

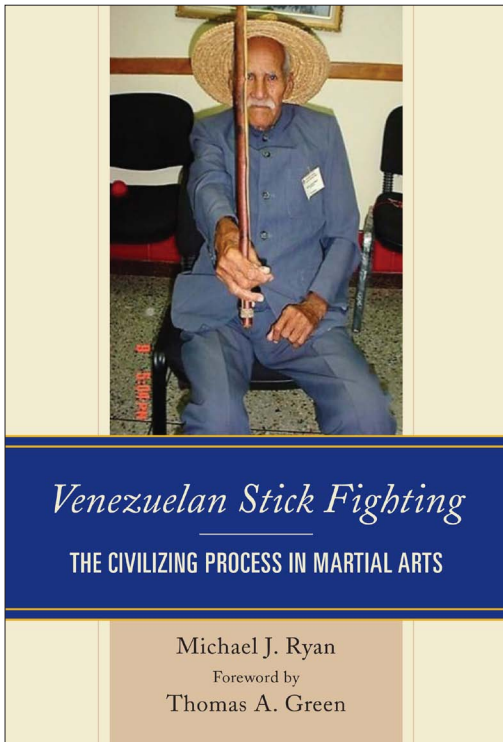
BOOK REVIEW

Venezuelan Stick Fighting: The Civilizing Process in Martial Arts

Michael J. Ryan

Lexington Books, 2016

186 pages



REVIEWER

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It is surprising to open an academic study and find, within the first few pages, a clear-eyed review of the volume that one is set to embark upon. The Foreword contributed by Professor Thomas A. Green to Michael J. Ryan's *Venezuelan Stick Fighting: The Civilizing Process in Martial Arts* provides readers with exactly that. While taking some of the surprise out of the coming exercise, Green lays out both Ryan's contributions and his place in a rapidly growing field. After considering this book, I am inclined to agree with Green's assessment that it:

warrants a close reading as a first-rate example of the work produced by the current generation of martial arts scholars and of the preoccupations and methods of the discipline of martial arts studies as it develops in the early decades of the twenty-first century. [xi]

Venezuelan Stick Fighting is first and foremost an impressive contribution to the growing body of ethnographic studies on regional martial arts. As Ryan correctly notes, the close links between patterns of community violence and the development of fighting systems (whether formalized or vernacular in nature) can be seen in many locations around the globe. Yet, this diversity of human experience is not always reflected in literature that tends to focus on traditional Asian and European fighting systems on the one hand and modern Western combat sports on the other.

Recent publications suggest that a potential rebalancing of emphasis may be underway. The release of multiple books on topics like capoeira [Griffith 2016; Delamont, Stephens and Campos 2016], the South Asian martial arts [Sieler 2015], and even hyper-real modes of violence [Goto-Jones 2015] suggest that the horizons of martial arts studies continue to broaden in both geographical and theoretical terms. Ryan's detailed ethnographic analysis of a South American stick and machete fighting community is a welcome contribution to the literature on the martial arts of the Western Hemisphere.

Even those who are new to the academic study of the martial arts will find Ryan's writing compelling and his arguments easy to follow. This short work (only 143 pages of actual text) is divided into eight brief chapters (not counting the Introduction), each of which tackles a single subject. Most of these discussions were previously published as articles in a variety of journals, which helps the author to move through a wide range of topics with relative ease.

Each of these chapters grounds Ryan's arguments within the ethnographic method. The author freely shares descriptions, interviews and excerpts of his fieldnotes in such a way that one develops a sense of empathy both for the region's aging stick fighting masters and the intruding anthropologist seeking to study their (often secretive) art. The rich descriptions of both the technical instruction that Ryan received and the rapidly evolving social environment which structured it is one of this work's strongest features.

While not as rich, Ryan's work also tackles an ambitious number of theoretical topics. As Green suggests in the Foreword, these reflect many of the current trends seen in the field. Indeed, Ryan quite consciously situates his book within the evolving martial arts studies literature.

The author's overarching theoretical concerns grow out of what sociologists term the 'modernization hypothesis'. In Ryan's work, this takes the form of an assertion that, as societies around the globe become more democratic, economically successful, rational and secular, we should expect to see a decrease in violent behavior and the sorts of social institutions (vernacular and formal fighting systems) that support it. Yet, here, as in so many other areas, the seemingly intuitive expectations of the modernization hypothesis are not playing out as planned.

While it is true that stick fighting has retreated from the space it once occupied (both figuratively and literally) in rural Venezuela's public squares, it has not vanished. Rather, Ryan suggests that, while the sticks which were once carried openly are now concealed in a car's trunk, or strapped to a moped, they are still an important aspect of local life. In a few areas – such as festivals popular with tourists as well as efforts to create a unifying Venezuelan martial art – the cultural prominence of the *garrote* (a hardwood walking stick also used for fighting) has increased.

This puzzle is then explored through several linked discussions, each focusing on different topics and theoretical approaches. Norbert Elias' 'civilizing process' is invoked, as well as the contributions of such familiar names as Bourdieu, Foucault, Wacquant and Downey. For the most part, now-standard theoretical concepts are used to illuminate trends in the underlying ethnographic data and to draw connections between ongoing debates in the literature. However, Ryan is less interested in using his data to challenge these approaches or to craft a truly unique theoretical contribution of his own. One exception to this trend is his use of the concept of the 'warrior habitus' to explore the understudied question of how traditional fighting systems assist in the social reintegration of individuals who have been exposed to significant acts of violence.

Unfortunately, certain aspects of the production of the volume distract from Ryan's efforts. This book would have benefited from more attention to detail in the proofreading and copyediting process. Issues like missing punctuation, spacing errors and even misspelled names became a distraction as the volume progressed. And while the physical construction of the book is good, the quality of some of the photos is so poor (see Figure 5.2) that one is left to wonder if perhaps this was an attempt to make an aesthetic statement about the difficult to resolve, and quickly fading, nature of traditional *garrote*. Readers attempting to visualize the scenes described in the book will be better served by locating the author's Facebook page and watching the many interesting training clips that he recorded throughout the course of his fieldwork. On the other hand, the glossary found at the end of the text is invaluable.

The overall length of the manuscript also creates its own set of challenges. Ryan does an admirable job of painting a detailed picture of the environment and habitus that shaped an aging generation of *garroteros* (individuals who have mastered stick fighting). At its best, the text can invoke a genuine sense of empathy for a set of figures that are culturally remote from most modern readers. Yet, due to the nature of both the research questions asked and the constraints of space, other figures remain less well understood.

Readers may find these omissions to be a challenge precisely because these other, opaquer individuals might constitute the future of stick fighting in the area. While Ryan delves into the life and times of an aging generation of experts (many in their 70s and 80s), by the end of the volume, we still know very little about their younger students.

At multiple points in the text, we are assured that garrote is not on the verge of extinction. Ryan notes that, while it may have receded from the public into the private sphere as the region's strong 'culture of honor' gave way to different social systems, certain young men (and a few women) still take an interest in the art. While we are informed that such individuals may carry a fighting stick on their moped, or apprentice with an older relative, they make surprisingly few appearances in the author's narrative and are inevitably invoked as supporting characters when they do emerge. What sorts of work do these individuals do? What is their educational background and worldview? How do they negotiate the realities of rapidly changing social and economic environments? Why do certain individuals take up the garrote when so many of their siblings and cousins walk away?

I found myself coming back to these questions more frequently while reading Chapter Seven, 'The Creation of a National Patrimony'. This is among the most interesting sections of the volume because it speaks directly to the author's central questions about modernization and the civilizing process which has structured the development of these fighting systems. Ryan concludes that these arts survived because they were useful to, and helped to shape, patterns of local resistance to exploitation by an ever-shifting array of elites coming out of the national (and global) center.

Given this context, recent attempts to recast local forms of stick fighting as a 'national martial art' have been met with suspicion by local garroteros seeking to resist the erosion of their unique regional identity. They understand these efforts (possibly with good reason) as an attempted act of cultural appropriation or theft wrapped in nationalism. Their response has been to retreat from the public display of their art; this in contrast to the younger generation of teachers and their creation of programs designed to extract payments from the national government while at the same time stripping the resulting classes of any cultural or combative value. These individuals hope to build a reputation as shrewd leaders of the local resistance by selling a fraudulent version of the art to urban elites while protecting its secrets.

It may be easy for these younger teachers to protect such secrets since, as Ryan suggests, they never possessed this knowledge in the first place. These individuals, by and large, were always excluded from the small circle (defined mostly by kinship ties) in which 'real' combative stick fighting was jealously guarded. Still, I am not sure that this sort of strict division between 'authentic/combative' and 'fraudulent/public' can capture the full totality of the shift in social systems that the author seems to hint at throughout the volume.

Ryan describes a situation in which the older social group takes on ever fewer new students while mass classes are being organized to spread a new 'national art' in both schools and police academies. While the move away from an honor-based social discourse places the older version of stick fighting in an ever more marginal position, parents and various institutions are eager to have their children involved in a 'character building' activity not premised on the valorization of drunken brawling and knife fighting. This seems to be exactly the sort of civilizing process that the work of Norbert Elias can speak to, and which the author indicated was central to his research. Yet, only half the story is explored.

Little attention is given to the actual statements and understanding of this new generation of 'fraudulent' teachers, and none whatsoever to the beliefs and motivations of either their numerous students or the agents of the state that are paying for and subsidizing all of this. It is important to remember that they too have had a lifetime to become acquainted with patterns of mistrust and secrecy in rural areas. If we have learned nothing else in martial arts studies, it is the ease with which the 'invented traditions' and 'simplified systems' of one generation become the 'ancient and authentic' cultural touchstones of the next. The very nature of vernacular fighting systems makes their history easily rewritten and forgotten. Looking at the question from a wider variety of perspectives, one is forced to wonder: Who is really exploiting whom?

Professor Green began his Foreword to this volume by noting that, 'in *Venezuelan Stick Fighting*, Michael Ryan does not break new ground. He does, however, sow seeds whose plants yield a rich harvest' [ix]. Ryan's book represents an ambitious marriage of detailed ethnography with the theoretical questions that unite and motivate the current generation of martial arts studies scholars. His book is sure to find a place on many syllabi and reading lists as it makes the rich traditions of South American stick fighting immediately accessible and relevant to many of the core discussions in the field. His interest in the process of modernization, as well as the psychological aspects of traditional combat training, are particularly stimulating. In short, Ryan has written a book that is sure to be read, and enjoyed, by a wide cross-section of martial arts studies researchers.

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