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## Kun Lbokator: The Ancient Cambodian Martial Art

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### Introduction

Kun Lbokator is an ancient martial art originating from Cambodia, dating back over a thousand years to the time of the Khmer Empire. Known for its combination of strikes technique, joint locks, grappling techniques, and the use of weapons. all those techniques are inspired by the animals, nature, and daily life the humans.

Over the centuries, Kun Lbokator evolved to serve not just as a tool for warfare but as an important part of Cambodian identity, with practitioners adhering to a strict code of honor and conduct.

Kun Lbokator is not just a martial art, it is also associated with the religion and traditions of the people in the community. Cambodians of all generations have used it as a tool to increase friendship and solidarity between people in the village or community through competitions and traditional martial arts performances, thssese are the traditions of the Cambodian people, especially practiced whenever there are traditional ceremonies.

"Kun Lbokator" is the combination of the words "Kun", "Lbok" and "Tor." "Kun" means Martial Art "Lbok" means pound, hit, or punch. "Tor" means lion, super energy, or superior power. Thus, Kun Lbokator means a combat system to fight against a superior power.

### 1.The History of Kun Lbokator

If we describe Kun Lbokator it will remind us of what happened in ancient times. We can see the protective structure and protective system of Khmer ancestors through the round village as you see in the picture. According to archaeologists of the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, Banteay Khou, or Round Village since 4000 B.C., we consider it a Memot Civilization.

They built the protective moat and constructed the wall from the soil and the important thing is they created the combat movement and weapons for hunting and defending against enemies, beasts, or men from another tribe. so the combat movement or fighting for survival it's developed into martial arts. Even though the name of the martial arts at that time were unknown but it is believed that it's the Cambodia Martial arts that ever recorded.

Later, a story has been told that a martial arts master went to kill a beast in the forest that often came to harass the villagers. This particular event is when the name of Kun Lbokator was introduced, representing the fighting movement created by the Cambodian people, as Kun Lbokator means a combat system to fight against a powerful opponent.

A historical evidence related to the name of Kun Lbokator is found a statue in the temple of Sambor Pre Kok that was carved in the 7th century during the reign of King ISANVARMEN THE FIRST which the statue depicts a man lying on the ground and another man holding a knife to perform martial arts to fight against a beast that is coming to attack him.



7th century during the reign of King ISANVARMEN THE FIRST at SOMBO PREY KOK temple

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Kun Lbokator has been with Cambodians throughout the ages and evolved from the first period to the next, the compilation and carving of martial arts sculptures are so detailed that we can see the Sculpture depicting a fight between humans and animals at Baphuon temple that was Built in the mid-11th century by King Udayadityavarman II.

Many martial arts sculptures were carved on the walls of Angkor Wat, including the military structures of King Suryavarman II. (12th century)



Baphuon temple that was Built in the mid-11th century by King Udayadityavarman II.



Angkor Wat temple King Suryavarman II. 12th century

### 2. Traditional of Kun Lbokator practitioner

With respect to the master or ancestors before training or Competing, some practitioners offer prayers or blessings to spirits or ancestors for protection and guidance, reflecting the deep connection between Kun Lbokator and Cambodia's spiritual traditions.

This ceremony honors the martial arts master's spirit. On occasion, we witnessed practitioners bring weapons to place on the altar and pray alongside them and also featured L'bokator sparring, wrestling, and sword performances. Some participants got processed by the spirit and they did martial arts dance for praying as well.

The uniform is the one of significant parts for practitioners of Kun Lbokator who wear traditional uniforms, often consisting of a \*krama\*, a checkered scarf tied around the waist or neck, which is an iconic part of Cambodian identity. The \*krama\* also serves as a symbol of rank or level of expertise, much like belts in other martial arts. traditional dance, Kun Lbokator, traditional music, and religion are connected like a circle.

Traditional dance is a basic of Kun Lbokator position and movement. when you know how to dance you will know how to block and move forward or backward. music connected to Kun Lbokator because it can give a lot of motivation, religion gives us confidence when we fight it's feeling like our master stands behind us we will have no fear.



### 3. Kun Lbokator: First Century to Angkorian Period

Kun Lbokator's roots are believed to be traced back to the first century, though it flourished most during the Angkorian period (9th to 15th centuries). At that time, it was not only a martial art that was preserved by the citizens but also developed into military training. Warriors of the Khmer Empire, especially during the reign of kings like Suryavarman II. (12th century), Jayavarman VII , practiced Kun Lbokator to defend their territories and expand the empire's influence.

#### 4. Kun Lbokator: Colonial Era (19th and Early 20th Century)

During the French colonial era (1863–1953), Cambodia saw significant cultural changes, and many traditional practices, including Kun Lbokator, were marginalized. The martial arts faced decline as the country became more Westernized, and traditional systems of martial training were gradually replaced by colonial influences.

Despite the colonial suppression, Kun Lbokator continued to be practiced in some rural communities and pagodas. But during that era, we can see how Kun Lbokator was developing into modern combat sports that were less violent and followed the rules and regulations.

#### 5. Khmer Rouge Era and Near Extinction (1975–1979)

The Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979) brought about one of the darkest periods in Cambodian history. The regime sought to eliminate any cultural expressions they saw as part of the old order, and Kun Lbokator, along with many other forms of Cambodian culture, faced near extinction.

Many martial arts masters were killed, and training was banned. Many masters were killed, and the direct transmission of knowledge was heavily interrupted. This led to a dramatic decline in the number of skilled practitioners, causing Martial arts to almost disappear entirely. Despite the systematic erasure of cultural practices, some masters survived and continued practicing Kun Lbokator in secrecy, preserving what they could of the tradition.

#### 6. Kun Lbokator in the Present

Kun Lbokator, after surviving centuries of conflict, suppression, and near extinction, has experienced a remarkable resurgence in the 21st century. Its revitalization reflects Cambodia's efforts to preserve and promote its cultural heritage. While the martial art has made significant progress. Kun Lbokator was inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list, a milestone that has raised global awareness and increased efforts to safeguard the Kun Lbokator even more.

There has been a push to integrate Kun Lbokator into public schools, promoting it as a cultural education tool. In all cultural activities in the field of education, students often demonstrate Kun Lbokator to show the participation of young people in persevering the cultural heritage. In recent years, Kun Lbokator Federation has been working with Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports incorporating Kun Lbokator lessons into student sports hours weekly throughout the country. It is also practiced in community centers and private schools, helping to ensure that the Kun Lbokator is transmitted to future generations.

Cambodia has successfully used Kun Lbokator as a form of cultural diplomacy. By showcasing it on the international stage, the country highlights its rich cultural heritage and promotes cross-cultural exchange, especially with the country that has similar martial arts styles like Pencak Silat or Arnis and with the country that have historical connections including India China Japan, and French and building Cambodia's reputation in the global community.

#### 7. Significant Kun Lbokator value after being inscribed in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list

After UNESCO was inscribed on the Intangible Heritage of Humanity list, the movement to support Kun Lbokator got more attention from society, especially the youth, and the participation of the Government. Opportunities for knowledge transfer and knowledge acquisition by the younger generation are becoming more widespread through Preserving community traditions, and development programs of authorities and sports federations.

**Cultural Identity and Pride:** For Cambodians, Kun Lbokator is a symbol of their national heritage, representing ancient traditions and the resilience of our culture. Its inscription by UNESCO enhances national pride and reinforces the importance of maintaining our unique cultural identity.

**Promotion of Kun Lbokator Knowledge:** The philosophies embedded in Kun Lbokator, go beyond just fighting techniques. This martial art includes friendship, unity, philosophy, education, discipline, morality, leadership, innovation, physical health, and mental health beyond that, Kun Lbokator also showcase spirituality, traditions, history, religion, pride.

There are rituals in Kun Lbokator that form faith and establish a strong bond between the ancestral soul and the practitioner's inner strength. On top of that, practitioners are influenced by history; Khmer warriors throughout history have produced significant historical moments that illustrate the martial arts. Historical proof of the tactics and methods used in battle in ancient temples makes Kun Lbokator a rich and unique heritage.

**Global Recognition of Cambodian Heritage:** Being listed by UNESCO brings Kun Lbokator into the international spotlight, allowing it to be recognized alongside other globally significant cultural practices. This listing helps integrate Cambodia's martial arts tradition into the broader global context of intangible cultural heritage.



### 8. Changing perspective on Kun Lbokator

Kun Lbokator has lived with Cambodians of all generations, and history has left us with many memories of this martial art. There were rallies and losses; the biggest loss for us was when the country was at war; traditional martial arts and culture were banned and eliminated. Much of the data is lost on the inexplicable value of Kun Lbokator, but fortunately, the country is peaceful and offers many opportunities for Kun Lbokator. Following the List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity on November 29, 2022, the value of Kun Lbokator was widely disseminated to the population, especially the youth. In turn, they have embraced and maintained this traditional sport well. Negative views are corrected, and positive opinions and education are disseminated.

### CONCLUSION

Kun Lbokator's journey from the first century to the present is a testament to Cambodia's cultural endurance and the art's significance as part of the nation's identity. With continued efforts in preservation, training, and global recognition, Kun Lbokator will likely remain an enduring aspect of both Cambodian heritage and the world's martial arts landscape.

Kun Lbokator's revival over the past few decades represents a powerful comeback from near extinction, symbolizing Cambodia's cultural resilience. Traditional art forms, such as Kun Lbokator, face challenges from modernization and commercialization. As for Kun Lbokator in Cambodian society, it is used in the fields of culture, education, and national defence, which is a good factor in the preservation goals. On the other hand, in the field of sports, to comply with modern sports, traditional uniform, technical materials, rituals, and rule and regulations has been compromised to fit in. In Kun Lbokator, there're categories of combat if it is used in amateur sport, it is aligned with the development goal in order to adapt to the development of the world today. On the other hand, Kun Lbokator can also be used in commercialization purposes such as professional fighting match that serve business industry. Thus, the future of Kun Lbokator will depend on a careful balance between preserving its traditional roots and adapting to the demands of the modern world.

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