

**HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF MARTIAL ARTS AND FIGHTING: A NARRATIVE
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

**HISTÓRICO E EVOLUÇÃO DAS ARTES MARCIAIS E LUTAS: UMA REVISÃO
NARRATIVA DA LITERATURA**

**HISTORIA Y EVOLUCIÓN DE LAS ARTES MARCIALES Y LA LUCHA: UNA REVISIÓN
BIBLIOGRÁFICA NARRATIVA**

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ABSTRACT

The history of martial arts and fighting has evolved into structured sporting and cultural expressions, so discussing these aspects is essential in order to elucidate the historical transformations, cultural impacts and contemporary manifestations of these practices. The aim of this research was to carry out a narrative review of the literature in order to ascertain how the historical and evolutionary process of martial arts and wrestling took place in different cultures and what their impacts were on the transformation of warrior practices into contemporary sporting, philosophical and cultural manifestations. A narrative literature review

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was carried out using the descriptors: “martial arts”, “fighting”, “history”, “origin”, “evolution”, “sportivization”. The search was carried out in the Scholar Google and SciELO databases. The results were discussed along three main axes: historical development, cultural impact and contemporary manifestations. The historical development of martial arts stems from issues related to power, self-defense, religious rituals and later sports practices. The cultural impact of these activities is related to the philosophical and social aspects of their regions of origin, as we can see in the discipline present in Japanese martial arts. In terms of contemporary manifestations, there has been a greater inclusion of fighting as a bodily activity capable of improving physical fitness and personal development, as well as being an important form of leisure and sporting practice. It can be concluded that martial arts have undergone major transformations over the years in line with the development of societies, where they still have a major influence as a mechanism for the physical and personal development of those who practice them.

Keywords: History. Martial Art. Fighting. Evolution. Sportivization.

RESUMO

A história das artes marciais e lutas evoluíram para expressões esportivas e culturais estruturadas, assim discutir estes aspectos é essencial a fim de elucidar as transformações históricas, os impactos culturais e as manifestações contemporâneas destas práticas. O objetivo desta pesquisa foi realizar uma revisão narrativa da literatura a fim de verificar como se deu o processo histórico e evolutivo das artes marciais e lutas em diferentes culturas e quais foram seus impactos na transformação de práticas guerreiras em manifestações esportivas, filosóficas e culturais contemporâneas. Foi realizada uma revisão narrativa de literatura, utilizando os descritores: “artes marciais”, “lutas”, “história”, “origem”, “evolução”, “esportivização”. A busca foi efetuada nas bases de dados *Scholar Google* e *SciELO*. Os resultados foram discutidos em três grandes eixos: desenvolvimento histórico, impacto cultural e manifestações contemporâneas. O Desenvolvimento histórico das artes marciais advém de questões ligadas ao poder, a defesa pessoal, os rituais religiosos e posteriormente às práticas esportivas. Os impactos culturais dessas atividades se relacionam com aspectos filosóficos e sociais de suas regiões de origem como vemos na disciplina presente nas artes marciais japonesas. Quanto a manifestação contemporânea observa-se uma inserção maior das lutas como atividades corporais capazes de melhorar a aptidão física e o desenvolvimento pessoal, além de serem importantes formas de lazer e prática esportiva. Conclui-se que as Artes Marciais passaram por grandes transformações ao longo dos anos acompanhando o desenvolvimento das sociedades, onde ainda exerce grande influência como mecanismo de desenvolvimento físico e pessoal de quem a pratica.

Palavras-chave: História. Arte Marcial. Luta. Evolução. Esportivização.

RESUMEN

La historia de las artes marciales y de la lucha ha evolucionado hacia expresiones deportivas y culturales estructuradas, por lo que discutir estos aspectos es esencial para dilucidar las transformaciones históricas, los impactos culturales y las manifestaciones contemporáneas de estas prácticas. El objetivo de esta investigación fue realizar una revisión narrativa de la literatura para conocer cómo se dio el proceso histórico y evolutivo de las artes marciales y la lucha en diferentes culturas y cuáles fueron sus impactos en la transformación de las prácticas guerreras en manifestaciones deportivas, filosóficas y culturales contemporáneas. Se realizó una revisión bibliográfica narrativa utilizando los descriptors: “artes marciales”, “lucha”, “historia”, “origen”, “evolución”, “deportivización”. La búsqueda se realizó en las bases de datos *Scholar Google* y *SciELO*. Los resultados se analizaron en torno a tres ejes principales: desarrollo histórico, impacto cultural y manifestaciones contemporáneas. El desarrollo histórico de las artes marciales tiene su origen en cuestiones relacionadas con el

poder, la autodefensa, los rituales religiosos y, posteriormente, las prácticas deportivas. El impacto cultural de estas actividades está relacionado con los aspectos filosóficos y sociales de sus regiones de origen, como se observa en la disciplina presente en las artes marciales japonesas. En cuanto a las manifestaciones contemporáneas, se ha producido una mayor inclusión de la lucha como actividad corporal capaz de mejorar la forma física y el desarrollo personal, además de ser una importante forma de ocio y práctica deportiva. Se puede concluir que las Artes Marciales han sufrido grandes transformaciones a lo largo de los años en consonancia con el desarrollo de las sociedades, en las que sigue ejerciendo una gran influencia como mecanismo para el desarrollo físico y personal de quienes las practican.

Palabras clave: Historia. Arte marcial. Lucha. Evolución. Deportivización.

1 INTRODUCTION

The origin of modern sports differs from the origins of the broader concept of fighting related to the search for survival, historically involved with human beings since the prehistoric period, prehistoric man, at the beginning of his primitivism, had his daily life marked, above all, by two major concerns: to attack and to defend himself (So; Betti, 2013; Paiva, 2015).

The first evidence of man's use of some primitive form of individual and unarmed struggles dates back to three to four thousand years BC (Virgil, 1994). However, before that, knowledge is lost in time, but the very survival of man presupposes some form of struggle. In other words, the act of fighting is as old as the history of humanity itself (Natali, 1981; Rufino; Darido, 2013).

Over time, these manifestations that were of survival and utilitarian began to be systematized and regulated according to each society, thus emerging different practices, permeated by historical processes full of ruptures and discontinuities (Virgílio, 1994). This context is essential because it highlights the concept and origin of Martial Arts and Fights, especially about the Fights that is linked to history.

The origin of Martial Arts and Fights differs from the origin of modern sports, first it is necessary to make it clear what "sports" these are. Rufino and Darido (2013) state that modern sports emerged in England in the nineteenth century, but the authors argue that in the eighteenth century began what they call the "process of sportivization" of popular pastimes, that is, the concepts of sport characterized below correspond to those of modern sport, originating in England in the nineteenth century.

Martial Arts and Fighting have been an essential part of human history, from the dawn of civilization to the present day. These practices not only served as a form of self-defense, but also play significant roles in culture, philosophy, and the formation of society around the world (Franchini; Del Vecchio, 2011).

Currently, considering the evolution of Martial Arts and Fights, they are present in gyms and it is possible to observe a type of ideology that links practice, health and aesthetics. In these spaces, there is the practice of modalities such as *Body Combat*, an aerobic collective gymnastics activity that uses the gestures of fights and that is totally disconnected from the technical and philosophical principles of Martial Arts (Kruszewski *et al.*, 2024).

Finally, it is worth noting that Martial Arts not only serve as competitive sports, but also as paths for personal development, highlighting mental discipline and ethical values (De Souza Ribeiro *et al.*, 2025). In this sense, in order to elucidate the history and evolution of Martial Arts and Fights, this research aimed to carry out a narrative review of the literature in order to verify how the historical and evolutionary process of Martial Arts and Fights took

place in different cultures and what were its impacts on the transformation of warrior practices into sports manifestations, contemporary philosophical and cultural aspects.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

A narrative literature review was carried out with different types of documents. This type of research allows for an expanded description of the subject, however, it does not exhaust the sources of information, given that it is carried out by search and systematized analysis of data (Canuto; De Oliveira, 2020).

The works included in this study were obtained from the search with the descriptors "martial arts", "fights", "history", "origin", "evolution", "sportsmanship". The search was carried out in the *Scholar Google* and *SciELO* databases. Studies that presented the descriptors either in the title or in the abstract of the text were selected, in order to contribute to the findings on the theme of this research.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

To meet the objective of this research, which was to carry out a narrative review of the literature on the historical and evolutionary process of Martial Arts and Fights in different cultures and what were their impacts on the transformation of warrior practices into contemporary sporting, philosophical and cultural manifestations. Based on the studies analyzed, three major thematic axes could be analyzed, namely: 1) Historical development; 2) Cultural impact; 3) Contemporary manifestations. These are directly related to the objective of this research. Thus, the discussion based on the thematic axes located in the articles continues.

3.1 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The term Martial Art derives from "Mars", the Roman God of war. This is characterized by the use of a set of systematized techniques that are used by a people for their self-defense with the aim of neutralizing the opponent. Still, it is important to highlight that the term Martial Art can include practices with philosophical and/or spiritual connotations and/or objectives (Paiva, 2015; Belt; Franchini, 2010).

The origin of Martial Arts is surrounded by many different doubts and theories, the best known version, especially in Eastern history, being the story that has as its main character the Buddhist Monk Bodhidharma who left his country in the sixth century. He traveled from India to China, staying overnight in the temples he met along the way and preaching to the Monks or whoever the Zen philosophy and a series of physical exercises were (Natali, 1981).

The Buddhist monk, after having wandered through much of the Chinese territory, was led to the Shaolin Temple. Legend has it that when he entered the old monastery he came across the precarious health condition of the monks as a result of their physical inactivity. It was then that he initiated the Monks into the practice of a series of physical exercises, while transmitting to them the fundamentals of the Zen philosophy, with the objective of both physical and spiritual rehabilitation (Paiva, 2015).

The exercises taught by Bodhidharma were based on deep breathing and yoga methods and his movements resembled combat techniques. The practice of these exercises soon became a tradition in the Temple, later reaching such a state of evolution that it could be considered as a true and complete system of self-defense: "Shaolin Kung Fu". The reputation of the Fighting Monks soon spread throughout China, causing "Shaolin Kung Fu" to spread (Breda *et al.*, 2010).

Kung Fu is considered the style that gave rise to most of the Martial Arts known today. Chinese immigrants spread the techniques developed in the Shaolin Temple in other spaces in China and in other countries such as Japan, where new arts emerged and developed (Breda *et al.*, 2010). The term Martial Art is currently used in the East and West for fights with or without traditional weapons. Whether it is Bushido in Japan or Wushu in China, both are more specific terms for combat, meaning "path of the warrior" (Paiva, 2015).

In the social sphere, the term struggle can have different meanings. In the area of Physical Education and sports, the term is related to a content of body culture. Thus, it can be understood as body disputes in which participants employ specific techniques, tactics and strategies to immobilize, unbalance, hit or exclude the opponent from a given space, combining attack and defense actions directed at the opponent's body (Brasil, 2018). ‘

It is difficult to date the emergence of the struggles, since it is not an isolated action, but a sociocultural construction that has been transformed and given new meanings over time. Our ancestors were forced to fight, regardless of the reasons, the goal was almost always power (Paiva, 2015).

The first forms of fighting arose with the need for self-defense, and over time other forms appeared, such as ritual fights (especially indigenous peoples), in the preparation of armies for war (in the East and in Ancient Greece), as a game, as a physical exercise (in Europe) and as a form of defense (capoeira, in Brazil) (Breda *et al.*, 2010).

In contemporary times, these practices have been transformed into well-defined systems, established by sport, especially after the decline of body fights from the sixteenth century onwards, with the arrival of gunpowder in Europe. Later, with the technologies of war, hand-to-hand combat began to have secondary relevance in the military area. Over time, the

fights acquired a sporting character, and general rules were adapted that stipulate the development of competitions (Oliveira; Santos, 2006).

3.2 CULTURAL IMPACT

Martial arts are arranged in a variety of ways, emphasizing not only their practice as a physical activity, but also deeply rooted in cultural practices and philosophies. This anthropological perspective enriches the understanding of martial arts as a reflection of the values and social traditions linked to the origin of the martial art ("Martial Arts of the World", 2000).

In the analysis of the cultural impact of martial arts, it is verified the incorporation of cultural elements, by the practitioners, in their training. As an example, African traditions rehearse combat moves through dance, while Japanese Aikido focuses on blending in with the aggressor, rather than opposing him. In this way, these practices illustrate the philosophical foundations of martial arts (García, 2018; Bowman, 2020).

Martial Arts carry the mission of promoting the development of socio-emotional skills such as respect, personal hygiene, rules, promoting a more adjusted social insertion with subjects capable of integrating society and living together in a respectful and harmonious way (Stamenkovic *et al.*, 2022). The formation of socio-emotional skills, through Martial Arts, strongly contributes to the formation of children and adolescents, shaping their character and also their ability to deal with frustrations (Alif *et al.*, 2024). In general, these aspects are linked to philosophy, culture, the origin of the martial art, which as a consequence transform its practitioners in an integral way.

The different martial arts reflect the unique cultural narratives and philosophies of their origins, such as the emphasis on discipline in Japanese arts such as Kendo, Judo, and fluidity in Chinese Kung Fu (Huang; Hong, 2018). Thus, in martial arts the combination of combat discipline with philosophy, tradition and codes of honor stands out. In this context, historical figures such as the Japanese Samurai and medieval knights stand out, exemplifying this mixture of physical and ethical training with the importance of honor in the practice of martial arts (Culeddu, 2018).

In summary, martial arts serve as a valuable resource for understanding the multifaceted nature of martial arts, emphasizing their historical, cultural, and philosophical dimensions. It is worth noting that the globalization of martial arts has led to the fusion of styles and philosophies, impacting contemporary sports and cultural practices around the world (Green; Svinth, 2000).

3.3 CONTEMPORARY MANIFESTATIONS

In the nineteenth century, fights were adding new values and modes of behavior, consistent with the insertion of Western customs, moving away from warlike origins and fatal techniques and linking self-defense techniques to leisure and physical exercise (Breda *et al.*, 2010). The first athletic confrontations involving fighting actions took place in Ancient Greece, pankration was part of the Olympic Games. The first training models were structured in this period. In Brazil, Japanese immigrants gradually disseminated Fights and Martial Arts such as Judo, Karate and others (Junior; Capraro, 2023).

Martial arts, nowadays, serve not only as competitive sports, but also as paths for personal development, emphasizing discipline and ethical values. Martial arts and fights are essential practices for the population, as they promote health, well-being, in addition to encompassing the improvement of motor, social and emotional skills. They teach about respect, self-control, self-esteem, rules, order, hygiene and other skills that contribute to insertion and coexistence in contemporary society (Merkel, 2013).

In contemporary society, with the progression of martial arts and the associated fights, a specific ideology can be observed that associates the domains of practice, well-being and aesthetic value. Within these practices, activities such as *Body Combat* are conducted and this particular form of group aerobic exercise incorporates combat movements, but remains entirely dissociated from the technical and philosophical underpinnings inherent in traditional martial arts.

Body Combat and similar activities, while promoting physical health and social engagement, can inadvertently dilute the rich cultural heritage and educational values inherent in traditional martial arts, raising questions about the long-term impact on students' understanding of martial arts as a holistic practice (Rogowska; Kuśnierz, 2013; Sanchez-Lopez; Silva-Pereyra; Fernandez, 2016).

Currently, we can consider martial arts and fights as leisure and exercise activities that aim to increase physical fitness, self-defense and sports practice. In addition, they are constantly associated with a values-oriented lifestyle and gain space in clubs, schools, among others.

4 CONCLUSION

From this narrative review, it is concluded that Martial Arts have gone through different transformation processes over time. The evolution of these bodily activities went hand in hand with the development of human societies influenced by cultural, religious and sports factors. Its functions as defense mechanisms and body combat have been losing space since its



systematization as a sports practice. This fact did not diminish the cultural impact of the fights, which continues to be permeated by its practitioners. In contemporary times, the diversity that enables its practice has allowed the insertion of fights in different environments, which contributes to its relevance as a tool capable of promoting the physical and personal development of its practitioners.

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