaw Soe is a former student of Sayagyi U Win. There is a bit of a rivalry between trainees.

only trained Myanmar professionals. Since *let-whay* is not an official sport in the Games and as the appointed Myanmar national coach for the Games, the Ko Kyaw Soe had to train both males and females in *muay* Thai. It so happened that two of his own professional fighters qualified, however the professional fighters from *Thut Ti* did not.

There are no national female professional *let-whay* or *muay* Thai champions or legends in Myanmar. Moreover, female athletes were not eagerly coming to Coach Ko Kyaw Soe so finding qualified candidates was a bit of a challenge. Women do not openly advertise competing in such a violent and uncivilized sport considering it makes them appear unmarriageable and too manly to men, therefore blemishing their chances to marry.[41] Therefore, Coach Ko Kyaw Soe had to recruit Myanmar female athletes from modern fitness gyms throughout Yangon City. Here he describes his experience in recruiting females:

> The approach was simple. I just saw women at the gym and I could judge if they were athletic. If I thought they were athletic, I went up to them, explained who I was, and asked them if they wanted to be in the 2013 Southeast Asian Games. If they said yes, I told them they would be training in *let-whay*, but competing in *muay* Thai. Only eight said yes after that.[42]

He eventually chose eight female bicyclists, weight lifters and football (soccer) players to begin the training process at his large, but modest *let-whay* center using very simple equipment compared to *Thut Ti* (See Figure 3.3.1 and 3.3.2.). After the first four months of training, he had his female trainees fight the Vietnamese female competitors (who already qualified and were training in Yangon) to determine if they would be able to qualify. Half of them did well enough to qualify later in such a short amount of time. The other half decided that getting hit in the face or body was not an ideal exercise so they politely declined. Ko Kyaw Soe was pleasantly

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[41] Sawbwa, Aldrich. Personal communication. 9 Jan. 2014.

[42] Ko Kyaw Soe. Personal communication. 14 Jan. 2014. Ko Wyn Soe-lin was the interpreter.

satisfied to witness at the Games that two of his female fighters earned medals in *muay* Thai and his national *let-whay* champion earned the gold medal (See his gold medalist and national champion in Figure 3.3.3).

Sayagyi U Win reassured me that 50% of the people who train at *Thut Ti* are women, but it has been rumored that he prefers professionally training only males, although he may never say it publicly and he never said it to me directly.[43] He is also rather strict when he recruits. Currently, he and Lone Chaw (retired) train four professional fighters - three Myanmar nationals and one British fighter. The following two Myanmar fighters train and fight in *let-whay* for practical purposes. I will then describe their training practices that reflect liminal rituals and rites of passage.

FIGURE 3.3.1: EQUIIPMENT AT KO KYAW SOE'S LET-WHAY GYM.

[43] Sawbwa, Aldrich. Personal communication. 21 Jan. 2014.

FIGURE 3.3.2: TRAINING AT KO KYAW SOE'S LET-WHAY GYM.

FIGURE 3.3.3: PROFESSIONAL FIGHTER - CHAMPION AND GOLD MEDALIST AT THE 2013 SOUTHEAST ASIAN GAMES AT KO KYAW SOE'S LET-WHAY GYM.

Lone Chaw:

Before arriving at Thut Ti, Lone Chaw had multiple other coaches, but Lone Chaw never became reached his life-long goal to become a national champion. In 2004 Lone Chaw's teacher, U Win's former student, contacted his teacher from many years ago and asked if U Win would coach and guide Lone Chaw. Refusing to accept failure, Lone Chaw arrived at Sayagyi U Win's house trusting that he would help him become the next national champion. U Win saw that he was determined and honest with great potential. Although, Lone Chaw trained before, he was still rough around the edges. He was a rice farmer just as his father, U Aye Thein, before him.

Lacking a sense of sophistication and training ethics, Sayagyi had to "carve the stone to be a gem."[44] It required intense training everyday, commitment, and the willingness to succeed. For the next two years Lone Chaw trained hard and remained humble. His efforts won him gold belt national championships in 2005, 2006, and 2007. Fighters usually retire at 30 years, but he could not stop. This life provided for him and his family. Winners are able to win several hundred dollars for each fight that lasts about fifteen to twenty minutes. Finally, after Lone Chaw at 35 years, fought a New Zealand fighter younger than 30 years, U Win suggested he retire and coach instead. He agreed and is now the head coach of *Thut Ti* and nominated as the sports Ambassador for UNESCO. Instead of physically hitting and kicking opponents, every day he now encourages trainees and children to try their hardest and never give up. *Let-whay* will always be the key component and the justification in his every life.

[44] Sayagyi U Win Zin Oo. Personal communication. 9 Jan. 2014.

Ko Shan Ko aka Lay Nyo Shin (The Archer):

Shan Ko lost a lot of *let-whay* matches. His teacher, also Sayagyi U Win's former student, suggested he go to *Thut Ti* if he wanted to become a national champion. So he packed up his few belongings and left his rural surroundings. His winnings go toward rent and food, but the rest he sends back home to his family. As a *let-whay* champion, he lives with Lone Chaw, and Lone Chaw's wife and mother in the apartment right next to the gym. For him it is very satisfying to train others in the activity that he loves. At 24 years, he has won two gold belts, but his ultimate goal is not unlike Lone Chaw's - to become Myanmar's national champion. *Let-whay* also drives his life's motivations.

Both Lone Chaw, who is a Karen ethnic minority and a Christian, and Shan Ko, who is Burmese and a practicing Buddhist, live in a subculture community that consumes their everyday beings. They don't know what their lives would be without it. This demonstrates that they live in a community environment. There are certain rules to ensure the gym functions safely and efficiently. U Win is the manager who controls the administrative processes and the professionals handle the training. There is also an unspoken hierarchy of experience between the professional fighters.

Practicing *let-whay* would seem to be a choice. However, for these two men choosing to train and pursue a national championship, isn't a luxury or a hobby. It is a fact of life. It is they're livelihood. It is their passion. It is they're job. The word choice brings on a whole new meaning in the case of these *let-whay* fighters. To be respected by their peers and family members they want to succeed.

3.4 The Grass Roots Construction Plan for Let-whay Training:

A *let-whay* fighter wins a match by knocking out his or her opponent within a set number of rounds. There are five rounds of three minutes each with a three- minute rest between the rounds. However, seven, ten and 12 round matches have occurred during competitions. If at the end of the five rounds a fighter has not knocked out his or her opponent, the referees can choose the winner by deciding who fought the hardest, who demonstrated a dedicated fighting spirit, and who emerged as the most committed in the fight. In other cases, if one fighter is too wounded to fight, the referees can stop the match and decide who wins. During other instances, if referees determine that both competitors are not fighting his or her hardest they will end the match and declare no winner. No points are ever awarded. Throughout the match, spectators will give money, which are considered "tips" in Western cultures, to whichever fighter they believe is fighting the hardest, thus is the best fighter. This practice is very similar to when spectators give money to chinlone players.

Since there are no weight classes or segregation according to experience, fighters put their names on cards and are then chosen at random to compete against opponents who are taller, heavier, and often more experienced. Therefore, more so than technique and endurance, the most fundamental component to *let-whay* fighting is the *embodied willingness* to fight. For instance, it is possible that an experienced fighter, who clearly exhibits technique, may not win a fight because he does not demonstrate effort. On the other hand, referees may choose the least experienced fighter as the winner as long as he or she is fighting hard. Nonetheless, technique and endurance are extremely critical and necessary in order to survive in the boxing ring. It just so happens that the two factors inevitably develop in relation to the level of embodied

willingness. Most successful fighters must be both self-motivated with clear goals and intentions possessing appropriate skills.

Let-whay is considered more brutal than *muay* Thai because the lack of regulations. A *let-whay* fighter uses his or her entire body to fight utilizing every body part, which includes gloveless fists, elbows, knees, shins, feet, as well as the head (considered illegal in *muay* Thai). Furthermore, in *let-whay* fighters may keep attacking his or her opponent if they are on the ground. Without these bodily restrictions, training sessions extensively train all parts of the body from feet to head. Fights often result in injury and sometimes death in earlier times.

With all this in mind, how does an individual embody the willingness to endure physical and mental hardship? Where does this self-motivation originate? What are the outside and internal forces that coincide to create a high level of motivation to succeed? At the same, how does a fighter exhibit integrity and honest and friendly spirit amidst pure savage violence?

The best way to describe a *let-whay* fighter's embodied willingness to fight, I suggest in my own embodied of training, is in terms of a "grassroots construction plan" to build ones own house. The personalized "house" of course, represents the fighter's physical body and the construction plans are his or her embodied responsibilities to become a great fighter. This phase is the "preliminal stage" before entering the liminal stage. Although describing embodied *let-whay* training as a "grassroots construction plan" is my own approach, connecting human body or spirit to a Southeast Asian architectural form is not an entirely new concept, but a concept that has been developed by multiple scholars in other fields[45] and which holds further comparative potential.

[45] See Chotima Chaturawong's dissertation, "The Architecture of Burmese Buddhist Monasteries in Upper Burma and Northern Thailand," 2003, Roxana Waterson's "The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture in South-East Asia," 1997, and Irene Moilanen and Sergey S. Ozhegov's "Mirrored in Wood: Burmese Art and Architecture," 1999.

First, a professional fighter must be self- motivated. No one other than U Win Zin Oo and Ko Kyaw Soe are most capable of choosing their professional fighters. But there is no contractor or factory producing an impersonal house. Instead, the manager and trainers of the *let-whay* centers are facilitators and consultants and the professional fighters are their own planners, builders, and creators.

Just as a house must have a strong foundation and walls to withstand all types of weather conditions, include running utilities, and endure depreciation, a fighter must also build a durable and functional body that can perform efficiently, maintain stamina, and skillfully protect him or herself.

Each "house" reflects the personalities and needs of a fighter. A fighter can master a certain technical move, but overall, he or she must be skillful in every way. For example, Shan Ko, nicknamed the "Archer" for his powerful and elongated jabs, may not jab during a fight because it would not be as effective with a particular opponent, thus he may not be able to knock him out before the five rounds are up. Perhaps, his opponent is taller, thus resorting to kicks may be more useful as opposed to close jabs.

U Win and Ko Kyaw Soe choose their fighters that demonstrate a high level of integrity and eagerness to win. For example, when U Win first met Ko Shan Ko, he observed that he possessed the willingness to build a personalized "house" with a potential "construction plan" in hand. Shan Ko wanted to pursue a professional career in *let-whay,* but he needed someone to advise him how to succeed. U Win had no difficulty convincing him to fight. Instead he trained him in the proper techniques.

Constructing a firm groundwork and balanced frame are crucial to fight. No matter how advanced and secure a roof is, if the foundation is weak, wind, fire, water can easily erode and

destroy the house. To survive a fight and avoid a knock out, a fighter must stay erect, remain steadfast, and be firm. Shan Ko and the other trainees at *Thut Ti* begin the training session with a warm up to strengthen his feet, calves and thighs (See Figures .3.4.1 and 3.4.2). The trainees hold hand bells to the chins and firmly and firmly bounce on a rubber tire. Every ten seconds they switch they're feet. Five minutes later when Lone Chaw yells "speed!" the trainees switch they're feet back and forth more rapidly almost like they are running. Five minutes pass, another command, "normal!" and they return to bouncing. They continue this warm-up for 40 minutes.

FIGURE 3.4.1: PROFESSIONAL FIGHTERS BEGINNING THEIR WARM-UP AT THUT TI.

FIGURE 3.4.2: PROFESSIONAL FIGHTERS, KO SHAN KO IN WHITE AND SAW KAW MU DO IN BLACK BEGINNING THEIR WARM-UP AT THUT TI

Whereas, Ko Shan Ko and other trainees begin with a physical warm-up and then a stretching session (See Figure 3.4.3 and 3.4.4 for *Thut Ti* stretches), Ko Kyaw Soe's t trainees begin with stretching (See Figure 3.4.5) right away.

In the second half of the training Ko Shan Ko continues to build his stamina while strengthening his legs. As he erects the walls with appropriate planks and nails, his house also needs functioning utilities such as well-placed electrical wiring, water supply and plumbing, and heating systems. His plans include kicking and knee jab exercises to ensure sustainable endurance and healthy breathing techniques (See Figures 3.4.6 to 3.4.9)

Shan Ko chooses to incorporate various rooms that employ individual functions. Each room focuses on an application of a body part to attack or block such as the "elbow" room,

"head" room, and the "forearm" room. Each room has a task and he perfects all the trimmings, the paint on the walls, and the placement of furniture. For today's session he and the other trainee focuses on stand-up grappling. This skill practices locking up an opponent's upper body and head in close contact, while at the same time exercising body release (See Figures 3.4.10 and 3.4.13).

On the other hand, after stretching the trainees at Ko Kyaw Soe's gym complete a work-out circuit where two trainees work on the big boxing bag, another trainee jumps rope, and the fourth conducts sit-ups exercises (See Figures 3.4.14 – 3.4.17). After 20 minutes, the trainees who were kicking, punching, and knee kicking the boxing bags switch to pad work on the blue mat, while the other two trainees switch to the boxing bag. 3.4.18-3.4.21).

FIGURE 3.4.3: STRETCHING AT LET-WHAY.

FIGURE 3.4.4: MORE STRETCHES AT LET-WHAY.

FIGURE 3.4.5: STRETCHING AT KO KYAW SOE'S GYM.

FIGURE 3.4.6 JUMPING DRILLS

FIGURE 3.4.7: FIRST POSITION KNEE KICKING DRILLS.

FIGURE 3.4.8: KNEE KICKING DRILLS.

FIGURE 3.4.9: SIDE KICK DRILL.S

FIGURE 3.4.10: GRAPPLING WITH SEAN

FIGURE 3.4.11: MORE GRAPPLING WITH SEAN

FIGURE 3.4.12: GRAPPLING DRILLS WITH SEANAND KO SHAN KO.

FIGURE 3.4.13: MORE GRAPPLING WITH SEAN AND KO SHAN KO

FIGURE 3.4.14: BAG WORK AT KO KYAW SOE.

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FIGURE 3.4.15: KNEE STRIKING

FIGURE 3.4.16: CIRCUIT TRAINING.

FIGURE 3.4.17: MORE BAG WORK.

FIGURE 3.4.18: PAD WORK WITH KO KYAW SOE.

FIGURE 3.4.19: MORE RING TRAINING.

FIGURE 3.4.20: PAD WORK TO BUILD IPRECISION

FIGURE 3.4.21: DEFENSE TRAINING.

To understand how these centers function is to view them as *liminal* spaces. These preliminary exercises prepare the trainee for the liminal phase. As I mentioned earlier, regardless of sex, skill level or experience, nationality or religion, each trainee experiences specific training exercises and drills. These activities can be considered "ritualistic" and progress into three stages of the liminal process first established by Arnold Van Gennep.

In the first stage the trainees begin at equal footing by participating in a warm-up that is exactly performed the same way during every training session. After the warm-up, the instructors teach the same beginning basic movements. If the trainees come regularly, gradually they increase the number of movements and level of difficulty. In the beginning stages no one uses or interacts with any boxing equipment or a physical opponent. Again depending on the frequency of visits and motivation, instructors will allow trainees to use boxing gloves, the large punching bag, and the eventual entry into the boxing ring. They only do pad work. There is no sparring at that level. At this *let-whay* center, only when the trainee requests to spar and if the instructors confirm that the trainee is ready, will he or she get a chance to spar or mock fighting. As for me, because I only trained for a limited time, I only entered the ring once for pad exercises. Another example describing the sacredness of using boxing equipment was when I invited two foreign friends to *Thut Ti* for the first time. After the warm that everyone engages in the beginning, I separated from my two friends. Whereas I trained with Lone Chaw using a large boxing bag to perform kicking, knee kicking, and elbow and hand strike drills, my friends trained with an assistant coach in the *let-whay* basics that I learned on my first sessions. At the end of the session, one of my friends asked Lone Chaw if she could punch and kick the boxing bag. Lone Chaw gave a definitive and firm shake of the head and said in English, "No no." And said "No no" again after she insisted one more time. *Thut Ti* prides in having a set regiment and

certain rules to abide by just as in societies. In other words, the gym encompasses preliminal drills and repetitions of movement.

Since the professionals have entered the liminal phase and experienced the postliminal phase, their training sessions differ greatly from the trainees still in the preliminal phase or in liminoid space.

Kalarippayattu is also a traditional South Indian martial art where the practitioner prepares the physical body for training. The practitioners are part of a community dedicated to the spiritual and religious relationship that is embodied during performative exercises. Rituals and liminal space are factors in creating the character such as appropriate facial expressions are required (Zarrilli 1990:131). When fighters train in *let-whay,* they perform exercises and movements. After executing them many times, they become natural and habitual and part of the fighter's unique fighting technique.

Zarrilli describes a *kalarippayattu's* training similar to a *let-whay* fighter's training session.

> 'In essence, mastery of in-body form, when combined with the ability to fix and focus both gaze and mind, frees the martial or performing artist from "consciousness about, "preparing him for a state of "concentratedness.' The yogi is freed for meditation; the martial artist is freed to fight; the performer is freed to perform. All three are dynamic sets of actions – doings in the now moment (134).

Although, *let-whay* does not carry overt spiritual or religious connections, the fighter must lose him or herself in the fighting moment. The fighter outside of the ring is gentle, kind, and thoughtful. But inside the ring the fighter transforms into an aggressive being unconsciously performing immediate movements in reaction to the opponent's actions. However, these skills

are not natural. Training requires intense drills repeating over and over the same movement until it is part of the habitual memory.

3.5 Foreign Fighters: Sean Bardoe aka "The Hammer"

Farrer contends that foreigners practicing the Malay martial art of *Silat*, cannot truly embody the spiritual and magical powers of Sufi mysticism, therefore their training experiences and even competitive matches are not "real" and are liminoid. Can the same be for foreign *let-whay* fighters? Even though they fight alongside their Myanmar peers, they are not *let-whay* "real" fighters or part of the *Thut Ti* or *let-whay* community? I argue that foreigners can enter the liminal phase through appropriate "rituals" without being "liminoid."

Spencer also grapples with the idea of what does it mean "being a mixed martial artist." Appropriate training and entering the ring establishes the criteria for being considered a MMA fighter. For instance, two MMA training sessions at the local fitness center does not appoint someone as a MMA fighter. Spencer's research alludes to this perception:

> On the question of what 'officially" constitutes being a mixed martial artist, meaning and identity are inextricably intertwined. Within MMA culture, a dimension of the signification of an MMA fighter is in a widely understood rite of passage that takes place when he or she fights in a professional MMA event…The view that one is not a mixed martial artist until after they have had their first fight was held by all participants in the study. A fighter becomes a mixed martial artist in the experience of being in the ring. This transformation in status occurs because it is believed that only those that enter the ring can comprehend the significance of the event (2012: 73-74).

Sean stands a head above most fighters, literally. British and at 42 years old, he is the only foreign professional *let-whay* fighter in Myanmar and the oldest. He has won fights, which earned him the respect from his professional peers and spectators as well as the name "The Hammer." Not only does he sport a mohawk, but he also brandishes the traditional Burmese

tattoo on both thighs that begins at his waist, wraps around the entire thigh, down to right above his knees. About seven years ago he came to Myanmar for a job and has been training in *let-whay* with Sayagyi U Win and Lone Chaw ever since. When I met him in January of 2014, he just returned from Thailand for business and for physical recuperation. A few months prior to meeting him, he broke his left cheekbone, received about eight stitches above his left eye, broke a few knuckles in his right hand, and had damaged ribs. U Win asked Sean if he wanted to fight a retired fighter in a special event the following month. Sean was hesitant at first because of his physical state, but agreed to as long as the training in the next two confirms his condition to fight.

For this upcoming event the other fighters strongly urged him to perform the traditional fight dance, *Lai Ka*, in order to gain respect from the people and his opponent, a former national champion. Prior to this event, as a foreigner Sean was excused from doing the dance. But now they require him to do it. Since he belongs to this community of fighters, he felt obligated to perform. Performing the *Lai Ka* is almost a second liminal experience. The first liminal transition was when he first entered the ring as a professional fighter. As a foreigner, he must continue to enter these liminal phases to maintain his position as a member of the *let-whay* community. Another liminal ritual includes procuring the tattoos. The next liminal phase is performing the *Lai Ka "*dance fight" in front of a thousand spectators.

Sean begins the Lai Ka dance by challenging his opponent (See Figure 3.5.1)[46]. Facing almost sideways toward the fighter, he lifts his left knee slightly up, his left arm bent laying the left hand over his right upper bicep, the right hand in motion. Slap. Slap. Slap. The left upper bicep. He continues punching the air in front of him, left –right. Dancing forward, hopping toes by toes, Jabbing right, left, right left. Head butting, jabbing left-right, dancing forward, hopping toes by toes, spinning left, spinning right, thigh slap, thigh slap. Dancing forward. Hopping.

[46] I was not able to get a live photo of Sean doing the Lai ka dance . This photo is from a video of Sean at the January 21, 2014 let-whay fight. Watch https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPI6hfJbHys to see his dance and fight.

Jabbing right, left, right, left. Head butting. Spinning left. Spinning right. Thigh slap. Thigh slap. And so on.

Sean's participation in *let-whay* is not liminoid. He does not perceive boxing as a leisure activity. Through specific "rituals" he has past through the three phases of *let-whay* inception. He is invested in it monetarily, emotionally, and physically. Sean's company has donated a lot of boxing/*muay* Thai equipment to the gym. He has created family-like bonds with the other professional fighters. Although, he is retiring soon, he is considered a *let-whay* fighter and a champion.

FIGURE 3.5.1: SEAN BARDO PERFORMS THE FIGHITNG DANCE, LAI KA, TO CHALLENGE HIS OPPONENT.[47]

[47] Photo captured from a youtube video, published 24 January 2014.

Wyn Soe-Lin:

The final fighter I want to bring attention to is Wyn Soe-Lin, my Burmese-American translator and now my friend (See Figure 3.5.2, Wyn Soe-Lin is standing in the black t-shirt to the right of Lone Chaw). As a foreigner, Wyn does not compete professionally and has not passed through the rites of passage (fighting in a real match), thus his participation in the martial arts and *let-whay* appear as liminoid or "play." He warms up with the other foreigners, does the skill work exercises, and often does pad work in the ring. However, when I returned to the United States in late January, Wyn announced on Facebook and then to me in a private message that he had the opportunity to spar, or mock fight with pads, with Ko Shan Ko. This was most certainly the highlight of his trip.

FIGURE 3.5.2: LONE CHAW AND WYN SOE-LYN AT THUT TI AFTER A SPARRING.

Wyn was born in Washington D.C and grew up in Bethesda, Maryland training from the age of seven years in the Japanese martial art, Tang Su Do, with his Myanmar-born father. As the son of a traveling private contractor assisting and advising potential business owners build their companies in Myanmar, Wyn also has had many opportunities to visit and train in Thailand (*muay* Thai) and Myanmar (*let-whay*).

Instead of telling you that for Wyn the martial arts and *let-whay* are liminal, I'll let him describe it.

Me: How has let-whay influenced you – mind, body, and spirit? How has it empowered you?

Wyn: When I was young I was the only Asian kid in my class. During an era before bullies were called bullies, I beat up a lot of kids. I know things are not like that now and I'm happy about it. I'm different from my peers now also. I have made some investments that have fortunately gone well. So I have a lot of time to travel and train. The people I train with are from all walks of life. I think that's part of the fun. Meeting different folks.

Me: How has let-whay affected your personal life – your relationships with others?

Wyn: When I got super serious my life was not going well. I partied a lot. I was 200 lbs. Now I'm 160. My cardio is really good. I last a longer time in the ring. I'm stronger. Know more about my body. Have a great network of martial artists that are great friends. Not just good time friends to party with. On the downside I have lost a lot of friends whose lifestyles I could not be around anymore. I don't do clubs and bars. I kind of limited myself socially. My family is happy. I don't snore anymore. I had a big problem with that. I eat healthy; avoid tobacco smokers; also I'm more happy and confident.

Me: How is your relationship with your trainers? With other trainees?

Wyn: I have met some bad teachers but I have met more good ones. I find in every school I become closer to the trainers and coaches than the students. I am there everyday; they feel close to me. Also they are fun to hangout with. No BS type of folks. Warriors make good company. Head trainers and I have not become close. Not yet at least. But I respect them all.

Me: What is your opinion on competition versus performing in exhibitions?

Wyn: I think competition is more valuable. It is more real. You get tested on your skill and your nerves. It's not choreographed. You learn and grow fight to fight. But

performance is fun to watch also. I saw a Shaolin Monk performance that was amazing.

Me: Did you ever want to quit?

Wyn: I did quit during high school. I was too cool for school. Last summer when I was in Chiang Mai my first day training at a gym call Petchthompun (diamond honey bees) it was really hot and I was doing heavy bag work. I almost died. It was so hot and humid. I felt like quitting. But I stuck through it and had a wonderful time with them. That's where I got my screaming grunts from. They are very noisy in Northern Thailand.

Me: What personal challenges has *let-whay* helped you overcome?

Wyn: Snoring. Obesity. Certain social anxieties. Bad friends. Boredom and belonging. Martial arts has enabled me to become a good citizen of this Earth. Along with respecting all that are dangerous. I also see the military and cops from an interesting angle. I have gotten to know a few of them. They are good folks.

Me: How do you see yourself in 10 years?

Wyn: I will practice martial arts till I die. When I am 45 I will be Sean from Thut Ti's age. I will be a beast by then.

Me: What would you be doing if you weren't doing the martial arts?

Wyn: I think I would be dead. Sounds kind of gloomy when I write it.[48]

Wyn Soe-Lin comes to Myanmar and *Thut Ti* gym at least two times a year for a month or two months at a time. He has built a strong relationship with the professional fighters and Sayagyi U Win. Every trip he comes bearing gifts for them. There is a sense of mutual respect and expected loyalty between them. For instance, when Sayagyi U Win found out that Wyn went to visit Ko Kyaw Soe's gym, U Win wrote Wyn an agitated letter stating that he was displeased with him for going to Ko Kyaw Soe's gym to train. And that he should only train at his gym. The communication in turn upset Wyn and he was not sure how to handle the situation. The next

[48] Soe-Lin, Wyn. Personal communications. Between 8 January 2013 to 9 March 2014.

day the two of them smoothed it over and Wyn assured him that he would not train at the other gym. On the other hand, Sayagyi U Win was never concerned about my participation at the other gym, nor does he concern himself with the other foreign trainees. However, it is difficult to decipher if Wyn's acceptance into the Thut Ti community is due to his Burmese heritage and language skills or if it's a true acceptance of a foreigner. Regardless Sean's Lai ka dance, tattooing and professional boxing status and Wyn's acceptance demonstrate the liminal or their rites of passage as a foreigner. They and the other Myanmar professional fighters participate in *let-whay* for different reasons. Nonetheless, they all experience it as liminal, not liminoid. It's personally important and practical in their lives.

These liminal experiences are by choice, but are not characteristically liminoid. They do it because they have to. In order to cross over into the new phase as a true respected fighter, they have to embody the experience and go through those ropes that surround the boxing ring with the intent to fight with honor, dignity and commitment.

Both Sean and Wyn demonstrate the same embodiment and liminal experience as the professionals, therefore they are part of the *Thut Ti* community.

CONCLUSION

Concentration, precision, and habitual movement. Self-discipline, commitment, and respect. Refinement, strength, and skillful sophistication. These words are of a "civilized" suggestion. They evoke struggle. They require serious attention. They also are a sense of doing an action that is meaningful and productive. These words are what Turner proposed as the liminality of being. Furthermore, they are being of work. Being provincial. Being burdensome. Therefore, they are also a part of *let-whay.* They are joints between limbs of power. They are the skin of integrity. The organs of embodied willingness. The blood of passion. It is the feeling of belonging. The knowing of skills. The maneuvering of awareness. *Let-whay* fighters embody rare characteristics. They must be resourceful in high stress matches. Humble yet innovative. Strong and enduring. *Let-whay is* work.

In this paper, I hypothesized whether a *let-whay* gym in a country where ethnic and religious separatism exist, where a history of xenophobia perpetuates, and public violence renounced, could be a site for community formation. I first established that my argument would be through the lens of van Gennep's theory of liminality and later developed by Turner to include the binary opposition – liminal versus liminoid. What do these two abstract terms mean in relation to societies and to community formation? How can they describe the events, relations and emotions that occur at *Thut Ti Let-Whay* gym? Is it possible to implement a theory that speaks to small-scale societies into a martial arts subculture? I argue that liminal and liminoid experiences do occur in a *let-whay* space of experiences placed in a disjointed city, but that foreign trainees can also have liminal experiences.

In chapter I, I first introduce the readers to Aldrich Sawbwa, my main informant, who slides in and out of Myanmar and the foreign societies. As both a Myanmar national and an international entrepreneur, he provides a unique perspective on the martial arts subculture. He is keenly aware of the public political attitude toward the martial arts and *let-whay,* and provides an unbiased opinion on the secrets held within the centers. The second section outlines the different techniques and styles of Myanmar martial arts and how they evolved internationally by also maintaining the Myanmar styles. By providing a brief political history and martial arts development in Myanmar the readers can see the correlation between the two and the reasons for secrecy and the lack of access to research. The secret training sessions or "rituals" are characteristic of liminal experiences that individuals in small-scale societies experience.

Chapter II stands almost by itself as it delves a little more deeply into the origins of the marital arts and why historical narratives are significant for practitioners. Seeing through the historical narratives of TBB and *let-whay*, the martial arts subculture constructs and maintains independent histories, as do small-scale societies. These historical narratives define and shape the "rituals" and determine which "rituals" are important. They are meaningful regardless of the truthfulness.

I introduce the various trainees, trainers and managers involved at the various *let-whay* centers in the final chapter. I demonstrate how trainees from multiple ethnicities, nationalities and religions train and socialize together at the *let-whay* center. By describing *let-whay* training as a "grass roots construction plan" I also demonstrate how all *let-whay* fighters, national and foreign trainees at *Thut Ti* gym, "embody the willingness" to fight, the integral condition to be a successful fighter. This training is a component in the pre-liminal phase and must be repeated in the post-liminal phase. The liminal or the rites of passage occur when the fighter climbs over the

ropes to enter the ring not to spar and not to train, but to fight with heart and devotion. For the Myanmar nationals, in general, the liminal phase is not a recurring stage in order for them to maintain status in the Myanmar *let-whay*, but they do have to maintain training sessions. On the other hand, as for the foreign trainees they must continue to experience liminal phases to protect their status and to avoid liminoid experience. This is a departure from Turner's impressions of the liminoid and liminal. For him, the liminal can only be sustained in small-scale societies or in agrarian, non-developed populations and the liminoid is among industrialized nations where concepts of "play" and "leisure' flourish.

I illustrate how liminal experiences are always evolving in the context of the *Thut Ti let-whay* gym. Foreigners from industrialized nations come to enjoy and train in a hobby, sport or a fitness regiment. However, the foreigners I have mentioned have the ability to become a member of the *let-whay* subculture in Yangon local society. In order to become a member, they are required to participate in the three phases. In contrast, a difference for these foreigners is that they must repeat or engage in various liminal experiences to continue for respect and to be a member the difference. Therefore, I conclude that a sense of community exists at the *Thut Ti* center despite the presence of novice, amateur, and professional fighters, of various ethnic and national groups and religion, of both genders. Since foreign fighters can embody similar liminal experiences that national fighters endure, they participate as a member of the Myanmar boxing club.

There are, of course, alternative perceptions to consider. Will this change as Myanmar opens its political, social and cultural gates? What if Myanmar begins to produce martial arts films that create and encourage a collective sense of identity and community throughout indigenous population as they do in China, Japan and Thailand? Would this collective and

proscribed identity prohibit foreigners to engage in martial arts and *let-whay* liminal experiences?

Furthermore, can the example at *Thut Ti* be applied to other *let-whay* gyms and martial arts styles? Does "embodied willingness" apply to all *let-whay* fighters during the preliminal phase? Do they respect the liminal rites of passage for Myanmar nationals as well as for foreigners? A more thorough investigation can also look into how women are perceived in *let-whay* and what liminal rites of passage do they experience?

By looking at Myanmar's society as large in the context of the martial arts and *let-whay*, regardless of geographical location of the gym, gender and sex, age, and gym space, and in the context of van Gennep's theory of liminal rites of passage, could Myanmar's ethnic minority conflict subside while at the same time building a cohesive nation?

Lastly, I want to recommend one more potential research approach for the future. Other scholars have written on the Southeast Asian architecture as a "living body." For instance, Roxana Waterson mentioned how in Burma human sacrifice was essential while constructing new palaces with the intention that the spirits of the dead would return to protect the new home from enemies (123). Thus, I want to build and further my research on viewing the *let-whay body* itself as a "home". I want to ask what is the association between the violence of *let-whay*, which is often fought at festivals and in front of religious constructions, the protection of homes, and the building of both self and community.

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